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PREFACE

The publication of this collection of research essays focusing on various aspects of early childhood education in Malta is testimony to the steadily growing interest in the field of early years in the local context.

Malta cannot really boast of a long history in Early Childhood Education since the local tradition and Catholic upbringing of the vast majority of the population embraced an approach whereby children were raised at home within the family, predominantly looked after by the mother with the father affirming his position as the breadwinner. This was certainly the case until the mid-seventies when kindergarten provision for four-year-olds was introduced in all state schools and later extended to three-year-olds in the late eighties. Around the same time, the first child-day care centres were beginning to appear as efforts were made to increase the presence of women in the labour market.

Fast forward to 2012 and we now have about 50 child day-care centres with more planned to open in the near future. We also have well-over 95% attendance rate at kindergarten, covering three to five-year-olds and compulsory education starts in the year a child turns five. Thus, children growing up in Malta today spend a substantial amount of time in very diverse early years settings. The experiences and provision shaping early childhood education and care are thus of interest not only to children themselves, parents and practitioners as immediate stake-holders, but to researchers and policy makers who can have an impact on improving the quality of the experiences which, in the long run, will influence the lives of the children as they develop into responsible citizens.

Research, publications, documentation and academic recognition for early childhood education and care are all relatively recent milestones. Two important documents were published in 2006 – the publication of the National Policy for the sector was an attempt at providing a vision and recommendations towards a holistic view to the
early years, bridging the gap between child care and kindergarten; kindergarten and the first formal years of compulsory schooling. The publication of the *Child-day care standards* sought to provide a framework and guidelines to ensure that the quality of provision was raised. More recently, the proposed *National Curriculum Framework* (2011) has recognised the importance of the early years and a curriculum framework for the sector, separate from that of the primary years has been drawn up.

The introduction of a joint European Masters degree in Early Childhood Education and Care in 2007 and the introduction of an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education in 2009, both at the University of Malta and the Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education by the University of Sheffield offered through an independent school are all testimony to the interest which the sector is garnering in the local context.

This collection of research essays reflects a range of topics related to early childhood education in the local context and is indeed a welcome publication: it serves to present snapshots of issues and perspectives which predominantly contribute to the field at a national level. This in itself is of particular relevance to the local researchers and practitioners. However, the publication is of value to the wider research community, which can gain insights and understand the cultural, social and educational underpinnings that contribute to early childhood education and care in Malta. Such insights allow for a universal sharing of information with the possibility of enabling comparative studies in the field of early years.

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**Professor Valerie Sollars**  
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Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education  
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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We are delighted to present this collection of fourteen essays written by students of the MA in Early Childhood Education. The graduates of the MA programme whose work features in this electronic book have been studying with us whilst living and working in Malta.

The MA in Early Childhood Education is a unique, internationally renowned course, which has been running successfully in the UK since 1998, designed for a range of early childhood professionals including: early years practitioners, FE and HE lecturers, teachers, nursery nurses, preschool assistants, voluntary and independent providers, advisors, inspectors and managers working in areas relevant to early childhood. Students from around the world, including: Japan, India, Malta, Czech Republic, Germany, United Arab Emirates, Cyprus and Vietnam have successfully completed this distance learning course which covers a broad range of issues, encourages students to reflect on their practice, on current policy, and addresses theory and research relevant to their interest.

In October 2009 the first students enrolled on our Malta-based Post Graduate programme and we have been pleased to work with them at study schools held at St Catherine’s School, Pembroke, Malta. Their graduation in January 2012 marked an important stage in the development of our Malta programme and the publication of this book provides an opportunity for those with an interest in early childhood education, and our future students to learn from the work they have done.

We want to thank all the authors featured here for their willingness to share their work more widely and Professor Valerie Sollars of the University of Malta for her opening words. Karen Kitchen has been a patient and efficient editorial assistant throughout the process. Finally, we pay tribute to our local partner, Ms Sue Mifsud Midolo of St Catherine’s High School for her continued encouragement and support to us and to our students.

Professor Peter Clough, Professor Cathy Nutbrown, Dr Jools Page

The University of Sheffield, School of Education
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Abela

My first work experience was as a nanny for a newborn baby girl and her two elder brothers; this and the joys of motherhood helped me determine that working with very young children was the path I wanted to pursue. I completed a childcare course qualifying as a childcarer, worked in a pre-school nursery and ran my own home-based playgroup for eight years. My current employment is in a childcare centre which forms part of a large school, my first four years were spent as a childcarer and I have since been promoted to assistant director of the childcare centre, a position that I have held for the past two years.

To further enhance my knowledge within this field I decided to read for a Masters Degree in Early Childhood Education with the University of Sheffield, UK. My research focused on using various strategies to give children the opportunity to voice their opinions about their childcare centre. Graduating with an MA has stabilized my position within the school. My learning journey with the University of Sheffield has been an incredible and unforgettable experience!

Josette Bezzina

Until recently I was a Complementary Teacher helping learners aged five to ten years who had fallen behind in literacy. I am currently Head of Department for literacy in the Primary Years. My work includes discussing with teachers and the Senior Management Team matters regarding literacy. My MA research was focused on the kind of literacy practices that parents and their five-year old children engage in at home.

Caroline Bonavia

Having worked in the financial sector for twenty years and my interest in parents’ involvement in their child’s literacy development emerged when my son was one year old. At that time I was reading a degree in Youth and Community studies but in the back of my mind I wanted to further my studies in the area of early childhood education. Five years later, I had a baby daughter and my interest continued.

The opportunity to fulfil my ambition came when I was awarded a Scholarship from STEPS to read an MA in Early Childhood Education with the University of Sheffield. The Malta based study schools fitted my personal life perfectly.
I am Victoria, I am 58 years old, married, I have five children, 3 of whom are married, and I am a grandmother of 5 precious little ones. A Diploma in Social Work in 1996, lead me to an array of new experiences and realities. For 6 years, I worked with people with mental health problems, which was a strong and touching experience, having worked mainly in the forensic sector and in the area of gerontology. I have since worked for 9 years with children in residential care, which introduced me to a new aspect of childhood, as I have never known before, which urged me on to ‘learn the child’. For a number of years I have lived with my family in Kenya and Venezuela and travelling is a passion. I express myself by writing poems, a source of therapy for me in difficult moments. I also like drawing, which I attribute to my family of origin’s artistic trade of figurine makers. All in all I am grateful with all I have achieved to date, which I feel was culminated with the Masters in Early Childhood Education, a significant learning curve for me in my mature years.

My name is Laura Busuttil and I am a Resource Worker within the Early Intervention Services. My work entails supporting children aged 0-5 who are not developing typically, both in schools and in their home environment. I have a first degree in Psychology and the recently obtained MA in Early Childhood Education is aiding me a lot in my profession. In my free time I enjoy travelling and reading.

I am Maria Camilleri, mother of a four-year old girl. I am 25 years old and currently work in an Independent school in Malta as a kindergarten teacher. This is my fourth year working in this school and I must say that I love my job because it gives me a lot of satisfaction. I was always interested in pursuing my studies in early childhood education. As soon as I heard about the MA in Early Childhood Education with the University of Sheffield, I got some information about it and after some time I applied. I must say that I will never regret this decision since throughout this course I learnt considerably and met new and great people, especially my lecturers. I appreciate their support and help throughout the two years of the MA. They were always ready to help out and this is what kept me going. Today, I am proud to have contributed a chapter about my dissertation and share it with others, especially prospective students.
My name is Melanie Darmanin, I obtained my teacher-training degree from the University of Malta in 2007. For my dissertation I conducted an ethnographic study of parental involvement within a particular school. This experience gave me the opportunity to work with parents within the school setting. I was also involved in the planning and running of parental courses which were held after school hours.

I also obtained a diploma in Child Psychology which was awarded by the Institute of Education. I reached my academic goal in 2012, when I graduated from the University of Sheffield after reading a Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education. My empirical research focussed on the views of male teachers in the early years setting.

It has been always my dream to work with young children so after completing my first degree in psychology, I decided to continue with my studies and focus on early childhood education. Just after a few months from my graduation this course has already opened doors for new opportunities. My full time job is working with young children in a school setting. Working with children is never boring since they make you laugh with their innocence and show you love all the time. Also, I have recently started teaching a diploma in Child Care and Education. I feel responsible in delivering good ways of practice with young children. I am enjoying this new experience!

As a child growing up in Malta, I was fortunate to attend a school that professed a strong educational and ethical philosophy that has remained with me throughout my life. It is this foundation and the constant support from my parents, educators and husband that has allowed me to embrace my dream of furthering my studies in Early Childhood education in line with my teaching career.

In 2009, an opportunity of a lifetime arose when St Catherine’s High School, my current working place, entered into partnership with the University of Sheffield to be the official local tuition center for the Sheffield post-graduate programmes.

That was the beginning of my amazing two year educational journey, where at its finishing line saw myself as a different person. Besides learning how to juggle all my commitments I learnt to live in a different light, as Alvin Toffler wrote: ‘The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.’

’Saħħa’
Claire Grech

Claire is a paediatric nurse and has been working with sick children for the last 4 years. She is interested and passionate about educating young children with chronic conditions as she believes that it is a very important aspect of her nursing profession. Since she is a creative artist, she had designed educational leaflets for children with chronic conditions and also compiled an animated programme for asthmatic children. Thus, after successfully completed a B.Sc. hons in Nursing, she completed a Master Degree course in Early childhood education. She is now planned to start educational sessions for children within the Maltese General hospital depending on their age group in order to help them cope and adapt effectively with the changes that any chronic condition demands on both the affected child and his caregivers.

Elizabeth Jones

Elizabeth Jones is currently employed by the Maltese Education Department as a Complementary Teacher where, she teaches basic literacy skills to pupils who are encountering difficulties in literacy. Her MA research focussed on the way in which a Maltese home and kindergarten environment assisted a preschooler in the acquisition of emergent literacy skills.

Julie Mangion

I am a British expatriate, living in Malta with my Maltese husband, two teenage children and one lively dog! I have taught 3-5 year olds at several schools on the island and am currently Head of Kindergarten at a leading independent school. I have recently started lecturing early years students at a local college.
Louise Micallef

I am Louise Micallef, currently a physical education teacher at St Margaret College Zabbar Primary B. After finishing a Bachelor of Education degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Malta, I started my teaching career in 1999. My interest on the effect of the school leader on young children’s motivation and performance comes from my nine years of teaching experience in the lower grades observing how children react to different leadership styles. Following a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Administration and Management in 2007, I pursued my studies, with the support of a STEPS Scholarship to graduate from the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education at the University of Sheffield in January 2012.

Christina Pace

My name is Christina Pace and I am 24 years old. My interest in Education began through educational placements while reading a Bachelors degree in Psychology at the University of Malta. I had the opportunity to spend a considerable amount of time working with young children in a school setting and here is where I started developing a passion for teaching. For five years, I was a volunteer within the disability field, and spent three years running a programme for children with developmental and learning difficulties. These varied experiences enhanced my decision to extend my teaching skills. Whilst studying for the MA in Early Childhood Education I worked as a learning support assistant. Here I found myself inspired by the challenge of encouraging these young people to realise their potential and this further strengthened my desire to follow a career in teaching young children. Currently I am teaching a lovely group of first graders where my philosophy in class revolves around the belief that “Instead of trying to reach your students by always making them act more like adults, approach your day with the spirit of a child and your classroom will become your playground.” My aim is to ensure that all the children are happy in school by making sure that they are feeling valued as members of their class and are comfortable in their environment. I sincerely believe that when these conditions are satisfied, children are able to learn.
PART 1

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES
CHAPTER 1
Revisiting my Childhood: Reflections on my life choices

Victoria Bugeja

Introduction

This autoethnography is a journey back in time, touching on realities that surrounded the time of my birth in 1954 and the preceding events, which are particularly relevant to the woman that I have become today and the choices I have made in the process. The events that prevailed in 1950s in Malta were tainted by bitter memories of a post-war Malta, of devastation and an urge to rebuild on the rambled past, whilst trying to hide the pain of war. Denzin and Lincoln (2002) argue that ‘to a large extent, these self-narratives involve looking back at the past through the eyes of the present’ (p. 262). As Austin (2010) argues, ‘in reality the self is the lens through which our subjects’ stories are conveyed. I, we, are inherently tied to our subjects and the world’s activities we study’ (p. 56).

Another factor that urged me to do this study is the element of generativity; there is like an undying need as one grows older to continue to live on in the younger generation. ‘Generativity is critical to the survival of our society’ (Newman & Newman, 2008, p. 480). This ‘need’ has urged me to leave an ‘inheritance’ for my ‘future generation’ that is my children and my grandchildren.

My work as a social worker with children in ‘out of home care’ has been a learning experience prompting me to continue my studies, as I encountered an aspect of childhood I had never touched on before or experienced as a mother. My proximity to this new aspect of ‘childhood’, which in the past I had considered as being just part of a natural process experienced by every human being, made me realize that the way I had looked at childhood was similar to the experience one has when looking at an iceberg; I had just been seeing the tip of it – the rest went beyond all
my expectations. This made me want to ‘learn the child’ in all its complexity, directing my attention to different aspects of childhood, including advocating for children’s rights, to wanting to learn more of childhood and subsequently of early childhood education.

**Why Autoethnography?**

The ‘personal’ aspect of this method is what attracts me. One might ask who would be interested in a handful of clustered childhood memories? One of the aims of this study is the need to break the boundaries that we normally build around us in our venture to ‘hide’ feelings, eliminating at times the self from the research. For Poulos (2009), though, ‘the challenge for the writer of autoethnography is to go inside and probe and write from within these emotions’ (p. 141), whilst Ellis (2004) emphasises the need to ‘put yourself in your study’ (p. 14). Every person has a story to tell, as Poulos (2009) claims the ‘need to know is transformed into a need to tell, in the end, offers a new kind of healing, available only through the magic of a story’ (p. 35).

**Refining the Research Question**

The central question for this study is ‘How did my childhood, set in a specific point in time, influence the way I am today and reflect on my life choices?’ This question is at the heart of this research, although it is not intended to be self-indulgent. Mandell (2007) indicates, ‘reflexivity is much more than a single act of intellectual navel-gazing, it is an important element of best practice for those of us who choose to be of service to others’ (p. 157). It is no small feat to delve into your life scripts, to expose yourself, that hidden aspect that would otherwise have remained hidden. As Ellis and Bochner (1996) state, ‘we find and lose and find ourselves through the objects and images we gather around us’ (p. 172). I used this process of the ‘gathering of objects and images’, together with the notion of ‘self’ to try to understand the correlation that ties the ‘adult’ to the background that reared me. This approach is fundamental to this research, where I have used my experiences, as a springboard, from which I have delved into my ‘life scripts’, whilst remaining in
touch with the ‘here and now’. What I have learned along the way, what I have lost, what I have gained, all combine to answer, in one way or another, the basic question of this research.

**Literature Review**

The events of history form part of our lives. Everyone has a story to tell, and my own story started in the years following the Second World War in Malta, a small island in a strategic position, set in the middle of the Mediterranean. This chapter draws on the literature, and related historical events which formed part of a scenario where my life script unfolded. As Corey & Corey (2008) explain, ‘our experiences and the environment help us to put these scripts in context’ (p. 74); in a way I feel that my life script started before my birth as world events and war unfolded.

**The War Reaches our Shores**

Malta in the 1950s was experiencing the aftermath of the war but ‘when the war was declared against Nazi Germany in September 1939, Malta was unprepared for it...it was, by far, the most massive and destructive war’ (Spiteri, 1997, p. 11).

‘In a six-day spell in January 1941, with the carrier HMS Illustrious in the Grand Harbour attracting enemy bombers, like bees to honey, there were five hundred air raids’ (Jackson, 2006, p. 127), during which, according to Attard (1997) ‘the losses among civilians were considerable. About 1,495 were killed, including 386 children under the age of 15’ (p. 15).

The following portrayal by N. K. N. (2010) of the situation in Malta leaves nothing to the imagination

Malta was one of the most heavily bombarded countries during the war. The hardship was enormous. Bombs killed many Maltese people, many were left homeless.
Building and infrastructure destroyed and as a result the shipping industry was disrupted, which caused food and fuel to be in short supply. Food was rationed to half a sardine, three boiled sweets and a teaspoon of jam. With this brought about poor nutrition and no sanitation lead to spread of disease. Malta was starting to starve. It would take many years for Malta to recover from this. (p. 13)

The Church and the State in Post-War Malta

By 1947 although still a British colony, Malta was self-governed; the country was practically divided between two parties that is the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party, neither of whom obtained the majority in ‘subsequent elections in the 1950, 1951 and 1953’ (Sultana, 1992, p. 148). In the years that followed, the integration with the United Kingdom became a bone of contention not only between the two leading parties but also with the church.

The church in Malta was highly active on the local scene at political level, ‘the dominant patriarchal ideology of the Church was further strengthened by the dire economic conditions of post-war Malta’ (Darmanin, 1992, p. 108). ‘Visions of Malta’s future also separated Monsignor Michael Gonzi, the Archbishop [of the time] and Dom Mintoff, head of the Labour Party’ (Goodwin, 2002, p. 95). But the conflict between the church and the Labour Party did not end there, ‘when in 1955 the Labour Party defeated the Nationalist party, conflict between them (church and Labour Party) rose to the surface rather explosively’ (Goodwin, 2002, p. 95) and on the eve of a referendum by the Labour Government about integration ‘Monsignor Gonzi made a broadcast appealing to voters to disapprove it’ (Goodwin, 2002, p. 95).

Grech and Sansone (2011), in an article in the Sunday Times of Malta written to commemorate the 50 years of this epic church-state conflict, suggested that families were divided, and that ‘relations between Church and state deteriorated into a full-blown feud, with mutual accusation of attempts to undermine the other’s authority,’ (p. 10).
As a child I was too young to understand political matters, but not too young to understand the conflict and the hatred that prevailed. Life to a certain extent was conditioned by this socio-political and the religious ‘war’ that consumed our island, still coming out of the bitterness of the ‘War’, still on its knees, was now divided by these political and religious ideations.

**The Epoch of Baby Boomers**

Following the war, the population in Malta showed sharp demographic changes with ‘trends towards an accelerated expansion due to the many marriages which had been contracted after the war’ (Attard, 1997, p. 17). As this demographic change in the birth rate reached our shores the local authorities felt the need to ‘adapt’ a ‘safety valve’ in an attempt to address this situation. Although the baby boom in Malta was certainly not viewed positively by everybody – I for one differ from such implications, having formed part of this ‘famous league’ of baby boomers.

**The Safety Valve**

Once the war was over the Maltese found themselves faced with the prospect of emigration as a solution to the problem of unemployment that was on the increase, but ‘the great exodus of migrants in the late 40s and early 50s lasted for 20 years....so that some villages in Malta and Gozo were depopulated of young able-bodied men’ (Cauchi, 1990 p. 8).

Emigration was deemed by those at the helm as ‘the Safety Valve of the nation’ (Attard, 1997, p. 13), and the Maltese were faced with the hard decision of either emigrating or ‘else face stark economic hardship’ (Attard, 1997, p. 12). The Colonial and the Maltese authorities seemed to have lacked foresight in their decisions as ‘they did not seriously consider the long-term effects that such haemorrhage would have on the future development of Maltese society’ (Attard, 1997, p. 13).
A new common spectacle appeared on our shores as entire families gathered at the harbour to wave their loved ones goodbye, maybe for the last time. The following is a description of the emotions experienced by N. K. N.’s (2010) father, just 11, years old, when together with his two brothers, aged 10 and eight he boarded the ship that was to take them to Australia:

Clinging onto his brown suitcase so tightly he walked onto the ship with his brothers, looking back the whole time – his mother getting further away with every step he took she was getting smaller as he got further and further onto the ship he could barely see her face – he would never see her face, I will never see her again he thought....the ship was moving he ran to the back of the ship yelling to his mother waving and yelling, ‘I love you mama I love you.’ (p. 18).

This narrative captivated me so much that I could feel the pain and the confusion experienced by the author’s father when he was compelled to join a scheme that promoted child immigration for a better life

My own recollections of this experience, was lived from the shore seeing one of my aunts emigrating to Australia after her husband was made redundant; she was one of eight of my fourteen maternal uncles and aunts who emigrated to the different corners of the world in subsequent years.

Living through educational changes

My entry into the mainstream school system coincided with the early days of the post-war educational reforms and even though I might not have been aware of these changes as a child, today I realize the intensity of the impact of such changes from the benefits that I have managed to reap along the years. At the same time I find that my primary years were ingrained in the history of a country in transition, particularly in education. Education was slowly picking up after the dark clouds that loomed over Malta as in the rest of Europe; Malta joined forces following the steps other countries had taken to put the past behind, by investing in the future, in the children, the new generation.
The influence being generated in other parts of the world, with pioneers like Pestalozzi, Frobel, Mason, Dewey, McMillan, Steiner and Montessori amongst other was gradually reaching our shores as well. ‘For Pestalozzi, and so many of the other pioneers, education was important for society as well as for the individual. Education was seen...as a means by which the social regeneration of humanity could be achieved’ (Nutbrown, Clough & Selbie, 2008, p. 158). Slowly along the years, children started to rank high in the policy making worldwide, with Malta following suit.

**Method, Methodology and Ethics**

I used an autoethnographic qualitative research approach to explore the connection between my experiences in my early years and the environment that nurtured me as a child. As Du Preez (2008) argued, ‘personal narrative and reflective practice – in the form of autoethnography– are used as a means of locating the researcher in research’ (p. 509). This is not a vacant echo of my past, notwithstanding this being an autoethnography. I want to dissociate myself from the result of this study as much as possible as the actual ‘fulcrum’ is not me or my childhood. I consider my own life script more as a ‘means’, a ‘springboard’, as the underlying aim of this research is to take this study to another level, namely to consider how the composition of the environment, events and situations experienced by a child in the early years, and the context even prior to birth, affect the child and how ultimately childhood affects adulthood, as one cannot separate the adult from the child nor the child from the adult.

‘Autoethnography, alongside other methodological approaches, can make it possible for the ordinary stories of the small stuff of childhoods to become more familiar...through an honest and reflexive telling of ordinary tales of our younger selves’ (Nutbrown, 2010, p. 13).
Ethics in Autoethnography

Wall (2008) implies that there is a risk when ‘sharing private and personal feelings and experiences just to have people gawk at my family life is abhorrent to me and gives me great pause when I consider making my story public’ (p. 50), but Nutbrown (2010) specifies ‘if we write our own stories we can prod and poke at their salience in ways which would not be possible with the childhood stories of others’ (p. 9).

In reality, coming from a very small island, denies us as a nation, the luxury of anonymity. The ethical aspect of the study is thus transformed into a balancing act, between the need for credibility and the need to protect the relational ‘identities and our relationships with them, deal with privacy and consent, and decide when to take our work back to those who are implicated in our stories’ (Ellis, 2007, p. 6). When I touch on certain episodes of my life, I use and report them conscientiously.

Vignette 1 – The Bed

The following is an abstract of a poem I wrote, referring to my father’s lengthy illness, memories of which have remained like sepia image imbedded in my mind. Poetry forms part of my healing process, a tool I have used along the years to express and to deal with my feelings and emotions. ‘Poetry needs few words to capture experiences....poetry can also be appreciated as vehicles to convey messages’ (Etherington, 2004, p. 151). Like Blinne (2010) I feel that ‘for me, writing is a calling, a return to what was always there’ (p. 189).

The bed

I am young, I am still a child, I am just three
the bed I’m in, just keeps me company
the iron bed, with iron rails
that holds me there for still a while
and yet, at the back I can still see
a picture of your face, your harsh breathing,
your heaving breath, your fragility....
so insecure and you fight on, I can see it all,
a child, in fear of the unknown...
Vignette 2 – My Early School Days

When, aged five, I started my pre-elementary classes in a government school, I accompanied my mother on the first day to the headmaster’s office. On the way to school, which fortunately was just a few minutes away from home, my mother lectured me on good behaviour. Whilst my mother, a strong believer in education, made her introductions to the headmaster, he caught me staring at the window panes and questioned my behaviour whereupon without any hesitation I retorted, ‘Sir I think your caretaker is careless; the windows are very dirty!’ I do not recall the headmaster’s reaction, but I still remember the telling off my mother gave me on our way home; my first encounter with early childhood education started with a bang!

Vignette 3 – Behind the Scene

My perception of life as a child was that the world was a big stage and that my family members were the main ‘actors’. I believed that the rest of the people did not ‘exist’. I think that the root of all this perception was due to my eldest brother’s endeavours; he had made a makeshift theatre out of a cardboard box, which he adjusted and painted to represent a stage, making curtains and cutting strips from comic magazines, which he rolled and manoeuvred to generate movement.

We might have been one of the poorest families in our street, but my father had a weakness for technology and we were in fact one of the first families in our street to own a television set, as he meagrely put aside some earnings until he managed to buy a set. Somehow my brother must have gotten the idea of his makeshift theatre from watching television; he wanted to simulate this new world that was opening up to us; giving voice to his characters and I found myself so entrapped in this fascinating world that for a long time I truly believed that the world was one big stage.
My brother eventually became a television technician, a self-taught trade, in which he was quite professional; whilst I learned that life was not a stage and that things did not end when the ‘curtains’ were drawn, as I had seen my brother do. I learnt that the rest of the world is made of real people, who like me had their own story, although this took a long time to sink in, but I carried this illusion for a number of years.

Vignette 4 – Catch a Falling Star

For a long time my father worked with the Royal Air Force as a cook. Once he was preparing a special treat for the family, a traditional Easter treat we locally call ‘figolla’ – which is an almond filled sweet pastry made in different shapes and covered with coloured icing sugar, with a chocolate egg on top. On this particular year, my father made different shapes, one of which a star, larger than the rest, intended for my mother. We children gathered round the table as he prepared his ‘masterpieces’, and at one point we quarrelled, all wanting the ‘star’ for Easter; without much ado my father punching each ‘figolla’, whilst in his firm but kind voice, without any hesitation he stated, ‘now you will all get a star this Easter’.

The way we were

In recent years I lost two of my siblings, my sister who was two years older than me and who was my mentor and my brother who was older than her by two years. As part of my research, I carried an interview with my two sisters picking up on ‘our’ fragments from the past.

The memory that helps make us up in a veritable patchwork quilt stitched together from the ever-growing mountain of discrete, multi-coloured memories. What will be stitched into the quilt and what will be discarded...will depend greatly on how we sew our memories together and how others – from those who are closest to us all the way to our culture as a whole – sew them together for us. (Volf, 2006, p. 25)
**Analysing authoethnography: Analysing my life**

Autoethnographies are life narratives that providing rich insight into lived experiences, as Sprenkle (2005) indicates, ‘when I make myself so vulnerable by telling a story of myself, I confront the closest place to knowing myself that is possible in the moment. I enter and sustain a dialogue with myself and the characters in my life’ (p. 159).

Whilst I consider statistics as being a vital aspect of research, such methods might at times lack the emotional aspect behind the study, eliminating to a certain extent the humanity of the persons who find themselves under the reflectors of the researcher, as if it was possible to dissociate the persons’ actions from the person himself in the process. ‘Autoethnography is not a solution to our organizational research problems. Rather it is but one more piece in a fascinating research’ (Buchanan & Bryman, 2009 p. 699).

As McIlveen (2008) declares ‘storying serves the reader: I read you, I hear you, I speak you, and thus I am here too....a shared humanity that reaches out’ (p.19). Looking closer into this study I ask myself if what I have experienced matters to the reader, if this ‘shared humanity’ is in fact reaching out to the reader. Personally if I had had any doubts about this I would not have taken up this journey in the first place. Ultimately the aim of my autoethnography is to:

‘...make sense of what happens, sorting out meanings, arriving at interpretations about the significance of actions and events, providing analysis with description and writing fiction – a product of negotiation between one’s culture and one’s self’ (Boynton & Malin, 2005, p. 94)
Reading between the lines: Analysing my Life

Caught in the midst of these conflicting years, the literature shows how the Maltese population, drawn by the undercurrents of the Second World War, rose to meet the surging challenges. Our parents’ generation seemed to stagger from one trauma to another. At the same time, the socio-political and religious conflict created a lot of division in the population, which for the children of that era must have been very hard to assimilate; family feuds, violence in the streets, amidst strong political rivalry. Malta was experiencing a state of devastation on different levels that is from extreme poverty, to unemployment, which led to forced emigration. The changes in education bought with them new hope and possibilities that were to give opportunities to people like me who otherwise might not have attained a higher education.

Looking back I often wondered how my parents coped. This caused me to question where such resilience came from and if the endeavours of my parents made me stronger from their having overcome this heavily burdened time, which they have certainly transmitted to me with their life style and the strength they had gathered in the process. The reality must have weighed heavily on their shoulders, locking them away in their secretiveness, in their attempt to protect us, their children, from the absurd realities that lay in the shadows of their past.

Subsequently this makes me reflect on how life events, experienced by children too young to question and too young to understand, influence them once they have reached the threshold of adulthood, as Yang and Clum (2000) define ‘children are able to form stable autobiographical memories and retain them for lengthy periods’ (p. 185).

I have had to cope with a series of traumas throughout my life, yet I have been able to draw upon an inner strength, which causes me to wonder if I inherited such resilience from observing my own parents’ determination through times of extreme adversity. On the other hand having formed part of the Baby Boomers, I am
impressed by what Latimer (2010) implies, ‘Baby Boomers are different than their parents.... they want to stay engaged, involved, and active in community...they want to do something to feed their personal values ’ (p. 36).

In itself this gives me great satisfaction; this staying ‘engaged’ and active in the ‘community’, which clearly identifies with my role as a social worker, which might be considered as my way of being active in the community and which I feel is deeply rooted in my ‘personal values’ and beliefs that have been shaped by the life script I have somehow adhered too.

For all of us, we’re being forced to be pioneers, finding our way through a thicket never before explored. And like the Baby Boomers throughout our lives, we’re pushing, shoving, and asserting ourselves to change the way things have been done in the past, so that our children and grandchildren can have more opportunities (Latimer, 2010, p. 44)

Without any doubt I consider that part of my strength in character is also a by-product of this ‘generation’ that went against all odds to be born after the depressive years of the war. Giving voice to research in a study both as a participant and as a researcher in my own study has helped me listen to my own voice. By not giving narrative coherence means that we at times live our life as if in a vacuum, as if we have no past or as if our past has no tie with our present, when we, I feel are shaped by our past ‘memories do not merely replicate pleasure or pain, they also decisively shape our identity’ (Volf, 2006, p. 24).

**Limitations of conducting an autoethnographic enquiry**

The major ethical dilemma I felt whilst working on my autoethnographic study was anonymity; within research where anonymity was difficult to obtain due to the very nature of the subject, for as Mukherji and Albon (2009) imply, ‘in becoming the subject for the research, there is no anonymity’ (p. 167). At the same time respect for sensitive data is a priority for me, and for this reason I have not included discussion of certain aspects of my life that might have affected third parties, nor
ventured too much into the conflicting political issues in their totality. Ultimately maybe the major limitation was that this autoethnography represents just a part of a narrative, which in reality is broader and more complex.

Implications for Further Research

Entwined in this study is the ultimate aim of finding the connection between the past and the present, the early years and adulthood, this transformation of the child into the adult. The effect that experiences lived in the early years might have on the child has always intrigued me, initially as a young mother raising my five children. I was always conscious that the events that I was living with my children, could and might influence them as adults, but I was not aware to what extent.

My work, for a number of years, with children in residential care has helped to ‘conceive’ the idea behind my autoethnographic study, when I started to notice the correlation between the culture and the environment of these children and how these affected them. Becoming a spectator of such a phenomenon, experiencing the hurt these children go through most of the time, in the bosom of their family of origin, could be consuming. In fact this ‘proximity’ to this phenomenon left me highly perplexed as I was able to visualize every day how these children seemed to be conditioned by what they had lived. ‘Not only do we act on memories of wrong suffered, these memories act on us’ (Volf, 2006, p. 69).

This ‘full blast’ exposure to ‘childhood’ left me feeling that I had learnt more about children by working with children than when I was raising my own ‘brood’. This gave me the opportunity to ‘study’ childhood at close range, yet today, surveying the fruits of grandparenting, I feel as if I am entering another world unknown to me; the attachment I feel is different from the one I experienced in those first instances when I had my own children. I have lived each experience in its individuality and diversity as I consider that there are many faces of childhood, which must be viewed from different perspective, as each one tells a different story.
This study helped me explore how strongly the environment and the culture, which I compare to the waters that surrounds the embryo in the womb, influence the child. Today I might be enticed to take this study to another level, by looking closer at what happens when the same environment, culture, family and the same system ‘fail’ the child or when children are ‘hurt’ to some extent by the same family, which fails to ‘honour’ its’ mission to protect. Fundamentally the aim of such research would be to underline the importance of ‘reading’ beyond the person.

**Conclusion: When all is said**

I strongly feel that this study was characterised by ‘indented data’, embedded in my past, these ‘multiple voices’, buried but not dead, covered by layers of years, events and experiences, ready to sprout once they are brought to light.

At this point, I might even be tempted to ask myself if this autoethnography might be of interest to anybody, whilst as a professional I wonder if this research could affect me in some way. In reality, prior to doing this research, I seriously considered if there was anything in my past or in my present that I feel ashamed of. Today I find myself echoing Blinne’s (2010) words, ‘I write myself in the past, in the present, for the future. I write myself to belong to something bigger than myself’ (p. 189).

This gives rise to another question that is, is this autoethnography a valid research on Early Childhood Education? As Nutbrown (2011) explains ‘learning takes place within the womb before a child is even born’ (p. 100), even Burke (2008) stresses that ‘the first critical step in preparing students for learning occurs in the womb’ (p. 33). I feel my learning process started prior to my birth, with the values, strength and determination I have managed to acquire in the process. ‘Providing children with an enriched environment early in life provides them with the stimulation they need to grow emotionally and intellectually’ (Burke, 2008, p. 34).
What have I learnt about myself by this ‘exposure’, which has enabled me to look back reflectively on my self as a subject and on my life script as the data of this research? In my vignettes I have tried to underline the significant episodes that have remained imprinted in my spirit, that have accompanied me in my adult years that have been my silent mentors. At the same time my life is not the vignettes, it is not the history that preceded my birth and yet it owns itself to both, whilst belonging to none, moulded by these experiences, like the clay a potter works until he gets malleable constituent to make a figurine. I feel my life has been shaped from a malleable dough, by the course of events, by the input of my significant others and by my own life script. Would I have been different had I been born in another period of time? Most certainly – my parents would have been the same, but different at the same time, my country would not have been in such turmoil, I would not have needed that added strength to ‘make it’. Certainly my life script has shaped me into the way I am today.

I agree with the need indicated by Clough and Nutbrown (2007), to heed to the voices of research participants, particularly in those instances when these participants do not make themselves heard (p. 82). Giving voice to research in a study as a participant and as a researcher in my own study helped me listen to my own voice. ‘Many of us live happily without trying to give our memories narrative coherence’ (Volf, 2006, p. 197), not giving narrative coherence means that we at times live our life superficially, as if we have no past or as if our past has no tie with our present, when we, I feel are partly shaped by our past.

References


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CHAPTER 2

Are you listening to me? Young children’s views of their childcare setting

Karenann Abela

Introduction

This chapter summarises my study which was built on the belief that children, just like adults, are citizens who hold their own views and perspectives. I conducted a small-scale qualitative study in a childcare centre in Malta. The participants were between the age of three and four. Using a multi-method approach I found that when appropriate methods are used it is possible to elicit children’s views and perspectives of their daily lives at childcare and such information can be useful to inform school policy and practice and can perhaps also inform the development of early childhood services. There is a lack of research in Malta within the early years sector, so this chapter contributes in a small way to a growing research base. Finally, my study affirms for me that importance should be given to ongoing staff development training for childcarers.

One of the challenges of involving young children in research is to find and use appropriate methods to access their voices. I chose four young children for my investigation into what they liked and disliked about their childcare centre. My data collection methods included participant observations, child/puppet interviews, child led tours, digital cameras and an audio recorder to gain insight of their early years experience. According to Clark, Mc Quail and Moss (2003) it is important for educators to be able to listen to and understand what is important to children, therefore I had a responsibility to find appropriate methods to achieve this so as to be able to understand children’s priorities, interests, concerns and to effect change and enrich children’s developmental experiences. As Mc Naughton, Hughes and Smith (2007) state:
‘honouring young children’s rights to express their views ... contributes to a healthy democracy which recognises that children’s rights are the human rights of any citizen’ (p. 9).

**Literature Review**

**Children’s rights and participation**

In accordance with the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a legal right to express their views and to participate in decisions that affect their lives (UNCRC, 2005). Children’s rights, particularly participation and democratic rights in the early years are important as children are respected as social agents and as constructors of their own learning (Hayes, 2005).

By listening to young children we show them that we value their opinions and this can give them a sense of worth and belonging, through participation we help them to reach their full potential. Adults working with children who listen to, respect and value children’s views are better able to understand them and what is important to them. Research has revealed that young children are reliable informants and give valuable and useful information and they are able to speak for themselves if appropriate methods are used (Evans & Fuller, 1998: Clark & Moss, 2001).

In Lansdown’s opinion ‘we do not have a culture of listening to children’ (1994, p. 38) and George (2009) states that dismissive remarks such as ‘Children should be seen and not heard’ are often still heard. Nutbrown (1996) noted that children’s views are mostly considered to be ‘ill-informed, irrational, irresponsible, amusing or cute’ (p. 6) and that adult’s did not seem to be ready to take children seriously, however a small number of recent studies have sought to change this.

**Early Childhood Education and Care in Malta**
The concept of early childhood education and care is relatively new in Malta, with the introduction of early years provision for children under the age of three and the opening of childcare centres becoming more popular over the last decade (Ministry of Education, 2006). According to Sollars (2002) this explains the lack of research in this field on the Island.

A recent audit performed by the National Audit Office in Malta argues that the introduction of child care arrangements reflects the Maltese Government’s policy to enhance a pro-family environment, increase the number of child care facilities and encourage women to remain within or return to the labour market (2010). Different measures have been adopted by Government to encourage and facilitate access to child care. These have included tax incentives, promotional campaigns, the launch of the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities, and the financing of new child care centres in different localities (National Audit Office, Malta, 2010).

The National Maltese Programme Vision 2015 lists the setting up of more child care facilities across the country as one of the priorities of Government in the area of social development. This goal also reflected the European Union target of providing, by 2010, child placements for at least thirty-three per cent of children under three years of age (National Audit Office, Malta, 2010). This is essential for the Department to have the required legal backing to effectively enforce the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities established in 2006 (Sollars, 2006).

The Department for Social Policy is currently addressing the regulation of the provision of Child Day Care Services. Once the required legislation is enacted, it will focus on the licensing of social welfare services, on the monitoring and assessment of established standards and on ensuring compliance with regulations set out by the Maltese Government (Department of Social Welfare Standards, 2012).

The Draft National Children’s Policy was launched in November 2011 and is currently undergoing public consultation (The Times of Malta, 2011).
‘The draft National Children’s Policy aims to ensure that children’s views are not only listened to, but also taken into account. Through the adoption of such an approach, children will be respected as human beings, with the capacity to shape their own lives. These concepts are reflected in the ten principles underpinning this Policy.

- Best interests
- Mainstreaming
- Well-being
- Participation
- Inclusion
- Accessibility
- Protection
- Families
- Accountability
- Sustainability’

(Draft National Children’s Policy, 2011, p.8).

I do believe that Malta has come a long way since signing and ratifying the Convention of the Rights of the Child of 1989. Our country has witnessed various advances both from the services aspect as well as on a regulatory level and the Children’s Policy recognizes the valuable work done by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Cristina, 2011). However in my opinion the local authorities are taking far too long to legalize and implement both the necessary childcare standards and the much-needed children’s national policy.

Why and how to listen to young children?

Listening requires us to be sensitive to the variety of ways in which children express their views and feelings. Similarly, we need to find ways to respond to the preferred ways that children choose to communicate their views and experiences. Several researchers (Einarsditter, 2005b; Langsted, 1994; Evans and Fuller, 1998; Wiltz and Klein, 2001; Rosenthal and Vandell, 1996; Clark and Moss, 2001) have worked alongside children to explore and document their daily experiences in their early childhood settings, allowing for children’s views to be directly elicited through
creative and non-verbal child appropriate methods such as interviews, observations, photography, audio and visual recordings, drawings, story telling, role play and making use of puppets or persona dolls. Clark and Moss (2001) developed a framework for listening to young children called the Mosaic Approach. This is a multi-method approach in which children’s own photographs, tours and maps can be joined to talking and observing to gain deeper understanding of children’s perspectives of their early childhood settings. Lancaster (2006) introduced a framework for listening to young children and ensuring their active participation. She goes on to explain that the RAMPS approach is about how to listen and acknowledge the range of ways in which children communicate, the five principles are:

- Recognising children’s many languages;
- Allocating communication spaces;
- Making time;
- Providing choice;
- Subscribing to a reflective practice.

(Lancaster 2006, p.1)

**Children as co-researchers**

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in accessing and understanding young children’s perspectives on their own lives. Finding out what children’s real interests and concerns are, rather than what adults think or hope they are, has been put forward as one of the reasons for listening to children (Tolfree and Woodhead, 1999).

O’Brien and Moules (2007) claim that researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of involving children in research projects as they have important points of view and hold the answer to a lot of questions.

The only people who can tell you what it’s like to be a child ... is us so listen to what we have to say. Consulting us...rather than telling us what we should be doing is the best way to improve service delivery. (O’Brien & Moules, 2007, p.387)
The role of children in our society today is changing, childhood and children are seen as worthy of investigation in their own right, and researchers now seek to learn about children’s knowledge, perspectives and interests from the children themselves (Christensen & James, 2000, Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Mayall, 2000; O’Kane, 2000). Bragg (2007) points out that it was the UNCRC’s recommendation that children should be informed, involved and consulted about all activities that affect their lives that led to a growing practice and body of literature on the role of children as researchers and reflection on how they can be involved in projects.

Methods and Methodology

Choice of method and sampling strategy

Qualitative methods were chosen for this small scale study as the purpose of the study was to obtain information on what the children liked and disliked about their childcare setting. Ritchie and Lewis, (2003) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2007) explain that qualitative research provides in-depth descriptions and analysis of the people studied in order to understand particular factors and relationships that influence people’s understandings and behaviour.

I used convenience sampling as a means of recruiting the participants; this is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). I was aware that some children would be left out of the study but as this was a small scale study it was not possible to include them all. The aim was to create rich detailed data and an understanding of the studied phenomenon, being the four children in the study, rather than generalisability (Rolfe & Mac Naughton, 2008).

According to Clark, Mc Quail and Moss (2003) when involving young children in research ‘It is important that children are in an environment that is familiar and comfortable to them and that adults known to them ... are available’ (p. 31). Following their suggestion I chose a sample of four children between 3 and 4 years
old, who were in their second year of attending the childcare centre. This meant that they were familiar with the environment and the children knew me very well. I chose two boys and two girls however gender was not significant to the research, to a certain extent the sample represented a mixture of all the children attending the childcare centre, in this case a shy child, a very reserved child, a bi-lingual child and a confident talker. I was aware that some children would be left out of the study but as this was a small scale study it was not possible to include them all.

**Ethical Issues and Procedures**

When research involves young children there are a number of ethical procedures that need to be taken into account. Before initiating this study I applied and obtained ethical approval from the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review committee. Permission to conduct the study within the childcare centre was essential, an information sheet was presented to the director and written consent was obtained to conduct the study on the premises. Written consent was also obtained from the children’s parents after all the necessary information and consent form were presented to them explaining my research.

I then was able to approach the children and, in an appropriate manner, I explained my research to them and what it would entail and asked them if they would be willing to participate in my study. I explained to the children that if they were uncomfortable or unhappy they could withdraw from the research at any time. The children’s names remained anonymous to protect their identity throughout the research, I gave them the option to choose a different name for themselves which they thought was quite fun. As recommended by Alderson (2004) I prepared a child friendly booklet and during a group session and in the presence of their childcarer I explained my research to the children, they were given the choice to colour in a smiley face if they consent to participate or a sad face if not. A childcarer was present to witness the children’s consent, she was presented with the necessary information and written witness consent was obtained prior to the above mentioned activity. As Morrow and Richards (1996) consider, the biggest ethical challenge for
researchers working with children is the discrepancies in power and status between adults and children (p.98). Therefore it was important to inform myself of appropriate ways of listening to young children before I chose the methods for this study.

**Methods of data collection**

Using a multi-method approach I chose interviews and observations to collect data and a puppet, child led tours, photography and an audio recorder as tools to access the views and experiences of the children in this study. These methods made it possible to access the views of all the children in this study even those who normally find it hard to express themselves verbally in this case due to being shy and reserved.

The following research question areas guided the inquiry:

1. What are the children’s likes and dislikes of their childcare setting?
2. What methods are useful when seeking children’s perspectives on their early childcare setting?

Following Levy (2008), I used a puppet named “Krissy” to mediate a conversation between myself and the children. This activity took place during morning circle time and began by introducing the puppet and allowing time for the children to play with her and to become comfortable with the interview situation. Within this conversation the children were asked to tell Krissy about the various activities they engaged with at their childcare centre, as predicted by Thorpe (2005) the puppet stimulated talk and all the children became engaged in conversation even those who are normally shy and reserved.

On my suggestion the children took the puppet on a tour of the childcare centre and as we went along they talked about various things such as the play areas, their playmates, their childcarer, daily activities, their likes and dislikes. Unexpectedly the tour became a walking interview as described in a study conducted by Langsted.
(1994). During the tour the children also used digital cameras to capture images of areas and things of importance to them. Apart from the children leading the tour they were also partly in charge of collecting the data. At a later stage the images were printed and during another session each child compiled a picture book representing what they liked best at their childcare centre.

On another occasion I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with each child. These differed from more traditional interviews in the sense that the photos and children’s comments about them directed the interview. The purpose of the individual interviews was to complement the information gathered from the photographs. Using the puppet the children were asked a series of open ended questions to investigate their likes, dislikes and any changes they wanted to see in their childcare centre. During the interviews the children showed me and the puppet their picture book and we discussed the pictures that they took. This generated many answers and I just followed the children’s lead. During the interviews I utilized active listening methods, such as restating the children’s words, to ensure that the data collected was an accurate representation of their views. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Each child was individually observed over a period of time, in the various play areas available in the childcare centre, in an attempt to confirm their most favourite and least favourite play area. My intentions were to confirm that the data from the observations matched that gathered from both the photographs and the interviews. Furthermore the observations were intended to provide evidence why certain areas of play were preferred by children more than others and to provide a background from which to understand the children’s perspectives. I kept a diary and took down notes of field experiences after each observation. As the study progressed I created profiles for each child on the basis of data collected from the observations and interviews with the children.

**Data analysis**
Dockett and Perry (2007) argue that children are ‘competent, capable, and effective reporters of their own experiences’ (p. 60). I have tried to make sense of what the children have told me, in the interviews, my transcripts from the observations and audiotapes, personal notes and photographs, about their experiences and presented their views as clearly and as authentically as possible.

Data were analyzed following the strategies of qualitative inquiry outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and those suggested by Bogdan and Biklin (1998) which was mainly to carefully read all the data then conduct initial coding by generating numerous category codes as I read the data, labeling the data that is related into several categories.

I transcribed the interviews and made individual summaries of what the children had told me, I compared them to see if there were common themes and coded them into meaningful categories. The following categories were developed: children’s likes and dislikes, children’s friendships, children’s views of their childcarer, children’s views on their participation in decision-making.

After examining the images that the children had taken I grouped them according to the themes that each picture seemed to represent. From the notes I had taken of the observations I made narratives of each observed child. Within these narratives I searched for common themes, I wanted to find out whether what I had observed during children’s various activities was supported by the images they had taken of their favourite play area and also if they matched the responses from the interviews. Thus strengthening the argument that children’s views regarding their preferred areas of play are consistent and provide a reliable source of information.

All the methods used in this study allowed me to compare, contrast and strengthen my understanding of the children’s perceptions.

**Overview of findings**

This study shows that it is indeed possible to access the ‘voice’ of children as young as three years old, so long as appropriate methods are used to collect data. The children had strong opinions about what they liked or disliked about their childcare
centre and were able to express them clearly. Marchant and Jones (2003) noted that when children are happy, feel safe and are comfortable in their environment children find it easier to communicate their wishes and feelings. In this study the children were excited, happy and confident at all times and enjoyed the various methods that were used to collect the data, being willing to participate in every session.

Preferred Play areas

The children thoroughly enjoyed using the digital cameras, they felt in control and quickly learned to use it.

Table 2:1 Areas photographed by the children and numbers of images taken

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play areas</th>
<th>Number of images taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor play</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor blue room</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow room</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water play</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand play</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Pan room</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role play/dressing up area</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puppet area</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating/cooking area</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the play areas photographed by the children and the number of images taken of each area. The blue room is a soft play area which is mostly decorated in blue hence the name, consequently the colour yellow is quite prominent in the yellow activity room. The outdoor area was the most photographed indicating that it was the place children most liked. Apart from the
photos listed in the table below, they also took images of art and craft items on display in the childcare centres corridor.

The children were observed for three consecutive days, the observations revealed that the children’s preferred places of play did in fact match the photographs taken by the children.

**Interviews**

The group interviews worked better than individual interviews, probably because the children encouraged each other to participate so that, even the shy and reserved children were drawn into conversation. Children were asked about what they liked and disliked about their childcare centre and expressed themselves clearly and held firm views about their likes and dislikes. When I introduced the puppet they were amused and although they knew that it was just a representation of a real person, they were willing to play along. Using the puppet evoked more conversation amongst the children as Levy, (2008) found and using the puppet stimulated and engaged even the most reluctant children to share their thoughts about their childcare, something that Thorpe (2005) also found to be effective. The views children expressed in the interviews were corroborated in my observations of them, children and the interviews data; children returned to play with the same children and engaged in similar play throughout the three days.

**What children liked about their childcare**

The outdoor area was the most popular play area amongst the children, they talked about using the ride-ons, the tunnel, the castle, the house, ball play and the slide
were very popular. Outdoor play seemed to present an opportunity for the children to increase social interaction and they also used it for imaginative play.

The children talked about other things they liked such as the books, watching dvd’s and playing with toys in the Peter Pan room with friends. They also said they liked cooking, playing on the seasaw in the blue room, arts and crafts activities, water play, dancing and playing with playdough.

The following is one example of a conversation with a child who enjoys playing with playdough, Kelly said she likes to make caterpillars.

Kelly: I like to play with playdough, I can make a caterpillar.
KA: How do you make a caterpillar?
Kelly: I roll balls, then I press them together then I make the eyes.

When asked if they would like to change anything about their childcare centre some said no and that they liked it just the way it was. When asked if they thought that they should have something new Brian said he would like construction trucks and Neil nodded in agreement, Michelle said she would like paintings on the music room walls and she would like to have a garden so she could plant flowers. Kelly said “no I don’t want to change it, I like it like this”.

Children expressed that they liked to play with their friends, these findings reflect those of Einarsdottir (2005a,) and Langsted (1994), who reported that playing with others was important to children. When asked who they liked to play with, the children all expressed that they liked to play with a particular child or other. This study, then, offers evidence that social relationships are an important factor in children’s thinking about child care.

What children disliked about childcare

All children said that they did not like fighting and in Kelly’s case she said she did not like the house in the outdoor area as she associated it with boys gathering there and
occasionally fighting and she felt the same about the blue room as the boys tend to get boisterous there too. Children in Langsted's (1994) study were also concerned about children who were ‘mean’ as were the children in this study.

Some children objected when it was time to move on to another activity as this meant it interrupted their play and they wished they could have been able to stay and play longer. This was confirmed during one of my observations when the children got very upset when play was terminated abruptly due to having to move on with the timetable. However when the children were told in advance that they had to move on they did not seem to mind.

**Children's views of their childcarer**

The children held a very high opinion of their childcarer when asked what they liked about her they said, variously “she’s like a mummy”, “she gives me cuddles”, , “she loves me”. The description that they gave of her suggests that the adult-child relationship is important to the children it would seem that she takes on a motherly role, she is kind, affectionate, firm when the need be and engaged in various activities with the children.

**Children's views on their participation in decision-making**

I asked the children who decided what to do in childcare? And they all said that the childcarer made the decisions. When asked if they were given any choices at all they said that sometimes they were allowed to choose the colour of paint for their art activity. They were allowed free play in the indoor, outdoor, role play, gym, sand and water playareas. At the centre the children followed a varied timetable that gave them the opportunity to play in all the areas during their morning at the childcare centre but they could not choose the areas themselves. Cooking, arts and crafts activities were organized by the childcarer. With regards to the arts and crafts activity a couple of the children stated, “she shows us how and we do it”. At times they were allowed to choose the toys they wanted to play with while waiting for
other children who were finishing off art or craft activities. They were given blocks, puzzles, threading beads, games, playdough to choose from. The children were aware that they were not involved in the overall organization of their mornings and that there were rules and routines that they had to follow. When I asked the children whether they would like to be able to decide for themselves the things to do at childcare? They giggled and said yes, these are some of the responses:

Michelle: I would like to make cookie biscuits, they’re my favourite.

Kelly: I would like to bring some of my books to read to my friends but we are not allowed to bring things from home.

Brian: I like playing with trucks but there is only one, I think the school should buy some more then we don’t have to fight and we can share and play together.

Michelle: I think that the music hall should have paintings on the wall like the blue room and yellow room. I would paint princesses and Winnie the Pooh and Dora, I like Dora.

Neil did not comment.

It is not common practice for childcarers, to consult or involve children in daily decisions that affect them and it is the adults who plan their programme and initiate the activities without consulting them. Having said this during arts and crafts the childcarer occasionally allowed children to participate in deciding which colour of paint to use or occasionally they were given the choice of whether to paint or make a collage. The findings indicate that there is need for further staff development and awareness of children’s participation rights. However it is evident from the children’s comments that the childcarer is very affectionate and dedicated as they clearly show that they respect her qualities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out what the children in this study liked and disliked about their Maltese childcare centre, the findings suggest that when
Appropriate methods are used it is possible to elicit very young children’s views of their early years experiences. This study used a puppet, child led tours, photographs, child interviews, audio recordings and observations to discover children’s perceptions as in studies by (Einarsdotter, 2005b; Langsted, 1994; Evans and Fuller, 1998; Wiltz and Klein, 2001; Rosenthal and Vandell, 1996; Clark and Moss, 2001). Echoing the findings of Clark and Moss, (2001) shy and reserved children who participated in research gained new skills, raised their self esteem and confidence.

Children were aware that the adults in the centre made all the decisions about rules and organization of their daily programme of activities. As Sollars (2006) advocates, administrators of childcare centres and practitioners should make room for change in values, belief systems, customs and traditional practice. Such has occurred in Scandinavian countries, Reggio Emilia in Italy and Te Whariki in New Zealand where educators have incorporated a respect for children and children’s voice into early childhood education and provide positive models with their strong belief in the importance of children’s viewpoints (Doverberg and Pramling, 1993; Langsted, 1994).

Though very young, the children in this study were capable of expressing their views about their childcare. By using appropriate methods to listen to the children, it was possible to gain insight and a better understanding of their daily lives in childcare. Listening to young children is an integral part of understanding what they are feeling and experiencing, and what it is that they need from their early years experience. I suggest that some settings in Malta could benefit from a change in traditional attitudes towards very young children, with adults working with children regarding them as social agents who are intelligent and rich in potential. My enquiry has given me a deeper understanding of how important it is for those working with young children to familiarise themselves with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adults need to be willing to listen to and learn from children, to understand and consider the child’s point of view, those who regularly work with young children should give them opportunities for decision-making in every day routines and
activities (Clark, Mc Quail, Moss, 2003). This will call for adults to inform themselves so that they are prepared to give children the chance to participate, freely and increasingly, in society and gain democratic skills.

It is the responsibility of all of us working with or researching with young children to make sure that children’s rights to active participation maintains a high profile in practice as well as in theory. Further local research in the early years sector on a larger and generalisable scale is needed to provide more Maltese perspectives on early years settings and provision.

References


CHAPTER 3
Moving on to First grade: two children’s experiences

Marvic Friggieri

Introduction

This study investigated the experience of transition for Maltese children moving into First grade. The literature focuses on three main aspects of transition which help the reader understand what the transition process actually entails. A qualitative approach, using a case study research, was used in this study as the objective was to investigate transition and gain a deep understanding of this unique experience from the perspective on young children. The interviews and observations yielded four main themes which are: Effects of transition; difficulties during transition; strategies used to facilitate transition; and strategies suggested for the near future. Findings revealed that the experience of transition effects children in different ways, however they also suggest that many children may experience some difficulties when they move into First grade. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research studies are also discussed.

Background of the study

Butterflies in the stomach and a brand new outfit. Family gathered around. A few tears, usually the tears of a parent... It is the first day of “big school”.
(Ramey & Ramey, 1994 p.194)

The above ‘picture’ demonstrates the first day of formal education for some five year old children in Malta (Ministry of Education, 1999). The Maltese primary school entrance age corresponds to entrance age in the United Kingdom (UNESCO, 2010). Ramey and Ramey (1994) describe the transition to school as one of the ‘universals of childhood’ (p.194). However, little is known about First grade transition (Entwisle
& Alexander, 1998). According to Brooker (2008) the transition to school can be a big shock for children due to the drastic change in the environment. Therefore, Johansson (2006) emphasises the importance of understanding the effects of transition when children move from one setting to another.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the transition experience in the Maltese context. From my experience of living here, I think that gaining an understanding of transition in Malta would certainly assist in increasing awareness in implementing ways of reducing the undesirable outcomes which might result from this process.

**Aims of the study**

In order to gain a deep understanding about this experience, I have investigated three components of transition. I will explore the effects and any difficulties some Maltese children experience when the transition occurs. I will also look into the teachers’ views of how they could facilitate more effective transition.

This qualitative inquiry uses a case study approach with participants being teachers, parents and children. The data, interviews and classroom observations were analysed by extracting common themes that characterised the experience for both of the children in this study.

**Literature Review**

I felt scared because I did not know my teacher, I did not see any sand area, or a carpentry corner, not even a see-saw or a swing. The environment looked strange to me. My teacher gave orders to us and we had to move quickly.  

(Brooker, 2008 p.75)

The above quote provides an idea of how a child can feel when moving from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one without being provided information in advance. This literature review examines the effects and difficulties of transition and the strategies which could be implemented by educators to facilitate a smooth
transition. The term transition does not have a single definition (Fabian, 2006). Fabian (2006) and Brostrom (2005) explain this term as a process of moving from one culture or status to another. Therefore, children are moving away from their comfort zone to experience the unknown.

**Readiness for School**

Similar to the term transition, readiness for school is also considered a controversial term (Dockett & Perry, 2009). According to Brostrom (2000) and Ramey and Ramey (1994) many believe that to experience a positive transition, children have to be ready for school. According to Dockett and Perry (2009), readiness is sometimes referred to the age and stage of development of children. In other words, children will be ready to start school when they are at the appropriate age and have reached the necessary stage of development. The question is, who decides which children are or are not ready for formal education? Before judging children’s abilities, one should also consider the effects of transition. Ramey and Ramey (1994) are aware that parents and other stakeholders also need to be prepared for transition.

When transition from kindergarten to First grade occurs, it has to be as smooth and unproblematic as possible. When positive effects of transition are present, children adapt themselves easily and are more liable to be active learners (Ramey & Ramey, 1994; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Conversely, Levy (2009) suggests that reading could be detrimental for some children thus provoking negative self-perceptions.

The Ministry of Education (1999) argues that the National Minimum Curriculum considers the first two years of formal education as part of a continuous process which starts from the two year programme in kindergarten. However, as Potter and Briggs (2003) state, transition to First Grade often generates uncertainty caused by the lack of continuation in the environment between kindergarten and First grade.

The environment in kindergarten is child-centred (Fisher, 2009; Dunlop & Fabian, 2006; Cassidy, 2005; Ofsted, 2004; Sollars et al., 2006) where children are
independent and learn through play (Yeboah, 2002). In primary school children make a shift from a child-centred approach to a direct instructional approach to learning (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006; Cassidy, 2005), where the teacher determines what the children have to do and learn (Yeboah, 2002). Thus, children become passive learners.

Unfortunately, the transition from kindergarten to First Grade is not always easy and difficulties are encountered by the children and by the teachers. Primary teachers feel burdened by the formal curriculum imposed on them (Cassidy, 2005; Ofsted, 2004; Soler & Miller, 2003). The shift from child-centred approach to teacher oriented approach to learning might lead children encounter difficulties during the transition. Studies conducted by Wong (2003) and Bartholomew and Gustafsson (1997) show that the discrepancy in pedagogy between the two settings can hinder children’s learning and achievement at school. Wong (2003) gives us the example of children finding difficulties in abiding by the rules.

Parents and educators are responsible for helping children through the transition period. Brostrom (2000) argues that not only do children have to be ready, but even schools need to be prepared. Ofsted (2004), Brostrom (2000) and Ramey and Ramey (1994) argue that both the physical and psychological environment of first grade has to be similar to the one in kindergarten to promote happiness. Schools can also be ready for children if they promote continuity between grades and a collaborative relationship between teachers (Sink, Edwards, Weir, 2007).

Connection between kindergarten and primary school is established by regular communication between teachers. Findings (Ofsted, 2004; Wong, 2003; Bartholomew & Gustafsson,1997) suggest that educators are open for greater levels of communication. Schools need to also communicate with the parents as there is a strong recognition that parents’ involvement in school supports school success (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). Yeboah (2002) and Entwisle and Alexander (1998) attest that when children remain in the same school and stay with the same peers, this
affects the transition positively. Studies by Fisher (2009) and Brooker (2002) support this view. However, Johansson (2006) recognises that friends in the same classroom can negatively affect children’s learning and adjustment to school.

This section has drawn on the literature to demonstrate that perspectives on school readiness can affect the transition to formal education. Positive transition to First grade can leave positive effects on children. However, the literature indicates that not all children have a positive experience of transition and strategies could be implemented by parents and educators to support transition.

The literature reviewed prompted me to investigate the experience of transition for Maltese children moving into First grade, as I think this needs further consideration. Having a background in psychology, I believe that it is important to gain understanding of the type of experience children are living when the transition to First grade occurs and to explore the kind of strategies the school in this study implements to help in the transition process.

Methodology

Research questions

Research questions are indispensable for any research study (Punch, 2001). Clough and Nutbrown (2007) developed two tools which are employed alongside each other when generating research questions. These are the ‘Russian Doll Principle’ and the ‘Goldilocks Test’. After going through this process I generated three research questions for my study:

What are the effects of the transition for young children moving into First grade?

What sort of difficulties, if any, do Maltese children experience in the transition to First grade?

What could be done to facilitate effective transition?
To investigate the experience of transition for Maltese children moving into First grade, I decided to use the qualitative approach as my aim is to deeply understand the participants’ lived experience of transition. By adopting this approach the researcher has multiple ways to gain information about the topic being investigated. However, this approach cannot produce generalisable findings (Hara, 1995).

**Case Studies**

Punch (2001) states that it is impossible to give a full definition of a case study as everything can serve as a case. However, Zainal (2007) states that a case study only includes a limited number of subjects in the study which according to Cohen et al., (2000) assists the reader to understand more clearly the situation.

Case studies have a number of advantages which make the research more appealing. Neale et al., (2006) state that one of the primary advantages is that it provides more detailed information than any other methods. Punch (2001) and Neale et al., (2006) explain that this could be due to the fact that case studies are more liable to use multiple sources of data. Conversely, both Zainal (2007) and Neale et al., (2006) agree on the fact that case studies lack rigour and findings cannot be generalised to other cases.

This research entails a case study of two children who during the scholastic year experienced the transition to First grade. The focus of the study is on two girls; one girl who moved to First Grade from the school’s attached kindergarten and another girl who attended kindergarten in a different school.

**Interviews**

Punch (2001) states that interviews are one of the main research tools used in case studies as they deeply investigate a particular phenomenon (Neale, et al., 2006;
Edwards, 2001). I decided to conduct interviews with teachers, parents and the children in order to gain as much insight as possible about the transition experience. During the interview I used a glove puppet (Sandy Sassy) because, as Levy (2008) states that this will minimize the risk of children getting bored.

Only lately have children been provided with the opportunity to speak on their own behalf (Darlington & Scott, 2002). However, Levy (2009) mentions that including parents and teachers in the data collection helps the researcher to gain a broader context. The children’s responses in my study were really helpful to understand the impact of transition to First Grade.

Before starting with the collection of data, as Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggest, I piloted the questions with a teacher and a parent to test the questions. As Darlington and Scott (2002) and Punch (2001) recommend, I had built a good relationship with all the participants since I met and communicated on a daily basis with both the teachers and the children and I spoke with the parents when they came as helpers. As Darlington and Scott (2002) suggest, I also informed the parents about the structure and content of the interview with their daughter.

I decided to use prompts from observations (Edwards, 2001) to inform the interviews. Observations were done between mid-October and December, right after the transition occurred. During my observations I looked for both the children’s and the teacher’s behaviours in the setting. When analysing the data, these observations will helped me access some factors which might have not come out in the interviews.

**Ethical considerations**

Research involving human beings must be ethically reviewed to make sure that it conforms the ethical standards (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Darlington & Scott, 2002;
Mac Naughton & Rolfe, 2001). As Clough and Nutbrown (2007) attest, participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity and I gave my participants pseudonyms. All participants were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Before conducting the research, informed consent was obtained from the participants and organisations which were involved such as the Malta diocese and the Head of school (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Mac Naughton & Rolfe, 2001). This provided protection for both the researcher and the participants. As Clough and Nutbrown (2007) recommend, I explained to the participants the purpose of audio recording the interview. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the interviews in Maltese and translated them into English.

**Data Analysis**

As Darlington and Scott (2002) and Punch (2001) suggest, I started analysing the data by coding it. I used codes such as: effects of transition, difficulties encountered, strategies used and strategies to be implemented. At this stage I was able to discuss them in relation to the literature reviewed, thus being more able to make conclusions about the experience of transition for Maltese children moving into First grade.

**Findings and discussion**

The presentation of findings is divided into four main themes which are discussed in relation to the literature. Each participant was given a pseudonym for reasons of anonymity. The girls will be called Amy and Sarah, the parents will be called Claudia and Marta and teachers will be called Ms. Martina and Ms. Victoria.
Table 3:1 Relationships between interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>First Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Ms. Martina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Claudia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effects of transition**

The effect of transition was very different for the two girls in this study. When asked about her experience during her first day at school, Sarah reported that one of her concerns was that she ‘did not know who Ms Victoria was’, despite the fact that both teachers were sure that Sarah knew who Ms. Victoria was. However, Ms. Martina acknowledged the fact that children tend to forget. However, data further suggested that Sarah soon settled very well into the school setting.

Indeed, Sarah’s transition into First Grade does seem to have been relatively unproblematic. However, while Amy, who came from a different school, was initially very happy to move to this school, she started to miss her old school after just a few days since she reported that:

We used to colour a lot for mummy and daddy… now we don’t do a lot of crafts… we have a lot of writing. (Amy)

From my observations I noticed that whereas writing activities were being done daily from the first week of school, there was only one lesson a week dedicated for crafts.
This surely indicates a level of discrepancy between the two settings which appears to have affected Amy.

After moving from kindergarten to First Grade, Sarah perceived herself as a grown up. It appears that Sarah was influenced by Ms Martina and her mother. Whilst Claudia associated Ms. Martina with small children when talking with her daughter, every year Ms. Martina tries to convince the girls that since they are growing up they will no longer be suited for a kindergarten classroom. She reported that:

    I try to persuade the kids that they are big girls now. (Ms. Martina)

Ms. Martina’s statement concurs with Brooker (2008) who mentions that when children experience transition to First Grade, they tend to be seen from a different perspective and in this case acquire the label of a ‘grown up’.

Conversely, the transition process led Amy to develop a negative opinion about her new teacher since ‘she gets angry with all the children.[and] shouts a lot’. Therefore, referring again to Fisher (2009), Wong, (2003), Ramey and Ramey (1994) and Pallas et al., (1987), this might be one of the reasons why Amy did not adjust immediately in the First Grade classroom.

Findings reveal that Amy would go back to kindergarten if she could. This conflicts with Wong’s (2003) views. This suggests that the transition to First Grade was an unhappy experience and left a negative impact on Amy.

**Difficulties during transition**

It is apparent that both girls have experienced some difficulties during the transition to First Grade. Data findings suggest that both Sarah and Amy experienced some difficulties in reading and writing during the first term. This appears to support Levy’s (2009) argument that the formalised teaching of reading can be damaging for some children.
Similar to Bartholomew and Gustafsson (1997), these findings suggest that every child who experiences transition from kindergarten to First Grade, independently from the school, might find it more or less difficult to shift from a child-centred environment to a more formal approach to learning.

Nevertheless, findings suggest that Amy encountered more difficulty to adjust herself than Sarah due to the huge pedagogical discontinuity. In fact, Ms. Victoria seemed to immediately notice the difficulty Amy was experiencing, admitting that:

I think Amy was one of those girls who did not know the letters. (Ms. Victoria)

This finding consolidates Wong’s (2003) argument, as it seems that while every child might feel burdened by the amount of writing they have in First Grade, children coming from a kindergarten where writing activities are not given such importance, will tend to experience more difficulties in the primary level due to the lack of continuation between the two settings.

Both Sarah and Amy found it difficult to abide by certain ‘rules’ in First Grade. Ms. Victoria reported that:

I try to be consistent with last year’s so that the girls will not be confused. However, every teacher has her own rules. (Ms. Victoria)

Through my observations and the case findings it was obvious that both Sarah and Amy found it difficult to sit down and listen to their teacher. Unfortunately, as Ofsted (2004) state, children in First Grade are required to behave in a certain way without being shown the desired behaviour in advance.

It seems that the transition from kindergarten to First Grade could be difficult not just for the children but also for the First Grade teacher. As Cassidy (2005), Ofsted (2004) and Soler and Miller (2003) also state, it appeared that Ms. Victoria felt
burdened by the curriculum and restriction of time as her opportunities to teach were limited.

When asked if her teaching approach corresponds to her ideological approach, Ms. Victoria stated that:

When I was studying to become a teacher we used to do learning through play a lot. However, here we lack resources and the time is very restricted compared with the work that needs to be done. (Ms. Victoria)

Ms. Victoria’s statement was in line with my observations showing that the teacher did not have time to deliver the lessons using learning through play. This finding conforms the overwhelming issue raised by Soler and Miller (2003) who state that in order to manage the curriculum, many teachers are bound to use a teaching approach which does not correspond with their principles.

**Strategies used to facilitate transition**

Strategies were implemented to help both girls adjust in First grade. Similar to Yeboah (2002) and Entwisle and Alexander (1998) I found that while having peers in the same class helped Sarah to be more confident in First Grade, the lack of friends had negatively affected Amy’s adjustment at the new school. Certainly, this case finding does not support Johansson (2006) who states that peer relationships can be oppressive thus leading to a negative transition.

As an observer in the classroom, I noticed that one of the strategies used to help children adjust and feel secure in First grade was the involvement of parents at school. However, while at first only Claudia seemed to recognise the importance of her role at school, later findings suggested that both Marta and Ms. Victoria recognised that Amy could have benefited from this strategy. While the literature highlighted the importance of parents’ direct contribution with the teacher, more intense research needs to be done about parents’ contribution during school.
Marta and Ms. Victoria said that the school is ready to welcome children since it offers a worksheet pack for the new comers to work during summer. Certainly this requires children to be ready for school rather than vice versa. However, since the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (2009) states that the term ‘school readiness’ is controversial, it might have confused the participants. Conversely, the school’s environment seemed to be ready to welcome all children. It appeared that Ms. Victoria tried to create a positive emotional environment for the children especially for the new comers. She stated that:

I tried to be kind as much as possible and in class I kept emphasising that they were new girls to our school.. (Ms. Victoria)

This finding consolidates the argument of Ramey and Ramey (1994) who argue that the teacher should avoid any type of negative feelings as they might negatively affect the children. The strategy used by Ms. Victoria in this case study might have helped the new girls like Amy, but it did not work with Amy as mentioned earlier.

Apart from the emotional environment, children also require an interesting atmosphere in the classroom (Brostrom, 2000; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Conversely, the findings suggested that the physical environment seemed to depend less on teacher. Although it seemed that there was continuation in the physical environment from kindergarten to First Grade, kindergarten appeared to have more resources. Ms. Victoria reported that:

We both have displays of letters, numbers and colours. During the beginning of the scholastic year I told the girls to sit wherever they wanted, as in kindergarten. But then, Ms. Martina has a play area. (Ms. Victoria)

The school expects children to conform to its philosophies of formal education. However, the study showed that this was deeply problematic for both girls, particularly Amy. Hence, this clearly suggests that some change is needed to accommodate the needs of all children.
Strategies for the near future

It was highly noticeable that some of the participants recognised that more strategies should be implemented to help with the transition. One of the most highlighted concerns was the need for more communication between the kindergarten assistant and the First Grade teacher. While initial data suggested that there was communication between the teachers, it seemed that both identified that there should be more time allocated for meetings. Ms. Martina reported that:

We do not have a strong relationship about the transition. There isn’t time to talk... I think we should meet more; at least at the end of every scholastic year. (Ms. Martina)

These findings consolidate the statement of O’Kane and Hayes (2006) and Wong (2003) who state that only a few schools meet with their attached kindergarten to share information. Moreover, these findings also endorse O’Kane and Hayes (2006) statement as both teachers seemed to desire greater levels of communications. One of the participants would have liked to see more communication between the First Grade teacher and the parents. While Amy’s mother and Ms. Victoria seemed to be satisfied with the available channels of communication, Sarah’s mother would have liked more opportunities to discuss her daughter’s issues with her teacher. Ms. Victoria stated that:

As you know we have the communication book and parents’ day. During the first parents’ meeting I tell them that if they are preoccupied about something, they can also set an appointment with me; so I am not only available during parents’ day. (Ms. Victoria)

Hence, this suggests that parents had various ways to communicate with the teacher. Similar to Ofsted (2004) the communication book is one possible way of communication. However, after comparing with other schools, Claudia reported that:

It is true that we have that notebook but for example other schools send everything at home during the holidays and they tell the parents to pick them up. We were told nothing. (Claudia)
This conforms with Cassidy’s (2005) argument that certain parents prefer talking about their children directly with the teacher rather than using formal communication such as diaries.

Ms. Martina and Ms. Victoria agree the view put forward by McGann and Clark (2007) and Cassidy (2005) that visits to the First Grade classrooms would be helpful. Certainly, the little ones seem to be familiar with only First Grade classroom that is nearby, but they are unfamiliar to the other First Grade classroom’s surroundings.

**Conclusion**

This study was carried out to investigate how two children feel when moving from a familiar environment like that of kindergarten to an unknown place such as First grade. This study focused on three important aspects of transition by using interviews and observations as the main research tools. It was mainly found that discontinuity between kindergarten and First grade could be difficult for children especially when the settings are separate. The discrepancy between settings and teaching approaches lead children to become negatively affected by the transition and furthermore, meet several difficulties at the beginning of the scholastic year. When these difficulties persist, children may not be motivated to learn. Thus, practitioners may need to make more effort to meet every individual’s needs as what works with one child, does not necessarily work with the other. However, teachers feel burdened by the demands of the curriculum imposed on them, hence, in order to keep up with the curriculum, they feel that they are restricted with time. Consequently, I had hoped that the outcomes obtained from the study would be helpful in improving practice in the local context. This would start by increasing awareness and making curriculum changes to allow early childhood educators to adopt a more child-centred approach to learning. Indeed, this could help Maltese children experience a more successful transition.
Considering that this was a case study research, and the sample size was very small, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study with a larger number of participants in order to produce more generalizable findings. It would be also interesting to investigate the transition from kindergarten to First Grade from the perspective of school administration as most of the decisions have to be approved by the head of school.

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CHAPTER 4

“...And she appears to be invisible...” Imaginary companions and children’s creativity

Christina Pace

Introduction

Mandy is off for a picnic with Spike, Nicola pretends she is having a tea party with her friend Emma, Sarah makes space for her friend Gail to sit beside her during break time...

These are some of the most common scenes of my experience in the everyday school life of young children, but is there more to the picture than meets the eye? Intrigued by these childlike episodes, I was tempted to find out more about children’s engagement with imaginary companions and their outstanding sense of creativity.

Children start engaging in fantasy play at the very early stages of their lives and this form of play is usually extended throughout their childhood. Amongst these children, there are some who engage in this form of play on a regular basis through the creation of an imaginary companion (Roby and Kidd, 2008). Through this study, my intention was to expand on prior research and focus on the concept of creativity. Could the presence of imaginary companions be positively associated with a high level of creative thoughts and abilities in young children?
Literature review

Effects of creating an imaginary companion

During play, children tend to use a lot of their imagination by creating fantasy episodes; however, some children may also use their imagination to create friendships with imaginative characters. Bloom (2008) argues that the most common reasons for the creation of an imaginary companion are a child’s birth order, imagination and fantasy life. The firstborn child is more likely to feel the lack of play companions and therefore, such children balance this loneliness through the creation of an imaginary companion. Moreover, children with imaginary companions tend to be more imaginative and engage in more make-believe activities than children without imaginary companions.

Harter and Chao (1992) state that imaginary companions may be created because children do not have the necessary social skills to form friendships or because they are not given a chance to form a relationship with other children. Despite this, Gleason (2004) argues that most children value their friendships with imaginary companions in the same way as their friendships with real friends. On the same note, Singer and Singer (1990) found that in some instances children with imaginary companions tend to be more outgoing and friendly with their peers. They also found that such children are more supportive and show more positive emotion while playing. Gleason (2004) argues that children may improve their interaction skills while engaging in play with imaginary companions and may even form better relationships with real friends as they would have practiced certain skills while engaging with their imaginary companions.

In his study, Bouldin (2006) found that imaginary companions also play a part in cognitive development. Children with imaginary companions were more likely to take part in fantasy play and tended to come up with more creative thoughts than children without imaginary companions. Bouldin’s study also concluded that children
with imaginary companions tended very often to engage in daydreaming and provided a very descriptive and imaginative picture of their encounters. According to Lewis, Boucher, Lupton and Watson (2000) imaginary companions also affect children’s development of language. This is because when they engage in imaginary companion play they have the opportunity to practice their communication skills, and therefore, improve their verbal abilities.

Research shows that there is a relationship between the presence of imaginary companions and emotional understanding (Niec and Russ, 2002). Lindsey and Colwell (2003) found children show great understanding of others’ feelings while playing. Moreover, this study showed that while interacting with their peers, children with imaginary companions tended to think, feel and act in a responsible way when it came to understanding the concept of a relationship. Turn-taking and waiting also proved to be more consistent in children with imaginary companions (Singer, 1961).

Real friendships and imaginary companions

Gleason and Hohmann (2006) argue that at particular stages children begin to develop the notion of friendships. Through their first two years, children start to choose particular peers to play with and start to behave differently with various children. Hartup (1992) argues that by the age of four, the concept of friendships is taken a step further as children begin to refer to their most preferred peers as ‘friends’.

There are numerous descriptions of what constitutes a friendship. Ladd, Kochenderfer and Coleman (1996) studied mutual relationships between children, where they defined friendships by means of a give-and-take relationship. Astington (1993) took his study a step further and focused on ‘unilateral friendships’, where a child’s preference of engaging with a particular peer is not reciprocated with the same type of friendship. In addition to the above, there is another important type of friendship; one which I was intrigued by and led me to focus my research study on;
that of children engaging with an imaginary companion (Gleason and Hohmann, 2006). Taylor (1999) argues that although friendships with an imaginary companion cannot be regarded as a relationship with a peer, research has shown that children who engage in imaginary companion play receive some of the same benefits as children who only engage in a peer-to-peer relationship. Gleason (2004) shows that peers accept children with imaginary companions as much as other peers.

One interesting issue relating to the concept of imaginary companions versus real friendships is the ability of children to differentiate between fantasy and reality. Bouldin and Pratt (2001) argue that children are able to differentiate between fantasy and reality from the age of three years, however, the element of the surreal makes their explanations rather far-fetched and mysterious. Wellman (1990) believes that this occurs because at this age children cannot come to terms with the notion that fantasy imitates the actual world, and as a result, wrongly believe that imaginary content mirrors reality. Taylor, Cartwright and Carlson (1993) conducted a study of the fantasy-reality issue in children’s lives showing that children with and without an imaginary companion thought about a companion which can be mirrored in the real world, therefore, the fantasy issue did not confuse them.

Creative imagination in early childhood education

Finke, Warde and Smith (1992) argue that creativity is made up of two stages; the generation of a novel hypothesis and the exploration of that hypothesis. Harris (2000) incorporates this assumption into children’s pretend play. He believes that the first step to a child engaging in make-believe play is the imagined picture. Then, the child takes action by performing actions through his/her own background knowledge. On the same note, Carruthers (2002) points out that following this, children start to broaden the make-believe episode through their own imagination. With regard to the notion of creativity, Hagel, Brown and Davison (2010) point out that gradually, we are moving away from the belief that knowledge lies in the millions of resources and large amounts of information we find in classrooms, and in organization and accuracy. According to Lehane (1979) creativity in children is expressed through coming up with novel ways to use objects, through merging
several objects together or through finding out and exploring something which they never knew before. Lehane (1979) continues to argue that it is the process of interest, discovery and play that is important to children rather than the final product. But how can the element of pretence aid children’s development of creativity?

From the age of eighteen months children start to engage in what we may see as a peculiar method of play, which means, they start the first steps towards engaging in pretend play. Therefore, play can be seen as one of the most important factors in the development of creativity (Russ, 1993). According to Russ (1993), through play, most children experience the cognitive and emotional processes that are associated with creativity. Fein (1987) pointed out that play has an important role in the development of an emotional symbol technique in creativity. Clark, Griffing and Johnson (1989) found a relationship between play and divergent thinking while Leiberman (1977) found a connection between spontaneity, pleasure and divergent thinking in preschool children.

Singer and Singer (1981) also found that children who had a high level of imagination used elements of risk and authority a lot more than children with a low level of imagination. Studies like this show that imagination is a key instrument in solving most mental activities. With respect to this assumption, Saifer (2010) argues that ‘imaginative and creative thinking are the most important abilities for effectively negotiating the complex world we live in now and especially for the world of the near future’ (p. 41). In fact, a study by Pink (2006) shows that children who use their creative imagination during play, will be better able to understand algebra when they grow older rather than methods of rote counting. In conclusion, Mindham (2005) rightly argues that educators should not focus only on the educational aspect, but they should give more importance to the most essential skills in children’s lives, those which include imagination, innovation and creativity.
Methodology

The study

To explore the relationship between children’s imaginary companions and their creativity, I used a qualitative research approach. I believe that quantitative methods would have been inadequate on their own to explain the phenomena I wanted to study as I wished to ‘study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Lincoln and Guba, 2000 p. 3).

The main qualitative research methods I used throughout this study were participant observation and unstructured interviews. I decided to focus on these two methods because through participant observation I wanted to collect data by letting the participants express their usual behaviour in their usual day-to-day setting. On the other hand, through unstructured interviews I wanted to obtain richer and in-depth data about the children’s creative thoughts and abilities and to obtain information about any experiences I would have failed to pin-point through the observation period.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Selecting who would participate in my study was a very important step in the research process, and required careful thought. Before selecting the participants for this study, I thought about several factors, including the time I had available, the size of my research study, I thought about what I planned to explore and where I wanted to gather my data from. I focused on the method of ‘handpicked’ sampling. This sampling method was ideal for selecting participants based on the purpose of the study and on the characteristics of participants who most likely fitted the research criteria (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The participants included three 5-6 year old children from a grade 1 classroom from an independent school. All the three participants were girls, there were no boys who had an imaginary companion in the classroom where I carried out my research study.
Methods of Data Collection

The first step was to observe the children in their normal school routine. As Becker (1958) points out, when using participant observation, the researcher is the most important tool to gather data as (s)he becomes part of the participants’ lives by gaining knowledge of the language they use and the behaviour they show.

I carried out my observations over a period of two weeks. During the first week of observation, my aim was to watch children and take notes about the situations in which the children mentioned their imaginary companions, how they treated their imaginary companions and the type of language they used to interact with their companions. This was done by involving myself in children’s everyday activities and by looking at and listening to their conversations. During the second week of observation, I mainly focused on the children’s sense of creativity by looking at various aspects, some of which were their artistic abilities, their generation of ideas during group work, the ability to express themselves and their methods of play.

In my research study, participant observation served not only as a means of collecting data, but also captured children’s non-verbal expressions such as facial expressions, eye-contact, gestures, the tone of their voice during interaction as well as the way they looked, listened and reacted to activities going on in class. Moreover, observation gave me the opportunity to view the children’s behaviour and creative abilities during spontaneous episodes. To be able to add-on and enhance the data collected through observation, I also conducted unstructured interviews with the participant children. This gave me the opportunity deeply to explore the first responses that children gave me so as to obtain a more specific answer about how their engagement with imaginary companions affected their creative abilities. During the unstructured interviews, I gave particular importance to the children’s descriptions of their imaginary companions and to the creativity in the language they used to talk about their imaginary companions.
Ethical Considerations: Protection and wellbeing of participants

In my study, children were protected at all times during the course of this research. Parents and the junior school director were informed that if throughout the observations there were any signs of distress from any of the students, I would stop immediately. Parents were also told that throughout the research they could withdraw from the study at any time without offering any particular reason. I explained to parents that their child’s privacy was going to be respected and any information such as real names and other identifying information was going to be changed so children would not be identified in any report or publication. Moreover, I explained that the collected data was going to be stored in a secure location and that any photographic media of their child’s activities made during this research were going to be used only for my study and then destroyed.

Through this research, I also went through a vetting process where parents were given the opportunity to view the observations and any photographic material of their children before I analyzed the findings. They were told that if they wished me to omit something, their opinion would be respected. In the event of concerns relating to the protection of the children, I informed them that I would be obliged to report such information and comply with the designated agencies as appropriate.

The purpose of the research was also explained to the children and, in a child friendly way I asked whether they would like to participate. This was witnessed by a colleague, to confirm that the information was appropriately explained and, most importantly, understood by all three girls. Finally, all information sheets and consent forms were signed and approved by the junior school director of the school in which I carried out this research study.

Means of Analysis

The process of analyzing data involved a number of steps. I began the process of data analysis with transcribing the audiorecording to be able to listen to the data once more and familiarize myself with it. Following that, I read the transcriptions of
the collected data. Here I did not look for common themes but just read the children’s ‘words’ as I heard them during observations and interviews. Then I moved on to the step of interrogation. Here I focused on categorizing any matters which came out from the collected data. This also helped me to start coming up with a structure for sorting out the data into significant themes. The next step involved thematizing the data. At this stage I came up with specific themes from different categories. This helped me to link the various concepts together under one theme. Following that, I expanded the themes. Here a build up and amalgamation of themes occurred. This was needed to discover any associations and to make out any other potential connotations. Finally, I summarised the themes and clearly described the my findings with regard to the relationship between imaginary companion play and creative abilities in children.

Findings and discussion

A unique vision toward play

Children who had imaginary companions were noted to have a complex sense of imagination during play, both while playing with their imaginary friends and while playing with their peers. Engagement with imaginary companions allowed the three participants to experience everyday situations with a different and more imaginative attitude than their peers. In her study, Bloom (2008) argued that children who had an imaginary companion were more likely to engage in make-believe activities and seemed to be highly imaginative. Findings from my study support this assumption as the three participants were observed to engage in play that did not involve skill building, structure and electronics. They did not limit themselves to play with popular characters but seemed to prefer playing with either their imaginary companion or with things and characters they made up themselves. It was also noted that when they had a problem or wanted to solve something, they tended to come up with conversations to try and figure out what to do.
In addition, all three participants were observed occupying their time constructively and giving a hint of imagination and creativity to every toy they chose to play with. No toy was seen as having its own specific functions to carry out, but there was always their input of decisions and their own formulation of ideas over their play things. This clearly showed that children who created imaginary companions did not rely on adult’s intervention to enjoy themselves, but could come up with their own unique ideas and were able to make appropriate choices during unscheduled periods of the day.

An Endless Sense of Creativity

Children with imaginary companions tended to show high levels of creativity in a diverse number of tasks. Observations and interviews revealed that the girls with imaginary companions showed a high level of creativity in four areas. These were:

**Self-confidence and responsibility**

Overall, while participating in a wide range of tasks, the participants seemed to appear confident and satisfied, even when a task was not fully completed. Whereas other children tended to give up or feel sad at the thought of not completing a particular activity, children who interacted with imaginary companions had the ability to still look satisfied and confident that they will succeed in the following task. Self-confidence was also evident in the participants’ expression of satisfaction once they finished a piece of work. These children seemed to feel proud of themselves when they finished a piece of work and could show this very clearly through their facial expressions.

The three participants, I think, believed in themselves and had the ability to handle responsibility appropriately. As a result, I observed that this sense of confidence seemed to encourage these three children to engage in more challenging tasks as well as taking decisions without fear of failure. Their sense of responsibility was clearly evident while I observed the children during recess and play time. All the
three participants were seen picking up things and clearing up after playing with a particular object without being asked to do so. In addition, they were the ones who mostly volunteered to help out in classroom chores and the ones who least complained when being told to stop playing and start working. The three participants’ self-confidence also stood out in their endeavors to help their peers. Very often, I observed them giving verbal praise to their friends and this seemed to transmit their self-confidence onto the other children in class. In addition, they also tended to show their appreciation toward the teacher’s help and complimented their peers when doing something good. From the above episodes, it is possible to say that the children who had an imaginary companion were likely to have high self-esteem and a great ability of valuing, respecting and accepting both their own opinions and those of their peers.

**Teamwork and Co-operation**

When participating in classroom teamwork games, the three girls worked together with other children to achieve a common goal, they showed very good skills while working in a team. During the unstructured interviews, all three girls told me about a fundraising activity they were organizing at school. They explained about how they planned it together with their teacher and friends and while talking, I could see that they clearly understood what teamwork and cooperation meant. This clearly showed they were able to cooperate together with other children to achieve a common goal. They also understood the concept of teamwork and were able to apply it in their everyday lives.

**Communicating and Presenting Ideas**

To communicate their understanding of certain concepts and to present their ideas, I observed that regardless of which method they chose to express themselves, they always did this with a certain amount of creative potential. Their drawings always included a high degree of imagination, and they were observed to explain their
drawings in detail and with a confident tone. They also used a lot of colours and detail in their drawings. On the same note, Bouldin (2006) argued that children who created imaginary companions tended to come up with a lot of creative thoughts and were able to form vivid dramatic psychological representations. Data from my study revealed that the girls had a great ability to communicate their ideas and present them in a creative manner, also their verbal explanations involved a lot of detail and they provided very creative responses.

**Taking risks**

It was evident that the three girls displayed less fear when experimenting and exploring new things or novel methods of play than the majority of the 5-6-year-old girls – who usually preferred playing with dolls and going to the ‘grocery store’. The children with imaginary companions often opted for the more risky kind of play. While focusing on the realm of creativity, Singer and Singer (1981) found that children who had a high level of imagination used elements of risk and authority a lot more than children with a low level of imagination. My study supports this assumption, showing that the girls who engaged in imaginary companion play displayed minimal fear when experimenting and exploring new things or novel methods of play.

**Creativity expressed through children’s holistic development**

In my study I found that creativity promoted the holistic development of children. Apart from being creative in learning and play, children who created imaginary companions also expressed their creative potential in all the areas of development.

**Cognitive Development**

The three participants were noted to have good attention skills, remembered a number of things and enjoyed learning. An episode which portrayed a sense of creativity in cognitive development occurred during an art session. One of the
participants was very focused on a piece of art that she was painting. She was mixing colours to get the exact colours that she wanted, and she seemed to be so happy and enjoying what she was doing. Half way through her painting, her teacher stopped to look at her work and asked her what she was painting. She looked so surprised and could not understand why her painting had to be something meaningful. While looking very surprised, she answered “its something very nice, I don’t know what it is but I like it and its going to be so beautiful when I’m ready”. This example suggests that it is possible that children with an imaginary companion have the ability to come up with their own unique ideas and to be proud of them.

**Social and Emotional Development**

The girls who had an imaginary companion were also noted to be socially skilled and emotionally mature, as expressed in a number of ways on a daily basis. They showed high emotional expression while interacting with their imaginary companion and also while interacting with their peers. In contrast to the above positive perception toward creativity, Harter and Chao (1992) found out that most children created imaginary companions because they did not have the necessary social skills to form friendships or because they were not given a chance to form a relationship with other children. However, my study does not support this notion as the children who had imaginary companions showed competent social skills and were always noted to find creative ways to build positive relationships with their peers. My findings also concur with Singer and Singer (1990) when they argue that children who create imaginary companions are more supportive and show more positive emotion while playing. The three participants were noted to show awareness of other people’s feelings. Furthermore, all the three children were able to share and play appropriately with the friends they chose. The participants were able to hold conversations with their friends and took turns to speak. They were also capable of listening to what their friends wanted to say in their conversation and did not find any difficulties in verbally expressing their emotions, both positive and negative.
Language Development

Imaginary companions seemed to promote rich vocabulary in these children. Lewis, Boucher, Lupton and Watson (2000) found that children who had an imaginary companion tended to develop creative language abilities. I found this to be true, for all three participants used rich vocabulary and were able to engage in long and meaningful conversations with both peers and adults., Mouchiroud and Lubart (2002), defined creativity as ‘a set of capacities enabling a person to behave in new and adaptive ways in given contexts’ (p. 60). The participants in my study were seen doing this in a variety of ways. These children did not rely on adult’s intervention to enjoy themselves, but could come up with their own unique ideas and were able to make appropriate choices during unscheduled periods of the day.

The participants were noted to use enhanced talk, both in class and while playing with their peers. They used a vast range of vocabulary and were able to come up with appropriate conversations. Since playing with their imaginary companions often involved coming up with original ideas, the three participants developed sophisticated language skills.

Physical Development

It was evident that while playing, children who had an imaginary companion seemed to use a lot of body movements, gestures and facial expressions. The findings showed that children with an imaginary companion could clearly show a vast range of facial expressions depending on whether an activity appeared enjoyable or work-related. I could particularly observe their obvious non-verbal gestures as they moved from one activity to another in class. The participants’ facial expressions changed from that of bored and sad when doing something they did not like to that of enjoyment and satisfaction when doing an activity they really enjoyed. The three participants also had a great ability to combine verbal and non-verbal communication, used appropriate eye-contact and a corresponding voice tone to get their message across. The three participants were also noted to differentiate
between keeping a close spatial distance and when they should keep a greater distance. They stood close to their best friends but kept a distance when talking to teachers or people they were not familiar with.

**Conclusion**

Data from this study suggested that overall, children who created imaginary companions showed a high level of creativity in a variety of ways. Throughout this study, I came to realize that past misconceptions and negative messages portrayed by the media seem to have left a deep impact on imaginary companion play in early childhood education. I learned that looking at the world through children’s eyes is very important as sometimes children may be offering us educators a subtle awakening that they are not being given much opportunity to express themselves and to show their creative potential. I feel that children have a lot to teach us with regard to creativity. Our role is to make sure that we are giving all the children multiple opportunities to explore and understand their sense of curiosity and creativity. Concentrating on academic input and behaviour only will definitely not strengthen early years practice. The world is moving at a fast pace and we have to prepare children for the challenges they might come across later on in their lives. With this in mind, I believe that giving them a chance to develop a creative mind and nurturing a positive perspective toward life will help them make the right decisions in the future.

Future research examining the relationship between children who create imaginary companions and their level of creativity should first and foremost include a deep understanding of what imaginary companions are and what creativity is. Moreover, it would be interesting to take various aspects into consideration, such as a wide age span, different gender and a larger sample. Data could also be enriched by interviewing parents to obtain information about their engagement with their imaginary companion and their level of creativity at home. Another interesting point for future research would be to compare characteristics of imaginary companions
with characteristics of real friends in the same sample in order to highlight the specific contributions of imaginary companions in relation to their creative abilities. It would be interesting too, to compare children with imaginary companions and children with other creative abilities who did not have imaginary friends. Such studies could help educators become more aware of the benefits and issues related to having an imaginary companion during early childhood. This could also lead to greater understanding of the importance of letting all children explore, experiment and engage in imaginative play to be able to benefit from a positive holistic development.

References

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CHAPTER 5

Two of a kind? A baby with Down syndrome and his typically developing twin.

Laura Busuttil

Introduction

‘Whether children are at risk or disabled or in a normal developmental situation, it has been shown that their development cannot be studied without looking at the particular contexts in which they live and are brought up’ (Serpa and Menéres, 2003, p. 210).

It is widely recognised that family life will change with the birth of a child, especially if the child has a disability (Dodd, 2004; Bower, Chant and Chatwin, 1998). Bateman (2004) claims; ‘having a disability has a strong impact on the family unit and each individual that makes up the family system’ (p. 1).

However, the degree by which the family is influenced depends on a number of variables including the type of disability, family style and dynamics as well as parental attitudes (Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti, Leonard and Bower, 2008). Since parents are very influential figures in children’s lives, they will have the greatest impact on children’s development (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000; Townsend, 1998). If parents view the child with disability as having a negative influence on family dynamics and on other family members, this state of mind and attitude can transfer to others in the family thus parental attitudes and perceptions towards disability and the child will affect the whole family (Kresak, Gallagher and Rhodes, 2009).

‘Siblings as well as parents face adjustment and adaptation to having a child with a disability in the family’ (Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti, Leonard and Bower, 2008, p.216).
According to Bateman (2004), more importance is being given to how siblings adjust to having a brother/sister with impairment a disability and how certain family characteristics influence this adjustment. Parental attitudes in early years will influence not only the child with disability but it will also affect siblings’ life (Kresak, Gallagher and Rhodes, 2009). Moreover, Pit-Ten Cate and Loots (2000) state; ‘the way in which parents cope with raising a child with a disability in part determines the sibling adaptation’ (p.400).

There have been numerous studies which focus on how siblings are influenced when they have a sibling with Down syndrome (DS) (Cuskelly, Hauser-Cram and Van Riper, 2009). Some studies claim that there are negative effects on siblings since there are related challenges and responsibilities related to the syndrome itself whilst other studies suggest that there is no confirmation that a child with DS negatively affects siblings (Rampton, Rosemann, Latta, Mandleco, Olsen Roper and Dyches, 2007; Van Hooste and Maes, 2003). Moreover, additional research studies mention the presence of positive effects whilst others report no differences when these children are compared to others who have no siblings with disability (Hastings, 2003).

As an early intervention educator working with children with DS I notice that sometimes siblings go unnoticed since the focus will be on the child with disability. I have been working with a family who has twin babies where one of the children has DS and the other is developing typically. I was curious to know whether the typically developing twin will experience some effects as a result of having a twin brother with DS and what are the parents’ views on this topic. Therefore I asked the following research questions:

What effects do parents consider their baby with DS has on his normally developing twin?
Do they interact in diverse ways with the developmentally different twins?
Literature Review

Down syndrome (DS) and Child Development

Amongst all the types of chromosomal abnormalities identified to date, DS is one of the most common, occurring approximately 1 in every 800 live births (Berk, 2003; Bee, 1995). Trisomy 21 is the most commonly occurring, which is characterised by an additional chromosome 21 so individuals will have ‘three copies of chromosome 21 rather than the normal two’ (Bee, 1995, p.51; Lott and McCoy, 1992).

Children who have DS have a degree of mental retardation (Orsmond and Seltzer, 2007; Van Riper, 2000). However, in order to better understand how development is influenced by the syndrome, it is important to evaluate typical development (Buckley and Sacks, 2001).

Development is not determined by genes at birth, but is the result of an interaction between a child’s potential, biology and learning opportunities available and this applies to children with DS too (Buckley and Sacks, 2001). Most learning in early years happens within the family where the first forms of social relationships occur with parents and siblings whose stimulation and support affect children’s development (Buckley and Sacks, 2001; de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2008).

Development of children with DS follows the same patterns as those of typically developing children, but usually at a slower rate therefore they will achieve developmental milestones later than typically developing children (Cuskelly, Hauser-Cram and Van Riper, 2009; Buckley and Sacks, 2001; Lane and Stratford, 1985). However, the effect of the chromosomal difference on development is not the same for all children with DS (Buckley and Sacks, 2001). They show a ‘wide range of individual differences in terms of their cognitive, social and physical abilities, health status and personality’ (Cunningham, 1996, p.88). This suggests that early
experiences will have an impact on how the extra chromosome 21 affects development (Lott and McCoy, 1992).

Regarding their developmental profile, children with DS will vary from one another in their rate of progress, even though there are specific strengths and weaknesses pertaining to most children with this syndrome (Buckley and Sacks, 2001). Nowadays we have a clearer picture on how DS affects development therefore effective strategies and interventions to better suit the children’s needs can be offered (Buckley and Sacks, 2001). Whilst bearing in mind the individuality and uniqueness of each child (Meggitt, 2006), we can presume that children with DS need ‘more intensive and directive interactions’ (Van Hooste and Maes, 2003, p.298) and though their genetic make-up plays an important role, a positive environment will affect their developmental progress (Berk, 2003).

**Developmentally different twins: Effects on typically developing siblings**

According to Dyson (2010), family dynamics are influenced by children and in their study, Graham and Scuddler (2007) found that ‘the uniqueness of the twin set, with one developing typically and one with Down syndrome, may further have affected family interactions in ways not previously evaluated’ (p.111). This particular case scenario is not so common, in fact, in a group of 1000 babies with DS, an average of 15 will be twins with the other twin developing typically (Buckley, 2003).

Almost 80% of children with disabilities have non disabled siblings (Naylor and Prescott, 2004; Burke and Montgomery, 2000). Whether twins or not, sibling relationships are important and unique due to their long-lasting duration (Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003).

Siblings affect each other’s development, however, when one of the children has a disability, sibling relationships may change (Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003). O’Kelley (2006) states that ‘siblings are in a unique position within the family to experience multiple aspects of a child’s disability’ (p.3). Moreover,
siblings will begin to understand disability as an everyday occurrence and so will perceive it as such (Burke, 2010). Sullivan (2002) sustains that siblings of children with DS will be indirectly affected because of the syndrome therefore it is important to remember that they ‘have needs of their own which require attention, understanding and support’ (Dodd, 2004, p.41).

According to Cunningham (1996), because of methodological problems, most research available on siblings of children with disabilities portrays a rather confusing picture since some claim that there are positive effects whilst others claim the opposite. Earlier studies tended to focus completely on negative effects on siblings, however, ‘more recent research has found little difference in a range of behaviour and social constructs’ when siblings of children with disability were compared to children who do not have siblings with disability (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009, p.23). Whether positively or negatively, childhood experiences for siblings of children with DS will be influenced by the whole scenario, primarily because most of the parents’ time, resources and energy will be directed towards the child who needs more of an input to develop (Rampton et al., 2007).

In Van Riper’s (2000) study, many siblings claimed that growing up with a child with DS is a positive experience, which helped them mature and grow up. Numerous research studies mention tolerance and awareness towards others who are different as a feature noted in most siblings of children with disability (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Atkins, 1989). These siblings will also show ‘greater overall understanding for the disabled child’s difficulties’ since they have the opportunity to observe them go through their daily struggles (Hames, 2005, p.14). Two other positive attributes found in siblings of children with disabilities are altruism and a caring, compassionate nature thus helping them become more mature and responsible (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009; Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti, Leonard and Bower, 2008; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Atkins, 1989). Other potential positive effects siblings will gain as a result of growing up with a child with disability
include sensitivity and nonjudgmental attitudes (Rodger and Tooth, 2004), independence (Rampton et al., 2007), empathy and helpfulness (Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003), a better self-concept and humanitarian concerns (Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000) and more appreciation of diversity (Eget, 2009).

Negative effects of living with a child with disability have also been highlighted in literature and two effects claimed by numerous authors include anxiety and loneliness (Barr, McLeod and Daniel, 2008; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000). Most negative effects on siblings of children with disability relate to the family and parents (Lobato, 1990). Most children report that because of the sibling with disability, family outings are sometimes impossible (Barlow and Ellard, 2006), family social activities will be limited (Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000) and routines will be restricted (O’Brien, Duffy and Nicholl, 2009; Lobato, 1990). Another issue was that siblings claim that they receive less/limited time and attention from parents (O’Brien, Duffy and Nicholl, 2009; Barlow and Ellard, 2006; Lobato, 1990).

Siblings may also experience many feelings like guilt, especially about their own health (Barr, McLeod and Daniel, 2008; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Lobato, 1990), depression (Rampton et al., 2007; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000), embarrassment (Rampton et al., 2007; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Lobato, 1990) as well as some difficulties regarding their peer relations as they may be teased or bullied and will have decreased time for social activities (Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Lobato, 1990). This is because they might have extra responsibilities at home imposed on them that result in resentfulness and jealousy with increased sibling conflict (Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti, Leonard and Bower, 2008; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000).

According to Hastings (2003), ‘these findings are useful in confirming that siblings are an important part of the family that should not be ignored by practitioners’ (p.102). By recognising that siblings are valued members in families where there’s a child
with disability will help to protect their wellbeing (O’Brien, Duffy and Nicholl, 2009). The development of the child with disability will benefit from siblings’ input since they offer a role model to follow (Dodd, 2004).

Being a sibling of a child with disability will carry some implications and it’s important that researchers and practitioners understand siblings’ experiences (Rampton et al., 2007). They are the ones who can help siblings ‘appraise their experiences positively’ and this will consecutively enhance sibling relationships (Orsmond and Seltzer, 2007, p.694). Therefore, siblings’ needs and rights should form part of the family’s situation assessment (Naylor and Prescott, 2004) since there are other factors apart from the presence of a disability that have an influence on siblings’ adjustment and experiences (Bateman, 2004). Among these factors, parental influences ‘are key elements that need to be understood if one is to appropriately address the needs of individual siblings’ (Atkins, 1989, p.281). Dodd (2004) sustains that parental acceptance of the disability will influence siblings’ reactions and perceptions. Children take their view of disability from their parents and so parents are the ones who need to help siblings develop a positive attitude with regards to the child with disability (Kresak, Gallagher and Rhodes, 2009; Cunningham, 1996). If the family is able to meet the needs of all family members, negative effects on the siblings can be greatly diminished (Cunningham, 1996).

**Parental Perspectives on Disability**

When a child has DS, parents may underestimate his/her ability and potential for learning thus inadvertently, change opportunities for learning (Graham, 2001). Moreover, ‘parents themselves may have difficulty accepting the child’s diagnosis and prognosis, and can experience anxiety about the child’s future and well-being’ which will influence their perspectives (Barlow and Ellard, 2006, p.20). Lane and Stratford (1989) actually claim that the parents’ primary need is to deal with the diagnosis that their child has DS.
According to Chen and McCollum (2001), parents’ perspectives and values may be different if the child has a disability. These perceptions will be reflected in how parents contribute to their child’s development since even parent-child interaction styles will be affected (de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2008).

Most parents of children with DS report higher levels of stress when they compare themselves with families who do not have children with disabilities (Sullivan, 2002). This is because these families not only have to deal with the demands ‘faced by families with typically developing children, but also to the unique responsibilities and challenges associated with raising a child with Down syndrome’ and this will influence how parents perceive disability (Van Riper, 2000, p.270). Moreover, Van Riper (2000) claims that due to these added demands on the family unit, other family members’ needs like siblings’ will not be a priority. Parental stress, increased demands on time, physical and emotional demands, decreased level of well-being and disrupted marital relationships are all factors parents may experience if they perceive the disability as something negative (de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2010; O’Brien, Duffy and Nicholl, 2009; Van Riper, 2000).

However, not all parents of children with disability have a negative outlook on disability and in Cunningham’s (1996) study, most families reported ‘no negative psychological effects on their lives or other children’ (p.93). Some mothers even perceive their child with DS as a collaborator, helping to create and sustain positive relations between family members (Cuskelley, Hauser-Cram and Van Riper, 2009). Cunningham (1996) also claimed that most mothers participating in his research sustained that the child with DS had positive effects on siblings.

An additional factor influencing parental perspective on disability is the issue of the parent as a teacher for their child with additional needs (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000). When compared to families of typically developing children, parents of children with disability spend more time with their children on educational activities and intervention and less time on social activities (Van Riper, 2000). For most parents, this might result in a role conflict since most often, they want to be simply
parents and not engage in a pedagogical role (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000). However, it is important to bear in mind that all children, whether they present some form of disability or not, ‘need their parents to spend time with them, supporting, explaining, endorsing and challenging them to move on from what they know to do more’ (Nutbrown, 2006a, p.97). Parents need to distribute resources and attention amongst all family members (Bateman, 2004) and when this is done, successful family adaptation takes place (Van Riper, 2000).

**Parental role in relation to child’s learning – is it affected by disability/syndrome?**

‘Parents are responsible for their children’s experiences’ (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2004, p.113) and if they know how children learn and develop, they can better understand children’s actions and act accordingly to augment their development and learning (Nutbrown, Clough and Selbie, 2008). This notion of parental involvement in children’s learning is based on the fact that families are the first social group children are exposed to and it’s within families that the first form of social learning occurs, an idea also sustained by Vygotsky (Nutbrown, Clough and Selbie, 2008).

When children have some form of intellectual disability, ‘development depends crucially on the degree to which parents offer suitable stimulation and emotional support’ (de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2008, p.490). However, depending on parents’ perceptions about disability, parent-child interactions may be influenced thus ‘mothers and fathers may contribute in different ways to the development of their DS children’ (de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2008, p.491).

In their research about parent interactions with twins who are developmentally different, Graham and Scudder (2007) found that sometimes, parent-child interactions are structured, especially the mothers’ with the twin who has DS. Mothers are those who most often assume a teacher role when working with their
child with DS and reportedly use more directions, sign language and gestures when interacting with the twin with DS (Graham and Scudder, 2007).

When parents were asked whether they are conscious of this discrepancy in interaction styles with their developmentally different twins, Graham and Scudder (2007) found that mothers more than fathers are aware of the differences in their behaviours with the twins. Mothers claimed that they knowingly spend more time with the twin with DS to work on particular intervention tasks since they deem that the developmental progress of the child with DS needs more attention (Graham and Scudder, 2007). The fathers, in contrast answered that they believe they interact in the same way with the developmentally different twins (Graham and Scudder, 2007).

This type of research shows that parental contributions to the development of children with DS are different but both positive and aid children’s development (de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein, 2010). By observing these types of parent-child interactions, professionals working with the family can gather more information on family dynamics thus ensuring that all the members’ needs are met and life is not ‘dictated by the needs of the child with a disability’ (Bateman, 2004, p.13).

**Summary**

The overall picture of a family where there is a child with DS is a normal one where the factors that influence family well being are similar to those of any other family (Cunningham, 1996). However, certain families do experience a certain degree of stress as a result of having a child with DS which will influence family functioning and cohesion (O’Brien, Duffy and Nicholl, 2009).

Dodd (2004) sustains that professionals working with the family can offer support to all members, including siblings so that emotional well being and adjustment is obtained. There are a number of ways that families can be assisted by professionals
but one of the most powerful is when service providers involve siblings in any events involving the child with disability (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009) as this will result in more positive sibling relationships (Orsmond and Seltzer, 2007).

When professionals consider the needs of the child with disability, it’s essential that siblings’ needs are also accounted for (Burke and Montgomery, 2000). Parents, together with service providers, need ‘to ensure that the needs of the siblings of disabled children are not hidden or masked by the constructed landscapes of both disability and childhood’ (Naylor and Prescott, 2004, p.205). If one family member has DS, it cannot be assumed that the other family members will suffer from some sort of problems and negative outcomes (Cunningham, 1996).

**Methods and Methodology**

Research always starts off from the premise that there is a subject of interest to the researcher which can be explored from a particular point of view within a given context (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007; Denscombe, 2007). When researchers identify the aim and rationale of the research, it will be easier to create the research design and see what type of methodology best suits the research’s purpose (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

My research study calls for a qualitative approach. I want to identify parents’ views of the effects their baby with DS has on his typically developing twin and according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a qualitative research is when researchers try to understand or explain scenarios and experiences by seeing what meanings people bring to them. This will allow readers ‘to understand the essence of what it is like to experience a particular life situation’ (Hutson and Alter, 2007, p.73). Moreover, the research sample in this study is rather small and emphasis will be on the lived experiences of participants. This goes in accordance to what Clough and Nutbrown (2007) claim; ‘some studies can be designed to achieve depth and specification by focusing on a small number of the participants to follow up in greater detail’ (p.160).
Devising the Research Questions

Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggest two approaches to aid researchers devising their research questions; the Russian Doll Principle and the Goldilocks Test. The Russian Doll Principle can be used to narrow down the focus of the research question and the Goldilocks Test is a way of checking whether a research question is appropriate to be carried out at a particular location and time (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). I utilised both the Russian Doll Principle and the Goldilocks Test as guidelines to help me devise my research questions. Clough and Nutbrown (2007, p.40) provide a framework (Table 5:1) which I used to refine my research questions.

Table 5:1: Devising Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Draft Research Question</th>
<th>Goldilocks Test</th>
<th>Russian Doll Principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How effective is early intervention? What are its benefits for children with DS aged 0-3?</td>
<td>Too big and too hot</td>
<td>This question requires several smaller questions before a study could be designed around it. This question is quite sensitive since it is a topic currently investigated by the Maltese government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How does DS affect family dynamics?</td>
<td>Too big</td>
<td>This question requires several smaller questions before a study could be designed around it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What effects does a baby with DS have on his typically developing twin?</td>
<td>Just right?</td>
<td>This question couldn’t be explored from the twins’ point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What effects do parents consider their baby with DS has on his normally developing twin? Do they interact in diverse ways with the different twins?</td>
<td>Just right?</td>
<td>This question will help to identify this unique family dynamics scenario.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Clough and Nutbrown 2007, p.40)
Case study

For this particular research study, I conducted a case study. I want to identify parents’ thoughts and feelings regarding having developmentally different twins, how they think DS will affect the typically developing brother and whether they interact in diverse ways with the twins. Through a case study I could better understand this particular case scenario. This in fact goes in accordance with what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) claim, that ‘case studies strive to portray what it is like to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and thick description of participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation’ (p.254). A case study will help to focus on parents’ feelings and thoughts on this delicate subject and I will better understand their perception of event and readers will better understand the situation as it will be recounted from the parents’ perspectives.

After choosing the methodology, one should then decide what research method best suits the study’s requirements (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). There are numerous techniques listed under research methods, amongst which interviews (Creswell, 2003) are suitable when sensitive and delicate topics need to be investigated.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews

Interviews are a very flexible tool; they give participants the opportunity to be spontaneous whilst simultaneously answering questions and researchers will still have some degree of control over the interview flow (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Denscombe, 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2007). Clough and Nutbrown (2007) and Denscombe (2007) sustain that the best way to record interview data is by audio or video recording so that no comments or quotes are lost. This will enable the researcher to also take handwritten notes to record any additional information and reactions, especially non-verbal, which might occur during the interview which will further enhance data analysis (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2007).
One of the main disadvantages of interviews is the interviewer bias since the researcher is the main research instrument and he/she will have values and biases which may influence responses and outcomes (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Denscombe, 2007). Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2007) also mention other factors like interviewer’s age, culture and gender as possible sources of bias which might affect how questions are analysed and answered. Thus one of the main advantages of the interview - its flexibility, can also be regarded as a disadvantage as this might result in lack of standardisation (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2007).

Another disadvantage of interviews is participants’ anonymity which can be somewhat of an issue since the researcher might know the respondents and these in turn might feel as if they are obliged to answer, even though some questions are rather sensitive (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2007). Although each and every research method has its disadvantages and advantages, researchers must be adept in trying to minimise the disadvantages and use the advantages to their gain.

**Sampling and Data Collection**

According to Creswell (1998), the first step a researcher must do is to identify whether the study requires using one case or several cases. One method of sampling strategy is called purposive sampling which means choosing research participants according to ‘their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In my case, the characteristic which I was looking for in my participants was having twins which were developmentally different and one of them had to have DS. The Maltese population is relatively small therefore it is somewhat rare to find a family with these characteristics. Thus for this research it was more apt to focus on one particular family rather than on multiple cases.

I interviewed the parents, using my review of the literature to identify the topics I wanted to explore during the interviews based on my research questions, using
semi-structured interviews offer more flexibility and a higher rapport (Denscombe, 2007; Groth-Marnat, 2003).

The parents were interviewed separately because I wanted to see whether the mother and the father held different views about their interactions. The parents were presented with the information letter which contained all information pertaining to the research. Following that, they signed a consent letter which stated that they understood the information letter and in which I asked for their consent and permission to use a tape recorder during the interviews.

**Ethical Issues**

Any research involving human participants requires to be ethically reviewed to safeguard both participants and researchers (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). One of the most salient ethical considerations is that of informed consent since a research which involves human participants should not be carried out unless informed consent is acquired, and ethical approval is obtained following ethical review. I gave the participants an information letter in which I stated that they are not obliged to take part in the study, and this will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which they are entitled to. In this letter I also explained that they can withdraw from the study at any given time. Participants were also requested to sign a consent form which ensured that they understood the information letter and they know their rights.

Two other important ethical considerations are anonymity and confidentiality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Denscombe, 2007). It is essential that all information provided by participants does not reveal their identity, thus guaranteeing their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). I used pseudonyms and participants were informed about this in the information letter. Tapes and transcripts were destroyed once the data was analysed and the research was finished.
Findings and Analysis

Both interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim and categories of meaning were elicited through the use of coding. Following data analysis and codification I came up with three main categories of meaning:

1. Parental views regarding disability
2. Effects of disability on the family and on typically developing twin
3. Parental interaction with the developmentally different twins

Following this, these emerged categories of meaning were discussed in the light of the existing literature reviewed earlier in this chapter. The presentation of the findings will be divided according to these categories and quotes from the interviews will be included.

Category 1: Parental Views on Disability

According to Mandleco, Frost-Olsen, Dyches and Marshall (2003), a family will experience some repercussions as a result of having a child with disability and sometimes this will result in family stress and ‘dysfunction’. On the other hand, Cunningham (1996) argues that not all families view the presence of a child with disability as a source of stress. It all depends mainly on parental perceptions and views regarding disability (Serpa and Menéres, 2003).

In this study, both parents claimed that their views regarding disability have changed. The mother stated that before the birth of her son, she used to ‘pity people with DS’ but now she has a positive attitude regarding disability which is also helping her in interacting with the child with DS as she claims that the syndrome does not affect her in this regard.

The father in my study said that disability is not something so negative, as opposed to past times where disability was a taboo in his opinion but it depends a lot on the
type of disability. Hodapp and Urbano (2007) claim that when ‘compared with families of children and adults with other disability conditions, families of persons with Down syndrome generally cope better’ (p.1019). In fact, the father considers his family as being lucky that the child has DS as a disability since as he believes that DS is the mildest form of disability. This goes in accordance to what Bateman (2004) claims, that the severity and type of disability will influence parental perceptions and interactions. Therefore, this outlook on disability has helped the father accept the child’s disability which according to Lane and Stratford (1985) is a crucial step for parents.

When asked whether they think their views about DS affect them in their interactions with the child with DS, parents had different answers. The mother stated that she does not let DS influence her, she treats him just as she treats her other child. In contrast, the father answered that for certain things he feels that DS influences him in his interaction. He knows his child’s limitations, so whenever he does not succeed in doing something, the father does not persist since he knows that he needs his time. This difference in responses is congruent to what de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein (2008) found in their study; that parents will contribute and interact in different ways with the developmentally different twins due to their different feelings and emotions regarding disability.

Barlow and Ellard (2006) claim that parents will sometimes be worried about the child’s future and this will also influence how they interact with the child. In my study, the mother worries about her son’s future but contrary to the literature, she does not allow this to influence her interactions in a negative way. Instead she said she will try to help the child with DS ‘lead an independent life so as not to depend on anyone in the future.’ Numerous authors also discuss parental stress related to raising a child with disability (Rampton et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2002; Van Riper, 2000). In my study, the only source of stress for both parents was the number of medical and therapy appointments.
Category 2: Effects of the disability

According to Barr, McLeod and Daniel (2008), the entire family will influence children’s development and ‘it is likely that disabilities and intervention will have an impact on the client’s family, including his or her siblings’ (p.22).

Both parents interviewed were aware of the effect DS has on their child’s development. The father mentioned ‘mental retardation’ as a major effect on development, a notion put forward by Van Riper (2000). He also said that sometimes, a child with DS may need further time in order to understand something whereby a typically developing child may ‘get it’ the first time round. This accords with other authors; that children with DS proceed through the milestones like typically developing children, but at a slower rate (Cuskelley, Hauser-Cram and Van Riper, 2009; Buckley and Sacks, 2001; Lane and Stratford, 1985).

Buckley and Sacks (2001) claim children with DS encounter delays in motor skills development. However, the mother does not agree with this claim since the child’s motor skills development is age-appropriate and milestones were reached a par with his typically developing twin. I believe this shows the importance of taking into consideration individual differences. Existing developmental profiles associated with DS do not imply all children with DS will follow this since there are individual differences within their development (Lane and Stratford, 1985), and this child is a case in point.

Regarding the effects of DS on family dynamics, the mother believes the child with DS unites the family because ‘everyone loves him’. In fact, Cunningham (1996) says that children with DS ‘appear to make a positive contribution’ (p.89). Within families, siblings will share some major experiences together and their relationship is an enduring one (Burke and Montgomery, 2000). According to Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall (2003), children’s development is influenced and affected by siblings. The mother claimed that the typically developing twin can help the twin with DS and the father stated that ‘since children with DS imitate a lot, he will have a
model to follow’. This goes in accordance with what Dodd (2004) claims; that ‘siblings are likely to have a positive benefit on the progress of their disabled sibling’ since they can be a role model for them (p.42).

Schumacher (1993) claims that mothers show more concern than fathers about the well being of the typically developing child and how the syndrome will influence them and this is congruent with my findings. According to the father, the typically developing twin will interact with society in a more ‘pro-social way’ and he will be more compassionate and helpful towards others. Several authors share this same point of view whereby they claim that siblings of children with DS will have some positive attributes like nonjudgmental attitudes (Rodger and Tooth, 2004), humanitarian concerns (Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000), empathy and helpfulness (Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003).

The mother said that in her opinion, the typically developing twin will be more open minded with regards to disability since ‘he will be living with someone experiencing disability.’ This goes in accordance with the findings of numerous researchers who list tolerance and awareness regarding diversity as another positive attribute found in most children who have siblings with disability (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Atkins, 1989).

The father believes the typically developing brother will not be influenced in a negative way by his brother’s DS since they are ‘two separate individuals’. However, most literature indicates the opposite as several negative effects are mentioned (Dyke, Mulroy and Leonard, 2009; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall, 2003; Pit-Ten and Loots, 2000; Lobato, 1990).

The mother, unlike the father, mentioned some negative effects which she believes the typically developing twin will experience once the children grow up. One of these was bullying, a notion also claimed by Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and Marshall (2003). She also said that ‘the child might resent the sibling with DS and also feel
jealous since he might think they are spending more time with his brother than with
him.’ Again, this perception accords with the literature (Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti,
Leonard and Bower, 2008; Rampton et al., 2007; Mandleco, Frost Olsen, Dyches and

Having listened to the parents’ perspectives, I believe DS will influence both family
dynamics and also the typically developing twin but parents will try to focus on the
positive aspects of the situation as these will help them to cope better with the
negative aspects. According to Cuskelley, Hauser-Cram and Van Riper (2009), life in a
family of a child with DS will ‘contain some mix of hassles and uplifts,
disappointments and great satisfactions (p.108) but, I believe, that if parents have a
positive attitude with regards to family dynamics, the hassles and disappointments
will be minimal when compared to the uplifts and satisfactions and all families
experience hassles, disappointments, uplifts and satisfactions.

Category 3: Parental interaction with the twins

It is widely acknowledged that parents play a crucial role in their children’s learning
and development (Pugh and Duffy, 2009; Nutbrown, Clough and Selbie, 2008).
According to Manning-Morton and Thorp (2004), parents are the ones who will
model and expose their children to life’s experiences. As stated by Van Hooste and
Maes (2003), ‘for children with Down syndrome, the relationship between the
quality of parent-child interactions and developmental outcomes has been widely
established’ (p.297). Both parents were conscious that parental involvement will
help their children reach their full potential. Moreover, they are also aware that
since there is a disability, their involvement is even more significant as they can help
their child improve in those areas where he might need more of an input, a notion
also sustained by de Falco, Esposito, Venuti and Bornstein (2010).

Barr, McLeod and Daniel (2008) claim that ‘siblings of children with disabilities may
encounter less parental attention than the child with the disability’ (p.22). This is
because they need additional help and support when compared to typically
developing children (Naylor and Prescott, 2004). On the other hand, ‘this assumption that children with disabilities receive more attention within families may not be accurate in all cases’ according to Bateman (2004, p.13). Orsmond and Seltzer (2007) share the same point of view since their results show that once siblings grow up, most of them claim that parental relationships were not influenced by the disability.

When asked whether she interacts in the same way with the developmentally different twins, the mother stated that as much as possible she tries to do so, although she worries a little bit more about the child with DS than the typically developing twin. This is because she believes the latter will be able to reach developmental milestones on his own as opposed to the child with DS ‘who needs more of an input.’

According to Hornby (1992), mothers are the ones who are usually engaged with professionals who are working with the children with disability. They have more contact time with the children than the fathers therefore most of the work and intervention is carried out by the mothers (Graham and Scudder, 2007). During her interview the mother stated that she does structured activities with the child with DS and these entail being on a one-to-one basis with the child for maximum attention and concentration therefore yes, sometimes she tends to spend more time with the child with DS just because he needs it for ‘intervention purposes.’ The numerous medical and therapy appointments the child with DS has also require the mother to spend more time with him than with the other twin. However, excluding these occasions, she stated that she gives the same treatment to both children.

In the study conducted by Graham and Scudder (2007), fathers’ responses regarding paternal interaction with the twins showed that they interact in the same way with the twins. The father in my study noted that he tries to interact in the same manner with the twins. However, he spends more time playing and interacting with the typically developing twin rather than with the child with DS. According to him, the typically developing twin is able to interact more with him whereby ‘the child with DS is somehow limited in his interactions.’ I believe that again, parental perspectives
with regards to DS influence the type of interactions parents have with the children. The father is aware that the child with DS has some limitations and he tries to do the same things with both children. However, he thought that occasionally, DS does influence him in his interactions.

Summary

Most intervention programmes for children with disability are based on the assumption that parent-child relationships will influence learning, interactions and ultimately the child’s development (Chen and McCollum, 2001). This study also showed the influence parental perspectives regarding disability have on the interactions with their children. It resulted that the effects the disability might have on the typically developing sibling are very much determined by the parents’ point of view on DS. In fact, as stated by Bateman (2004), ‘the assumption that parental attitudes influence sibling adjustment is prevalent throughout family disability research’ (p.14).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify parental views on the effects their child with DS has on his typically developing brother and whether parents interact in different ways with each of the twins. Both parents mentioned positive effects that included increased social awareness, empathy and altruism amongst others. However, only the mother pointed out possible negative repercussions like bullying and jealousy. The father on the other hand felt that since the twins are two separate individuals, the typically developing twin will not endure any negative effects.

Additionally, the interviews indicated that parental perceptions on disability greatly influence how parents interact with the children. The mother claimed that for intervention purposes, she does tend to spend more time with the child with DS as opposed to the father who felt that he tended to spend more time with his typically developing twin.
This study shows that life is all about experiences and our perceptions of these experiences will influence us throughout our whole lives. The way the parents in this study perceive DS has an influence on how they interact with the developmentally different twins and this will ultimately affect family life for all members.

All family members have individual needs, and for siblings of children with DS these might include sharing ‘experiences with those who might learn to understand the needs of disabled children and their families’ (Burke, 2010, p.1695). I hope this research and further studies on this topic contribute to make the experience of living with a disability a positive one. It is up to parents and us as professionals to ensure that the needs of all family members are met and no one is left in the shadows. That is why in my opinion it is essential to keep in mind that there are individual differences and everyone has his/her own particular needs, just as do these twins who are two of a kind.

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CHAPTER 6
Living with Asthma at home and school

Claire Grech

Introduction

Any child who has trouble breathing gets very frightened (McNelis, Musick, Austin, Larson and Dunn, 2007).

Asthma is often seen as a non threatening condition; however, unfortunately many children still die worldwide due to asthmatic attacks as reported by the media in the last two years (Carrega, 2010; Chung, 2010; Hull, 2010; Springs, 2010; Daily Mail Reporter, 2009; Mathur, 2009). In Malta as stated by Ameen (2010, October 31), a 14 year old boy died in school due to an asthma attack. Within this context, I noted childhood asthma as a significant and important public health problem which prompted me to conduct a small scale study in the local Maltese setting in order to assess the impact of asthma on children and whether children are knowledgeable enough about their condition and thus manage their condition effectively.

Asthma is one of the most common chronic conditions worldwide (Global initiative for Asthma, G.I.N.A., 2010) and it can restrict a child’s life physically, emotionally, socially as well as spiritually (Rydstrom, Dalheim-England, Holritz-Rasmussen, Moller and Sandman, 2005). Children with asthma suffer from significant morbidity, including visits to emergency departments, hospitalization and absenteeism in schools that can affect their academic performance.

Asthma can be a life-threatening disease if it is not properly managed (Burkhart et al., 2007) and thus the goals to proper management of asthma remain to avoid hospitalizations, emergency department visits and school absences; to ensure normal activities and to avoid long-term lung damage due to airway remodelling.
(Hogan & Wilson, 2003). Any child with a chronic condition has to adapt to a life situation where the disease more or less becomes central and the disease is often an obstacle for the child to live a normal life in a world where physical health and normality are highly valued (Rydstrom et al., 2005).

As a nurse working with children who suffer from diverse medical conditions, I am aware that children who suffer from chronic conditions such as asthma need to be knowledgeable about their condition in order to manage it effectively and thus lead a ‘normal life’. In the last three years I have worked on a medical paediatric ward and I observed that children suffering from asthma are constantly being admitted to hospital due to asthma attacks and a larger number of children seek medical assistance through health centres around the island. This led me to believe that some school age children are not necessarily handling their asthma effectively, which increased my desire to conduct a small scale research project to examine the issue further. It seemed to me that there is also a growing need for good educational material in order to equip these children with enough information about the management of this chronic condition. Since I am interested and passionate about educating children with chronic conditions, as I believe that it is a very important aspect of my nursing profession, last year I designed an educational leaflet and with the help of colleagues planned an animated programme for asthmatic children. Thus, it was felt to be appropriate that before introducing any educational material, I would plan to undertake a study to explore what is means for four young children to live with asthma in Malta.

**Literature Review**

Asthmatic children and their families face numerous challenges as they attempt to manage the child’s asthma on a day-to-day basis (McCarthy, Herbert and Brimacombe, 2002). After reviewing the literature I felt the need to focus my study on the children themselves since there is hardly any existing research focused on them. Through my study, I wanted to identify children’s understanding of their
condition; their personal views of it; what they know about it; how it affects their daily life at school and at home; and finally how they manage their asthma.

Asthma: A Chronic condition

Asthma is a disease characterized by recurrent attacks of breathlessness and wheezing, that vary in severity and frequency from person to person (World Health Organization W.H.O., 2006; G.I.N.A., 2010). The condition is due to inflammation of the air passages in the lungs and affects the sensitivity of the nerve endings in the airways so that they become easily irritated. The symptoms experienced during an asthma attack are reversible, but can be life-threatening if not adequately and promptly treated (Lim, Wood and Cheah, 2009).

Chronic diseases are described as long-term conditions with an uncertain course, often leading to negative consequences such as physical suffering, loss, worry and grief as well as functional impairments (Lundman and Jansson, 2007). In other words, they are diseases that the individual has to learn to live with. Self-management requires coordinated efforts of children, carers and health professionals (Callery, Milnes, Verduyn and Couriel, 2003).

Children’s knowledge about Asthma

When children are diagnosed with a chronic illness, such as asthma, they must learn to manage a condition about which they are likely to have little knowledge and many concerns (McNelis et al. 2007). By the age of 4 or 5, children should know what to do for themselves when they have an asthma attack and get the feeling that they can prevent severe recurrences themselves (Rollins, 2000).

McNelis et al. (2007) conducted a study to examine the psychosocial needs of children with asthma. It was evident that children in this study did not appear to be getting and/ or understanding the information they wanted or needed about their
asthma. This clearly highlights the need of a proper assessment of asthmatic children’s current knowledge and management skills. Walton, Harding, Stewart and Tunna (2004) evaluated an education project on childhood asthma, designed to enable young asthmatic children to understand better their condition, manage it more effectively, and to identify improvement in asthma management. The study demonstrated that a high proportion of children aged 5-10 years were not taking their prescribed medication or were not taking their inhaled treatment correctly. Although the study focused on Tipton schools in the West Midlands in the U.K. only, this only raises concerns whether young children under the age of 10 are knowledgeable enough about their condition in order to manage it unsupervised by an adult.

In a qualitative case study (Lyte, Milnes, Keating and Finke 2007), 18 children, 16 parents, 14 nurses and 14 general practitioners from 14 general practices were interviewed in order to present an overview of review management of childhood asthma in one U.K. primary care trust. In this study children were found to lack knowledge regarding their asthma and the authors highlighted the need for a more proactive and family-centred approach in the care of childhood asthma. Children also confirmed that they wanted to know more about their condition.

Eiser, Town and Tripp (2006) investigated the knowledge of forty-nine children with asthma (aged 7-16 years) and found that the children’s level of knowledge was poor; few made any specific attempts to avoid situations known to precipitate attacks; and there was no significant increase with age in knowledge of allergens of how to control attacks. In contrast, McQuaid, Howard, Kopel, Rosenblum and Biblance (2002), found that age was positively associated with factual knowledge regarding asthma, and the conceptual sophistication of reasoning about asthma. In another study on medication adherence in paediatric asthma: reasoning, responsibility and behaviour the same researchers found that although older children knew more about asthma and assumed more responsibility for disease management; nevertheless their adherence is lower than that of younger children (McQuaid, Kopel, Klein, and Fritz, 2003).
Lack of knowledge can surely result in ineffective management of asthma (Gillissen, 2005). This was confirmed in a Maltese study by Vella and Grech (2005). Since inhaled therapy represents the basis for acute and long-term asthma management, Vella and Grech performed an audit on spacer usage in 200 Maltese children. Results showed that a significant number of children were using a spacer device which was not appropriate for their age and even a larger number of children were not using their devices properly. This highlights the fact that Maltese children were not taking their inhaler medication effectively resulting in poor asthma management, re-admission to hospital due to asthma attacks and frequent visits to their general practitioners and/or to health centres. The authors stress the importance for health professionals to do their best to spend a few extra minutes to educate children and their parents to ensure that drugs are delivered in the best possible manner, thus improving control of asthma, reducing side-effects and offering a more cost-effective therapy.

**Effects/Impact of Asthma on children**

Living with asthma is a constant struggle and the impact of childhood asthma on the quality of life for both the child and family has been described extensively (Mogil, 2007; Yawn, 2003). Horner (2004) asserts that the negative effects of childhood asthma is enormous and may be due to poor asthma management and education. Asthma is one of the leading causes of absenteeism in schools (Bravata et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2009; Wyatt and Hauenstein, 2008; Levy, Heffner, Stewart and Beeman, 2006; Anderson et al., 2005; ) and hospitalization (Bravata et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2009; Navaie-Waliser, Misener, Mersman and Lincoln 2004). Nocon (1991) asserts that it is in the early years that children with asthma miss most school days and this can affect their academic performance and lead to psychological problems as a result of the child feeling different or being overprotected.

In a study conducted by Anderson et al. (2005) a total of 877 children were interviewed and it was evident that a number of children were avoiding physical
activities because of their condition; reported that when they experienced an asthma episode in front of their peers they felt embarrassed, different, angry and sad; and three quarters believed asthma affected their school work. Rydstrom, Dalheim-England and Sandman (1999) found that children with asthma sometimes experienced feelings of deprivation, guilt, loneliness, anxiety and fear as well as lack of confidence.

Despite advances in knowledge and treatment, asthma is the leading cause of paediatric hospitalization (Norton, Pusic, Taha, Heathcote and Carleton, 2007). Hospitalisation often represents uncontrolled asthma in most cases; in fact as stated by Grineski (2009) uncontrolled asthma can be very dangerous and can result in death. Callery et al. (2003) add that non-compliance to asthma medication is reported as a continuing problem. The Global Initiative for Asthma management G.I.N.A. (2010) stresses that hospitalisations are preventable with better asthma control and education.

**Educating children about Asthma**

Education is a vital component of asthma management and the goals of asthma education includes improving quality of life, reducing asthma morbidity and mortality and decreasing healthcare costs (Underwood, Revitt, Field and Cowie, 1999).

Education on the characteristics of asthma, along with the implications of the disease for the child, caregivers, teachers, and friends, is essential to prevent problems with asthma in the school setting, and to improve the child’s quality of life at school (Lim et al., 2009). School-based asthma interventions have been successful in reducing asthma severity (Brooten et al., 2008). Bruzzese et al. (2006) used a school-based asthma intervention to improve school students’ control of asthma. The authors stated that although schools have been shown to be an effective setting for the delivery of asthma education, they are often faced with limitations that hinder asthma management at school. In contrast, Brooten et al. (2008) conducted a
quasi experimental study to test the effects of a ‘Healthy children, healthy homes programme’ that involved health professionals, the community and school children (grades 1 to 8). The programme was found to be a valuable tool in asthma prevention and management.

Numerous studies were performed to validate, evaluate and/or confirm whether education and educational programmes can have a positive impact on the management of asthma in children. Educational material such as: planned sessions, multimedia programmes, educational camp and leaflets amongst others were utilized and it was evident that these educational interventions appeared to have been beneficial in improving asthma management.

Liao et al. (2006) found that school can be an excellent location to provide education to asthmatic children through new initiatives such as the ‘Breathmobile program’ which is a mobile asthma clinic modelled to give service to children at more than 20 public schools in low-income areas in the U.S.A. Lim et al. (2009) highlighted that the way in which the school responds to a child’s asthma will affect the quality of medical management and it will also affect the child’s academic achievement and colour his/her psychosocial experience, thus influencing daily functioning, self-esteem, emotional status, and social development.

Bartholomew et al. (2000) had developed an interactive computer programme called “Watch, Discover, Think and Act”, where children were assigned a character whose asthma they managed by avoiding triggers, taking medications, and monitoring symptoms. When compared with children who had not seen the programme, the intervention group had a lower rate of hospitalisation and greater functional status. The goal behind asthma education initiatives is to improve the child’s physical and/or psychological management of their asthma (McPherson et al. 2001). These studies demonstrate that planned asthma education strategies can surely have positive effects on the asthmatic child.
Methods and Methodology

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to understand and explore what it means for four young children to live with asthma. To achieve this aim, I have focused on the following objectives:

1. To explore children’s understanding of their condition
2. To identify the level of knowledge children have about asthma
3. To investigate the impact that asthma can have on the daily life of young children at home and at school.
4. To enquire whether young children are well educated by health professionals about asthma management.
5. To investigate whether the introduction of an asthma leaflet and an asthma animated programme which I have designed for children are necessary.

Research Design

This study is of a qualitative nature and comprises an explorative descriptive design; such a design is appropriate for areas about which minimal theoretical and factual knowledge is known (Carter, 2000). It attempts to identify new knowledge, new insights, new understanding, and new meanings (Brink and Wood, 1998). I considered that this was the best method to address my research question. I thought that a quantitative approach would not be suitable since it seeks to obtain data through statistical procedures for the purpose of describing phenomena or assessing the magnitude and reliability of relationships among them (Polit and Beck, 2004). I wanted to obtain data collected in an in-depth and holistic fashion by using a flexible research design.
Furthermore, the area upon which the study focuses remains, so far, unexplored in Malta (Vella and Grech, 2005). It is against this backdrop that an explorative descriptive design was determined to be appropriate for the purposes of this study and it is hoped that the findings of this study would elicit evidence which would in turn contribute towards better care for asthmatic children. An exploratory approach was seen as the most suitable method in order to allow for the collection of as much data as possible. Also, it helped me to capture as many elements of the children’s experiences as possible in order to provide an accurate description of their personal experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). At the General Hospital where I am employed there is a lack of educational material adequately prepared by health professionals for children with diverse chronic conditions and this study would aid to highlight the need for good, interesting educational material for children with diverse chronic conditions.

Target population and sampling technique

The target population is defined as ‘... the entire population in which the researcher is interested in and to which the researcher would like to generalize the results of a study...’ (Polit et al. 2001, p.716). In this study, the target population consisted of children aged 5 to 8 years with a diagnosis of asthma.

For the purpose of this study, the participants chosen were six children (two for the pilot work and four for the actual study). Purposive sampling was chosen to select the children to be studied. A purposive sample is a sample selected in a deliberative and non-random fashion to achieve a certain goal (Cormack, 2002). I had spoken to three head teachers who I knew and they were able to identify asthmatic children from their respective schools that met the required criteria for my study. Only the two children (brothers) used for the pilot study were not recruited from school but were known by a colleague of mine and their parents indicated their interest in taking part in the study. None of the children were known to me. Criteria for children to be included in this study were as follows:
1. Children of Maltese nationality and residence
2. Aged 5 to 8 years
3. With a diagnosis of asthma
4. With no history of any other chronic or medical condition
5. On daily medication for asthma

I excluded children under the age of four years as diagnosis of younger children as having asthma is difficult in view of other conditions which may cause wheeze and breathlessness such as recurrent aspiration of feeds, cystic fibrosis or maternal smoking as indicated by Lissauer and Clayden (2001). In addition, I thought that in order to grasp the children’s knowledge about asthma management, they should at least be five years old so that they could understand the questions I intended to ask and would have been taught by parents and/or health professionals about how to take their medication at school and what they should do if an asthma attack arose. Locally, we, as health professionals, reinforce the importance that children that age should be well informed about their medical condition in order to manage it effectively and thus lead a ‘normal’ life.

**Data collection method**

This study has used an exploratory descriptive methodology, with semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection. I evaluated the use of questionnaires, interviews and focus group for the purpose of this research study. I felt that using an interview was the best method to conduct this study since it is difficult for children to fill out a questionnaire (Polit and Beck, 2004); information from a questionnaire tends to be more superficial (Polit and Hungler, 1999) and through an interview I could determine whether questions were being understood by the children.

The main topics regarding asthma management were originally chosen by me and other experts (paediatricians and nurses) in the field of my day to day work. We had previously created an animated programme that was designed specifically for young asthmatic children and these themes were found useful in planning the semi-
structured interview for this study. The planned questions were elaborated during each interview according to each child’s responses and this helped me obtain not only the children’s knowledge about their condition but also to identify their understanding of it and the impact that asthma may have on them.

Developing a rapport with children was essential during interviews as it helped to create a trusting, respectful relationship, where children felt comfortable sharing information and personal experiences. The rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews for this study centres on the current absence of knowledge and understanding of children’s experiences after diagnosis of asthma. Using a semi-structured format with open dialogue would allow for a range of questions to be asked covering all the necessary topics, thereby addressing the aims and objectives of this study.

Since this study involved young children (age 5-8), it was important for me to understand the world of children through their own eyes rather than from the lens of adults (Cohen et al. 2007). I planned the interview to be as informal as possible however as explained by Cohen et al. (2007) sometimes it may be useful to formalise the session, so that children have a sense of how important the situation is, and they can respond to this positively. I used open-ended questions in order to avoid a single answer type of response (Cohen et al. 2007) and this allowed for a richer and fuller perspective on the topic of interest. As stated by Polit and Beck (2004) this gives freedom to respondents and offers the possibility of spontaneity and elaboration.

A pilot study of the interview was carried out with two children in order to enable me to iron out any difficulties and reject the questions which appear to be inadequate for my needs (Cohen et al., 2007). The two children used for the pilot study were of different age groups (5 and 8 years old) who fitted in with the inclusion criteria. This helped me try out questions, techniques, equipment and my ability to probe further. Children were asked whether they understood the questions and this helped me to identify whether I could have done anything else to
obtain better data (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007). As explained by Marsh (2010) the language used with children should be appropriate to the developmental stage of the child and it is important to avoid asking leading questions. It was for this reason that I conducted two pilot interviews, one with a 5 year old and the other with an 8 year old child. I was aware that when interviewing children, it is advisable to rephrase the questions asked to ascertain how reliable the responses are. Marsh (2010) and Levy (2009) emphasised that questions asked in the third person will often depersonalise an interview and makes a child feel less threatened. I do agree with this as I observe that when children are not asked something directly, especially in my working environment where all individuals are new to them, they are often more cooperative and feel less threatened.

Since respondents were children it was felt to be important to consider and make sure they felt comfortable during an interview in order for them to respond appropriately; conducting interviews in a familiar place (Marsh, 2010) and building a trustful relationship with children prior to asking questions. Three interviews were conducted at their homes and one at school as requested by their parents. During the interviews I took with me a soft toy, SAM the friendly clown (see Figure 1). During the interviews, I introduced the clown to each child and I asked them to show SAM how he should take his medication since he is also asthmatic and tends to
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forget how he should take it. The children were asked to bring their own inhaler and spacer in order to role play how he or she takes the prescribed daily medication to SAM. (An inhaler is a medical device used by asthmatics that serves to deliver medication into the body via the lungs while a spacer is a device that has to be attached to the inhaler and is used to ensure proper delivery of inhaled asthma medication). This method was found to be very effective and children enjoyed showing SAM how he should take his medication. This helped me to identify several important aspects such as:

- How they were taking their daily medication
- If they knew how to take their medication
- If they were using a spacer
- How many puffs they were taking and if they knew how many puffs they should take.

In addition, some children were speaking to SAM about certain important issues that were important to them in relation to asthma management and this helped me to explore in depth what asthma really meant to them and identify its impact on their daily life. In this way children were stimulated to talk while I could easily obtain more information and understand the children better. Similarly, Levy (2009) used a glove puppet to mediate a conversation between researcher and child. I believe that the use of toys during interviews can help to create a more ‘child like’ conversation and alleviate discomfort on the part of the child. I made it clear from the beginning that there were no right or wrong answers and they were free to discuss anything that they thought was necessary about the topic in question.

**Data Analysis**

Without high quality data collection methods, the accuracy and strength of the study conclusions would be subject to negative criticism (Polit and Hungler, 1999). The first step of analyzing the interview data involves transcribing audio recorded material (Burnard, 1996). This assisted in displaying the data in a visual form and
thus enabled me to look at it in more detail. Verbatim transcription was a critical step in preparing for data analysis, as I needed to ensure that transcripts were accurate and that they validly reflected the totality of the interview experience (Polit and Beck, 2001). The use of thematic analysis helped me to emerge themes from the data (Polit and Beck, 2004) and by creative thought and analytical ability I was able to ‘put the pieces together’ so that a theme or synthesis was formulated (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter, 2007).

Burnard’s (1991) framework for data analysis has helped me to produce a detailed and systematic recording of themes and issues addressed in the interviews. This framework uses 14 stages to comprehensively analyse the content of the interviews.

**Ethical Considerations**

When undertaking a research study, the researcher should promote ethical practice and have a commitment to an ethical approach (Smith, 1992). Before carrying out the study, permission had to be granted from the Ethical Review board of the School of Education within the University of Sheffield in order to make sure that it will not violate any ethical principles. Permission to conduct the study was also sought from the Heads of the schools involved and the church school requested also the permission from the Archdiocese of Malta. Once all permissions were approved, an information sheet and a consent form were given to the respective head teachers to forward to parents of the four asthmatic children in order to invite them to allow their children to take part in the study. This provided the possibility of acquiring informed consent from parents. Parents were given my contact number in order for them to clarify any queries they may have and all parents phoned to speak to me before the interview was conducted. A verbal explanation of the study was provided on the phone to all parents invited for the study. Children were also provided with a consent letter and the parents were asked to explain to them what the study entailed while asking them if they wished to take part. Both the consent from parents and that of children were collected prior to each interview.
Parents were asked where they wished the location of the interview to be conducted and three of them preferred their home while one of them requested that it would be carried out at school. Also date and time of interview was dealt with according to their necessities in order not to disrupt family plans and other activities that the child may have during the week. Children were given a simple explanation of the study and why it was going to be done before the interview. They were asked whether they wished to take part or not. This was done to make sure that children were not persuaded or coerced by their parents to take part in the study. Interviews were conducted in a place which was familiar to them and where they felt comfortable (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). In fact, I asked the children to choose the place where they would like to be interviewed as this enabled them to have a little more control over the situation; however this was also negotiated with the parents or caregivers (Marsh, 2010). Before each interview conducted at home, I asked family members beforehand not to provide answers for the child. As stated by Marsh (2010) sometimes, parents can be willing and useful co-researchers, prepared to ask the child questions which he/she has not answered when you have posed them. After each interview, both parents and children were given information about the leaflet designed for asthmatic children and I promised to give them a copy of the leaflet once it was available in our General Hospital.

Streubert Speziale and Carpenter (2007) assert that the researcher is obliged to provide the participants with relevant and adequate information when obtaining informed consent. The parents were made aware that participation was voluntary and that they could refuse to take part in the study with no adverse repercussions. I was aware of the need to guarantee the children and their families anonymity and confidentiality, thus parents were informed that no information would be disclosed without their permission and that data would be treated with the strictest confidentiality and that the children’s names would be changed in order to protect their identity. Since the study deals with children suffering from a chronic illness and as confirmed by O’Brein, Duffy and Nicholl (2009); Dyson (1996); and Menke (1987), any chronic illness can have a significant impact on the affected child, it was felt to
be appropriate for me to use visual aids and encourage role playing (using SAM the clown and ask the child to teach him how to take the medication) to facilitate interviews. I tried to be attentive to the needs of each individual child interviewed and prioritized their well-being above data collection.

The presence of the audio recorder was acknowledged. Although recording is associated with several ethical disadvantages, using recording equipment was vital so that the richness of each child’s conversation and exact terms could be transcribed. Tape recording the interviews was beneficial as it enriched data that could be missed if written recording was to be obtained (Burns and Grove, 1997). Taking part in a research study might expose participants to potential risks as well as benefits, thus, there is a consensus in the literature that participants have a right to know about them (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter, 2007; Polit and Beck, 2004; LoBiondo-Wood and Haber, 1998). Apart from decreased participant confidentiality and anonymity a possibility in any means of data collection (Polit and Beck, 2004), other potential risks were difficult to identify. I assured parents, in the information sheet distributed, about the confidentiality of their child’s responses and the anonymity in writing and reporting of the findings. I explained to the parents that I would store recorded data in a safe place and that I will transcribe the interviews and no other person would listen to them. I also emphasized that the recordings will be destroyed once the project will be completed.

Ultimately, this study was intended to provide a glimpse of what it means for a child to live with asthma. As Graue and Walsh (1998) have argued ‘To act ethically is to act the way one acts towards people whom one respects’ (p.55) and this is what I have tried to achieve through this research study.

**Findings**

The main aim of the study was to understand and explore what it means for four young children to live with asthma in Malta. Asthma is a chronic disease that can
disrupt children’s lives, limit their activities, and hamper their success in school (Anderson et al., 2005). McNelis et al. (2007) emphasized that asthma is a serious condition that poses problems for many children and their families.

**Theme 1: Understanding Of The Term ‘Asthma’**

Children’s understanding of the term asthma was very ambiguous. During the pilot study carried out with two brothers (ages 5 and 8), I began by asking the question: ‘What is Asthma?’ The children did not seem familiar with the term ‘asthma’. Therefore, I changed the question to: ‘Did you ever feel short of breath?’ or ‘Do you know what it means when you get out of breath?’ Shortness of breath was an experience both children could relate to and were then able to recall incidences of feeling ‘asthmatic’. Consequently, from the results of the pilot study I was able to amend the first question in the main study to fit with children’s likely understanding of the term ‘asthma’.

‘I hear my mum saying I have asthma, but I don’t know what it is... maybe when I get sick’. (George)

‘I remember that once when I was in hospital they told me that I have asthma, and when I asked them what it is, they said that when someone gets out of breath frequently he will have asthma’ (Janice)

‘I don’t know what it is exactly but I often hear my mother mentioning that word’. (Carol)

‘I don’t know exactly’. (Jean)

These findings correlate with the findings of McNelis et al. (2007) as children did not appear to understand what asthma really is and the authors emphasized that a proper assessment of children’s current knowledge and management skills is needed to deliver appropriate care of such children. No other study was found that inquired young children’s understanding of asthma.
Theme 2: Children’s Knowledge About Asthma

Asthma attacks are likely to be very frightening for children, and they want to particularly focus on how to prevent them from occurring. The children were aware that they needed to take their medication daily but they didn’t know exactly what they needed to take.

‘I take a red inhaler but at the moment I am taking an orange one. I attach the inhaler to the spacer and take 10 deep breaths after I press the inhaler.’ (Carol)

‘I take puffs in the morning and at night, but my mum reminds me to take them as I forget. I put the inhaler in the spacer, press twice and breathe in and out’. (George)

‘I take them in the early morning - one yellow and one blue. I take 5 deep breaths and 2 puffs’. (Janice)

‘I don’t know what I take as my mother gives them to me’. (Jean)

Although one child said that he had an idea about how the medication should be taken, nevertheless the children were very unsure of the difference between the medication prescribed to prevent an asthma attack and that which is prescribed to relieve an asthma attack. This fits in with the literature, whereby for example Lyte et al. (2007) and Navaie-Waliser et al. 2004) found that children lacked knowledge about ‘their’ asthma and were unaware of the need to carry their inhalers with them at all times.

‘Sam’ the clown was found very useful in helping children feel more comfortable during the interview and also for me to identify how the children were taking their medication. I explained to each child that Sam is asthmatic but he had forgotten how he should take his medication. The children enjoyed showing Sam how he should take his medication. Carol was still using a spacer with a mask and since she is 7 year old, it could be argued that she is old enough to use the medication without the mask as only very young children are encouraged to use a mask since their
parents help them to take their prescribed medication (Vella and Grech, 2005). Carol also explained that Sam should take 10 deep breaths which contradict my experience in my day to day role as a qualified nurse whereby children are usually encouraged to take 5 deep breaths. However, as this project was being conducted in my role as a researcher and not in my practitioner role it was important to ensure that I did not contradict the information of the medical practitioner. Nevertheless due to the nature of the project it was my responsibility to bring any health concerns to the attention of the children’s parents in order to clarify any misconceptions.

**Compliance with medications**

Since children spend more time in school than in any other setting outside their home, it is essential that they should know how to take their medication and that they are compliant to their prescribed medications. The children in this study revealed that either they are not allowed to take their medication at school unless one of the parents is present; or they try not to take their medication as they are embarrassed to take it in front of their peers; or else they just forget that they need to take the ‘reliever’ when they feel tight or short of breath:

“When I feel unwell I go to the office and they call my mother to come over for me. Sometimes I just take my medicine when my mother comes and I feel much better’ (Janice)

‘I carry my medication always with me at school but sometimes I feel embarrassed to take it because of my friends. But when I feel very sick I go to the office and I phone my mother to come and pick me up’ (Carol)

There has long been recognition that children’s non adherence to asthma medication is a significant problem in asthma management (Rand, 2002). Similar finding were yielded by Bucher et al. (1998) and Vella and Grech (2005) as the most frequently identified explanation for problems with compliance with medications were ‘frequency’ (students forget, skip, or miss frequently dosed medications), ‘inhaler technique’ (students may use improper inhaler technique) and ‘embarrassment’ (students do not want to be perceived as sick or different). All four
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children stated that they carried their ‘reliever’ medication at school and said that they need to go to the Head teacher’s office in order to take their medication. Several authors stress the importance of involving children in the educational process in the management of asthma. In fact, Watts (2009) stresses that children 5-11 years old possess the cognitive skills to understand and implement interventions to control their asthma. When children fail to adhere to prescribed asthma therapy they may increase their risk for unnecessary asthma exacerbations that require trips to the emergency room or hospitalization (Rand, 2002).

**Theme 3: The Impact Of Asthma On The Daily Life Of Children**

In school, children with asthma face the difficulty of self-managing a chronic ailment outside of the more predictable home environment (Anderson et al. 2005). Half of the children in the study by Anderson et al. (2005) reported that they believed their friends and those around them at school didn’t understand how they felt regarding their condition. In fact, both girls in my study reported that no one at school understood them when they felt breathless and when they started to cough after exertion. Janice explained:

‘My class mates turn around to look at me when I start to cough or wheezy during the lesson’

Most of the students in Anderson’s study said that when they have an asthma episode in front of other students, they feel ‘embarrassed, different, angry and sad’. In contrast, three of the children interviewed didn’t feel any different from others, neither expressed that they felt embarrassed when they experienced symptoms related to asthma such as coughing or wheezing. Only Carol explained that she felt embarrassed when the teacher stopped teaching and would not begin again until her coughing had subsided. This was difficult for Carol as the more she tried to stop coughing the more of a challenge it was for her as she became the centre of attention, which made her feel uncomfortable:
'I feel very embarrassed when I start coughing during a lesson and the teacher stops and tells me that until I stop coughing she won’t continue. I try hard to stop wheezing and coughing but it’s not easy... then I tell her I need to go to the toilet as I feel so so embarrassed!’ (Carol)

Carol’s comments fits with the point raised by McNelis et al. (2007) who stated that children in their study reported that taking medications at school disrupted their activities and made them feel different from other children. Carol’s view also correlates with a child in a study by Callery et al. (2003) when she started coughing at school:

‘I try not to cough in assemblies because then I get embarrassed...we had these class assemblies and I was coughing and coughing in one of the assemblies and everybody was looking around’ (p.188).

In my study in the local schools in Malta children are not allowed to take their medication in class, they have to go to the head teacher’s office and someone has to supervise them while they take the inhaler. Unfortunately, there are also schools where children are not allowed at all to administer their medication and the school personnel will phone the parent to come and pick up the child when he/she feels unwell due to asthma. This was clearly explained by the two older children of 7 and 8 years who were interviewed:

‘The class teacher won’t allow me to take my inhaler when I feel breathless.... I have to go to the Head teacher and she will call my mother to pick me up. It’s not fair that I have to leave school due to this as after I take my medication I feel OK. I often have to leave school due to shortness of breath’ (Carol)

‘My mum has to come and pick me up whenever I feel breathless at school. I take the medications with me in my bag but they won't allow me to take it until my mother arrives’ (Janice)

Asthma in fact was found to be the most common reason for children’s absence from school in several studies (Braman, 2006; McGhan, Reutter, Hessel, Melvin and Wilson, 2002; Navaie-Waliser et al., 2004) and school absence can affect academic performance (Nocon, 1991).
Avoiding physical activity

Physical exercise is one of the main triggers of asthma attacks (Fraser, 2010). Anderson et al. (2005); Braman (2006) and Callery et al. (2003) all reported that most asthmatic children avoid physical activities because of their condition and that they sometimes chose not to play sports or games because of asthma. Most of the children in my study mentioned physical activity as one of the activities that they cannot perform like any other child. Carol said: ‘I try not to run too much during physical education lesson’, while Janice explained: ‘We were given a choice whether we want to play basketball or tennis after school but my mother told me that its better if I choose tennis as I don’t have to run too much’. Jean emphasised that: ‘I still play football with my friends even though sometimes I feel breathless and have to stop during the game’.

These findings align with those of Callery et al. (2003) as nearly half of the young people in their study described limitations of activity and experience of regular symptoms during physical activity. The extent to which asthma affects children in their social and recreational activities largely depends on how well their symptoms can be controlled (Braman, 2006; Nocon, 1991).

Fear of asthma attacks

As emphasized in previous sections, children are afraid of asthma attacks. Brazelton cited by Rollins (2000) assert that: “Any child who has trouble breathing gets frightened and begins to wonder, ‘does anybody know how to take care of me?’” (p.538). In my study it was apparent that children were afraid of becoming out of breath and their comments revealed their inner fears. It was evident to me as they spoke how frightened they were when they recalled memories of trying to overcome their fears of becoming gravely ill or even dying during an asthma attack:
‘I feel that am going to die when I become out of breath. My mum assures me that am not going to die... but I still feel that when I have an asthma attack I am going to die’. (Janice).

‘I feel so afraid when I become out of breath that I start to cry. Sometimes I am afraid that no one can help me get my breath back’. (Carol)

As stated by Braman (2006) asthmatic children can become very distressed by their condition. Rollins (2000) emphasised that since the child is so vulnerable to the fear that no one knows how to help him or her, it is particularly important that a strong, dependable relationship is forged between the provider, the family and school personnel. In the study by Yawn (2003) asthma was described as ‘life threatening, crippling, unpredictable and scary’ (p.83). The author stressed that parents and families living with asthma want to gain a sense of control over their lives and this will require access to knowledgeable, committed people in schools, the health care systems and the communities where children live, work and play.

Conclusion

Asthma continues to threaten the lives of children and this problem demands more attention (Cheng et al. 2007). The findings of this study suggests that in line with the views of Bucher et al. (1998) children with asthma face multiple challenges that encompass learning how to cope with and manage the unique demands of their illness. Yawn (2003) contends that children living with asthma and their parents want to gain a sense of control over their lives. This will require access to knowledgeable, committed people in the schools, the health care systems and the communities where they live and play.

The aim of this small scale study situated in Malta was to understand and explore what it means for four young children aged between 5-8 years to live with asthma. It sought to explore the children’s understanding and knowledge about their chronic condition while investigating the impact that asthma had on their daily life. All this helped me as a health professional and health educator to identify whether the
research participants are well educated about their condition in order to manage it effectively and thus lead a normal life.

Findings provided evidence that these four asthmatic children need more support in order to manage the unique demands of their illness. These demands as highlighted by Bucher et al. (1998) involve: monitoring peak flows, administering medications and treatments, modifying the environment to limit exposure to asthma triggers and dealing with the potential side effects of their medications. The participant children had a general idea about asthma but were uncertain about what asthma is; what medication they should take daily; the proper way they should take their inhaled medication, and how to deal with an asthma attack. The children chosen for this study came from four different schools but this did not influence their level of knowledge about their condition. Although the two girls tended to speak more about their condition this does not provide evidence that girls are necessarily more knowledgeable than boys as the sample was too small to generalize results. However, it would be beneficial if this study would be done by using a cross sectional study including all the asthmatic children that visit the ‘Child out patient department’ at the general hospital in Malta where I work for follow up or those attending the accident and emergency department due to an asthma attack.

The study revealed that these four children require more support while at school particularly related to the awareness of school personnel and how well-informed they are about asthma management in order to support and assist children while at school. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of education regarding the characteristics of asthma and its management along with the implications of the condition for the child, caregivers, teachers and friends in order to prevent problems with asthma at home and in the school setting. As stated by McGhan et al. (2002) the complexity of asthma management and control requires a collaborative effort of various disciplines and sectors. Successful collaboration can help meet the health needs of asthmatic children more effectively, efficiently and consistently.
Several studies mentioned earlier reported an increase in asthma knowledge and improved asthma outcomes through education hence the introduction of educational material in the local setting can be beneficial in teaching young children and their caregivers on how to deal and manage the condition. I believe that knowledge is power and therefore understanding asthma and the ways of managing this condition effectively will help dispel many of the fears that children with asthma face. It is these fears that hold them back from living full and active lives (McNelis et al. 2007).

**Personal Reflection**

As I started to write my personal reflection at the end of this study, I felt there is so much more to say, so much more to write. For me conducting this inquiry was seen as an interesting, at times daunting journey. As I reflected on the topic, the research question and the importance I placed on this research, I had wonderful dreams. The study for me was to be a place to play, to create, to think differently. Life is on the move, and I believe it is important to move in harmony in whatever way possible to keep abreast of the pace of change. Although I spend much of my professional day to day role working with children, interviewing children for the purposes of conducting research was a new and exciting experience for me, full of surprises along the way. It was like watching a film whereby it is impossible to predict the end. The surprise makes the film extraordinary and much more interesting.

Through this study I have realized that a greater degree of asthma control and ultimately a better quality of life for asthmatic children is a worthy goal for professionals who work with asthmatic children. Asthma is a prevalent disease and has a high morbidity if not adequately controlled, and still causes significant mortality (Scullion, 2005). This exploratory study has offered a new perspective to the existing literature and I believe to the nursing profession in Malta by specifically seeking to gain a deeper insight into the complexity of living life with asthma from the children’s point of view. Whilst, the findings of this study cannot be generalized, they do provide an indicator of the need to conduct more research studies that listen
not only to the voices of young children but that recognise the need for education for asthmatic children, parents, school personnel and friends. It is hoped that the results and recommendations of this study will have a favourable impact on the health professionals caring for children suffering from chronic conditions, so that children can be confident in order to control their condition and thus lead a normal unrestricted life.

References


PART II

LITERACY HOME AND SCHOOL
CHAPTER 7

Five Maltese Mothers talk about their role in children’s early literacy development

Caroline Bonavia

Introduction

I have always been passionate about the importance of literacy in a person’s life and my interest in the subject was subsequently influenced by my own personal experiences in raising two young children where I noted that new parents are often concerned about their children’s health and good nutrition. In fact, as a first time mother, I was initially more concerned about my son’s developmental progress but, having had my second child and commenced postgraduate studies this has since changed; my concern has now broadened to encompass an interest in children’s literacy with a particular focus on the influence of older siblings. This, coupled with the influence of gender and the role of parents in their children’s education fuelled my passion to investigate five Maltese mothers’ views of their roles in their children’s literacy development during the first five years of life. In this study, I examined whether parents are aware of the opportunities concerning their child’s development that can occur in their home environment. The study also examines whether these parents engage in literacy with their children.

Epstein (2001), states that children learn and develop in their families, schools and communities, and children who are encouraged by their parents at home show better achievement at school (Wells, 1985). Realising the importance of the parents’ involvement in their children’s education is a fundamental aspect for sustained educational development and achievement of children at school. The ability to read, to understand and to be active in a particular subject matter is essential in our daily lives as students, parents, workers and citizens because illiteracy has serious consequences on people’s ability to provide for both themselves and their family.
Research shows that the involvement of parents in literacy development influences the child’s performance at school (Fan and Chen, 2001). According to Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2001), when parents are involved in their children’s literacy development, other benefits such as higher academic achievement, greater problem solving skills and cognitive capability can be recognised. The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, Malta, 2011) acknowledges that the role of parents should be given priority during the early years because ‘the influence of the home environment on children’s personal achievements cannot be negated and the effects of home are tangible at a very early age’ (p. 17).

**Literature Review**

The first part of this section is focused on the meaning of literacy, theoretical views and also the importance of literacy. In the second part, the focus is on the importance of parental involvement along with the parental awareness, the parents’ role and also family lifestyles.

**What is Literacy?**

Many researchers have conflicting views on how to define ‘literacy’. For Walter (1999) literacy is often viewed as the ability to read and write. However, McLane and McNamee (1990) state that ‘literacy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon’ (p.2). Hannon (1995) and Street (1984) put forward that different types of literacies exist but unsurprisingly, both agree on the importance of print. For Barton (1994), emergent literacy has been important in the past two decades. For some children, literacy emerges naturally if there is ample material available to the child, even before a child starts school (Mass, 1982). Formerly, it was considered that children achieve their reading skills when they start elementary school (Wilson and Lonigan, 2009) but Lonigan (2006), and others, have demonstrated that learning to read is, for many, a continuous practice that takes place early in life.
To arrive at a single agreed definition of literacy, is almost impossible since ‘literacy’ may have different meanings for different people in different cultures (McLane and McNamee, 1990).

Theoretical views

One of the theorists that provided a useful theoretical framework that helps us to better understand literacy development was the classic theorist Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1996, 1978). His socio-cultural perspective theorised that children develop literacy perceptions through everyday experiences with others (Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982). This element is being taken for consideration because it concedes that an influence exists between social interaction and cognitive development, and biological and intellectual development does not occur in separate instances but as an inclusion (Pellegrini and Van Ryzin, 2007). Further, we can consider social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978) where learning is ‘focused on connections between people and the cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences’ (Crawford, 1996, p.43). According to Lantolf (2002), Vygotsky believed that humans use ‘tools’ that develop from different cultures that show such characteristics in their social environment. At first, children use these tools as a way to communicate their needs, however when these are internalised, they are able to develop to a higher skill (Riddle, 1999). Within this theory, there are two important concepts that underline the importance of learning between the relationships amongst people and their surroundings. They are the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding. Bodrova and Leong (1996) and Vygotsky (1978) describe the ZPD as the difference between what a child can do on his own and what he can do with adult guidance. According to Verenikina (2003), it is important that when ZPD is discussed, one must understand how the mentor is able to attain the child’s level of understanding and then to be able to direct the child to a higher level of development. Schweiker and Schweiker (1993) associate ‘scaffolding’, where an adult, constantly directs the child’s attainment and adapts the level of guidance in response to the child’s level of achievement. In fact one of the parents’
Responsibilities during the preschool transitional period is that they need to acknowledge the importance of instigating the learning and development of their child, in order to exploit the child’s development (Hannon, Morgan and Nutbrown, 2006).

**Views of Early Literacy**

Marie Clay (1967) believed that one can discover a lot of information by analysing what children can do with books, reading and writing, even though they cannot yet read or write. According to Goodman (1980), Teale (1986) and Clay (1967), the first five years of a child’s life is the time where reading and writing development occur. Young children learn through progressions of incorporating and acclimating the information and data that is used around them, mainly the everyday context of the home and the community (Goodman, 1986). For Shapiro and Doiron (1987, p.263), the ‘major preconditions for literacy are rooted in the home environment’, because different features of behaviour in the home are associated to later literacy achievement. If in a home environment, reading and writing are part of the daily routine, children within these surroundings are at an advantage when they start school (Wells, 1985).

**The Importance of Parental Involvement**

It is well recognised that parental influence on their children’s early educational experiences often translate into succeeding differences in reading and other areas of academic achievement later on in life (Torgesen, Wagner and Rashotte, 1994). Saracho’s hypothesis that parental involvement in their children’s education can enhance the children’s literacy development (1997) has been supported in various research contexts (Fantuzzo, Tighe and Childs, 2000; Christian, Morrison and Bryant, 1998; Leseman and de Jong, 1998).
Snow (1991) and Heath (1982) state that the home environment, particularly the parents’ role signify an essential responsibility to the initiatives demonstrated by their children’s early literacy development. Parents ought to be conscious that various interactions such as positive responses, warm gestures and guidelines are fundamental elements to support children’s interaction and help to promote literacy development and practice (Stavans, 1996). Denessen (2007) proposes that in the course interactions between parents and children, the children’s literacy progresses. According to Kowalski, Wyver, Masselos and De Lacey (2004), first born children are more likely to have more contact and instances with their parents. Also, it has been concluded that first born children are at an advantage compared to their siblings because they are able to reach the fifty word milestone prior to their younger siblings (Pine, 1995). Lenhart and Roskos (2003), established that literacy learning between siblings is superior to those with other family members because younger siblings often copy what older siblings do. Gender can have an impact too, for as Lynch (2002) identified, girls are more advanced than boys in some areas of literacy development (such as alphabet knowledge).

In a study carried out by Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts and Wright(2005), confirmed that, from birth, children are engaged in practices that are correlated to culture, media and technologies. Stephen and Plowman (2003) state that in the present day, technology is present in the daily lives of children and because of this it is being used in early childhood educational settings (Beck, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000). Marsh et al. (2005) noted that literacy development can be enhanced when media and technology was used in early childhood settings because media encourages play, language, listening and reading. Used properly, technology can be a beneficial educational means for preschool children, enhancing learning opportunities, communication and also social skills (Hutinger, Bell, Daytner and Johanson 2006).
Parental Awareness of Literacy Development

Despite several studies of parent’s roles in literacy, little is known about the assumptions and ambitions that parents have during shared book reading even though studies have authenticated that an association exists between parent impressions and attitudes during shared book reading (Audet, Evans, Williamson and Reynolds, 2008). This raises the issue as to whether parents are aware of the meaning of their early child literacy development even though studies show that the home has been established to assist children increase oral language (Burgess, Hecht and Lonigan, 2002).

Parents are willing to engage with their children’s home literacy practices (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson and Shapiro, 2006; Weigel, Martin and Bennett, 2005). because some parents consider it their responsibility to help their children in their literacy development, whereas others believe that children should learn when they commence school (Weigel, Martin and Bennett, 2006).

According to Burgess et al. (2002), three attributes are important; the attitudes of the parents, the parents’ habits and the parents’ efforts. If parents have the habit of reading themselves, it is very likely that their children will benefit from reading as well (Meagher, Arnold, Doctoroff and Baker, 2008). Baker and Scher (2002), argue that the greater the involvement of the parents, the more their children’s interest in picture books and reading was increased. If parents consider that their contribution is important in their child’s learning achievement, they will certainly become more engaged in their child’s learning (Eccles and Harold, 1993). There seems to be a broad-spectrum idea that parents are the main association with the children’s learning process amongst researchers (Meisels, 1998). The question is, but do parents make the same supposition? Shared book reading between a parent and a child has a number of advantages that encourage language development (Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever and Ouellette, 2008), one of them being that the language used in children’s books is distinct from the normal conversation used on a daily basis (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992). In fact, there seems to be a correlation between shared
reading and the children’s increased vocabulary (Raikes et al., 2006; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Frijters, Barron and Brunello, 2000).

Parents’ Roles in Literacy Development

One of the most important responsibilities that parents have in respect to their children’s literacy development is to instill reading in them (Spreadbury, 1992; Pulvertaft, 1985). Children who have access to books, from a very early age, have been found to be at an advantage through their primary school years (Wade and Moore, 2000). Parental participation in reading, can have a positive effect on reading, language and expression (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh, 2004). According to OECD (2002) children’s education achievement is far more vital than their socio-economic condition and parents reading with their children should be a pleasurable event a view supported by Flouri and Buchannan (2004). Baker and Scher (2002), state that parents who promote reading as a useful and significant activity have children who are eager to read for enjoyment and this will be demonstrated in other academic subjects as well (Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Jordan, Snow and Porsche, 2000).

Nutbrown and Hannon’s (1996) REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) project aimed to involve parents in their children’s literacy development. The outcomes of the study have been variously reported (Hannon et al., 2006; Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan, 2005; Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003) and reveal that the programme supported parents in showing recognition of the child’s activities, their interaction with the child’s literacy activities and providing literacy models of readers and writers. This study employed the ORIM, framework where the focus was providing the parents with opportunities, recognition, interaction and modeling themselves as literacy users.
Family Lifestyles

In research on family lifestyles, it has been established that home environments present a child with various ways to learn through interface with grown ups by using also age-appropriate materials (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Hart and Risley, 1995). According to various researchers such as Frijters et al. (2000) and Christian et al. (1998), home environment has a positive effect in various areas like oral language, letter knowledge, reading capability and understanding. Print awareness (Purcell-Gates, 1996), library visits (Payne, Whitehurst and Angell, 1994) and parental understanding of literacy concepts (Weigel et al., 2006) may assist a child’s early literacy development. The considerations and objectives that parents hold during their children's first five years are vital because this has an influence on the child’s approach, skills and language later on in life (Hebert, Swank, Smith and Landy, 2004; Landry, Smith, Miller-Loncar and Swank, 1998).

Taylor, Anthony, Aghara, Smith and Landy (2008) confirm that children who experience less attention from parents during early childhood had lower achievement in the eighth grade. A child’s home environment and early child care is highly associated with school readiness (Smith and Dixon, 1995), and those children who do not have motivating home environments have been found to do less well cognitively and academically (Stipek and Ryan, 1997).

For a child to be eager to read, s/he must understand not just the importance of reading but also a ‘fervent belief that being able to read will open him to a world of wonderful experiences, permit him to shed ignorance, understand the world, and become master of his fate’ (Bettelheim and Zelan, 1981, p. 49). Literacy should be seen in terms of gratification and importance and one should instill reading as being a key aspiration in one’s life.
Methods and Methodology

My research question asked ‘How do some Maltese mothers view their roles in their children’s early literacy development.’

It seemed appropriate to use qualitative research methodology because I believe that ‘knowledge is socially constructed by people active….and that as the researcher I should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live in it’ (Schwandt, 2000, p.189). My intention was to illustrate the notions and opinions of the people in my research and how they experience things from their point of view because I was concerned in how they make sense of their experiences they have in their world (Merriam, 1998). Thereby, in order to delve deeply and to bring forth the participant’s responses, behaviour, emotions, values and beliefs (Punch, 2001) semi structured interviews seemed to be the most appropriate because of its flexibility (Patton, 2001), even though the sample used is small compared to other methods (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007).

My main aim was to select participants that are likely to be ‘information rich’ with the emphasis being on the quality of the information rather than the quantity with respect to the rationale of my study (Gall, Borg and Gail, 1996) and also possess the essential characteristics necessary (Cohen et al., 2007). Five mothers who had a child under the age of five were identified. I took the decision to interview mothers only based on sample size, accuracy and experience (Hoinville and Jowell, 1978) because as a mother myself I was more interested in the views of other Maltese mothers.

I gave careful consideration to ethical issues because these are of significant importance in every research and it was my role to take into account the effects of research on participants. The mothers received a detailed verbal explanation of the projects as well as the Information Sheet about the nature of the study (Burns and
Groove, 1987). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms have been used for the mothers and their children to preserve anonymity (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992).

Analysis and Findings

This section presents and discusses the findings of my study under four themes:

1. Perceptions of literacy
2. Role of the parents and reading practices
3. Reading practices in relation to older siblings, birth order and gender
4. Family lifestyles and accessible resources.

1. Perceptions of Literacy

Lynch et al. (2006), argue that parents practice literacy activities according to their own beliefs; my interviews suggest that the mothers’ perceptions of literacy moments centred mainly around formal reading sessions where printed material such as books was being utilised. The mothers’ main concern was that they did not have enough time to read stories to their children. Also, three of the five mothers seemed unaware of the potential opportunities that were originating from the informal time spent together in families using other forms of resources besides books and they did not perceive literacy in a more general way as advocated by Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas and Daley (1998) who state that ‘home literacy experiences should not be considered a unitary construct’ (p. 111).

All the mothers were aware of the benefits that books have on their children and this supports what Audet et al. (2008) stated that ‘the beliefs parents have about the importance and function of shared book reading...contribute to the decisions parents make about the behaviours and literacy activities provided to their children’ (p. 114).

Asked about their views of television, not all mothers agreed that it may be of a benefit to their child’s literacy development, as suggested by Marsh et al., (2005).
According to Hutinger et al. (2006), television is not used properly but it is used as a means of distraction and to keep the kids occupied for a period of time.

When the participants were asked for their thoughts about the benefits of computers, all five mothers thought that computers were very beneficial, confirming Beck’s views (2002), however one mother mentioned that sometimes computers can result in a waste of time due to increased interest in social networking among children because, as Hannon warned, ‘information technology today will have repercussions in the future that are hard to predict’ (Hannon, 1995, p.3).

Although, school was the main place for learning to read, the mothers in my study were aware of certain literacy experiences and benefits that may take place in the home (Neumann and Neumann, 2009). They seemed less aware about opportunities that informal literacy moments at home such as conversation, playing computer games and watching television (Rutgers 2004) and they seemed to be unaware of how some resources could be positively used to support literacy development (Shapiro and Doiron, 1987).

2. Role of the Parents and Reading Practices

The role of the parent in every child’s early years is of a great importance for their literacy development (Bruner, 1983). Not all the mothers in my study said they read to their child everyday before bedtime; lack of time being the main issue (Nichols, 2000). Despite their busy lifestyles, all the mothers in my study perceived themselves as the primary carer and as part of that role they felt compelled to read to their child even though this was sometimes seen as chore.

They reported a relatively low level of the father’s involvement (unlike the finding of Morgan Nutbrown and Hannon, 2009) and according to the mothers it appeared that the fathers did not necessarily realise the connection between their child’s reading practice and literacy development. They did not seem to model reading behaviour so that their children could imitate and follow their actions even though
studies have shown that when the fathers’ participation exists, children benefit from intellectual success (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera and Lamb, 2004). However, if the fathers had been part of the study they may not have necessarily agreed with the mothers’ responses.

3. Reading Practices in Relation to Older Siblings, Birth Order and Gender

Interviews with the mothers revealed that those children who had older siblings were exposed to opportunities to engage in literacy practices (Lynch (2002), and whenever a child was accustomed to seeing other members of the family especially their siblings, using literacy, they were more likely to imitate them (Lenhart and Roskos, 2003) thus giving them some advantage at the start of school (Wells, 1985).

Three of the five mothers said that they had spent more time reading with their firstborn child than with their other children, and Pine (1995) states that because of this the younger children could be at a disadvantage. In my study the second, third and fourth born children did not have as much involvement from their parents in literacy experiences as their older sibling. Kowalski et al. (2004) note that ‘first borns have more pretend play experience with their parents than their later-born peers’ (p. 397), and Taylor et al. (2008) argue that children who are given less attention with reading at home during early childhood may result in lower educational achievement. This could be due to a range of reasons, but time constraints seem to be the most common in my study.

Of the mothers who participated for my study, three had a boy and two each had a girl. According to the mothers the girls were more interested in drawing, colouring and reading than the boys which fits in with Lynch’s views (2002). Although there seemed to be a clear distinction between the activities that the boys and girls did in their leisure time, there was no such distinction between reading practices; they were reported by their mothers to enjoy initiating the reading process equally as much as the girls. As Scarborough and Dobrich, (1994) noted, it seems that all children like to be read to, once this is being exercised at home.
4. **Family Lifestyles and Accessible Resources**

It seems that family lifestyles have changed from when the parents themselves were young children (Nichols, 2000) because nowadays many Maltese children go to their grandparents’ house and are collected when their parents finish work. In fact when asked to describe a typical day in life, it was very interesting to note that none of the mothers mentioned reading as being part of the normal routine even though Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) state that if a child experiences habitual literacy practices in the home; there is the tendency that interest in reading will occur. It appeared that reading was not part of the daily routine but a spontaneous activity. During the interviews, reading was seen as being the bed time story and not part of an organised activity at other times, planned specifically to help their child’s literacy development (Nichols, 2000).

Since interviews were carried out in the participants’ home, I was able to note the kinds of literacy resources available and various resources such as books, games and printed materials were available throughout the participants’ homes (Purcell-Gates, 1996). Although in all the homes, books were seen as an accessible resource, parents’ time to use them with the children was limited because of work commitments, which limited the mothers’ opportunities to engage in literacy activities with their children, something which Chazan-Cohen et al. (2009) claim may have an effect later on in the child’s academic achievement.

**Limitations of the Study**

It was not my intention to generalise from the findings of this small scale study, but to provide some insight into the views of five mothers. Nevertheless, one of the limitations of this study was the time constraint. If I were to repeat the study and allow more time, I would consider interviewing fathers along with the mothers because fathers’ involvement in their children’s literacy development deserves
further investigation (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth and Lamb, 2000). By doing this, a researcher could then obtain a clearer perception of both genders since studies using the term ‘parent’ often refer only to mothers (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003).

I would also consider triangulating the research method by using some interviews, a larger questionnaire survey and possibly observing some children in their home environments. Through the use of questionnaires, I would have the benefit of a wider range of data (Wilson and McLean, 1994). In addition, through the use of observation methods, there exists ‘the potential to yield more authentic data than would otherwise be the case with mediated or inferential methods’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 396). This will surely help to find out more about the views of mothers compared with the views and practices of other members of the family.

Recommendations

I suggest that further research be done on aspects of parents’ roles in their children’s literacy development during the first five years of life because ‘the myth that education starts when children start formal schooling has long been dispelled and the Early Years are indeed the most crucial phase in each individual’s life’ (Ministry of Education, 2011, p.11). There were six main findings which I consider worthy of further investigation:

1. Mothers participating in this study did not appear to recognise the significance of their role in mediating and providing informal literacy practices in the home
2. Mothers did not view informal literacy as forming part of literacy development
3. The mothers used television and computers only as a form of keeping their children occupied, it would be interesting to investigate how parents could be better used such facilities to enhance learning.
4. Time constraints and work commitments, prevented the mothers from regularly reading to their children, it would be interesting to understand how families spend time together and whether there is a role for more literacy.

5. Literacy resources were provided for the children to use unaided, it would be interesting to learn more about how children used these resources at home.

6. Mothers demonstrated limited understanding of the importance of their role in modeling literacy practices to their children within the home environment, it would be interesting to learn more about what mothers would find useful in terms of learning more about how early literacy develops and how they can support it.

These six issues warrant further investigation with a view to providing additional opportunities and information for parents to engage in informal literacy practices (Nutbrown and Hannon, 1996) as a way of recognising the importance of their role as their children’s first educator (DCSF, 2008). More in-depth studies on parental involvement in their children’s literacy development such as the REAL project (Nutbrown and Hannon, 1996) are needed in the Maltese context, to stimulate discussion and enable parents to understand the importance of their role in modeling literacy practices in their children’s home environment. Such studies would help families, and could also usefully inform policy makers of the benefits of family literacy for Maltese families.

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CHAPTER 8
The impact of the home literacy environment on children’s literacy development

Maria Camilleri

Introduction

This chapter sets out to examine the influence of the home literacy environment and its effects on the child’s literacy development. This was investigated in a school-based sample of four to five year old children together with their mothers. The sample was categorized into two different groups: two children coming from a ‘rich’ home literacy environment, where parents actively engage in literacy activities with their children, and two children coming from a limited or passive home literacy environment, with limited literacy opportunities and engagement with parents.

As a new group of young learners enter my early years classroom each year, I always look at the little faces and wonder what kind of experiences these children have had and what their attitudes are towards schooling and learning. More specifically, ever since I started teaching, I have observed how the different literacy-related activities children have at home before starting school may be important in determining the ease or difficulty with which they acquire language and literacy skills. To this effect, I have set out to explore the connections between the literacies of the home and the school in an effort to investigate the extent to which a four or five-year old child’s literacy development is influenced by his/her earliest experiences and engagement with literacy-related activities in the home context.

Literature Review

Understanding of how children acquire literacy and become literate have changes in the last 30 years. The term emergent literacy is “conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the life of a child, rather than an all-or-none
phenomenon that begins when children start school” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, pg. 848). An emergent literacy perspective sustains that children start developing their literacy skills soon after they are born. Moreover, this model of literacy explains how children can gain literacy and learn how to become literate as a result of exposure to print in their homes and communities. The emergent literacy perspective suggests that from such experiences children can become literate and that they are the agents in their own learning (Weinberger, 1996).

Literacy develops within a cultural and social context and thus children coming from diverse cultures and backgrounds will have different literacy experiences. Moreover, these experiences will have an influence on the child’s literacy development shortly after he/she is born and undoubtedly before the child starts school. Subsequently, “learning to be literate is a complex, culturally shaped process” (Weinberger, 1996, pg. 14) and in turn it gives an indication about children’s acquisition of literacy before starting formal schooling, (Burgees, Hecht, and Lonign, 2002).

Leseman and Jong (1998) note that “becoming literate is thought to start at an early age, long before formal instruction in reading and writing begins” (p 294). However, there exists a large discrepancy in home literacy environments, such as trips to the library, joint-book reading and engaging in writing together (Leseman & Jong, 1998). Parents and significant people in a child’s life play a crucial role in the literacy development (Taylor, 1981; Heath, 1983; Minns, 1990). Much of children’s literacy learning does not occur in isolation but through rich and direct social interactions in their daily lives (Weigel et. al, 2005). Weinberger (1996) argues that:

Whilst acknowledging that children have their individual predisposition, we need to recognize that much of their literacy learning arises from, and is influenced by, the social environment in which they find themselves. Virtually all children are born into a print culture have a great deal of experience with the written word at home and in their communities, often mediated by their parents, before they formally start school (Weinberger, 1996, pg. 15).
The emergent literacy perspective sees the social context as being fundamental for a child’s early literacy experiences and emphasises active participation in literacy activities between the preschool child and the adult (Vandermmas-Peeler et. al, 2009). Pre-school children learn to a large amount in their home environment where literacy practices are common and used in everyday life situations ((Goodman et al., 1978), Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Nutbrown et. al, 2005). Children attending an early years setting also benefit from this experience but most learning occurs out of school and the parents remain a fundamental figure in the child’s learning and literacy development. Weigel et al. (2010) support the fact that the home and family environment is a powerful factor in the literacy development of young children (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2010). They argue that the home environment is a context from where children acquire literacy and language because it “serves as an important influence in the development of emergent literacy skills in young children” (Weigel, Bennet & Martin, 2006, pg. 194). Nutbrown and Hannon (1997) suggested that children’s emergent skills develop from real life situations happening in the everyday life in the home environment such as seeing parents write a shopping list, reading newspapers and books and engaging in other similar literacy activities.

As a teacher of four and five year old children I have observed how families’ involvement can effect children’s literacy development at school; the kinds of interactions the parents have with their children, the opportunities they provide for them and the role models they portray to their children. The development of literacy skills is enhanced when the children live in a home environment full of literacy engagements and resources such as books, papers, markers, crayons, educational games and parent-child engagements. I believe that literacy starts at home and if children live in a rich literacy environment their literacy development can flourish effectively.
Methodology

Aims and research question

I devised a research question that would enable me to gather rich information about the child’s home literacy environment and examine the effects that it has on the child’s literacy development. Bearing this in mind, I used the Goldilocks Test and the Russian Doll Principle (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007) to develop the research questions:

1. In what ways do the emergent literacy skills of four-year-old children coming from different home literacy environments vary?
2. What factors influence their literacy development?

I chose to work with two children who I regarded as living in a rich home literacy environment, and two children who had more limited home literacy environments. The study focused on the home literacy environment and how it aids and promotes the child’s literacy development.

Research Method

I used interviews and observations because the best way to gather information about the children’s home literacy environment was by interviewing the parents since I chose not to make home visits. Conducting interviews with parents rather than looking at the children’s opinions and asking them about their home literacy environment was the most appropriate way of gathering data since it gave me rich and descriptive information. From the interviews, I collected data from parents about the parent-child literacy activities and about other literacy activities children engaged in at their home.

I conducted four semi-structured interviews, each lasting about an hour. Interviews took place in the classroom, after school hours, and each parent was given a separate appointment. Data on children’s literacy skills were obtained through semi-
structured observations during everyday classroom activities. The four children participating in this project were presented with the same task and their work raised some issues about their home literacy environment. A literacy book was designed intentionally for the four children in order to store all the written work of children done during the literacy activities. Such observations provided me with real behaviours and facts taking place in a naturally occurring environment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Furthermore, they gave me the opportunity to “see things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed, to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations, to move beyond perception-based data and to access personal knowledge” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, pg. 398).

Sample Recruitment and Procedures

I selected four children for the study and spoke with parents about their involvement when they brought their children to, or collected them from, school were able to ask any questions about the study that were not clear to them. During a meeting with the parents I explained the study and gave them an information sheet and consent form. Prior to this, approval and consent was given to me from the school stating that I can carry out the research at a high school in the centre of Malta. Subsequently, parents were given time to look at the information sheet and decide whether they want their child and themselves to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted at school and each lasted about an hour. At the beginning of the interview I clearly stated the aims and procedures of the study and made sure that the consent forms were signed. All participants were assured that participation is completely optional and that all responses would be treated with anonymity. The semi-structured interview consisted of a few questions related to literacy opportunities in the home, parent-child literacy engagements, parental involvement in literacy practices, parental literacy habits and beliefs.
Having obtained written permission from their parents, children given a brief explanation about the study and given the choice to freely decide whether or not they want to be part of this study. I made sure that they are able to opt out of the study if they wanted to. Observations of children were conducted in the classroom while the children engaged in literacy activities such as reading, looking at books, writing and drawing. The times of the observations were not fixed as some of them occurred while the children were engaged in free play and others took place during planned literacy activities. Each child was observed six times during a period of two months and the time of observations differed. Some observations took longer than others depending on the task at hand or on the child’s interest and concentration in the literacy activity. Children were also observed even if they were in a group of friends during social encounters. These activities occurred during the everyday literacy sessions in my class so as to reinforce the letters and blending of sounds. Part of these activities included children’s writing of letters and simple words on their literacy book which each child has. My observation notes focused on the children’s literacy skills and their levels of literacy development. The main focus was to compare the children’s literacy skills and in turn look at their parents’ reports of their home literacy environment and identify any connections or impact the home might have on their literacy development.

Ethical Considerations

Before starting with the study, I needed to consider several ethical issues especially being that I was going to do a study with young children, and obtain ethical approval from my university. One key ethical issue is that of ensuring that all participants are aware of the purpose of the study and enabling them to give informed consent. I wanted the parents to fully understand what the aims of the research were and what their participation entailed. In order to guarantee clarity and deal with ethical issues, I provided an information sheet to the parents prior to their agreement to participate which included the research purpose, the reason why they have been chosen in particular, that the results would be anonymised, that all data will be kept
confidential and stored in a safe place. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at anytime and that they did not have to answer all my questions or to participate in the study at all.

Another fundamental ethical issue was to keep the anonymity of the children so names were changed in order to guarantee this.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

In this section I will present the findings of my study. Thematic analysis was used to present the results of my research study which is an approach of gathering the data together into codes, creating categories in relation to the data collection and grouping the data together (Gibson, 2006). The results answer the research question: In what ways do the emergent literacy skills of four-year-old children coming from different home literacy environments vary and what factors influence their literacy development?

**Approach to Data Analysis**

For the analysis of data, I first started by transcribing the audio recorded interviews. This was done through careful attention to the recordings of interviews and my observations. This process was then followed by the coding of data which was useful to look at the emerging themes by noting repetitions, patterns and frequencies in the data. The most effective way which helped me code the data was by using colour codes as I went through the information gathered from the participants. I used tables and grids to classify the observational data under the correct and appropriate columns which facilitated more structure and organization. All observations helped me to consolidate the information gathered from the classroom about the four children to that collected from the mothers during the interviews. I looked at the similarities and differences of the children’s literacy skills such as letter sound knowledge, writing of letters, writing of three letter words and blending of
sounds and spelling out the word. The themes were mainly focused on the data collected from the interviews but amalgamated with them was data collected from the observations supporting the issues tackled in the themes.

**Thematic Analysis**

In this part I will discuss the themes that I identified after transcribing the data and making meaning of the observations after amalgamating them with the transcripts. The main themes were:

1. Parental literacy beliefs
2. Mother’s psychological adjustment
3. Opportunities and engagement of literacy in the home
4. Establishing routines
5. Parental involvement in literacy activities

**Theme 1: Parental Literacy Beliefs**

I found that parental literacy beliefs of the parents in my study had an effect on the child’s literacy development. When I analyzed the interviews I found that there were two different types of literacy beliefs amongst the four parents. On one hand, I had two parents stressing the importance that parents should be the primary educators of their children whilst on the other side I had two other parents believing that the school should be the primary source of education for their children. Moreover, the parents’ level of education had a great impact on the literacy beliefs and parents’ opinions about the primary education for their children.

**Theme 2: Mother’s Psychological Adjustment**

The mothers’ own levels of stress and life problems had an effect on their children’s literacy development. In the first three years of life, which is an important period for children’s learning and development (Bee and Boyd, 2006), two mothers from the
study were not in a healthy psychological state and thus they said they neglected their children’s education due to their social problems and circumstances. Both mothers had a similar story to disclose. Their problems meant they could not be the primary caregivers of their newborns and thus they could not be ‘there’ for their child from the beginning.

**Theme 3: Opportunities and literacy engagement in the home**

Two children from the sample are provided with plenty of literacy material in the home such as children’s magazines, flashcards, note pads, markers, colours, stamps, colourful diaries and books. The opportunities and rich experiences they got from home helped them acquire literacy skills and in turn made them good readers at a very young age. The mothers’ encouragement and provision of literacy material in the home were crucial factors for the children’s rich literacy development.

Furthermore, the kind of literacy engagement they are involved with at home differs amongst the two girls coming from a rich literacy environment and the other children coming from a more limited or passive home literacy environment. The differences between the home literacy environments of these children are that the rich literacy environment seemed to prepared them for schooling where as the other children’s more limited environment did not enhance and promote their literacy development and thus they entered school with fewer emergent literacy skills.

**Theme 4: Establishing Routines**

Routines were not mentioned explicitly during the interviews but analysis showed that routines were established in two families. Due to the life problems, two mothers cannot really provide a particular routine for their child whilst the other two mothers who provide a rich literacy environment for their children have set routines. These mothers’ stressed the importance of establishing routine for their children because they think that it helps them to concentrate more and feel settled.
Theme 5: Parental Involvement in Literacy Activities

Parental involvement was dealt with during the interviews and it was mentioned by the parents themselves. Again, this theme shows that parental involvement plays a crucial factor in the development and literacy learning. The kind of interactions the mothers’ show to their children and the kinds of involvement they engage with were reflected in the child’s literacy performance at school during observations.

Summary

These findings show that the home literacy environment the parents provided for their children had an effect on their children’s literacy development. All the above themes include influential factors which can impact positively or negatively of a child’s literacy development. Exposure and opportunities are especially important in the first three years of life. Lack of literacy experiences in a child’s everyday life could be disadvantageous to their reading and writing development. A rich home literacy environment can prepare a child for schooling and for good literacy achievement.

Discussion and Conclusion

An emergent literacy model explains of how children can acquire literacy and how they become literate from their home literacy environment (Weinberger, 1996). Studies have provided encouraging evidence of the benefits of literacy development children can gain from their home literacy environment (Leseman & Jong, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Weigel et al, 2010; Weinberger, 1996). From the literacy experiences occurring in the home environment children can become literate and they are the agents in their own learning (Weinberger, 1996). Results in this study reveal that home environment is a fundamental aspect for the children’s literacy development. Exposure to literacy and provision of rich literacy opportunities such as, different interactions with print, singing rhymes, seeing parents write shopping lists or reading, being provided with literacy material and reading books with an adult, promote and aid children’s literacy development. The two girls, who come
from a rich home literacy environment full of fruitful experiences, show that their literacy development has developed in a positive way and they are benefiting from the opportunities they were provided with in their home literacy environment. Weinberger (1996) maintains that literacy develops within a culture and thus children coming from different backgrounds will have diverse literacy experiences. This statement supports the real situation of the four children in my research study. Since their home literacy environments were different and they came from different backgrounds, they had different literacy experiences.

Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan (2005) suggest that parents are powerful models to their children and their engagements in literacy may have an effect on the child’s literacy development. Parental involvement has an impact on the child’s literacy development and many researchers believe that pre-school children learn to a large extent from their home literacy environments and from the literacy practices occurring in the everyday life situations in the home (Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan, 2005; Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Vandermmas-Peeler et. al, 2009; Weigel et al., 2010). My study, suggests that the kind of interactions the children were provided with from their parents impacted on their literacy development. As the ORIM Framework (Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005) indicates, parents are powerful models of their children and their literacy engagements helps their children early literacy development.

Tizard and Hughes (1984) demonstrated that the home environment is very important for the child’s literacy development and from the rich experiences in the home environment children can learn substantially even more than from their school setting. They suggested that at home the attention is much more focused on the individual child rather than being split amongst several children. One mother in my study believed that her son should learn best from the school setting. He has limited literacy opportunities at home. It has long been recognized that children are affected from the surroundings which they live in and the family has a direct influence on the child’s literacy development since they are positioned at the centre (Bronferbrenner, 1979). In my study, the children coming from a rich home literacy environment have
attained positive literacy development whilst children who have a more limited home literacy experience were doing less well in literacy in school. This suggests, in line with the literature, that the family context is a strong contributor for the children’s literacy development and when the home environment offers an environment which fosters literacy development the outcome of children’s performance and preparation for schooling will be enhanced. Much of children’s learning does not occur in isolation rather it occurs through the social interactions they encounter in the everyday life situations through rich and healthy encounters (Weigel et. al, 2005).

Implications

Despite the limitations of the scale of the study, and the impossibility of generalizing from a sample of four children. I think there are some implications for me, and some questions for future research.

My study supported the literature by showing that children who come from a rich home literacy background benefited from it and acquired good literacy skills. The home literacy environment is influential and has a great impact on the child’s literacy development. Therefore, raising awareness of parents in improving the home literacy environments is desirable.

Above all, some parents could benefit from educational programmes and awareness about their role in their child’s early literacy development. Parents should be aware that literacy does not develop in isolation but it occurs through the social interactions and opportunities provided in the home setting (Nutbrown et. al, 2005).

Recommendations

The issue of recognizing the importance of literacy development in children is not new on the educational agenda in Malta. However, it seems the home literacy environment in this country especially in some families is still left aside. One possible
solution for a more effective provision to take place is to make parents aware of the effects of the home literacy environment onto the children’s literacy development. One way of doing this is for schools to offer parental involvement programmes and support, to give parents more information and confidence in supporting their children before they come to school.

References


CHAPTER 9

Home And Kindergarten Influences On The Emergent Literacy Skills Of A 4-Year-Old Girl

Elizabeth Jones

Introduction

In Malta, various policies, strategies and programmes (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009; Vallejo and Dooly, 2008; Camilleri, Spiteri and Wolfendale, 2005) have been created to help school aged children develop basic literacy skills (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009, p.26) but as yet, few strategies have been proposed for kindergarten and preschool aged children. This emphasis on literacy acquisition in the formal years of schooling could give the impression that literacy acquisition does not begin until children start formal education.


What is Emergent Literacy?

The term emergent literacy reflects an important shift in theory, research and practice (Williams, 2004, p.352). In the late 1960s researchers began to discover that children as young as 5 years learned a lot about reading through informal
literacy activities (Clay, 1967). Later, Teal and Sulzby (1986, p.xviii) proposed a new paradigm for understanding early childhood reading and writing and challenged the view that literacy development begins with formal schooling. Since then, researchers in the field of early literacy development agree that the term emergent literacy refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are regarded as the developmental precursors to the more conventional forms of literate behaviours such as reading and writing (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998, p.848; Teale and Sulzby, 1986, p.viii). These skills and attitudes develop as the result of stimulating and responsive home and kindergarten environments (Cunningham, 2010; Frijters, Barron and Brunello, 2000; Minns, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Bryant, Burchinal and Sparkling, 1994; Dickinson and Smith, 1994; Schlieker, White and Jacobs, 1991; Strickland and Taylor, 1989; Teale, 1986). Such skills and attitudes are also nurtured by social interactions with caring adults (Morrow, 2009, p.296; 2007, p.23; Deckner, Adamson and Bakeman, 2006; Weigel, Martin and Bennet, 2006; Theroit, Franco, Sisson, Metcalf, Kennedy and Bada, 2003; Burgess, Hecht and Lonigan, 2002; Bus 2001; Senechal, LeFevre, Payne, Whitehurst and Angell, 1994); exposure to literacy materials such as paper, writing supplies, magazines and books (Hendrick, 2004; Allor and McCathren, 2003; Weinberger, 1996; Payne, et al., 1994; Cullinan, 1989); and the inclusion of environmental print and props (Morrow, 2007; Vukilech, 1994) that enable adults to model behaviours for reading and writing (Morrow, 2009, p.296; 2007, p.23).

In today’s world, children’s environments are filled with visual, electronic and digital texts (Bearne and Bazalgette, 2010; Kress 2003). These multimodal texts have challenged traditional definitions of literacy, which focused on reading and writing (Bearne, 2009) and proposed a wider definition of literacy, which includes technology as a way of conveying meaning (Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2007, p.7; Bearne, 2003). In fact, several studies have demonstrated that emergent literacy practices do not focus exclusively on print literacy but incorporate a range of multi-modal practices such as watching television, using computer games and using mobile phones (Linebarger and Piotrowski, 2009; Moses and Duke, 2008;
My study was grounded in an ecological theory of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 1979) and takes into account the critical roles that the home and preschool environments play in the emergent literacy skills of children (Samuelsson, Byrne, Quain, Wadsworth, Corley, Defries, et al., 2005). Given the difficulties of intruding upon family life (Miller, 1996, p.38), I decided to make my 4-year-old daughter the focus of the study. My study follows in the steps of other researchers who studied their own children and grandchildren (Whitehead, 2002; Campbell, 1999; Baghban, 1984; Payton, 1984; Crago and Crago, 1983; Bissex, 1980) and it attempts to demonstrate that daily life activities play a significant role in the early literacy experiences of children (Whitehead, 2002, p. 272). The research questions that guided my study were:

- To what type of emergent literacy skills is a four-year-old Maltese child exposed to in the home and kindergarten environments?
- How does the classroom environment support this child’s emergent literacy skills?
- How do the activities of everyday family life affect the emergent literacy skills of this child?
- In what ways do the home and kindergarten environments interact to support this child’s emergent literacy skills?

**Research Methods**

The purpose of my research was to describe, understand and interpret (Merriam, 2009, p.11; Crotty, 1998, p.67) the daily events that occurred in one child’s home and kindergarten settings (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.10) so, the case study design fitted perfectly within the aims of my study. The participants in this study were my 4-year-old daughter, Emily, Ms Borg, her kindergarten assistant Emily’s father, Jonathan and myself.
Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with Emily’s father and her kindergarten teacher so as to be able to gain their perspectives on literacy (Patton, 2002, p.341).

Observations

To explore how Emily experienced emergent literacy I made naturalistic observations in the kindergarten and home environments. These observations gave me the opportunity to look directly at what was taking place in the home and kindergarten environments (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.396) with the result that I understood more about these environments and the processes that were taking place there (Denscombe, 2010, p.197).

Documents and Artifacts

Documents and artefacts were other sources of evidence utilised during this study. Documents in the form of photographs were taken during observations whilst artefacts consisted of ‘written’ samples made by Emily at the time of the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993, p.99-p.100).

Findings and Discussion

Supportive Adults’ Beliefs and Attitudes towards Literacy

Ever since Emily was a little baby she has had supportive adults in her home environment who responded to her enquiries and needs. Our philosophy, that children start to learn about literacy when they are still babies “...it-tfal minn ċkunithom, minn meta jkunu ghadhom babies jitghallmu dwar il-kitba u l-qari” has framed the type of beliefs and attitudes that we as parents hold about Emily’s literacy development.
Ms Borg, Emily’s kindergarten assistant believed that children are intellectually ready to be exposed to reading and writing from a very young age. Ms Borg’s assumptions that children start to acquire literacy at a very young age influenced the type of educational programme she offered Emily (Ure and Raban, 2001, p. 159). In fact, my study showed that she presented Emily with various language and literacy experiences which are important for the development of children’s emergent literacy skills (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998).

**Adult-Child Interactions**

When Emily was still a baby, her father and I frequently looked at books with her and talked with her about the pictures and the text in the books. As Emily grew older the conversations about books and the reading of books by a significant adult became a prevailing characteristic of her literacy development, in fact home observations show how joint book reading was one of the most frequent adult-child interactions that we engaged in. Apart from nurturing in Emily an interest in books (Bus 2001) such parent-child shared book reading interactions are also important elements in Emily’s developmental and educational outcomes because they are related to language skills, emergent literacy and reading achievement (Leseman and de Jong, 1998; Bus, van IJzendoorn and Pelligrini, 1995).

Jonathan’s words “minħabba x-xogħol, l-iktar li taqra miegħek” (“because of my work schedule, she reads books with you”) highlight the fact that I as the mother play a significant role in Emily’s literacy development. In actual fact, the important role played by the mother is confirmed by Bus and van IJzendoorn (1988, p.1262) who claim that the beginnings of emergent literacy can be found in mother-child interactions during activities related to written words such as the reading of books. The findings also demonstrated that when reading aloud, I tend to engage in discussions with Emily. The following is an excerpt of a discussion I had with Emily whilst reading her one of her favourite books:
Mother: (Reading from the book)


My name is Mark. I like to get to know people in the Bible. Do you know what I have found out? God can find you new friends, even if you go and live in a new town.

Mother: (Addressing Emily)

Emily, inti meta mort fl-iskola l-ġdida sibt xi ħbieb ġodda?
Emily did you make new friends when you went to the new school?

Emily: (Nods)

Mother: Lil min sibt?
Who did you find?

Emily: Lil Chelsea u lil Aidan.
Chelsea and Aidan.

Mother: Ἡadt gost bihom il-ħbieb ġodda?
Were you happy with your new friends?

Emily: (Nods)

Iva.
Yes.

Mother: U xi thobb tagħmel magħhom?
And what do you like to do with them?

Emily: İnhobb nilghab u npenġi maq̧ħhom.
I like to play and draw with them.

Our mother-child interaction is consistent with Hiebert’s (1988, p.165) premise that whilst reading stories, adults make use of scaffolding techniques. In fact during this observation I asked Emily questions which helped her link elements in the story with what she already knew. These ‘interactions with responsive, more competent others’ (Landry and Smith 2006, p.138-139) helped Emily to comprehend and make use of vocabulary, to construct grammatically correct sentences and to make use of words to convey meaning (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).

In the classroom setting, Ms Borg engaged Emily in cognitively challenging conversations. The following excerpt indicates that these conversations involved personal narrative about things that happened:
Kindergarten Assistant: ...lil Emily indaħħalha f’dawn il-konverżazzjonijiet...nistaqsi lit-tfal kollha x’għamlu fil-weekend... u Emily tğhidli hi x’għamlet is-Sibt u l-Ħadd...
...I engage Emily in these conversations...I ask the children about the things that they do during the weekend... and Emily tells me how she spent Saturday and Sunday.

She also asked Emily questions about things that were going to happen:

Kindergarten Assistant: X’inhi l-festa li ġejja?
Children: Il-Karnival.
Kindergarten Assistant: Emily, tista’ tghidli għalfjejn nieħdu gost f’din il-festa?
Emily: Because we wear our costumes.

These conversations gave Emily the opportunity to talk about past and future events. By giving Emily the ability to make use of language that conveys information distinct from context, the kindergarten assistant provided Emily with an opportunity to understand and discuss abstract concepts (Dickinson and Smith, 1994) which, as the above conversation demonstrates are helping Emily in the development of her comprehension abilities (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).

**Modelling Behaviours**

From a very early age Emily had opportunities to see us engaging in a variety of literacy practices and as Emily watched us, she began to be exposed to the ways in which print and literacy are used in everyday life (Morrow, 2007, p.23). She also started to emulate the literacy behaviours that she observed occurring in her home environment (Neuman and Roskos, 1993b, p.49). For instance, one afternoon after
returning home from school I took out a Record of Work Sheet (a handout where I write down pupils’ names, year group and a description of the literacy activity that I conducted with them), and started to fill it in. Emily had been seeing me do this for months and she frequently asked me questions such as, “What did you write?” or “Why are you writing on that paper?” but during this particular instance Emily took one of my sheets and started to write on it. Her finished product was an imitation of what I usually write on these sheets (Figure 9:1).

![Record of Work Sheet](image)

Emily wrote: ‘I have read a book about Buxu (a cat) to the children.

**Figure 9:1 Emily filling in a Record of Work Sheet**

The above was not a one-off occurrence but during the course of the research, Emily engaged in various other imitative literacy behaviours (Figure 9:2) such as:

- writing cards, letters, invitations and shopping lists;
- writing short notes as reminders;
- asking me to help her send emails;
- sending ‘Thank-you’ or ‘I love you’ notes to her classmates;
- writing messages to the bank.
Emily wrote: Dear Neil. You are invited to Emily’s party. On Monday.

Emily wrote: Hello Josette. It is Floppy’s (her favourite toy) birthday. Emily

Emily wrote: Chelsea Galea. Kisses. I love you. See you at the beach. Emily and Floppy

Figure 9:2 Emily engaging in other imitative literacy behaviours
These literacy behaviours are clear examples of Bandura’s (1977) theory of social learning which states that children acquire knowledge by imitating or modelling the behaviours of the people around them.

In the classroom context Emily watched as Ms Borg filled in the class register, read circulars and filled in forms. Ms Borg frequently asked the children to come near her table to see her engage in these activities. She also took the time to explain to the children the reason why she was reading or writing. According to Morrow (2007, p.179), this gave Emily the opportunity to see how knowledgeable others go about writing and it also helped her ‘understand that the marks we make convey meaning.’ The kindergarten assistant modelled literacy practices whilst reading stories to children. For instance, during an observation, whilst reading a storybook she demonstrated how to hold a book and by carefully turning the pages she provided a model of appropriate book handling behaviour to the children. Later on, Emily emulated her teacher’s book handling behaviour and ‘read’ books to her peers in a tone of voice which resembled the way in which her kindergarten assistant had narrated the story (Figure 9:3). When Emily returned home, she continued to practise her newly found knowledge by first explaining to her soft toys how to hold the book and then by ‘reading’ to them the same story that the kindergarten assistant had read to her in the morning. Emily’s behaviour seems to confirm the claim that opportunities for learning provided in kindergarten settings are sometimes continued at home (Daly, Byers and Taylor, 2004, p.127).

This raises new and important issues about the extent to which the literacy activities conducted in the kindergarten setting ‘match’ the literacy activities of the home environment. In Emily’s case there seems to be a very close ‘match’ because as a mother I use my professional knowledge as a teacher, to provide her with school
related activities such as talking about the text in books and spotting letters in the environment. Even my uses of literacy in everyday home routines are also mostly founded on school-based activities such as filling in forms and correcting pupils’ copybooks. This close match between the classroom setting and the home setting is helping Emily ‘build continuity between home and school literacies’ (Levy, 2008, p.44). However, whilst for some children the match between home and school is comfortable, for others it is not (Compton-Lilly, 2006). Levy (2008) warns that these children’s constructions of literacy, which are still valuable and sophisticated, are at risk of being disrupted by the demands of the kindergarten curriculum. She argues that for this not to happen it is essential that early childhood educators, ‘embrace, value and build upon’ children’s own constructions of literacy (Levy, 2008, p.64).

Labels, Signs and Print in the Environment

Emily is surrounded by environmental print on items such as cereal boxes, food labels, T-shirts, television adverts, magazines, street signs, logos, billboards and car registration plates.

Figure 9:4 Emily interacting with environmental print in her home environment
Father: (Talking about environmental print that Emily encounters in playing fields.)

L-ewwel ħaġa li tghidlek Emily hija, “Din hawnhekk nista’ nilghab?” U nurieha s-sign u l-age groups fejn tista’ tilghab... U tgħidlek, “X’hawn miktub hawnhekk?” “Dan ghaxiemxex hawn miktub hekk?” U l-fatt li tuża subgħajk... timxi fuq il-kliem u taqralha biċċa, biċċa f’moħħa qed tibnilha image tal-kliem.

The first thing that Emily asks you is, “Can I play here?” Then I show her the sign and the age group... then she asks you, “What is written over here?” “Why did they write this?” The fact that you point at the print with your finger and read it to her bit by bit helps her build a mental image of the word.

This excerpt indicates that Emily is not only exposed to environmental print but, as the significant adults in her life, we are constantly talking to her about signs and other print in her environment (Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan, 2005, p.41). According to Neuman and Roskos (1993a), interactions with a capable adult help a child learn environmental print words. In fact, these types of interactions have made it possible for Emily to recognise print on a variety of household objects such as chocolate bars, soft drink bottles and food packages. Emily’s ability to recognise brand names such as Mc Donald’s, Lidl and Mothercare is also a result of these parent-child interactions.

On a car journey away from Emily’s usual environment, Jonathan drove past a McDonald’s sign, which Emily had never seen before:
Father: … kien hemm sign tal-McDonald’s u kien hemm vleġġa u taf inti, jghidlek -200m Down the Road at McDonald’s. U malli għaddejna qaltli, “Ara, haw il-McDonald’s hawnhekk, hawn il-McDonald’s, nixtru ċips?” … and there was this McDonald’s sign with an arrow which said – 200m Down the Road at McDonald’s. And when we drove past she said, “Look, there’s a McDonald’s here, there’s a McDonald’s, should we buy some chips?”

The words uttered by Emily suggest that she not only recognised the print in her environment but she also recognised the purpose of print (Campbell, 1999, p.53; Payton 1984, p.30). According to Campbell (1999) this happens when adults continuously talk to children about the signs and print in their environment. This episode shows that parents can make children conscious of the fact that print carries meaning (Justice and Ezell, 2001) which, Neuman and Roskos (1993b, p.70) claim ‘is an important precursor to literacy development.’

As Figure 9:5 shows, labels and signs were also part of the classroom print in Emily’s kindergarten environment. The kindergarten assistant labelled items in the classroom setting because for her, environmental print was a source of reading material that provided literacy experiences to children (Neuman and Roskos, 1993a, p.115), “meta jagħrfu l-labels, ikunu qishom qed jaqraw...” (“when they recognise the labels, it is as though they are reading...”).

Figure 9:5 Environmental print in Emily’s classroom
The environmental print in Emily’s classroom was made up of flashcards with pupils’ names, colour and number words and labels on the objects in the room. There were no examples of environmental print that Emily tends to know best such as fast-food logos, road and traffic signs, and names of popular store chains and supermarkets. This finding may perhaps be explained by Vukelich (1994, p.165) who states that although early childhood teachers label objects and furniture, it is only a small number of teachers who actually include message-bearing signs and link functional experiences with these signs. According to Vukelich (1994) environmental print from Emily’s outside world embedded in the classroom would have allowed her to interact with it through play. This would have presented Emily with ‘opportunities for literacy which built upon what she had already experienced and achieved at home’ (Nutbrown, 2000, p.32).

**Exposure to her own name**

Our daughter’s own name was one of the earliest and most meaningful experiences (Bloodgood, 1999, p.342) she has had with environmental print. During the first months of her life Jonathan and I took pleasure in buying her things like bibs, T-shirts, scarves and key-chains with her name embroidered or printed, and now that she has grown older her own bedroom is saturated with signs which bear her own name. In the classroom environment the kindergarten assistant printed and displayed labels with Emily’s name on the child’s chair, drawings, crafts and personal objects. This created a ‘seamless connection’ (Nutbrown, 2000, p.33) between the home and school environment where Emily was presented with an opportunity to have a more frequent exposure to her name.

The kindergarten assistant also created games where Emily was given the opportunity to make use of flashcards with her name written on them (Morrow, 2007, p.116). The kindergarten assistant’s words, “Emily...bdiet tagħraf isimha, tagħraf isimha miktub fuq is-siġġu, tagħraf il-flexkards...” (‘Emily... started to recognise her name, she can recognise her name written on her chair and on the
flashcards...”) reflect Morrow’s claim (2007) that, once her name was familiar to her it became part of her sight vocabulary.

The frequent exposure provided by the home and kindergarten setting seems to have heightened Emily’s interest in the way her name is written down (Haney, 2002, p.104). In fact during one of my first observations Emily created a piece of writing consisting of the letter E (Figure 6).

![Figure 9:6 One of Emily’s first attempts to write her name](image)

Within months her frequent attempts evolved in such a manner that she was capable of producing a nearly accurate writing of the word ‘Emily’ (Figure 7).

![Figure 9: 7 Emily writes her own name](image)

This newly acquired ability gave Emily a sense of identity (Haney, 2002, p. 101) because she started to write her name on the things that either belonged to her or were produced by her. Consistent with Nutbrown’s (2000, p.33) argument that learning should be continued through experiences provided by the classroom environment, the kindergarten assistant’s words, “Flok niktibulha jien bhal ma kont naghmel fil-bidu, tikteb isimha hi...” (“Instead of writing it down for her as I used to do in the beginning, now she writes her own name...”) are a clear indication that Ms Borg built bridges between Emily’s home and kindergarten experiences (McLane and McNamee, 1990, p.137).
As Emily’s personal name writing and reading ability evolved there was also an accompanying growth in her alphabetic knowledge. On one occasion as we were walking towards our car, the letter E on our car registration plate caught Emily’s attention and, whilst pointing at the letter E she exclaimed, “E...Ara dik ta’ Emily! Elizabeth u Emily jibdew l-istess – Ara bħali!” (“E...Look that belongs to Emily! Elizabeth and Emily start with the same letter – Look, just as in my own name!”). This implies that through the exposure of the letters in her own name (Haney, 2002; Bloodgood, 1999) Emily is developing alphabet letter-name knowledge which is a component of emergent literacy abilities (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).

Available Resources

In her home environment Emily is given access to a variety of literacy resources such as whiteboard markers, pencils, pens, colours and paper. In addition, in her bedroom Emily has a collection of books which we have put on a shelf that she can easily reach. Emily frequently selects books from her shelf and asks us to read them to her or if she is familiar with the book, she puts it on the floor in front of her and starts to ‘read’ it. When her father buys a newspaper she asks him for the inserts so that she can have a look at them. Then when she finishes she tells him, “Ħa dawn ħudhom inti u tini l-gazzetta biex naraha” (“You can have these [the inserts]. Now give me the newspaper so that I can have a look at it”). She also utilises resources that she finds available in her home environment to make cards for her father:

Father: Taqbad biċċa karta, tpengiha, titwiha, tiktiblek xi ħaġa ġewwa...imbagħad tagħtielek u tgħidlek, “Ħa ħudha. Ghandek kard tal-birthday.”
She gets hold of a piece of paper, she draws on it and folds it, then she writes something inside... then she gives it to you and tells you, “Take it, you have a birthday card.”
Emily’s behaviour when interacting with these resources seems to substantiate Campbell’s (1999) claim that children utilise the resources that they have available in their environment to support their literacy learning. Therefore, by exposing Emily to a home environment which provides her with access to books, writing and drawing supplies and literacy play materials we are helping her in her literacy development. Evans, Shaw and Bell (2000) confirm this view and note that the literacy rich environment created by parents plays a significant role in children’s emergent literacy development.

Emily’s access to books was replicated in her kindergarten setting, where the library corner, which was made up of books brought from home by the children themselves was an important feature of the classroom environment. The kindergarten assistant observed that Emily frequently chose a book from the library corner and she either read it alone or read it to her friends. According to Neuman and Celano (2001, p.554) frequent access to books will help children become better at telling and recounting stories, at recognising letters, at understanding the conventions of print, and at grasping early writing skills.

In the two areas (the restaurant and the greengrocer’s shop) designed for sociodramatic play the kindergarten assistant included the following literacy materials:

- menus;
- jotting pads;
- pencils and colours;
- cash registers;
- shopping lists.

The photographs in Figure 9:8 demonstrate that the literacy materials provided at kindergarten helped to encourage in Emily, play that was filled with literacy opportunities and encounters.
Roskos and Neuman (1994) claim that when literacy props are included in dramatic play centres pupils engage in more literacy-related activities such as reading and writing. Emily also used literacy to meet a variety of personal needs such as reading a menu to order food, writing and reading grocery lists to buy food and writing down food orders. This gave Emily the opportunity to discover that print is functional and can be utilised to accomplish goals (Teale and Sulzby, 1989, p.3).
Television

Since Emily watches television both in her home and kindergarten environment, television viewing is an important aspect of her daily life (Moses and Duke, 2008, p.251). Whilst watching television in her home and kindergarten environments, Emily engaged with the content on screen by singing, dancing and copying the character’s actions and words (Marsh, et al., 2005, p.28).

Results showed that in her home environment Emily paid special attention to the print which appeared on screen. For instance, a few seconds before children’s programmes were aired on the Maltese state television, a caption with the phrase ‘Għat-Tfal’ (‘For Children’) appeared on screen. When Emily first noticed this caption, she asked me “Dik x’tinqara?” (“What does it say?”) Once she was told what that title read she repeated it after me. As time passed, Emily grew accustomed to this caption and whenever she saw it on screen she took great pride in reading it out to me. This seems to imply that by paying attention to the print on the television screen Emily is learning to recognise new words (Weinberger, 1996, p.53).

Exposure to Popular Culture

Research confirms that within the home environment parents and children encounter a range of popular culture and media texts (Marsh 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Weinberger 1996). In her home environment Emily is surrounded by popular culture texts and artefacts such as, comics, books based on television characters, stationery, stickers, bed linen and clothes. The following observation demonstrates how the print on one of these artefacts captivated Emily’s interest and provided her with an opportunity to engage spontaneously in an emergent literacy activity:
(Emily, wearing a new Hello Kitty T-shirt)

Emily: Mummy, hawnhekk x’hawn miqtub?
Mummy, what do I have written here?

Mother: Fejn, sabiha?
Where dear?

Emily: (Points at the print on her T-shirt) Fuq il-flokk...għax ma
nafx x’hemm miqtub.
On my T-shirt...because I do not know what is written
on it.

Mother: (Points at the words and reads) Hello...
Emily: Hello...
Mother: ...Kitty
Emily: ...Kitty...
Emily: Hello Kitty.

This excerpt indicates that these popular culture texts and artefacts could provide
numerous opportunities for children’s literacy activities (Marsh and Thompson,
2001, p.268). In fact consistent with Marsh’s claim (1999) Emily’s interest in popular
culture may have motivated her to engage with the text on her T-shirt.

Apart from the children’s satchels, lunchboxes and bottles, in Emily’s kindergarten
setting there was no evidence of exposure to popular culture texts and artefacts.
The kindergarten assistant’s words, “...lill-genituri għedtilhom bhal ma nagħmlu l-
iskola jekk jista’ jkun joqoqhdu jitkellmu magħhom u jagħmlu d-dar...” (“I have told
the parents to do the things that we do at school, if it is possible to talk to the
children and do the same things at home...”) could provide a clue for this lack of
exposure. According to McCarthey (2000, p.146) this disparity between Emily’s
home and kindergarten environment could provide a barrier for the acquisition of
literacy skills. In fact rather than insisting on an approach in which parents are
encouraged to reflect preschool literacy practices at home, kindergartens might
consider the benefits of understanding the literacy practices of the home and
incorporating them into the kindergarten curriculum (Marsh, 2003). According to
Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.6) this interconnection between settings could be
achieved through ‘joint participation, communication, and the existence of
information in each setting about the other’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.6). By
providing Emily with teaching that is culturally relevant to her life, what happens
inside the classroom will become connected with the outside world and literacy will become a meaningful tool to Emily (Mc Carthey, 2000, p.148).

**Conclusion**

This study has begun to identify an important aspect in a Maltese home and kindergarten environment that promote one child’s emergent literacy and language development. These aspects could be used as diagnostic tools that could be utilised to better understand the home and kindergarten environments of children, including those who are considered at risk of low literacy attainment (Weigel, Martin and Bennett, 2005, p.227). Better understandings of emergent literacy opportunities at home could then lead to interventions in the form of training programmes where parents and kindergarten assistants are introduced to strategies that enhance emergent literacy within the home and kindergarten environments (Weigel, et al., 2005, p.227).

In the classroom context Emily was presented with language and literacy experiences important for the development of her emergent literacy skills (Snow et al., 1998). Literacy materials provided by the kindergarten assistant helped to encourage in Emily, play that was filled with literacy events. Since these results only support the idea that the classroom environment should provide literacy related play to encourage children’s emergent literacy skills (Roskos and Neuman, 1994) further research on how different methods of teacher interactions in play affect children’s emergent literacy learning is needed (Morrow and Schickedanz, 2006, p.278).

Books which the children themselves brought from home, were placed on an accessible bookshelf in the kindergarten setting and Emily frequently chose a book from the shelf and she either ‘read’ it alone or ‘read’ it to her friends. This demonstrates that books need to be in close proximity to children so that they can make use of them (Neuman, 1999, p.34). This also raises an important question about the quality of books provided to children. Are books in Maltese kindergarten environments providing children with the rich and diverse reading material needed,
to acquire attitudes, skills and behaviours associated with emergent literacy development? Future research on emergent literacy, needs to investigate the impact that books provided in Maltese kindergarten classrooms have on children’s emergent literacy skills, in the short term and over a long period of time.

In addition, the way in which we as a family engage in specific types of emergent literacy practices such as storybook reading, exposure to print and popular culture and watching television programmes have been identified. These practices contributed to Emily’s emergent literacy development in different and particular ways. In fact, these practices fostered in Emily components of emergent literacy such as language skills, print knowledge, emergent reading, emergent writing and alphabet name knowledge (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). This study provided important information about the way in which two Maltese parents who are both university graduates (with the mother being a teacher) engage in specific emergent literacy practices with their 4-year-old daughter. How well these findings apply to families from different social backgrounds, immigrant families and multigenerational families, is a question for further research.

There was a lot of continuity between many of the home and kindergarten practices that were presented to Emily. Given the type of socio-cultural background that Emily comes from, this finding was not surprising. However, the study also showed that the kindergarten environment, supported early literacy, though did not use popular culture and environmental print. This finding raises the issue of potential discontinuity for children between home and school. I suggest that schools need to acknowledge that the home life of children matters (Marsh, 2003, p.379) and that a re-evaluation in practice can help to find ways to become acquainted with and incorporate the literacy practices young children engage in at home (Levy, 2008, p.64).

This study has taken the form of a single case study, conducted by a mother-teacher on her own child, who attends a state funded kindergarten; as such it is limited in its scope and its claim for typicality. A larger, similarly focussed study involving families
from different Maltese home backgrounds would offer a better understanding of the various home literacy practices young children are exposed to. Since the views and practices of a single kindergarten assistant may not reflect those of other kindergarten assistants working in other kindergartens (state, church and private) further research that explores the ways in which these centres are supporting children’s emergent literacy skills would also be of value.

This small scale study has shown how one child’s literacy was supported in the home and kindergarten environment through the opportunity to read books, to write, to listen to stories and to engage with different print resources. Literacy resources were available in these environments and they assisted her in her emergent literacy development. Emily also benefitted from the constant support of the significant adults in her life. Though there was some overlap, there was also a difference in the way these two environments supported literacy through the use of environmental print and popular culture. This demonstrates that educators need to know more about children’s constructions of literacy so that they can accept and build upon the children’s own experiences of literacy (Levy, 2008, p.64).

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CHAPTER 10

Literacy at home in a digital age

Josette Bezzina

Introduction

During the past ten years, research on new literacies arising from new media and technologies has become a rapidly growing area of interest (Marsh, 2004, 2000; Jewitt, 2002; Kress, 1997). Although until two decades ago literacy was still being defined as the ‘ability to communicate through and about print’ (Pellegrini & Galda, 1998, p.131), this definition is now contested. Literacy patterns have evolved from print to multimodal ways of making meaning (Yamada-Rice, 2010). In today’s postmodern world where digital technology is increasingly being used, knowledge and learning are undergoing rapid changes. There is a documented change for the children of the present generation who continually come across visual texts of all kinds at home from printed texts to technological information. However, much of the literacy that children encounter at school is still based solely on print-based texts. Carrington (2001) maintains that it is the responsibility of the educators to ensure that they understand the repercussions of the literacies that they present to the children in the classrooms and to become aware of the shifts in the types of literacy practices that will be of most benefit for the children in their lives. This might be the result of the fact that adults are accustomed to print-based texts and they find it hard to recognise the importance of digital technology in the literacy practices of today’s children today.
Definitions of literacy

In 1986, Goodman argued that ‘when children are reading and writing they are making sense out of print or through print’ (p.5). More than a decade later Powell’s (1999) definition of literacy included the ability to decode print into speech; the ability to derive meaning from written texts; and the ability to read and write at a specified proficiency level. More recently and in more simple language, Gee (2008) stated that ‘the traditional meaning of the word literacy (is) the ability to read and write’ (p.31).

These definitions imply that literacy is a print-based activity. However, children of the present generation access texts in a range of modes, for example: on computers, television and mobile phones (Marsh, 2004, p.252). That is why many now refer to multiliteracies.

Why is literacy important?

Strickland and Morrow (1989) state that, ‘children’s literacy development depends to a great extent on the literacy environment at home’ (p.530). If parents expose their children to different literacy experiences, this can have an impact on their success in becoming literate. So researching home literacy practices is very important in order to gain insight into how children acquire literacy skills and they can reveal practices that can be effectively implemented in the school setting.

Literacy and new technologies

Larson and Marsh (2005) state that ‘changes in literacy practices precipitated by the developments of technology have been so profound that they have challenged our understanding of the very nature of literacy itself’ (p.68). In fact, the fusion of reading and writing with the new technologies is often referred to in literature as ‘moving image literacy’ (Burn & Leach, 2004), ‘media literacy’ (Buckingham, 2003), ‘new literacies’ (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and ‘digital literacy’ (Glister, 1997).
Larson and Marsh (2005) state that whatever literacy is called, nowadays it refers to the ‘ability to decode, encode and make meaning using a range of modes of communication including print, still and moving image, sound and gesture, all mediated by new technologies’ (p.69). This implies that techno-literacy integrates literacy practices and events which are mediated by new technologies (Marsh, 2002; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel & Searle, 1997) within older technologies that are continuously being modernized to incorporate new technological developments. However, our educational system was not planned to teach these children. As a teacher who graduated before the present technological shifts, it seems that I have a lot to catch up in order to stay up-to-date with the changes that are taking place!

Children become competent in using these digital technologies from a very young age (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003; Marsh & Thompson, 2001). So it seems that although literacy is ‘on the verge of reinventing itself’ (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000, p.193), print-based literacy is not outdated but significantly changed. As an educator, I have the responsibility to understand the implications for the children I teach, of the literacies I present them with in the classroom and to include the types of literacy practices that will be of most advantage to them in their lives. Just as previous generations of children became literate in an environment where there were printed texts, the present generation is accustomed to multimodal texts. Therefore the sole use of print-based texts in the classrooms needs to be challenged.

This is also reflected in the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (Department of Education, 1999) which acknowledges that ‘among the recurrent challenges that the curriculum must strategically address are: developments in...technology...digital processing of information and knowledge’ (p.13). However, many of the literacy experiences which children encounter at home from birth are not well-embedded into curriculum frameworks (Luke & Luke, 2001). This creates a dissonance between the out-of-school literacy and schooled-literacy. As a result, Bearne (2003) states that ‘classroom literacy needs not only to recognize the new forms of text which children meet every day but to give multimodal texts a firm place in the curriculum’ (p.98).
As educators we can no longer underestimate the digital practices and experiences that young children bring to school by exclusive use of print-based texts in our classrooms. Learning must be interesting and relevant to the children while at the same time based on what the children have already learnt from home. This can be achieved by valuing and learning more about children’s popular culture interests and recognizing their technological knowledge, and making learning more significant to them (Evans, 2004, p.12) through more use of digital technology in the classroom so that the child is able to transfer digital literacy skills between home and school. This means that teachers need to ‘broaden their definition of literacy and to embrace innovative strategies’ (Scott, 2004, p.165). Levy (2008) maintains that ‘home and school cultures (can) combine, creating new and distinct meanings about reading’ (p.48) and writing. In this way, the school curriculum can be made more meaningful for children if their cultural resources are taken into account. Consequently, this study adds to the existing literature on this area of study by providing data about the kind of literacy practices that four Maltese families engage in at home.

**A Case Study**

The findings discussed in this section draw from a research question designed to investigate the kind of literacy practices that parents and children engage in at home in the Maltese context. This qualitative study was based on a small number of participants, four children in Year 1 and their parents. I chose a case study research in order to hear ‘the true voice of the participants’ (Hughes, 2001, p.36). In fact, Clough and Nutbrown (2007) state that ‘case studies...are often seen as prime examples of qualitative research methods and analysis’ (p.18) rather than of quantitative research methods which are ‘likely only to yield comparatively superficial information’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.96).

The four children who took part in the research were two boys, Mark and Tom, and two girls, Mandy and Rose. The children’s names were changed to protect their identities.
Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with the parents and the children. Drawing on Levy’s (2008) approach to interviewing children, I used a hand-held parrot, Pip, when I was carrying out the interviews with the children. I told the children that Pip knew nothing about reading and writing and that he wanted to ask them some questions because he wanted to learn. The interviews were more of a conversation with the glove puppet than with me!

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings are divided into four main categories: reading and writing, television, computer and mobile phones.

**Reading and writing**

Parents reported that their children liked to read and write. This might be the result of the time that the parents actually spent in reading and writing activities with their children before they started formal education. This confirms Hannon’s and James’ (1990) statement that parents provide their children with different writing activities. Moreover, the National Minimum Curriculum of Malta (Department of Education, 1999) states that ‘students consider the learning process to be relevant...when they realise that learning, in terms of both content and method, helps them throughout their life’ (p.25). In fact, Mandy’s mother said that when her daughter was a newborn instead of simply writing her daughter’s name on a birthday card she used to make her footprint with paint therefore encouraging her to be included in mark-making from the earliest days of her life. When Mandy grew older, her mother used to let her scribble on birthday cards. Nowadays, Mandy likes to play at being a teacher and always carries papers and a biro with her wherever she goes. Similarly, Rose’s mother said that at home, her daughter writes on pieces of paper whatever she does at school, such as new words learned. This gives the impression that the mother views writing as a repetition of schoolwork. In fact she said that she gave dictations to her daughter. However, Rose herself reported a different view of
writing that was not so closely related to a ‘school’ definition. After talking to Pip, the puppet, the children were asked if they wanted to write a birthday card to Pip as it was soon his birthday. All of them accepted and Rose in particular found the activity very exciting. In fact, she couldn’t stop writing and decorating the card with hearts, her enthusiastic attitude might suggest that since she found the activity purposeful, it was fun, worthwhile and educational.

The two boys in my study appeared to have mixed feelings about writing because during the interviews they admitted that although they like to write, in class they find it difficult to copy or write what the teacher tells them to do. Even Tom’s parents said that their son does not like to write. However, when they were asked to write the birthday card, their eyes lit up in excitement and Mark wanted to add detail to the card. These contradictory attitudes towards writing, that is, the boys’ reported apathy towards schoolwork and the enthusiasm I witnessed as they wrote the card trigger questions and demand a discussion of the implications: Why were the children immersed in writing the card and motivated to do it? Why do they regard schoolwork as difficult?

Tizard & Hughes (1984) argue that writing should be ‘embedded in a meaningful activity rather than [presented] out of context’ (p. 71). This means that for children to enjoy writing, they must have a purpose. In this case the purpose was writing a birthday card for Pip. The children had a reason to write and therefore the activity was meaningful. On the other hand, the classwork I see on these children’s copybooks is not. It often consists of filling in the blanks exercises or writing on workbooks. The children do not necessarily see a reason for this writing. The implications of such a feasible conclusion are crucial when teachers assign writing tasks to the children. For example, rather than asking them to write a sentence with a given word, every now and then they could ask them to write a short message or an email to a sick classmate telling him/her about something that happened at school, for example. Some parents feel that more use should be made of the computer at school because it helps them to gain literacy skills. Mark’s mother believes that the computer, through the use of the keyboard, has helped her son to
learn to write because certain games ask the player to write his/her name. These parents feel that this is needed in order to prepare children for the demands of the new technological age. After all, most children use digital technology at home. Teachers must therefore find ways in which to bridge the gap between schools and home by attending to the needs of the ‘new media age’ (Kress, 2003). In this way teachers would be making use of the children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and presenting writing as a pleasurable and meaningful activity because it becomes ‘a way of communicating’ (Tizard & Hughes, 1984, p.71).

The parents also show interest in their children’s reading. Rose’s and Mandy’s mothers try to find books which their daughters can read. Mark, who has a library in his room, used to enjoy being read to by his parents. Now he is happier because he can read by himself. Tom recognizes his parents as teachers because he said that they have helped him to learn to read and they listen to him read books. This reflects what Teale and Sulzby say that ‘literacy development begins long before children start formal instruction’ (1986, p.xviii).

The four children in my research admitted that they prefer books with pictures because, as they said, pictures help them to understand the story. It seems that pictures have a significant impact on their interpretations of stories. This is confirmed by Walsh (2003) who maintains that ‘it is now acknowledged that the reading of images is one aspect of visual literacy that is needed in an increasingly globalised, technological age’ (p.123). Weinberger (1996) also claims that ‘the printed word is not the only way for children to have access to narrative’ (p.51). In fact, Mark can read the menu of the Wii console because it has pictures, while Tom looks at the titles of the dvd covers before choosing a film to play. This seems to imply that pictures provide the boys with visual information which helps them to form an idea of what to expect if Mark clicks on the icon or if Tom chooses a particular dvd. Both boys can explore visual content with or without adult assistance. Therefore, if teachers recognise their students’ interests and their technological skills and integrate visual literacy instruction into their curriculum they might bridge the gap between school and home. Inclusion of on-line stories during
reading sessions as well as providing supplementary reading material such as comics besides books can help schools to move away from exclusive paper-driven text instruction and incorporate more visual literacy thus enabling young children to contribute to their own learning. Visual literacy can be one way of empowering or supporting young learners who are growing up in a world where they are bombarded with visuals from books and other media which is sometimes quite disconnected from traditional school-based, paper-based learning.

**Television**

Similar to surveys carried out by Marsh (2004) and Browne (1999), my study suggests that television is one of the primary sources of literacy activities that the children engage in. All the children have their favourite programme or cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, Little Einsteins and Hannah Montana. Reference was also made to watching dvds and, similar work by Alexander, Miller and Hengst (2001), the parents have mixed feelings towards dvds and video stories. For example, on the one hand, Tom’s parents as well as the girls’ mothers complained that their children like to watch the same dvd or the same television episodes repeatedly while at the same time, they acknowledged that repetition of the same dvds offer benefits too (such as the acquisition of new words and phrases as well as repetition of already learnt vocabulary). Mark’s mother, said that her son can now sing along when he is watching the programme ‘Little Einsteins’ and he knows most of the song of Clubhouse Disney. It appears that this happens because every time he watches these programmes he listens to the same songs. According to Mandy’s mother, her daughter likes to watch television a lot. As a result, although she is only 5 years old, she is already very fluent in English and she can have a conversation with a British person because she can both understand and communicate in English. Even when she is playing she speaks in English rather than Maltese. This reflects Arthur’s (2001) claims that children are able to repeat dialogues and retell the story of any familiar video as well as learn the words and tunes to repeated songs and advertising slogans (p.297). Similarly, Weinberger (1996) identified a positive attitude toward television
in her study: ‘In a number of cases parents made positive comments about the role of television in relation to their children’s literacy learning’ (p.53).

The parents in my study shed light on the reason why children learn certain phrases and words while they are watching television or a dvd. This suggests that if teachers present young children with meaningful programmes or dvds they are more likely to acquire new vocabulary and use it in the right context because as Robinson and Mackey (2003) maintain, ‘young children are more likely to pay attention to a programme if there is sound and vision’ (p.138). Perhaps the obsession that some teachers have of making the children fill in workbooks could be balanced by letting the children watch educational dvds in order to expose them to the English language and help them enhance their oral skills (Marsh and Millard, 2000, p.155). As Mark’s mother suggested it all depends on what the children are allowed to watch. Fortunately, as the children’s parents remarked during the interviews, today there are educational television programmes in English which require that the children interact with the characters thus helping them to understand and learn new words.

My study concurs with two studies reported by Marsh (2004; 2002) in that the children were not passive viewers in front of the television but are ‘active meaning-makers’ (p.5). Data from the parents’ interviews shows that while the children watch their favourite programme or dvd they take part in a whole range of other activities that confirm that the children are far from being ‘couch potatoes’ (Marsh, 2004, p.56). Instead, they are a dynamic audience who can interact with the characters on the screen, role-play what they watch on television and discuss the story with their mother while using words in English: ‘Mummy, Winnie the Pooh taf xi ġralu bil-honey?’ (Mummy, do you know what happened to Winnie the Pooh when he ate honey?) or ‘Mum, Jane broke up with me. I’m very sad’ (Mandy imitating in English a character from one of her favourite programmes). Besides helping the children to talk in English about their favourite films, the teacher can use role-play and encourage the children to express themselves in English. Teachers can also present printed texts which relate to their favourite television programmes or films because as Marsh and Thompson (2001, p.268) state, this can increase their
pleasure of both media while promoting a range of literacy skills. In this way teachers would be drawing from the children’s popular culture (Marsh, 2003a) while at the same time recognizing the children’s technological knowledge and making learning more significant to them (Evans, 2004).

Computer

All the four families had a computer at home but not all of them use it regularly. Since Mandy’s mother hardly uses it, neither does her daughter who prefers to write using a paper and a pen. Rose’s mother claimed to be ‘computer illiterate’ so unable to model use of digital technology for literacy purposes for her daughter. The boys’ parents use the computer more regularly and, perhaps as a result, the boys are more proficient in the use of the computer. This confirms Weinberger’s (1996) earlier idea that ‘for most children, parents are their most significant role models’ (p.55). However, although Rose and Mandy were described by their mothers as being uninterested or incompetent in using the computer, when asked to show Pip how to play an on-line game, both girls showed a great deal of enthusiasm. Parallel to Levy (2008), once the girls ‘understood how the game worked, they became more confident and [used] print and iconic images independently’ (p.62) to play the on-line game.

Furthermore, comparable to the mentioned study, Mark and Tom showed how digital literacy can help to create a third space in between school and home (Levy, 2008, p.60). Both boys use the computer with confidence and competence. The project data revealed that they use ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) they gained at home to play a game on the class computer. During the interview with the children, I logged on to the CBeebies website and although this site was unfamiliar to them, they were able to read screen texts because they recognized the words ‘start’, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and continued playing the game without any particular difficulty. Both could manipulate the mouse with precision. Data collected in this study indicates that the children who are allowed more independence on the computer at home ‘develop skills which would help them to navigate the computer successfully’
(Marsh, 2004, p.60). In fact, Mark is also very skilful in using the Wii at home. He could choose the game he would like to play from the menu without adult help. Even Tom likes to play games on the computer and sometimes he also reads on-line stories which his parents find for him. Both have learnt to read computer icons and therefore they did not find it difficult to play games during the interviews even though the website was unknown to them.

Three of the parents said that they would like to see more use of technology in the classroom because as Tom’s parents stated, there are children in Tom’s class who do not have a computer at home or whose parents do not let them use it. They believe that these children are at a disadvantage. However, my study demonstrates the opposite, as did Levy (2008). All children, including Mandy, who prefers a paper and a pen to a computer, and Rose, whose mother describes herself as ‘computer illiterate’, appear to be able to use technology even if the specific site presented to the children was unfamiliar to them. This is congruent with Bearne et al. (2007) who found that ‘very young children show expertise in on-screen reading, even where homes may not have computers’ (p.11).

At school, teachers often use their laptops to make lessons more interesting. However, the children are rarely given the opportunity to have hands-on activities on the computer. In fact, one of the boys in the study mentioned that in class the computer is only used during recess to play games on it. This gives the impression that when children begin formal education, only selective areas of their home literacy practices are in general focused upon, that is story-book reading and writing on copybooks or filling in handouts. This reflects Marsh’s (2003b) view that: ‘those literacy practices which are closest to the child are often the ones least likely to be included in the curriculum’ (p.374). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2004) ‘if limits to learners’…prior experience are transgressed beyond a certain point, even ‘successful’ learners…will decline the offers made by formal education’ (np). It is true that sometimes the teachers’ reluctance to integrate technology in their lessons may result from the fact that they do not ‘enjoy freedom over their time…[or they] may see technology as an unwanted or unnecessary distraction to what they believe
to be more pressing issues’ (Reiking, 1997, p.633). Still, as Rideout et al. (2003, p.5) maintain ‘many children six and under are active computer users’ and they would like more meaningful hands-on activities so that they would be able to transfer their ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) to the classroom situation. The recognition and analysis of

...“emergent techno-literacy” practices such as these will enable early years educators to develop appropriate pedagogical practices and support young children’s acquisition of the range of skills needed to navigate their electronic worlds (Marsh, 2002, p.7).

Perhaps if teachers use the computer to read on-line stories to the children or give them the opportunity to write sentences on the computer according to their ability, they would be helping the children to acquire literacy and digital-literacy skills. In this way they would be integrating technology into their teaching while at the same time recognizing the fact that ‘today, children’s early literacy...experiences are shaped increasingly by electronic media’ (Luke, 2000, p.97).

Mobile phone

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), ‘we are now familiar with mobile phones and their text messaging’ (p.182). Marsh (2002) elaborates this idea further when she says that as children watch their parents read and send text-messages, they are growing up in a world of electronic print that is also mediated through telephones (p.8). In my study, although the four children are familiar with mobile phones, they do not own one. There appears ‘to be minimal independent use of mobile phones by children in this age group’ (Marsh et al., 2005, p.40) because three of the mothers do not allow their children to touch the mobile for fear of breaking it or making unwanted phone calls. Only Mandy, who is a very keen mobile phone user, imitates her mother’s practice on the phone. Unlike the other children in the study, Mandy makes phone calls, has been taught by her mother how to phone her in case of an emergency, sends blank messages at random and enjoys taking photos of things around the house with the mobile phone camera device.
Although none of the children use text-messaging, all of them are aware of it and know when a message arrives for their parents. As a matter of fact, Alexander et al. (2001) maintain that ‘family life is embedded in recurring activities (and) young children come to orient themselves within particular systems of meaning by participating in these everyday social practices’ (p.379).

It is clear that children are being introduced to mobile phone use from an early age and although they are not using the mobile phone independently, they are developing understanding of its function and how it is used in social contexts. This emphasizes similar findings by Yamada-Rice (2010) who states that ‘even where children are not yet independent users, they still participate in their parents’ visual communications’ (p.347) and they are aware of the purpose of texting.

Yamada-Rice (2010), reports that parents mentioned that ‘where children did not have access to mobile phones, [they] had toy versions with cameras that they used in play’ (p.349). In my research neither Mark’s mother nor Tom’s parents made reference to this. Rose’s mother, however, mentioned that her daughter pretends that she is using the phone and enjoys calling people especially her father. She has long conversations with them. According to Yamada-Rice ‘this suggests an interest in, or playful engagement with the medium even where access is limited’ (2010, p.349). Rose demonstrates that she is quite adept at picking up on adults’ practices and she is able to mimic these practices in her own play (Marsh et al., 2005, p.40). Rose’s example shows that children are accessing new literacies and exploring unavailable multimedia such as cell phones through pretend play (Wohlwend, 2009, p.119).

It follows that although children find telephones very interesting, they ‘are one of the most academically neglected items of popular culture in the child’s world’ (Gillen, Accorti Gamannossi & Cameron, 2005, p.146). Moreover, when reference is made to ICT in curriculum documents for example, it is relatively rare to see the telephone included (Gillen, 2002, p.28). For example, the e-literacy aims of the core
competence policy described in the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (1999, p.19) do not make any reference to the use of the mobile phone and this reflects what Marsh (2004) states that ‘this is...generally the case in relation to analyses of young children’s techno-literacy practices’ (p.61). Early years educators can set up stations in a corner of the classroom like, for example, at the hairdresser and encourage pretence telephone conversations through the use of toy phones. Children can leave written phone messages because as Street (1984) states, telephone conversations can be an integral part of literacy events and can help to develop skills and understandings that are important in the acquisition of print literacy.

**Conclusion**

What emerges from my study is that the children like to read and write and at home they are exposed to different multimodal texts. However, in class, traditional tools, such as pencils, papers and books still dominate. This reflects the need for the addition of new literacy practices which will help to create a third-space between home and school. In fact, the boys’ parents said that their children are able to read texts on screen because they either recognize familiar vocabulary or they can ‘read’ visual images. As Levy (2009, p.89) maintains, more use of digital technology in the classroom can help even young children to learn ‘how to use and make sense of print’ because it builds on their own ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992).

An implication of this is that teachers need to build on the skills and strategies that children develop at home with regards to media and technology in order to help them make sense of digital texts. If school supports the use of technology in classes, it would be catering for the needs of today’s children and also, bridging the gap between home and school by making use of the children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992). Next scholastic year, this could be done through the use of Interactive Whiteboards which will be installed in every classroom of state schools in Malta. Still, this investment in new equipment has to be matched by a similar investment in professional development because the children cannot be expected to
benefit from technology if their teachers are neither familiar nor comfortable with it. They have to be trained how to translate the home everyday experiences of young children into digital capital by giving them hands-on activities through the use of the Interactive Whiteboard and other digital equipment which Collins and Halverson (2010) describe as ‘more aligned with the “learning by doing” view of education’ (p.20). Likewise, learning would be more meaningful and purposeful for the children who are living in a digital age and they would be motivated to learn. This would be congruent with evidence from Marsh et al. (2005) who suggest that accepting and incorporating media, popular culture and newer technologies into early childhood curricula can be an advantage for both early childhood educators as well as the children in these settings because most children are already acquainted with media and using technology at home.

Not to do so is to assign our...children to an education which, although generally successful in preparing children for encounters with the written word on paper, is not yet as successful in ensuring that they are proficient with the multimodal, multimedia texts and practices which permeate everyday life in the twenty-first century (ibid, p.78)

My small scale study suggests that schools need to become aware of young children’s constructions of literacy (Levy, 2008, p.63). Instead of replacing home literacy practices with print-based texts, I suggest that early years educators need to find ways to adopt them in their teaching. In this way, teachers would be valuing and building upon the children’s own constructions of literacy. This implies that schools need to help the children ‘develop encoding and decoding skills situated within the visual and iconic media of digital texts’ (Levy, 2011, p.164) so that children, even young ones, are able to access different texts. However, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of family literacy practices that take place in Maltese homes, it is imperative that research is now conducted with large sample sizes of children and parents. Likewise, apart from the information obtained from this study, there would be more reliable data that would support the inclusion of multimodal texts in the early years curriculum. In this way curricula would reflect the rapid change that is taking place in literacy in the twenty-
first century as well as building on what most children acquire from home in order to prepare them for the future.

References


CHAPTER 11

Blogging in the Kindergarten

Gabriella Govus

Introduction

Malta has made great strides in the Informatics area in the last few years and is emerging as a European, if not global champion in the management of information-based technologies and services. Thus as Zammit (2004) notes, Malta was slow in devising adopting a plan for an information based infrastructure. This happened after Malta joined the EU in 2004, when the Maltese Government began to shape its vision of Information and Computer Technology not as separate from the other subjects, but as a competence that supports the developmental objectives and attainment targets across the entire curriculum. In this light my study reflects upon the attitude of 4 year olds, using ICT as part of their daily curriculum building up on the conventional literacies and engaging with these ‘new literacies’ not only outside schools, but as part of their day to day running in class.

When my school reviewed its ICT curriculum to adapt to 21st century needs, the combination of the introduction of Blog use and the reciprocate interest shown by both parents and children led to the research question: Can young children living in the 21st Century use Blogging interlinked within their curriculum?

Literature Review

Reflecting on my own experience as a mother of two young boys, I see how children living in the twenty first century have certainly changed the way they encounter literacy in the home and in the wider community from previous generations (Davies 2009). These children are encountering, video games, mobile phones, interactive toys and books as part of their daily living experiences, which as Levy (2009) explains
these ‘digital literacies’ can be used as a way for young children to develop strategies to access and read a variety of screen texts with fluency, through an iconic system. Even though the potential of digital literacy is well documented, there are still professional concerns from educators (Davies 2009). There remains a belief, entrenched in curricula and policy, that children and their learning should be quarantined from engagement with these texts and focused mainly on print, as Wohlwend (2009) discusses. As a consequence, an increasing number of children and young people walking through many school gates each morning are required to leave behind an entire suite of competencies, practices and knowledge about digital technologies and digital text. Wohlwend further suggests, that teachers need to create ‘bridges’ from out of school experiences to their school learning activities by including ICT as a guidance to new habits rather than as an ‘add on’ to the norm (Loveless DeVoogd, Bonlin (2001).

On these lines I believe that we, as adults and educators can give a ‘voice’ (Alldred 1998) to our children in class, by listening to their needs and demands. Looking deeply into my young son’s personal interests I was guided in combining two areas together, his interests and his academic learning, gaining his willingness and performance in return, Segers and Verhoeven (2002) report how such strategies work. Working with a group of kindergarten children, they tried to help them become familiar with books and stories, enlarge their vocabulary and discover the alphabetic principle, through the use of computer games and interactive storytelling books. They showed how literacy attainment can be stimulated by the provision of a school environment that expands on the positive literacy experiences before school and as Owsten et al (2009) discuss, much of this motivating power could be harnessed in formal literacy instruction.

**Implementing new Web 2.0 tools in our children’s lives**

In 2004, the term Web 2.0 was popularized by Tim O’ Reilly, the founder of the American media company ‘O’Reilly Media (O’Reilly 2005). It opened up a new way of interaction in a digital world. This facilitated the artefacts of learning, reconfiguring
relationships between learners and experts, as well as teachers and their teaching resources.

Until recently this same thing happened through the means of pencil and paper – combining information and presenting it as a whole, through paper/books, but today, given the right tools children are becoming authors of their own work at a very young age. They can collaboratively produce texts and edit as they go along. Information is no longer considered as something static, which cannot be changed such as the ‘formal’ encyclopaedia, written by the experts. Through ICT, children can be part of a collaborative experience which provides social interaction, collaborative work, a space where individuals converse, reacting to each others’ ideas and the facility to recontextualize knowledge in innovative ways, (Marsh 2007; Davies and Merchant 2009).

This is not just a matter of redefining literacy and the literacy curriculum, but in terms of a broader sphere of education, it will involve all young children in experimenting and contributing to their own knowledge. It needs to be a ‘remix’ of skills, by combining children’s literacy attainment, interests, social interaction and contribution from their outside world (Loveless et al 2001).

**Blogs as a learning tool**

Observing Kayden, one of the boys in my class using Wiki pages embedded within the Blog, I saw him using skills, such as writing his name, words and creating his own virtual pet with no difficulty at all. Considering he was just four years of age when these skills were juxtaposed with his other skills, the computer enabled him to do more than was possible without it. This range of learning is diverse and achieved in a short space of time showing that the right tools within computers, offer new ways to learn. Kayden was learning to read in a multimodal sense – letter recognition as well as iconography. While different from the skills traditionally used in the early years, he was able to show his capabilities using this medium as his tool.
Blog (a portmanteau of the term web log) is a personal journal published on the World Wide Web consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Blogs are usually the work of a single individual, occasionally of a small group, and often are themed on a single subject. Blog can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.¹

Blogs can represent a perfect medium for literacy and many researchers, academics, teachers and students are excitedly embracing blogs (Bartlett-Bragg 2003). Children get the chance to write for an audience, a world-wide audience, enabling them to have the immediate feedback that a Blog can provide and motivating learning through collaboration and socialization with others (Davies 2009).

The more the curriculum integrates new ‘technical stuff’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006) with the kind of qualities and values currently associated with the concept of Web 2.0 – the more appropriate it is to regard it as a new literacy, in connecting a child’s interest to school’s learning activities. As Huffaker (2005) describes, when children are allowed to select tasks and texts that they are most interested in, they tend to expend greater effort on the relevant learning and understanding. Challenging activities can help children to take control of their own learning via self-monitoring devices and to also promote feelings of competence and self efficacy as a result.

**Methodology**

Before beginning my study, I made some changes to our blog in class, to set it up in a way, that facilitated understanding and accessibility for 5 year olds. Therefore using iconography, children could easily access any wiki page within the blog and be redirected into other areas which involved interactive games.

To promote a sense of belonging, an individual wiki page for each child was also set up within the Blog. Even though the children were not as yet readers and writers,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog
they could easily access their own wiki page and update it any time they wanted with my or their parents’ help. There they could express themselves, share their own work and scaffold each other’s learning by editing and sharing ideas.

The Blog also featured our own e-twinning journey with Ms Froehlich’s class in New York, which was specifically carried out for this study. Again through this wiki page the children could easily access our whole interactive diary and updates of this project. General information was updated frequently together with snapshots of this whole experience and children were also encouraged to contribute to this shared data as a way of learning.

Given that I had professional access to all the children in class, great ethical care was taken. I made a point of discussing the possibility with various parents. This consultation period confirmed the relevance of researching the Blog as part of their curriculum. This informal stage helped me to decide which children to focus on in my study, and even though I felt that any of the children in the class would have been interesting. Gender issues have indeed been identified as relevant to children’s perceptions of reading (Browne 2004), so equal number of boys and girls were included in the study. Once these criteria had been satisfied, a preliminary selection was carried out and the children were further observed during their free-choice time. The observations for this study lasted between five and forty minutes. The duration of each observation was determined by the children’s voluntary use of the computer. Children who used the computer the most were selected for this study.

Much of the data were collected directly from the children, using a range of age-appropriate participatory techniques; however parents were also interviewed to provide the study with a broader context and give me a greater insight into the children’s lives and individual stories. Also I was able to gain access to the children’s full technological involvement and how activities at home were supporting children's performance within the classroom. This meant that as the study progressed, profiles could be created for each child on the basis of data collected from the children at school and input from the parents, through direct handwritten field notes, from
video recordings of sessions and interviews with both parents and children. Once an initial set of behaviour such as attention span, excitement, enthusiasm, place of persistent activity, attention seeking, misbehaviour, competition, sharing of materials, display of fear and curiosity were established, the field notes were gathered for triangulation to confirm or otherwise the observations. The triangulation of data involved collecting and checking the findings, using multiple sources of evidence from the video clips, field notes and interviews.

Data collection from the children

Interviews and focused conversations:
These gave me the opportunity to view and observe underlying attitudes and believes and also the required flexibility (Clough and Nutbrown, 2011). Initially I used open-ended questions, in providing a frame of reference for the participants. The use of a child size doll, which as Cohen et al (2007) suggest, established trust, put the children at ease quickly and helped the children to feel confident when answering and expressing their views. This was followed by a ‘projection technique’ (Cohen et al 2007), a set of pictures were shown to the children and their response recorded.

Class Blog: Unstructured observation:
Considering the time constraints of fitting a study alongside teaching, I used participant observation to observe this small group of children. Very often, events happened frequently and only lasted a short period of time, so this tool enabled me to gather ‘live’ (Cohen et al 2007 p.397) data from naturally occurring social situations, by looking directly at what is taking place on site rather than relying on second-hand accounts. The camcorder was used as a recording tool at this stage of the observations. This captured all the activity going on, enabling me to become a complete observer alongside my day to day role in class. I developed a log of interaction, enthusiasm, application of knowledge, involvement and discussion with peers.
Structured and Unstructured observation during computer activities within the classroom Blog:
This phase of observation was divided into three sessions, comprising the three main curricula areas within this preschool class. Each activity was repeated twice over two consecutive days.

Experimentation

Reading on line books

Computer educational games (Numeracy)

This kind of observation took time to prepare for, but I was able to observe easily and it meant that the categories for analysis had been built up into the schedule itself. This activity provided an opportunity to investigate whether the physical medium of the computer encouraged the children to interact differently with books, in comparison with paper-based books by assessing their enthusiasm, eagerness and accomplishments for this task. To gain access to their mentioned behaviour while handling books, I also carried out a similar observation, which later was compared to the data collected during digital reading.

Findings

Results are based on analysis of four themes emerging from the whole study. The themes discussed are:

Positive digital literacy
Interaction
Emotional matters
Evidence of improved learning.
Positive digital literacy

Before this project began, some of the children in this study were already competent users of digital technology. It quickly became clear to me that some of them had previously developed skills which were transferable to unfamiliar technologies, such as the case of one of the boys who was able to navigate his way in his wiki page, with no difficulty at all. While some were competent users others were able to fluently use a trial and error mode – exploring possibilities within digital texts. This was seen in one situation where a child, while encountering difficulty in accessing his desired game, due lack of hardware available in class, somehow managed to access the game and quickly grasp its objective. He was observed making purposeful and independent choices through trial and error. On the other hand child who had little experience in using the computer independently, encountered difficulty in following the structure of the Story Maker and immediately began experimenting with the icons available. Without any adult intervention it seemed that she quickly managed to grasp the purpose of this program and showed great delight in making her selections in the creation of a story.

These young children, using a trial and error mode, had not only learned how to find their own ways in accessing all the activities on the Blog but also developed transferable skills, allowing them to access a range of texts with independence. As Levy (2009) notes, this suggests that young children may already be on the right path in reading multimedia texts, before they have even begun formal schooling by developing strategies through an iconic system.

Another factor observed was the reading of multimedia text. Most of the children in this study were accessing multimedia text, through pictorial symbols, icons and sound, understanding the meaning of many symbols on the computer even if the language they used to describe the symbols was unique to each individual child. For example, one of the children used the word ‘flavour’ referring to the Favourite tab on the internet explorer. This had meaning for him as he added “at home I click on it and immediately I can see our Class blog’.
This suggests that the children very often were able to acquire meaning from written words in much the same way as they would acquire meaning from pictorial and icons within the computer screen. How exactly they came to develop their understanding remains unclear, but I believe, that their experimentation - trial and error - in combination with a variety of cues enables the children to make meanings. It was as if they treated some words as icons.

Interaction

Children’s limitations at times are not necessarily associated with their abilities in using the computer independently, but rather a lack of courage that could be the factor that hinders them from independence. Very often children seek help from their teacher when they encountered difficulties, this study showed how the teacher-child interaction was needed for the teacher to guide and scaffold learning and guide the children through their difficulty. Teachers need to look at each child’s individual need, step back and allow them to follow their ideas whenever possible that aid and promote learning.

Parent-child interaction was also important. It seemed that this was used as a way of continuing learning at home, in a familiar and comfortable environment. While one parent reported that she was using the Blog as a one to one slot with her son, saying:

‘It’s very important for me to have some individual time with him, so given that his wiki is one of his main interests at home, I utilize it for our special time together’.

Another parent given her busy schedule at home, spent the initial stages, arming her own son with new skills, showing him how and where to find the information needed and empowering him with independence. Through this indirect interaction, we could see how this mother found effective ways to facilitate her child’s achievements. So here we see, how directives andadaptations to each child’s
individual needs, lead the children to accomplish their primarily goals. Be it an emotional, academic and independence need as discussed in this section.

Very often children were seen keeping an eye on each other’s work, a child would be using a computer and would comment on something that he/she had just done. The child at the other computer would look over and acknowledge nonverbally what they had heard and understood the child speaking, and sometimes try to copy the same pattern or behaviour on their own computer. This child to child interaction suggests how children themselves can be great tools for each other. This peer tutoring is not only facilitating the learning of new skills but through this kind of interaction they feel empowered to help out others in the same way.

**Emotional matters**

Findings in this indicate that very often the children had very high levels of independence in computer use. This happened through their interactions with teachers, parents and other children; through trial and error and practice. One mother reported how she believed that independence was promoted by good age-appropriate materials:

> “Through iconography, my daughter Nicole can follow instruction and above all when sound is included, somehow she gets really excited and motivated. She can follow the spoken instruction and works independently”

Here we see Bearne’s (2009) idea, that through a combination of images, sound and movement ‘Multimodality’; children integrate such information for their own meaning making purposes.

After gaining confidence in the new tools presented to them, the children were excitedly adding new material to their wikis. For instance Nicole, who got really absorbed by the Plant Unit, uploaded with the help of her mum, numerous photos and written data both on her wiki and the ‘Plant Unit’ Wiki. During one of the
observations of unstructured computer use, I noticed how one of the boys, who was browsing around and checking his friends’ work, encountered Nicole’s work. Out of nowhere Nicole emerged and slowly and calmly she said, “That is my page! Don’t do anything to it. Make sure you do not touch my photos too” while the other boy was left staring at her she continued by adding, “You know sometimes my things vanish from my wiki.................... I hope you won’t do anything.” While the boy insisted that he is only looking at her page she added “I will tell my mum to check it out for me at home”. She was acting possessively over her page to protect it from any unwanted mishaps and she made it clear that she was going to check it out as soon as she went home. This behaviour shows how the blogs are promoting self-expression, ownership of one’s own work and above all pride and sometimes over-protectiveness of their own successes, as suggested earlier on by Huffaker (2005).

Evidence of improved learning

Kayden’s interest in computers, wires and any technological things resulted in this drawing above (Figure 11:1). As his mum commented “He wanted to show it off to everyone, he kept insisting that I take a photo and upload it on his page.” This reflects his pride in his own work and how the wiki was facilitating the sharing idea. Just as an author has the opportunity to express his feeling and emotions, so did Kayden when presented with the opportunity to give a verbal explanation of his creation (Figure 11:2), which later was uploaded on his wiki. It is through this multimodal result, that in the days that followed, he showed ownership of his own
work and wanted everyone to visit his Wiki page, he insisted by saying, “Show it to your brother............ I’m sure he will like it. He likes computers like me.”

Here we see how these tools are enabling our young children to create and share their work with others. Given that these children cannot yet read and write in conventional ways, when these skills are juxtaposed with their abilities in virtual worlds, we see their improved learning.

This small study revealed that the children were using print to make meaning from computer texts, even though they were unable to decode it. This was also echoed by another child’s who, speaking of her daughter’s ability to use one particular text unaided at home, said, “I don’t know how she does it actually because it has got writing in it”. Throughout this journey Nicole showed how when handling books, she was finding difficulty in deciphering letters and sounds, while on the computer she was able to carry on with some basic reading. A combination of letter sounds, interactive images and direct help within this program, enabled her to read the given words. So when looking in depth at her reading abilities, we could conclude that ICT was facilitating her learning and improvement could be seen. These children had found strategies of their own in making use of print within the multi-modal context of the computer.

Conclusion

This project clearly gave young children extended opportunities to learn within a digital world. The extant literature indicates that children develop strategies such as ‘trial and error’ to read a variety of screen texts with fluency, through an iconic system (Levy 2009). This facilitated their immediate access to:

- The use of new software tools such as the personal, literacy and numeracy wikis;
- Accessing and browsing the web through an iconographic system;
- Sharing of information through their own wiki page.

Skills such as these are seen by some as essential to include in contemporary curriculum because of the changing nature of what it means to be literate in today’s
society (Loveless, De Voogd, and Bohlin 2001). The use of Web 2.0 tools and the interaction and relationship between learners and experts and their teaching resources, facilitated children’s learning (O’Reilly 2005). While the scaffolding system used by the teacher promoted independence and enabled them to build their confidence within these new tools, peer tutoring and sharing of information on the Wiki pages, were also major contributing factors in their learning. The sharing of ideas and materials on the individual wikis, the interaction and problem negotiation and discussion happening during these ICT sessions proved to be the key to their learning (Parker and Chao, 2007).

It is clear from this small scale study that as well as being involved children, all four children proved to be also ‘motivated producers and consumers of digital texts in and around online settings’ (Carrington and Robinson, 2009 p.50). These are children who, as long as they can remember, have been surrounded by ever-evolving digital technologies and practices, that impact on their daily experiences. Accordingly we have seen how they have developed the capacity to be literate in this digital textual landscape, and through different exposures within this study they have also applied these skills within their educational settings. They have shown competence around tools and facilities within specific contexts, and also manage to read and write using letters, numbers, images and sound electronically. As mentioned earlier by Bearne (2009) it is through a multimodal endeavour, that children showed interest, enthusiasm and motivation to produce and communicate their own creations.

As educators we need to understand how to find the right balance between traditional academics and the digital literacy happening daily in our classrooms. It is through the affordances that these multimodal activities provide, that frames are set in which all the children, had opportunities of engagement, mentorship and scaffolding of their learning. The classroom in this study has turned out to be their best opportunity for developing digital literacy practices that have value in the broader community, including the children’s own homes.
It is the synergy of the whole system: teacher-child-parent, that enabled the children to successfully venture and access the blog with ease. Yet, being so young the children needed guidance and reassurance in developing a relationship, that ultimately supports and motivates learning (Lewis and Wray 2000). The Blog has offered all children an opportunity to build on out-of-school knowledge and practices. The playfulness and creativity which was embedded within the Blog proved to be the motivating factor for children’s engagement with a wide range of multimodal texts. Secondly pedagogical practices within the Blog have fostered children’s ability to collaborate and share learning. This study has reached ‘well beyond the walls of the classroom and involved learners at different times and in very different places.’ (Davies and Merchant, 2009, p. 121)

While this study has begun to shine light on Blogging as a learning tool, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of how this tool can be further expanded and developed within the school curriculum. Such knowledge is crucial to inform pedagogies, to further application in formal and informal educational contexts and to integrating technology-enhanced classroom practice with autonomous and collaborative learning experiences beyond the classroom.

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CHAPTER 12

Mind the gap: preschool boys’ experiences of literacy at home and school

Julie Mangion

Overview

This chapter details aspects of a study in which I contend that the media-saturated world in which young children now live has implications for both the way in which children in early childhood settings learn and for the practice of practitioners. The aim of the study reported here was to examine popular culture as a motivator for literacy activities. In doing so, it investigated children’s home literacy practices and listened to children’s perspectives about literacy activities. Literature relating to the inclusion of young children as reliable research participants in Malta is not widely available, therefore an additional aim of this study was to discover if the children in my setting could express their opinions and contribute to the data. Implications for early childhood educators and policy-makers to acknowledge the way young children access literacy were identified.

The chapter begins with a brief review of the literature available pertaining to early literacy, with particular emphasis on the differences between home and school literacy activities and the role of motivation in learning. Previous studies which looked at how characters from popular culture can bridge the gap between home and school are presented. As my study took place in a setting with predominantly boys, the literature review concludes by presenting literature about boys and their particular difficulties with literacy.
In order to confirm my belief that young children’s home literacy practices differ considerably to the literacy activities presented at preschool, three research questions were devised. They were:

1. How do four-year-old boys engage with literacy at home?

2. What do four-year-old boys think about classroom literacy practices?

3. Can classroom activities based on a popular culture character encourage four-year-old boys to engage in literacy?

**Literature Review**

**What is early literacy and why is it important?**

Literacy has a multitude of definitions. Traditionally is has been described as ‘the ability to use written language to derive and convey meaning’ (Hannon, 1995, p.2). UNESCO (1988) has a wider definition, defining literacy as the ‘ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with various contexts.’ According to Heath (1983) definitions of literacy also vary according to one’s perspective of literacy and what importance a person attaches to certain aspects of literacy.

Hannon (2000) suggests that one consequence of acknowledging different literacies is that it focuses attention on ways in which ‘school literacy’ may differ, and even conflict, with ‘home literacy’ or ‘community literacy’. Middle-class families may find a high degree of congruence between home and school literacy, but for others, the differences are vast (Hannon, 2000). What is viewed by many as people’s (or children’s) ‘lack of literacy’ is really the fact that they are seeing a different literacy to the dominant one and therefore it is the ‘wrong’ literacy (Taylor, 1997). This has implications for educators and should encourage us to rethink the importance given to ‘school literacy’.
Differences between home and school literacy.

Much early literacy education is informed by traditional developmentalist and constructivist models which privilege children whose literacy practices match the literacies of dominant, monolingual, monocultural, middle-class urban communities (Jones Diaz et al, 2001). Gregory and Williams (2000b, p.34) describe this ‘schooled literacy’ and the government initiatives which form it, as a ‘very narrow definition of literacy’. Many of the different literacies which young children bring to school are rejected as being of little value (Gregory et al (2004). Several studies have researched how schools ignore home literacy practices (Ashton, 2005, Marsh and Millard, 2000; Lankshear, et al. 1997; Luke, 1993). Marsh and Millard (2000) found that children whose prior literacy learning did not match ‘schooled literacy’ were at a distinct disadvantage, particularly in curricula which restrict reading to certain texts and approved fiction. Kavanagh (1997) and Makin et al., (1999) agree, stating that schools tend to privilege experiences with ‘quality literacy’ over books based on popular culture, thereby marginalizing children who only have such books.

These disparities between children’s home literacy experiences and the setting indicate that the more educators learn about children’s home literacy practices, the more likely they will be to challenge accepted notions of what literacy learning, teaching and research should look like (Makin et al, 1999; Hill et al, 1998).

Luke (1993) concludes that settings regularly fail to take account of children’s interest in popular culture when they devise the curriculum. Practitioners complain that the introduction of texts based on popular culture trivialize the curriculum (Marsh & Millard, 2000). This lack of understanding of the notion of literacy as a social practice by early years practitioners was reflected in Makin et al’s (1999) study, which revealed that staff were concerned about popular culture and reluctant to include it in the curriculum. It is standard practice in the field of early childhood education that practitioners take account of the home practices of children when planning the curriculum (Marsh, 2003) - clearly in the area of early literacy they are not and there is a huge gap between ‘school literacy’ and ‘home literacy’. The
following section details research into how commonalities in the two distinct areas can be utilized in order to bridge the gap.

**Bridging the gap - children’s interest in popular culture.**

Popular culture is a powerful and regular event in the lives of young children - it is an integral part of daily life (Jones Diaz et al, 2001). Young children are immersed in a media-saturated world (Kinder, 1991) in which characters from children’s TV programmes appear in books, toys and games. According to Marsh (2000) these toys and artifacts related to popular culture are in the homes of children from all social backgrounds and children from middle-class backgrounds have, in addition to popular culture related artifacts, other cultural items at home which can be found in most classrooms. By rejecting popular culture, educators are rejecting the only literacies children from working class families may have, further marginalizing them. Children today are immersed in a rich variety of literacy experiences which include considerably more than traditional book-based texts. Today’s literacy incorporates texts of popular culture, represented in media and technologies (Jones Diaz et al, 2001). Due to children’s constant exposure, these literacies have increasingly powerful meanings to children’s everyday experiences.

Research into the possible benefits of popular culture in the early years curriculum has focused largely on superhero play (Dyson, 1997, 1996, 1994; Orellana, 1994; Paley, 1984). Jones Diaz et al, (2001) comment that within popular culture play, children experience strong empowerment and engagement. They often reinvent the narratives with their peers, based on the knowledge they have acquired from sites of popular culture. The power of popular culture to increase motivation towards literacy activities was a recurring finding in many studies of popular culture. According to Marsh, ‘Motivation is a key to learning’ (1999, p.121). This reveals the importance of grounding literacy tasks in the popular culture characters which make up such an important part of children’s daily lives.
In addition, there has been concern about how boys in particular cope with the literacy demands at school. As my research took place in a setting in which the majority of children are boys, the following section is dedicated to boys and how they access literacy.

**Boys’ achievement and literacy**

There has been considerable concern about the lack of interest many boys have in the literacy curriculum, leading to underachievement (Reynolds, 1995; Phillips, 1993). This is confirmed by data from the Foundation Stage Profiles for 2004-2006 (DCSF, 2007), which also established that not only were boys achieving less well than girls in literacy, but in all areas of learning. This led to the UK government setting up a variety of schemes focusing on equality issues and gender (Browne, 2004). Clearly, the UK government believes something needs to be done to rectify the situation.

**Why are boys are failing?**

The leading suggestion as to why boys in the UK were falling behind in literacy is that schools are failing to provide for the learning style of boys (DCSF, 2007). Boys are active-learners and problem-solvers- and yet that natural exuberance is often misinterpreted as ‘naughtiness’ or ‘over-boisterousness’ in a classroom environment. In spite of this, boys are still expected to follow the same curriculum and activities as girls. Schools also place great value on the ability to communicate orally and represent ideas on paper- the tasks which many young boys find most difficult (DCSF, 2007). The cycle of lack of success in such tasks leads to many boys simply choosing to avoid them. It is important therefore to reflect on the curriculum we offer each child and allocate time to help boys develop positive self-images and positive dispositions for learning.

Some research suggests that boys are programmed neurologically from birth in a different way to girls (Newberger, 2000). Newberger states that males tend to use the right side of the brain more than females- which is why boys prefer maths and
science subjects. Girls have a larger area for linguistic processing -which helps them talk, read and write more quickly. As the ability to talk impacts on accessing the early years curriculum, boys would therefore seem to be at a disadvantage from the very start. Hence early years practitioners need to devise methods for creating supportive literacy environments.

Creating supportive literacy environments

A survey by OFSTED (2007, p.5) suggests: ‘...staff in settings should help boys to achieve more rapidly by providing opportunities for learning that engage them’. Robinson (1997) suggests exploiting the link between TV and the early years curriculum. This entails valuing children’s home literacy experiences, including popular culture. As much of children’s literacy learning takes place at home, the challenge for schools is building on and extending this learning (Hannon, 1995).

Research into children’s literacy and popular culture reveals that popular culture has an impact on every aspect of a child’s life, except perhaps nursery (Marsh, 1999). There has been an abundance of research which reveals popular culture is an effective tool in increasing motivation towards literacy learning in the classroom, although it frequently reveals practitioners are often adverse to it (Arthur, 2001; Marsh and Millard, 2000; Marsh, 1999; Dyson, 1997; Hilton, 1996).

However, the area of children’s views on using popular culture in classrooms is much less researched. My study aimed to build upon previous research, particularly that by Marsh and Thompson (2001), Marsh (2000;1999), and McNaught et al (2000) by discovering if literacy activities based upon popular culture could not only motivate children in my setting, but I also aimed to add to the literature by hearing children’s perspectives on such activities.
Methodology

A combination of observations and small focus groups were used. All sessions were recorded and used not only for my analysis but also to elicit the views of the children. In this respect, they acted as ‘primary data’.

Observations

In order to verify my belief that some children in my setting failed to feel motivated by the literacy activities on offer, I decided to conduct narrative observations of current literacy activities. Direct observation is a reliable way to discover what is actually happening in a classroom (Nisbett and Watt, 1980). Bailey (1994) points out that observations are superior to experiments and surveys in order to obtain data on non-verbal behaviour. This was of the utmost importance for my study, as the intended analysis methods relied heavily upon using the Leuven Scale of Involvement (Laevers, 1994). These scales involve assessing mostly non-verbal behaviour (See Tables 1 and 2 for more detail about this analysis method). Throughout the project I took on the role of participant observer. I collected data and I was also part of the data.

Focus Group Conversations

I wanted to find ways to elicit information about children’s popular culture interests and to hear their views in ways which were respectful and within the children’s capacity to understand and respond. This was in recognition of the fact that children have valuable perspectives on their experiences, which should be taken into account by practitioners (Dockett and Perry, 2007). I therefore decided that two focus group conversations with six children, using the structure of ‘Circle Time’ was the most appropriate method for obtaining information on the children’s home literacy practices and the children’s views on the classroom literacy activities in Phases 1 and 2 of the study. For me, I found the focus groups with the children to be the most
enjoyable part of the research, as some fascinating and unexpected insights into the children’s home literacy lives were shared. Importantly, this method recognizes children as experts in their own setting and clearly acknowledges a child’s perspective. The role of the researcher in such groups, according to Roberts-Holmes, (2005) is simply a ‘discussion facilitator’ (p.113).

Central to the success of group conversation, is that the power dynamics relationship between researcher and children is shifted in favour of the children (Brooker, 2001). By having a group conversation, the emphasis on the adult-child relationship is removed.

**Children’s voices, views and rights**

Given that this study aimed to hear the perceptions of young children, it was driven by a commitment to hear ‘the voice of the child’ (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). Traditionally, children’s lives have been explored solely through the views and understandings of their ‘gatekeepers’ such as their parents who act as proxies (Christensen and James, 2007). Research methods to understand children’s learning have relied mainly on observations viewed by the researcher but little attention has been given to listening to children and hearing their views on life and learning (Nutbrown, 1996). The involvement of children as research participants rather than subjects should be afforded them as a matter of right (Nutbrown, 1996) and their voices should be taken into account in the development of polices and the practices which implement them. Rudd et al (2006) agree- they stress that allowing children their basic right to a say in their own learning experiences is more likely to result in learning experiences that actually meet their learning needs. This was the aim of including children as active participants in my project.

**Approach to Analysis**

The recordings of current literacy activities in the classroom were initially analysed using the Leuven Child Involvement Scale (Laevers, 1994). As one of the aims of the
study was to discover if introducing literacy activities based upon popular culture increased motivation to participate, I felt that Leuven Child Involvement Scale would be an appropriate tool to measure the children’s involvement and thereby record children’s levels of concentration and motivation. According to Laevers (1993), as a result of involvement there is evidence to suggest that development occurs. This scale is an observation instrument which aims to measure the level of a child’s ‘involvement’ in an activity, based on the premise that when children are learning at a ‘deep level’ (Laevers 1993), they display certain characteristics which Laevers presents as his concept of ‘involvement’. The scale uses a list of nine ‘signals’ of involvement, (Table 12:1), which are then converted to a level on a five point scale (Table 12.2).

Table 12:1: Laevers’ (1994) Child Involvement Scale Signals

| 1. Concentration- attention is directed towards the activity. It is difficult to distract the child. |
| 2. Energy- the child invests a lot of energy and is eager and stimulated. Often expressed by loud talking. Mental energy can be deduced by facial expression. |
| 3. Complexity & creativity- Child is working at his very ‘best’. Exhibits an individual touch and furthers own creative development. |
| 5. Persistence- Child does not let go easily- wants to continue with the satisfaction it gives them. |
| 6. Precision- Shows special care for their work- attentive to detail. |
| 7. Reaction time- Is alert and reacts quickly to stimuli introduced during an activity. Flies to activity and shows excitement at new ideas introduced. |
| 8. Language- child states he is enjoying it and other positive comments. |
| 9. Satisfaction- displays a feeling of satisfaction. |
The level ranges from Level 1 (no involvement) to Level 5 (continuous, intense activity by the child, with purpose and pleasure evident). (See Table 12:2). The nine ‘signals’ were adopted as the main themes for the analysis of my observations. The recordings of the classroom observations from Phase 1 were watched, looking for evidence of one single ‘signal’ each time.

The focus group conversations were scrutinized for recurring themes as well as irregularities. This involved repeated watching of the recordings before I finally decided on the 4 most dominant themes. The following section presents the findings and analysis of the data collection.

Table 12:2: The Leuven Scale for Involvement- Level descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1 - Extremely low</th>
<th>Level 2 - Low</th>
<th>Level 3 - Moderate</th>
<th>Level 4 - High</th>
<th>Level 5 - Extremely high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity is simple, repetitive and passive. The child seems absent and displays no energy. They may stare into space or look around to see what others are doing.</td>
<td>Frequently interrupted activity. The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around.</td>
<td>Mainly continuous activity. The child is busy with the activity but at a fairly routine level and there are few signs of real involvement. They make some progress with what they are doing but don’t show much energy and concentration and can be easily distracted.</td>
<td>Continuous activity with intense moments. The child’s activity has intense moments and at all times they seem involved. They are not easily distracted.</td>
<td>The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings and Analysis

Findings and analysis from classroom observations - Phase 1:

Current classroom literacy activities were analysed using Laevers’ Involvement Scale (1994). The activities consisted of completing a page in a phonics handwriting workbook, group reading from a ‘Big Book’ of the ‘Oxford Reading Tree’ Reading Scheme and making individual books about ‘Kipper’, a dog in the reading scheme. There was very little interest in the activities from the start. The boys showed some initial interest for the big book and ‘Kipper’ activity but this soon waned. They showed little concentration on the activities and were easily distracted by other children. Three of the boys needed almost constant coaxing to stay on task. Two of the boys rushed through the workbook without appearing to care how they formed the letters and there appeared to be very little feeling of satisfaction upon completion.

The activities could not be said to be complex or creative- they could best be described as routine and monotonous, well within their abilities. According to Laevers (1994), involvement does not occur when activities are too easy or too difficult. In fact, the activities need to be situated at the edge of a child’s capabilities or in what Vygotsky (1978) terms the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’. This is the difference between what a child can do unaided and what he or she can do with help.

One boy made it clear through his language that he wanted to stop after completing just two lines of letters when he said: “Can I do one more and stop?” ‘Being tired’ was a common complaint.

In conclusion, classroom literacy activities in Phase 1 were mostly Level 1 and 2, indicating poor levels of involvement and that the boys are not motivated by the activities offered to them.
Findings and analysis from focus group conversations with children-Phase 1:

In Phase 1 a focus group conversation was held with the same six boys in order to find out more information about their home literacy practices and to answer the first research question: How do four year old boys engage with literacy at home? It also aimed to confirm my belief that popular culture plays an important part in the daily lives of these boys.

The video footage was analysed for themes relevant to the research question. Three dominant themes relating to literacy emerged:

Books at home
The children stated that they had a variety of books at home. These include picture books and traditional stories, similar to those in the kindergarten. Many of their favourite books were books based upon films. According to Marsh (2000) the latest Disney films provide a plethora of texts which emotionally engage young children. In Marsh et al’s (2005) ‘Digital Beginnings’ Project, 60% of parents felt that books based on popular culture motivated their children to read or write. Three of the boys said they are bought comics regularly and they enjoy the pictures, especially of Buzz Lightyear, and also the free gifts. Clearly the boys have an array of reading materials which are different to the texts found in our kindergarten.

Writing at home
Four boys said they did drawings and often wrote their names on them. They occasionally wrote birthday cards and one could write texts messages on his mum’s mobile phone, two of them sometimes typed and sent emails (with help) and one said he sometimes helped his mum to write a shopping list. Two boys also said they ‘play schools’ on small blackboards.
Specific activities to learn letter names and sounds at home

I asked the boys if they play any letter games, like we do at kindergarten. One used magnetic letters, similar to those we have in class and to make words with them on the fridge. Another has a ‘Buzz Lightyear’ laptop on which he played letter and number games. Four of them said they used a computer to access websites to play alphabet games. They mentioned CBeebies as a favourite website. In recent years the concept of ‘multiple literacies’ has extended the boundaries of what it means to become literate. Marsh (2004) states that it is no longer appropriate to focus on literacy as a paper-based activity when children access text in an ever-growing number of modes such as computers, televisions and mobile phones. In fact, many researchers have stated that literacy is being redefined in response to digital literacy (Gee, 2000, Luke & Carrington, 2002) and will continue to change in response to new technologies which come on the market and merge into our daily lives (Gee et al., 1996).

One boy stated that his mother and his older brother sometimes ‘play schools’ with alphabet flashcards. This is an example of school literacy invading the home, rather than home literacy influencing the classroom. Research reveals that this is very often the case and that efforts to ‘bridge the gap’ often result in ‘one-way traffic’- in the direction from school to home (Dyson, 2001; Marsh, 2003). In other words, many teachers operate on the basis that in order to ‘bridge the gap’ between home and school literacies, it is not they who should change their practices but the home (Lambirth, 2003).

Popular Culture at home

From our conversation about their home literacy practices (above), it was apparent that popular culture played a significant role in their lives. They owned a lot of merchandise based upon popular culture characters. It was quickly apparent that ‘Buzz Lightyear’ from the Disney film ‘Toy Story’ was a favourite among this group of boys.

I asked them if they act out the story and if they travel in a spaceship. They said they did and simultaneously, two said: “To infinity and beyond!” They looked at each
other and laughed uproariously. According to Kenway and Bullen (2001), such pleasure is at the core of children’s interest in popular culture.

Although from the conversation of the focus group I cannot conclude that the children construct elaborate storylines, from their talk I can establish that they do indeed build on the film narrative. Earlier research has revealed that children do not merely re-play the story but they are innovative, re-interpreting characters and plots, expanding and elaborating storylines to make them their own (Sefton-Green and Parker, 2000; Seiter, 1993, 1999; Hilton 1996).

In conclusion, I would say that our conversation confirmed that popular culture, (at the time of the study the character Buzz Lightyear) plays a significant role in the home literacy learning of these young boys.

Findings and analysis from classroom observations- Phase 2:

Observations were carried out of the classroom literacy activities which were based upon Buzz Lightyear. As in Phase 1, the analysis was carried out using the Laever’s Involvement Scale (1994).

The activities involved the boys writing a list of requirements for Buzz Lightyear to take into Space, group reading of a comic and making their own comic. Words such as ‘cool’, and ‘wow’ were heard, amid much smiling. The six boys nearly fell over each other to reach the table first. On the Laever’s Scale ‘reaction time’ to the activity is an indicator of involvement. These boys reacted extremely quickly to the activity and almost ‘flew’ to the table. Marsh (2000) reports similar findings when she introduced Teletubby activities to nurseries.

I would describe their concentration on the activities as ‘intense’. Nothing could distract them from their writing, not even a group of boys playing with bricks nearby. The boys’ interest in inventing a storyline amazed me as they usually show limited interest in the Big Books we read. Makin et al (1999) likewise report that knowing the narratives of popular culture becomes ‘structured expertise’ or ‘funds of
knowledge’ which children make use of to readily construct their own meanings of popular culture characters.

Energy is another of Laever’s signals. The children could be said to have invested a lot of energy in the activities- this was evident in their smiling, laughing and loud comments.

One boy who is usually reluctant asked to do a second list. This persistence to do an activity is another of Laever’s signals. Similarly, Marsh (1999) found that when she transformed a role-play area into a Batman and Batwoman HQ, children who had previously been uninterested in using literacy in their play became highly motivated. Precision is another of Laever’s signals. All the boys took care in their work and if they felt they had not formed a letter correctly, they used an eraser to correct it.

The activities stimulated a lot of conversation, as they shared their knowledge about Buzz Lightyear. This shared discourse led to communal pleasure and much laughter. Bromley (1996) states that through watching DVDs and discussing them with the members of their community, children learn about structure of narrative and visual representation. Overall, I would rate the children mostly at Level 4 or 5 on the Laever’s Scale throughout the activities.

Findings and analysis from focus group conversations with children- Phase 2:

In Phase 2, a second focus group conversation was held with the same 6 children to elicit their views about the types of literacy activities they prefer at kindergarten. This was to fulfil the aim of answering the second and third research questions, What do four-year-old boys think about classroom literacy practices? and Can classroom activities based on a popular culture character encourage four-year-old boys to engage in literacy?

The children watched the recording of one activity from each phase. Their thoughts and feelings about what they observed were discussed and recorded for my own subsequent analysis.
Children’s analysis of classroom observations in Phase 1

The children were shown a recording of themselves completing a page in the phonics workbook. I asked them if they like doing the workbooks. Two of them said ‘no’ immediately and two of them groaned. The other two said they were ‘ok’. I believe their feedback reveals that the children do not find the activities enjoyable and merely complete it as quickly as possible in order to move on to a more interesting activity. It highlights the importance of presenting children with activities that build on their interests.

Children’s analysis of classroom observations in Phase 2

The children were then shown the recording of themselves writing a list of items which Buzz Lightyear could take into Space.

I asked the boys to look at their own and their friends’ faces on the recording and to say how they thought they felt. Answers included ‘happy’, ‘really happy’, ‘having fun’, and ‘he likes it’. I asked if they could say why they liked it. One answered that it was more fun because it was for Buzz and there were pictures of Buzz. Another stayed quiet for a while and then said: “our books are the page all the same. But the Buzz things are different.” I think he was saying that the pages of the workbook are more repetitive.

To conclude the conversation, I asked them which activity they preferred- the workbook or the Buzz list. I was almost deafened by all six of them shouting ‘the Buzz list!’ It left me in no doubt as to which activities motivated them towards literacy!

Conclusion

The study set out to explore how 6 four-year-old boys engage with literacy at home, their opinions on school literacy and if introducing literacy activities based upon a
favourite popular culture character could increase their motivation towards school literacy activities.

**Key findings**

The boys in the study owned a vast array of texts based on popular culture, including books and comics, which contrast with the traditional storybooks found in the kindergarten (which do not include characters from popular culture). They write for real purposes at home, such as lists and emails, rarely using workbooks. Popular culture plays a significant role in their home literacy learning and is a great source of pleasure. In Phase 1 of the study the boys scored relatively low on the Leuven Involvement Scale for the current classroom activities indicating that they are not very motivated by current literacy activities such as phonics workbooks and group reading from a reading scheme. During the focus group conversation the boys confirmed that they found such activities boring and stated that they preferred activities based upon popular culture. The boys scored highly on the Leuven Involvement Scale in Phase 2, (classroom literacy activities based upon a popular culture character), indicating that these activities motivated them. The children were able to competently express their opinions about their experiences and their input confirmed my analysis of their perspective. This indicates that children are reliable research participants.

Though small in scale, this study supports the view that popular culture can be a powerful motivator in early years classrooms. I therefore would encourage practitioners to embrace popular culture to enable children to build on their home literacy experiences in the classroom. Such approaches recognise the importance that home experiences play in literacy development and would allow practitioners to ‘narrow the gap’ between home and school literacy.

As Marsh and Thompson clearly state:

> It is time to firmly embed the popular cultural and media texts children encounter in home and community into schooled literacy practices if we
are to move the disparate elements in children’s worlds a little closer together (Marsh and Thompson, 2001, p.277).

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PART III

ADULT ROLES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS
CHAPTER 13
Male teachers in Early Years Education

Melanie Darmanin

Introduction

My teaching experiences and observations have always made me question why there are few male teachers in primary schools and why there are even fewer male teachers teaching the formative years. Previous teaching experiences have encouraged me to research the concept of gender in the teaching of the youngest children.

For the purpose of this study, I chose one particular context; a local primary school and data were gained directly from the four male teachers who worked in this school. In order to gain a wider whole school perspective data was also gathered from the head of school.

The main research questions formed at the beginning of my research were the following:

- What are male teachers’ perceptions of teaching within the early years setting?
- What are the head of school’s perceptions of male teachers teaching within the early years setting?

The study addressed the reasons why male teachers chose the teaching profession, whether they have encountered any gender stereotyped situations and whether they would feel comfortable teaching the early years. Their views about being a role model and whether they think they contribute towards increasing achievement in boys’ academic studies were also explored. The study aimed to gain a better understanding of the reasons why teachers tend to ‘avoid’ teaching the formative years and why are male teachers considered as an ‘endangered species’ in early years education.
Gender and the Maltese Education Context: Past and Present

Education in Malta goes back a long time and ‘goes much beyond the first written documents which record its existence’ (Zammit Mangion, 1992, p.8). Since teachers were being qualified in 1880, Savona increased the salaries of teachers (Brincat, 2001). In his First Report on education in Malta in 1850, Pullicino also suggested salary scales for teachers. Teachers and schools were classified into three grades and the salary of teachers varied according to the importance of the place they were situated in – ‘the most important were those schools in towns, followed by those in the most populated and industrialised villages, and then by those in the less populated villages’ (Camilleri, 2001, p.106). The grade system in 1871 clearly indicates that in all classes and grades, male teachers were paid more than female teachers and no male teachers were appointed to teach infants.

In 1946, the primary school sector was compulsory for children aged 6 to 14 years (Zammit Mangion, 1992) and during this time schools had a good number of students. Due to World War II there was a shortage in the teaching staff and so training colleges were set up. Zammit Mangion (1992) states that in the first year of training, 30 males and 60 females joined. There was a time in Malta when male teachers were highly present in local schools. However, the number of male teachers diminished due to political issues and due to the low status teaching had as a career. It can be argued that in most cases, the situation in Malta is still the same. A more recent example shows that in 2007, the year in which I graduated as a teacher, 3 of the 53 graduates were male.

In 1948 the marriage bar forced female teachers to stop carrying out their duties as teachers once they got married (Zammit Mangion, 1992). The number of female teachers in Malta decreased at the time and male teachers replaced the married female teachers. This enabled male teachers to make their way up to administrative posts (Mallia, 1999). In 1978, a professional degree from the University of Malta was
set as a pre-requisite for teaching (Zammit Mangion, 1992). This change has encouraged male students to opt for other courses since teaching was facing some obstacles due to political issues and low wages.

At present, government primary schools in Malta are normally found in every locality across the Maltese islands. The three main types of schools are; government schools, private schools and church schools. In Malta, there is no research which focuses on the gender issues of teachers in these schools. The Central Office of Statistics has provided education statistics along the years but there are no policies which focus on the number of male teachers and on promoting more male teachers in schools. Although there have never been any studies which focus on the number of male teachers teaching in the early years, it can be argued that in Malta, male teachers are normally assigned to teach the older pupils in schools.

A teacher can be considered as the person responsible for teaching children within a classroom setting. The term ‘early childhood’ within the Maltese context normally refers to children from infancy to the age of eight (Ministry of Education, Malta, 1999).

All research seems to agree that the number of male teachers in the primary schools is minimal especially when compared with the number of female teachers (Mills, Martino and Lingard, 2004). Furthermore, schools’ staffrooms are ‘inhabited predominately by women teachers’ (Bricheno and Thornton, 2006, p.28) and women ‘remain the front line workers in schools’ (p.52).

Some researchers argue that this issue influences teaching. This is due to the argument that girls do academically better because most teachers are female and boys are missing a lot from learning due to the lack of male teachers present within schools. There has been the presumption that ‘feminized’ schools has negative effects for the education of boys. A case in point is Fagot’s (1984) argument that a lot of researchers and educators 'promote' having more male teachers in schools
and ‘such a change in hiring patterns is predicted on the assumption that male and female teachers do indeed treat children differently’ (p.263).

Some studies claim that gender does not affect teaching and learning (Driessen 2007; Sokal and Katz 2008) whilst others argue that having more male teachers would serve to be highly beneficial (Gold and Reis 1982; Owens, 2010). Bricheno and Thornton (2006) believe that ‘all children need high quality teaching by skilled teachers, regardless of race, class or gender’ (p.9) and state that ‘in the current panic about boys a scapegoat is required: so-called feminised teaching practices’ (p.58).

Millis et al. (2004) summarise the most common reasons offered in the field of literature why men do not opt for teaching;

- Poor wages in relation to the work performed; limited career path for those seeking administrative roles; the labeling of male primary school teachers as homosexual or not ‘real men;’ the current media spotlight on allegations of child abuse; the fear of being labeled a paedophile.

(p.355)

King (1998) also refers to the public perception that men who teach young children are often considered as homosexuals or paedophiles, whilst others agree that there is more to it. Teaching is seen as a low status occupation because the majority of practitioners within schools are females (Bricheno and Thornton, 2006). Drudy et al. (2010) carried out a study among student teachers and in addition to the reasons already mentioned they added that teaching is at times viewed as unattractive, boring, stressful and requiring a lot of patience.

On the contrary, the same study referred to the following reasons as to why a number of male teachers chose the teaching profession; 1) job conditions, 2) satisfaction of showing children how to do things, and because 3) teaching is a worthwhile calling (p.100). Men chose this job due to academic interest, time compatibility good working hours and work conditions. Lortie (1975) argues that ‘teaching is special in at least two respects: few occupations can offer similar opportunities for protracted contact with normal [sic] children, and few can provide such compatible work schedules’ (p.32-3).
Whilst some researchers stated that male teachers are important, others suggested that the education system would still be successful the way it is; that is; female dominated.

**Conducting the research**

Within the literature on male teachers I found no reported studies which gained data directly from male teachers and from the head of school who is responsible for allocating teaching grades to teachers. This study focuses on prevailing issues of inequality and imbalance that still exist in the Maltese education system.

Since I teach in a local government school situated in the central part of Malta, I thought it would be ideal to conduct the research within my working environment. There are four male teachers at my school who were interviewed as well as the head of school since she is the one responsible for the teachers’ placements. Therefore, the participants were not randomly chosen from a larger group. Since this research is based on male teachers’ perceptions, all four male teachers in the school were automatically chosen for the study.

The qualitative interview approach was chosen because it records attitudes, behaviours and feelings. It also served as a tool which stimulated individual experiences. Conversational interviews were conducted with all the participants concerned. An observational log book was also kept on which situations related to gender stereotypes were recorded. This observational log book was kept in order to enable me to substantiate what was being said to what was actually being done.

Normally interviews are conducted by a ‘powerful’ researcher and the ‘powerless’ researched. Having chosen to interview my colleagues ensured that the latter boundary was minimised. I also decided to focus on one particular school in order to have a smaller and more manageable number of participants. The method chosen
links closely to purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In purposive sampling, ‘researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typically or possession of that particular characteristics being sought’ (p. 114-115). In my case I ‘handpicked’ the male teachers due to the fact that I was primarily interested in male teachers’ views. The snowball sampling is similar in a way as ‘researchers identify a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested. This method is useful for sampling a population where access is difficult, maybe because it is a sensitive topic....or where an outsider researcher has difficulty in gaining access to schools’ (p.116). Being a female researcher, this type of sampling provided me with a freer access to males’ perceptions.

Since I knew the participants I thought that the best method was ‘conversational interviews’ or what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010) describe as ‘interview guide approach’ in which ‘topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form, interviewer decides sequence and working of questions in the course of the interview’ (p.356).

One of the drawbacks interviews might have is that the interviewee might be hindered to respond in a particular manner. For this reason, I decided to keep an observational log book and jot down what Clough and Nutbrown describe as ‘unstructured observations’. From the very first day of school, I took note of various situations I encountered which were relevant to the topic of ‘gender’. Through the writing of this log book I could substantiate and confirm the interviewee’s responses. Keeping this logbook has helped answer questions such as:

Which roles does the head of school give to male and female teachers distinctively?

How does the head normally decide which classes to give to which teachers?

Who do teachers refer to when they encounter some sort of ‘technical problem’?
Do male teachers help out around the school?

Who takes a leading role for organising school activities?

Who carries out the assembly in the morning when the head of school is not present?

Do parents speak to male and female teachers evenly next to the school gate?

Through these observations I managed to observe ‘the environment; people and their relationships, behaviour, actions and activities’ (Cohen et al. 2010, p.167). Being a participant observer enabled me as the researcher to gain more reliable data because I was directly involved in the field of research.

The observations were recorded in the form of field notes. In each situation, the event encountered (observational notes) was described and my own interpretation of the event (interpretive notes) was formulated. I also took note of facial expressions and any reactions in the latter section. Reference to field notes was constantly made to substantiate and elaborate on what the participants discussed.

In order to carry out a research study of this type, informed consent was obtained from all the practitioners concerned. The research was explained to the head of school who gave me her immediate approval. My plans were then discussed with the four male teachers concerned who immediately accepted my proposal. Before conducting my study, an ‘oral consent’ was obtained. During the same week I gave each participant a letter which explained the purpose behind the study. The letter also explained that the practitioners’ names will be anonymised and that the interview will be recorded and used only for analysis and for the purpose of the dissertation. The practitioners concerned were also told that all information shared during the interviews will be held with strict confidence and the data would be destroyed after the submission of the written work. Together with the letter, each participant was given a consent form to sign. In the consent form, the practitioners were asked to tick and sign in order to show agreement.
Analysis and Findings

The choices we make in life can be influenced by a number of people; peers, family and even teachers (Bricheno and Thornton, 2006). Various studies have shown that male teachers choose teaching for various reasons namely: salary, long holidays, rapid career advancement, academic interest and time compatibility (Bricheno and Thornton, 2006, Drudy et al.; 2010).

The latter reasons reflect those provided by the interviewees but two teachers explained that they became teachers because they have always felt a need to work with children. Mr.Camilleri and Mr.Schembri both argued that becoming a teacher was their ‘childhood dream’. The most common reason offered by the teachers was what Drudy et al. (2010) refer to as ‘academic interest.’ Mr.Camilleri explained that he likes his job because he “is not dealing with a piece of paper or computer...I’m dealing with human beings.” The same was argued by Mr.Apap. During one particular summer, Mr.Apap worked as a summer school teacher and this experience made him feel “at ease” and “felt comfortable in a classroom setting.” This encouraged him to follow a career in teaching. Mr.Mifsud provided a totally different perspective. He explained that he became a teacher purely by “coincidence” since he did not obtain high marks in accounts and economics and teaching was seen as “another option” he could take.

Through all the interviews, the teachers explained that their family members were “happy”, “glad” and “thrilled” that they chose the teaching profession. They all agreed that their friends’ reactions varied and that teaching was considered to be of a ‘lower prestige’ by most of their peers. This was expressed by comments such as; “there were also some who thought that the work of a teacher wasn’t of a standard like that of a lawyer” and “other friends who took other courses at the university...they kind of felt....and nowadays I feel angry to admit it...that I was going to take a course of a lower prestige.”
Bricheno and Thornton (2006) and Drudy et al. (2010) both refer to ‘salary’ as one of the main reasons why men choose teaching. On the contrary, throughout all the interviews it was evident that the four male teachers did not choose teaching because of the wage. Some interviewees expressed anger and concern during the interviews whilst stating that the teaching duties do not match the respective salary. It can be argued that in this respect, there is a bit of a contradiction within the Maltese context. Whilst the literature states that male teachers choose teaching because of the good salary, the four male teachers interviewed all agreed that they believe they have a very low wage even though they are considered as professionals. In certain societies, men are still viewed as the family breadwinner and the wage might not encourage males to join this profession.

It was interesting to note that three interviewees explained that teaching in a primary school was not their first option. Mr.Mifsud argued that he became a teacher “by coincidence” whilst Mr.Camilleri was going to opt for secondary education. Mr.Apap was studying for a lawyer but he stated that he did not feel “comfortable” and felt that he was “in great doubt”. Mr.Schembri has always wanted to become a primary teacher but now that he is, he believes that there are other options a male could take and that teaching might not be the best one. This sense of insecurity is also expressed by Bricheno and Thornton (2006) who found out that ‘there is substantial empirical evidence that for many, if not most men, teaching is not their first choice of career’ (p.27).

Fagot (1984) states that ‘in the natural environment males and females react differently to children, and children in return react differently to males and females’ (p.593). Within the primary school setting male and female teachers tend to take particular roles. The interviewees mentioned that the male teacher has three main roles within a primary school setting; namely being a) a role-model, b) a disciplinarian and c) a ‘helping hand’.

A common issue which was addressed by some of the participants was the belief that male teachers act as role models. Although the term ‘role model’ is a vast concept and some researchers have argued that a role model can be female as well
as male, Mr. Mifsud expressed his idea that having more male teachers in the primary setting can be highly beneficial because “children nowadays, are being brought up in single parent and broken families so the role of a male is not evident in the lives of these children.” The same idea was expressed by Mr. Apap who stated that “it helps children to have a father figure.” This issue has been addressed by a number of policy makers who believe that having more male teachers in schools might minimise certain problems of misbehaviour in children (Farquhar, 1998).

Another point which was brought up by Mr. Apap was that boys tend to relate more to male teachers. Therefore, apart from being a ‘role model’ a male teacher can act as a ‘companion’ or ‘friend’ to boys; as one of the teachers pointed out “the advantage for male students is that they have someone to relate to in relation to football and stuff like that.” This point was also raised by Mr. Mifsud who stated that boys tend to “joke around more” with a male teacher; “boys do not have the same type of confidence with a female teacher.” The teachers elaborated on this issue and stated that they feel they are ‘role models’ for both boys and girls. Literature seems to focus on how male teachers affect boys and their learning when in actual fact both grade 6 teachers argued that having a male role-model is beneficial for girls as well.

Another indirect role which is associated and ‘expected’ by male teachers is discipline. Mills et al. (2004) refer to the idea that ‘the calls for male teachers utilize a “men as disciplinarians” discourse’ and that ‘there is evidence that male students are likely to misbehave more for female teachers’ (p.364). The male teachers who participated in this study have stated that they feel they are viewed as more ‘disciplined’ than their female colleagues. Mr. Camilleri stated that “children tend to expect that a male teacher would be stricter, but then again it depends on the character of the teacher.” Mr. Camilleri’s belief is backed up by that of the head of school who stated that parents tend to believe that a female teacher is “more sweet and patient” than a male teacher. Through her experience, Ms. Farrugia argued that she knows of female teachers who are “high tempered” and that it all “depends on
what one understands by the word ‘discipline.’ Although this might be the true case, Riddell and Tett (2006) believe that:

> When parents, principles, and teachers suggest that students need a male teacher, the issues are often ones of discipline and control. The assumption, which is usually unexamined, is that men as teachers are somehow better able to provide problem students with discipline.

(p.100)

The role of the male teacher as a ‘helping hand’ has been mentioned by all participants. The male teachers who participated in this study believed that they have specific roles which they are ‘meant to’ carry out since they are men. As a teacher, Mr. Apap helps in issues related to education; such as helping out a new teacher. Mr. Apap also referred to other duties he carries out due to the fact that he is male; mainly being responsible for the sound system during school concerts and activities and organising annual festivities amongst the school staff. Mr. Schembri has explained that apart from the paper work he takes care of the lighting effects during the prize day.

Mr. Camilleri is a member of the school council and believes that this is a special role since he represents the male teachers. Mr. Mifsud also explained that sports and drama are two concepts in which he is highly involved within the primary school setting. Both Mr. Camilleri and Mr. Mifsud explained that since they are male, they are often asked to carry furniture around the school. Although all male teachers have explained that their job duty goes far beyond teaching, they all seem to agree that they do not mind doing it. This is truly reflected in Mr. Apap’s comment; “I think one of the good qualities a teacher must have is versatility...he or she needs to do anything in relation to the school...because the school is not just a building...it’s something alive...just like a home...at home sometimes one ends up doing things which traditionally isn’t suppose to do but at the end of the day you do it anyway.”

The main purpose behind this research was to delve into male teachers’ perspectives about teaching the youngest children at school. Although there are four male teachers in the school concerned no one has ever taught grade 1 or 2. Mr. Mifsud
has taught grade 3 during his first year of teaching but has taught older children throughout the years. The formative grades are constantly being taught by female teachers at our school and it seems that this has been the case for over twelve years as the head of school explained; “I don’t believe there were any male teachers at the time I started at this school...there were peripatetic teachers yes...but no male teachers.” This seems to confirm Owens’ (2010) argument; that the number of male teachers in the early grades is not a true reflection of the number of men in our society. A study conducted by Riddell and Tett (2006) also shows that ‘data that are available show that there are a higher proportion of women in the lower grades than in the higher grades in all professions’ (p.18).

In order to delve into why this is considered as the norm, the following questions were formulated:

1. Are male teachers often invited to teach the young?
2. How would male teachers react if they were given a grade 1 or 2 class?
3. Would they ‘accept’?
4. Are male teachers ever seen in the ground floor where grade 1 and 2 classes are situated?
5. Why does the head of school assign the higher grades to male teachers?

When asked about teaching the very young pupils, all male teachers acted surprised and their reactions did not vary. Words such as ‘frightening’, ‘scary’ and ‘challenging’ were common amongst the practitioners. All teachers explained that if they had to choose between the formative years and the junior years they would definitely choose the latter age group. The reasons for this varied by all the participants.

Mr.Camilleri believes that such young pupils require a lot of patience and now that he is settled within the junior years setting, he would find it difficult to adjust to such a different environment. Mr.Apap’s reaction was similar to Mr.Camilleri’s. Mr.Apap explained that he believes that his big structure and deep voice would “scare
children”. Mr. Mifsud and Mr. Schembri expressed views of concern. Mr. Mifsud abruptly claimed that he “would fight against having to teach those grades” whilst Mr. Schembri’s reply was similar to Mr. Camilleri’s; “I’m not a very patient person, so if I had to choose I wouldn’t choose those grades for sure.”

The issue of ‘patience’ has been raised by most participants during the interviews. One notices that the male teachers’ and the head of schools’ perspectives are contrasting at times. While the male teachers believe that teaching the very young can be a ‘frightening’ and ‘a shocking experience,’ the head of school believes that both male and female teachers can do a great job in teaching very young children. According to Ms. Farrugia a male teacher “can love just like a female teacher loves her work.” Although Ms. Farrugia’s views were expressed in a simplistic manner the reality is that stereotypically female teachers are associated more with the mother figure and therefore is seen as a more patient and caring person; ‘caring is often closely linked to teaching in elementary schools. Caring is most often attributed to females, and justice and individualism are often attributed to males’ (Eng, 2003, p.3).

These type of associations seem to be incorporated within the stereotypes in our society and the idealistic situation is one in which ‘the education and the care of children as a career should be inviting and welcoming for both women and men caregivers and teachers’ (Nelson and Shikwambi, 2010, p.41).

The head of school believes that male teachers within the early years setting would be of great benefit for children and she “would love to have male teachers teaching the lower classes.” Ms. Farrugia believes that children associate the female teacher with the mother figure but in the same way they can learn to associate a male teacher with the father figure if they had to have a male teacher. The head of school has never assigned male teachers to teach grade 1 and 2. She gave two major reasons for the latter. Ms. Farrugia explained that although she is the person responsible for assigning teachers to their teaching grades, she tries to adjust to the teacher’s wishes. Since male teachers have never asked to teach grade 1 or 2, she did not impose that they should. Ms. Farrugia is also aware of certain stereotypical situations male teachers might encounter should they teach young pupils.
Both literature and the participants concerned seem to agree that the teacher’s gender is socially stereotyped. Although such stereotypes are at times highly evident, the head of school believes that she trusts both genders to do a good job within the early years setting. Whilst male teachers are also seen as ‘maintenance helping hands’ around the school, the interviewees were asked whether they have met any situations in which they thought it was best that a female teacher handle it. To this question every practitioner explained that they have met situations in which they asked the help of other female teachers. It was interesting to note that the experiences told were all related to the development and personal hygiene of girls.

**Summary**

This study has primarily set out to answer two main research questions. The male teachers confirmed their preference in teaching the junior years rather than the early years. This is due to the perception that the formative years should be taught by someone who is caring and patient. According to the male teachers and the head of school interviewed, these virtues are normally associated with a female figure.

This study also concluded that the practitioners involved have never met any situations in which they were ‘accused’ or associated with acts of paedophilia and so this issue was irrelevant as to why male teachers are rarely seen in the early years. This study also showed that the four male teachers concerned were accustomed to teaching the junior years and would feel uncomfortable if they were asked to teach the youngest pupils at school.

The role of the male teacher in a primary school setting is not solely related to teaching. According to the practitioners interviewed, male teachers have other roles. They are assigned to take leading roles in organising physical and extracurricular activities. Male teachers also contribute to school maintenance. They help with the light and sound in school concerts, share their opinions on certain
technological mechanisms bought and help with the carrying of furniture around the school. Such roles tend to reinforce gender stereotypes. The practitioners interviewed all said that they act as ‘role models’ but they all agreed that the fact that they are male does not affect boys’ academic performance.

Another issue which was evident and common in all interviews was the issue of ‘professional hierarchy’. All male teachers expressed their wish to climb the professional ladder. Mr. Camilleri explained that he would like to take the role of an assistant head; Mr. Mifsud wishes to provide more fruitful work in society; Mr. Apap talked about his wish to teach in higher secondary while Mr. Schembri would like to completely change his profession. The reasons behind such changes in the teaching profession link to the idea that teaching in Malta is considered as a low status profession. All participants expressed concern and explained that the teaching profession has a very low wage.

References


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CHAPTER 14

The impact of leadership on young children’s motivation and achievement at school

Louise Micallef

What effective schools look like is not a mystery. Effective schools have a coherent instructional program which is well aligned; they have a community of adults committed to working together to develop the skills and knowledge of all children.

(Boudett, City & Murnane, 2005, p.3)

Effective schools are led by people who set a clear vision, who continuously reflect on classroom practices and who encourage all stakeholders to participate in decision-making. Good school leaders are usually also good communicators, they show empathy and energize the people around them to perform at the maximum of their ability. Murphy and Meyer (2008) note that successful schools almost always have good, if not exceptional heads who play an important role in the education of young children. Yet they alone cannot make all the difference in a learning institution, Heads of School need to respect and value every stakeholders’ opinion as these form part of a team whose main objective is to educate the future generation.

In one of the first school-effect studies, Coleman et al. (1966) concluded that students’ family background and home culture largely determine their academic destinies. On the other hand, Hattie (2003) and Mulford (2006) suggested that all children can learn irrespective of their demographics. Thus, school leaders, early childhood educators and learning institutions can really make a difference. Attard Tonna (2009 p.693) states that “school leaders should engage all members of the organization and motivate teachers to share ideas and information and work together to achieve the common goals.” At the heart of every school, there needs to
be the school leader who together with all the stakeholders is ready to bring about the best performance of every individual child.

Early childhood educators need to facilitate learning, to use the children’s interests as a starting point, verify what students already know and lead them to the next stage by stretching them to reach their full potential. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the teacher and the parent are there to lead the children from what they have already mastered to a further stage where they can acquire new knowledge. He refers to this as the zone of proximal development. The adult is there to lead; what children cannot do today, they will do tomorrow with the assistance of their carers. Thus, teachers need to challenge children to step out of their comfort zone and encounter new learning experiences.

The aim of this chapter is to look at the impact of the school leader on young children’s motivation and performance at school. The primary objective is to discuss the Head of School’s influence in a student’s academic life, the early childhood educators’ role and the essential part that parents play in the upbringing of young children. It asks:

“Does the school leader leave an impact on children’s motivation and performance at school?”

The Impact of Schooling on Children

“Quality education for all is the overall important goal. Quality education is the right of each and every child with all that the child represents and brings along with him/her at school.” (Pace 2009, p.410)

Every student needs to be educated according to his or her own needs from the very early years. At home, in a nursery or when starting to attend pre-school, the children’s character, behaviour and attitudes are being formed. Thus, if the future society is envisaged to have a knowledgeable workforce, then the long process of education starts at home and continues formally at school. Education can make a difference in people’s lives, as Sylva (1994) confirms “schooling has direct effect on
children’s educational achievement, their acquisition of literacy, numeracy and scientific knowledge.” (p.135) But how can the children’s motivation and performance excel at school?

Until the early 1960’s, it was thought that family background had the most impact on children’s achievement (Reynolds et al. 2000). Therefore, it was assumed that if parents were illiterate or not very well educated, likewise their children’s education would suffer, because intelligence was believed to be a hereditary gene. However, educational research evolved and by the mid sixties, “the principals’ leadership was seen as an important factor that contributed to school improvement and success.” (Michalak 2009 p.399) So the role of the school leader was suddenly given more weight especially when schools were showing better performance. Nevertheless, Hattie (2003) argues that today it is the class teacher who has the main impact on children’s learning. Early childhood educators are constantly with children, they are with them for almost the whole school day and hence, their delivery of lessons, the learning strategies they use and their performance is crucially important to young children’s learning and progress.

Contradicting statements are highlighted by Dinham (2007, p.264) in a paper called How schools get moving and keep improving: leadership for teacher learning, student success and school renewal. Dinham claims that:

“if defining and measuring teacher performance is difficult, measuring the influence that leadership might have on teacher and then student performance is even more so.”

As more and more parents work when their children are very young, children start attending nurseries and pre-schools in the very early months of their life. Knowing the importance of education in today’s world, it is up to the parents to choose an effective school. Then again, how do they decide what makes an effective school; a school leader, an early childhood educator? There are several views about these questions. Vidoni (2009) asserts that “school influences student learning mostly by means of intermediate variables.” Evans (1999) and Sergiovanni (2001) argue that
although the teacher’s performance directly affects students, the quality of leadership matters in determining the motivation of teachers and the quality of their teaching. Likewise, Hallinger and Heck (1998) point out that the effects of leadership on student achievement are indirect. They affirm that even though the traditional belief that school principals leave a great impact, children’s achievement and performance at school depends also on the teacher’s energy. For this reason, the school leader together with the senior management team, teachers and even the parents need to work together for the same goal. Leading a school is no longer a one wo/man show. I suggest that a collective effort to support a child’s educational process is necessary.

There needs to be an involvement of more than senior management at the top of the organization. For,

“School principals, or any other leader for that matters do not single handedly lead schools to greatness; leadership involves an array of individuals with various tools and structures.” (Spillane, 2005, p.143)

An essential factor in the education of the young child is the role of the parents. Coleman (1991), and Epstein and Dauber (1991) suggest that family involvement in children’s learning has an influence on their happiness, achievement and learning in schools. Furthermore, it has been shown that if teachers involve parents and encourage them to initiate learning activities at home, “an improvement in motivation, behaviour and self-esteem will be evident.” (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006, p.23). School leaders thus need to generate positive relationships with parents so that they feel welcomed and use the school is a resource of knowledge where parents can also share their responsibility. Children can also improve socially and intellectually if their parents are involved, ensuring that they enjoy, achieve, develop and eventually make a positive contribution to society and economic security. The main objective of successful schools remains to educate children and ultimately, prepare them for the world of work; preparing them for life and help them develop into educated citizens.
The Research Question and the Methodological Tools

Using the Russian Doll Principle (Clough and Nutbrown 2007) I generated my research question, which was “Does the school leader leave an impact on children’s motivation and performance at school?” Two Heads of School, Mr Zammit, a young educational leader of a small school and Ms Borg, a more experienced Head of School of a largely populated learning institution, were interviewed to discuss different issues. These included an effective leadership, the school development plan, motivation and essential characteristics to create a successful school. Furthermore, the early childhood educators who are in the classrooms with the children for most of the school day were also involved.

A total of 35 early childhood educators spread across seven schools all in what I shall call St. Paul’s College completed a questionnaire. Six mothers, chosen at random, each took part in a ten minute interview. Questions highlighted mainly the effect of the school leader on their children, the impact of schooling on their children and their involvement at school. Parents are:

“the children’s first and most enduring educators and when they work together with practitioners in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on the child’s development and learning.” (QCA, DfEE, 200, p.9)

The research used two different methods: audio recorded interviews for Heads of Schools and parents, and a questionnaire for early years educators.

Although, transcribing the conversations took quite a long time, the use of open-ended questions elicited from the school leaders their views and opinions. Also, the focused interviews with parents produced varied views. I chose to elicit views of early childhood educators, using a questionnaire because, as Wilson and Mc Lean

2 pseudonyms

3
(1994) advocate, the questionnaire is a widely used tool and a useful instrument for collecting survey information, providing structured, often numerical data and often being comparatively straightforward to analyse.

The collection of the questionnaire distributed to early childhood educators took place two weeks after the distribution. Thirty questionnaires, (86%) were completed from early years educators working in the seven schools in the study. These were analysed to generate quantitative findings which sustained and contrasted the different views obtained from the literature.

**The Reality of the Maltese Classrooms**

“The leadership of the principal has been identified as a critical factor affecting the implementation of change initiatives. Successful leaders provide the energy and vision that make such shifts in practice possible.” (Meyer et al., 2009, p.171)

A good leader sets the pace, manages people and leads the school forward, for as Louis, Dretzke and Wahlstrom (2010) state, school leaders need to be supportive both with teachers and also with students since they encourage and boost their self-esteem. During their interviews, both Mr Zammit and Ms Borg, emphasized that they go into the classrooms of their school often, effecting management by being involved and helping the teachers in the school to remain alert to their job. Mr Zammit highlighted that in such a small school, going into the classrooms and talking to the teachers helps him to be more involved in the teaching and learning process. Pounder (1999) insists that shared leadership has its greatest impact by reducing teacher isolation and increasing commitment to the common good. The school leader thus, should make the Senior Management Team (SMT) and teachers act collectively. Parents too, need to be involved because they play an important role in the children’s life. So, what are the characteristics needed to be an effective leader? Which are the essential factors needed to leave an impact on the children’s motivation and performance at school?
What makes a Head of School an effective leader?

Analysis of the questionnaires showed an inclination towards the view that good leaders motivate teachers, set a vision and project a disciplined and a well-organized environment (Figure 14:1).

Figure 14:1 What makes a Head of School an effective leader?

Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) identified a list of leadership responsibilities which are associated with student performance. Order, discipline, communication, a good relationship with staff, a vision, knowledge of the curriculum, flexibility, the will to change and delegate, being a motivator and creating a sense of belonging are all vital characteristics to lead a successful school. In their interviews, the two school leaders told me that a learning institution needs to be developed into a community; it needs a vision which has to be shared by all stake holders. Furthermore, the emphasis should be placed on the teaching and learning process while
communication and a good relationship should always be present such that the motivation to work will follow.

Hoy and Tarter (1997) state that unhealthy schools lack an effective leader and the teachers are generally unhappy with their jobs and colleagues. In addition, neither teachers nor students are academically motivated in poor schools and academic achievement is not highly valued. Motivation in my opinion, both for the school leader and also for the teacher, is the key factor to the impact on the student’s behaviour, attitude and performance at school. A motivating environment and a happy atmosphere at school will enhance teachers’ drive to support children to reach their full potential.

All the teachers who answered the questionnaire agreed that children come happily to school. Amongst their responses, they stated that happiness shows on the children’s face. Students make new friends at school and many of them are eager to learn new things. Thus, teachers have to keep the enthusiasm and excitement very high. They need to be full of energy and transmit their efforts so that children themselves can give their best. In return the teachers have to be motivated themselves. Bezzina (1997) ensures that “when people feel secure, respected, find things to be challenging, interesting, engaging and find something of value, motivation will follow.” (p.59)

When asked Which is the essential characteristic which motivates you as a teacher? thirty-three per cent answered that a good performance in class keeps them going. Teachers reported that they look for positive responses from the children. They plan different activities to engage children, set learning in real and realistic contexts and interweave topics and subjects into a coherent whole. Nutbrown (2006) confirms that “this type of planning also draws upon children’s interests and can be a way of making learning opportunities dynamic and worthwhile.” (p.34) From my own teaching experience in elementary classrooms, watching students reading their first words, working their first mathematical operations, writing their own names gives great satisfaction.
In addition, relationships with different stakeholders play also an important role. Sixteen per cent of the teachers stated that a good relationship with the Head of School gives great motivation (Figure 14:2).

**Figure 14:2: Essential characteristics which motivate you as a teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good relationship with the…</th>
<th>Involvement in decision making</th>
<th>Good performance in class</th>
<th>An orderly, disciplined and…</th>
<th>A welcoming and safe environ…</th>
<th>All of the above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Series1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school leader needs to take the role of a motivator such that the early childhood educators will not only feel supported but will also be encouraged to do their very best. Furthermore, a feeling of belonging will be a great asset. When teachers work in a welcoming and safe environment and know that they can make a difference in the children’s lives, then they will feel useful and will be productive in their own ways.

Ross and Glaze (2005) claim that successful leaders monitor their staff on a regular basis, provide them with support and give them individual advice for improvement. When asked, How does the Head of School communicate with the teaching staff?, the early childhood educators indicated that school leaders still value the importance of face to face encounters, with staff meetings are also useful means of communication (Figure 14:3).
From my own teaching experience, I have learnt that the school leader’s support encourages and keeps the teachers going and, when early childhood educators understand that every school objective revolves around the success of the individual children, they will strive and work hard to achieve what is planned. Mr Zammit stated that:

“when this year, interactive whiteboards were introduced, teachers were taken aback. They were about to resist change but when professional support was given to them and they understood that children would benefit from it, they immediately started using it.”

The teachers were motivated to enhance children’s learning and so personal success of the child left its imprint on the teachers’ behavior in adopting to new technology in their teaching.
When asked ‘In your opinion which is the most important goal for the school vision?’ teachers agreed that the vision of the school should focus on the whole development of the individual child; not only academically but also socially and emotionally (Figure 14:4).

![Bar chart showing teachers' vision for the school](image)

**Figure 14:4  What should be the vision for the school according to teachers?**

In the whole process of education, children need to be given first preference. Ideally, they should attend the newest school buildings, be catered with the best learning environments and stretched to give their best. Nevertheless, this can only be done if human and educational resources are available.

> “Children do not learn successfully if they are simply told or shown what to do. Activities which stem from the child’s interests are more likely to lead to effective learning.” (David, 1999, p.5)

Consequently, keeping the children enthusiastic and motivated and creating a learning environment which is more appealing and stimulating helps in mastering new knowledge. The budget allocated for resources depends mainly on the action plans which are set in the school development plan. In effect, teachers are asked for an opinion when resources need to be bought as they know what is necessary and required for their children. Sargent (2003) argues that:
“feeling that their work is important and acknowledged is crucial for teachers, as they will be more likely to remain vital, dynamic and contributing members to school decisions.” (p.47)

The teachers’ morale needs to be high as it directly affects the students’ motivation and performance. Likewise, when children feel that teachers are full of energy, when they are taught with the use of the latest available resources, then children will be more likely to be inspired and driven to work harder. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a key to maintaining enthusiasm and motivation for, as Matthews (2009) states, “it identifies the needs of the individual teachers and supports the improvement of teaching and learning.” (p.26) Beare et al. (1989) emphasized that outstanding leadership was always a crucial factor for an outstanding school. However, when teachers are regularly involved in CPD their performance and even their learning environment will improve. Strong leadership alongside energized teachers who are supported in trying our new approaches, will likely enhance children’s learning and progress.

An outstanding leader working hand in hand with the SMT, and highly qualified teachers in the best learning environment need also to work with parents who play a very important role. They are the very first educators of their children and they want them to succeed. The National Minimum Curriculum states that

The earliest form of learning occurs in the home or in the institutions where the children are being raised. It is therefore important that, from the start, the schools develop a positive relationship with the environment in which the children are being brought up.
(Ministry of Education, 1999, p.71)

Thus, parents need to be involved not only in traditionally helpful roles such as fund raising activities or in attending parents’ meetings. These help parents feel part of the school community, yet parents can also be crucial in their children’s learning processes. Nutbrown (2006) insists that “parents who are informed about the ways children learn and think are in a better position to support the continuity and progression of their children’s learning and development.” (p.141) Furthermore,
when teachers share information with parents about teaching approaches which are being used in school, and allow them to take part in their children’s educational programme, they will most often be only too pleased to be involved.

Parents know their children better than anyone else does; they know what their interests and skills are. Hence, it would be a great asset for the classroom teacher to involve them. The EPPE Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project found that:

“Programmes which directly promote activities for parents and children to engage in together are likely to be most beneficial for young children.” (2004, p.25)

Furthermore, when parents participate in their children’s education, this has been found to enhance children’s learning and achievement. The children need to feel that their parents are part of their educational process as well. Lambert (2006) states that:

“successful school leaders not only get parents involved in goal setting for schools but they also endeavor to consciously match their cultural experiences and behaviour and lead community members in solving the deep problems that besiege school.”

During their short interviews, parents clearly indicated that the teacher leaves the greatest impact on children. Figure 14:5, clearly indicates that teachers themselves believe that they play a very important role in the children’s education.
Parents highlighted that when the teacher is happy, the children will enjoy learning while if s/he has low morale, is angry or sad, then they will be afraid. At times, children get even tense and thus their learning process will be hindered. Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010) suggested that:

“teacher effectiveness is the single most important thing; if we can have great teachers in front of every classroom, then the chances of us educators being successful are much greater.” (p.129)

Parents agreed that teachers have a great influence on young children stressing that, as well as maintaining discipline, teachers need to be loving and caring because they spend a long time with them.

“Teaching young children require clarity, honesty, courtesy, diligence and consistency. It means identifying what children can do, what they might do and what their educators need to do next to support and challenge them in their learning.” (Nutbrown and Carter, 2010, p.120).

In my study, the school leaders, parents, and early childhood educators all indicated that they all - Heads of School, teachers and parents- affect children’s motivation and performance at school. Together, they work hard to develop students to reach...
their maximum abilities; they help them to improve their strengths and to work on their weaknesses; they prepare them to live their future and give their contribution to society itself.

Heads of School were mainly concerned about the vision of the school and the importance of teaching and learning.

Early childhood educators said that they strive hard to present different learning strategies and use different approaches since they want success for every child.

Parents are the most important people in the child’s educational life. They said that they want the very best for their children and thus they push them to their limits and assist them in their homework and studies.

My study confirms that, in the schools participating in my study, for the best education of every child, the school leader, the early childhood educator and the parents need to leave their imprint. Hence, if within the school community, everyone works together for the same objective; that is the goal of every student benefitting in the long term from their education and children being highly motivated in the process. This triangular approach to educational excellence, together with the ideal learning environment, appropriate resources and education which supports children’s personal, social, emotional, and academic development.

**Conclusion**

The period between birth and 8 years of age is crucial in the development of human beings because the range and quality of events and activities experienced during this period have a direct impact on:

- each child’s personal growth and development,
- his/her achievement in compulsory schooling and
The future’s life-styles, life-skills and opportunities available for each individual in the community.

(Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2006, p.11)

The National Policy Early Childhood Education and Care launched in 2006 highlighted the need for a trained workforce in the early years and close monitoring of elementary schools which play an essential role in the education of young children. Achieving high standards in early childhood education is an investment in the well-being of students and the future generation itself.

My study has shown that starting from the top, the school leader leaves an indirect impact on young children since amongst the main responsibilities, s/he needs to develop reachable targets, create a vision and lead people to put the educational programme in practice. Mc Ewan (2009) established that:

“leadership is a key factor in raising the achievement bar for all students. Leaders accomplish what they do in an indirect way through teachers, by mentoring, coaching, supporting and helping.” (p.32)

Early Childhood Educators, in my study insisted that though senior educational leadership is the ideal tool to make a school function. It is them as teachers who help children learn and equip them children with the skills they need. They stimulate and initiate children’s curiosity and keep them motivated to discover new learning experiences.

Parents’ roles in their children’s education extends beyond attending meetings or participating in School Council and fundraising activities. They can contribute in their children’s learning and are more than willing to do so. As Hirst (1996) asserts:

“If they are welcome, and early childhood educators work in partnership to ensure their participation, then the best needs of the children will be met.” (p.89)
Thus, parents, together with the school leader and the early years classroom teachers, can transform the first years of schooling into an exceptional experience for all children.

Children have a right for education; however, as Hirst (1996) points out: “because they are young and they have no voice in our political system, they need support for their rights to be upheld.” (p.81)

Therefore, as my study has shown, school leaders need to be pro-active. Knowing that education is the key to create a successful generation, they have to prepare for change as it starts taking shape. They need to plan ahead for new challenges and go a step further. Whilst retaining the school ethos, they need to promote new learning strategies which can help in improving the children’s performance. Davidovich et al. (2010) declare that schools provide a service – they prepare children for the future. Therefore, Heads of School need to embrace change; they need to plan for it and encourage teachers to implement new developments in their classrooms.

Nutbrown and Carter (2010) insist that:

“Children’s learning is so complex, so rich, so fascinating, so varied, so surprising and so full of enthusiasm that to see it taking place every day, before one’s very eyes, is one of the greatest privileges.” (p.111)

Educating young children and giving them the tools to achieve in life is an opportunity which cannot be ignored. It entails hard work; however, if the main aim remains to produce the best quality of teaching and learning and to ensure that all the children can succeed, then, the Head of School’s leadership alone is not sufficient. They need the support of the early childhood educators in their schools and the active involvement of parents in the children’s educational journey.

References


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This collection of fourteen research essays brings together the work of Maltese educators who have been studying at Masters level with the University of Sheffield. Together these chapters offer a unique insight into young children’s learning in early childhood education and care settings and at home in Malta.

Sheffield has established with our local partners at St Catherine’s School, Pembroke, Malta, this book will be an important text for our future students. Not only in Malta but also those who study with us from many parts of the world. The authors hope it hope will make a small contribution to those who live and work with children and their families in Maltese contexts.

The studies reported in this book focus, in particular, on the specific experiences of individual or small groups of children, providing some of the fine detail which will help educators further understand young children’s perspectives on their worlds and their learning journeys. The publication of this book represents a significant step in the relationship the University of

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