

**They Forget That I'm There:  
Migrant Students Traversing Language Barriers at School**

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### **Abstract**

The positioning of migrant students within schools of the host country is considerably determined by issues related to the language of instruction adopted in these schools. This article presents a qualitative study conducted in two Maltese girls' secondary schools and examines how teachers and migrant students dealt with language issues. Data were collected through focus groups to find out power dynamics that emerged as a result of the negotiations surrounding issues related to language. The authors draw on Foucault's works on power relations to demonstrate that learning experiences of migrant girls are situated in language and shaped by joint construction of meanings, which students and teachers create. The findings indicate that migrant students' use of language functioned as a source of power, which seemed instrumental in developing a sense of belonging at school. Although the study is located within a specific Maltese context, it may be considered relevant to debates about the experiences of English language learners in other geographical and socio-cultural settings involving migrant students.

*Keywords:* power relations, migrant students, language proficiency, school peer relations, language barriers

The legacy of 150 years of British rule (1814–1964) has sustained numerous British cultural traditions and elements in the lifestyles of many Maltese people, including the English language. English is taught in all schools from the first year of elementary school and along with Maltese, the native language, is also an official language. Bilingualism is one of the basic competencies which must be attained by all students by the end of their schooling (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) regards proficiency in Maltese and English as a gateway for students' social, cultural and economic integration (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). Migrant students are therefore faced with learning at least two foreign languages (Maltese and English). During the secondary years of schooling, the percentage amount of time assigned for language learning in state schools is 30%, which comes to around 12 lessons per week and is dedicated to learning Maltese, English and another foreign language. Schools may provide students with the opportunity to study two foreign languages (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). This is stipulated in the NCF, which aims at supporting students to be in possession of adequate language skills in order to be able to cope well at school (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). The design of specific programmes for students who experience difficulties in the core languages is also encouraged.

The increasing influx of migrants to Malta during the last decade has made the Maltese classroom more diverse in terms of the multiple variety of ethnic backgrounds pertaining to students who arrive in Malta from different parts of the world (Falzon, Pisani, & Cauchi, 2012). Due to multicultural diversity, young people in Malta do not strictly share a homogeneous identity (Cassar, 2016, p. 66). The NCF acknowledges the nation's growing cultural diversity and specifically suggests that learning programmes are to be flexible so as to provide diverse learning experiences for a wide spectrum of learners (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). The NCF states that individual differences related to gender, age, sexual orientation, personal beliefs, stage of development, geographical location, socio-cultural background and ethnicity are to be taken into consideration when designing learning programmes at school. It holds that learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds should have access to an education, which is embedded within a supportive environment that respects their individual circumstances. Learners of all aptitudes and competencies are encouraged to be successful, and they are entitled to the necessary support to sustain their efforts. Schools and educational processes are to respect diversity in all its forms by promoting an inclusive environment and by ensuring that practices and policies address specific learners' needs (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). A *Language Education Policy* (Council of Europe, 2015) also acknowledges the diverse nationalities of students in Maltese schools. The *National Literacy Strategy for All* advocates for a framework to ensure that "third country adults and children are empowered further through the acquisition and development of the required literacy skills" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a, p. 21). Consequently in recent years a number of schools have been offering specialised language programmes in Maltese and English to migrant learners in the secondary and primary sector through a *Core Competences Support Programme* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a, p. 50), and through projects like *Language Learning and Parental Support For Integration* coordinated by the Migrants Learners' Unit (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). Despite these efforts the process of integration for migrant students has not been easy. There is empirical evidence of a study conducted in Malta, which found that in school settings, "the preservation of the child's language and culture of origin is seen as an obstacle to successful integration" (Martinelli, 2006, p. 160).

Within this specific socio-cultural scenario, the current study aims to investigate whether the language/s the migrant students spoke at school posed any difficulties in their interactions with their school peers and whether their spoken language/s created power issues amongst them according to their perspectives and those of their teachers. The research questions leading the study are:

- How is language influencing the migrant students' peer interactions at school?
- How are power differentials among students being acted out as a result of the status assigned to Maltese and English?
- In which ways does language highlight ethnic differences among students?
- How is the school learning context being constructed as a result of language use?

The dynamics of power in which the authors are interested relate to how the migrant students negotiated their “migrant self” with students of the host country. The authors' understanding of power is not confined to mean solely domination or control but is understood in a wider, positive sense, which conveys different relational aspects, such as the ability to make friends, acculturate, adapt to school cultures and contribute to the learning experiences of school peers. Foucault's notion of power (1995) is considered as having significance to this study and the findings of this study are presented within this theoretical framework.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **The Power of Language**

Language is one of the main vehicles which teachers use to deliver lessons and which enables students to participate within lessons and communicate within the wider school community. The need to understand what people are saying is very basic. The language skills the students possess make a direct contribution to their school experience (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim, 2004). Learning the language of the host country enables migrant students to do well at school and fit in (Council of Europe, 2005; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Haas, 2008; Berry & Sabatier, 2010). It is therefore considered beneficial for migrant students to gain skills in the official language/s of the host country. The language/s acquired can support them in the development of their sense of mastery and self-esteem; two factors which can help them adjust well at school (Liebkind et al., 2004). Language is considered one of the central factors that influences acculturation and integration processes (Neto, 2002; Duff, 2002; Liebkind et al., 2004; Karsten, Felix, Ledoux, Meijnen, Roeleveld, & Van Schooten, 2006; Becker, 2009). When students are conversant and articulate, they can explore aspects of their abilities, interests and identities, besides their linguistic and content-area knowledge (Duff, 2002). Migrant students who do not speak the school's language of instruction face significant disadvantages and perform less well at school (Marks, 2005; Falzon, Pisani, & Cauchi, 2012). Lack of proficiency in the new language forces some students to remain silent, marginal, disconnected and disengaged from mainstream discourse, peers, curriculum and classroom activities (Duff, 2002). This can inhibit social interaction within the community and can also affect young people in holding back learning gains (Karsten et al., 2006). Consequently these “silent students” may be victimised because of their ethnicity. They might face social exclusion and be perceived as intellectually inferior and socially inconsequential (Duff, 2002). Incidences of racism and discrimination at school affect the educational trajectories of minority ethnic groups (Crozier, Davies, & Szymanski,

2010). Teachers working in racialized school environments are often part of “invisible” educational structures that work to maintain existing systems of dominance (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005, p. 150). Educators hold positions of power and authority and construct discourses that “are often academically and emotionally debilitating to the ‘racial other’”. Such construction and related action is informed by a white, race-privileged position” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 147). Other research indicates that migrant students are generally highly motivated as they perceive education as an essential avenue for achieving purpose and achievement in life (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010).

The conceptual framework of the study is positioned within the authors’ understanding of Foucault’s notion of power, which affirms that the self is produced by power relations (1995). The analysis does not focus directly on how the two schools of the study operated as institutional agents of power, but rather zooms in on a micro level; specifically, on the exchanges which occurred amongst the students themselves. In particular, the analysis is based on how the migrant students perceived the effects of their spoken language/s in relation to the dynamics operating within their interactions with other students at their school. It draws on Foucault’s idea (1981) that people are constituted by language and that power is embedded in language and generated through it. Students’ developing competencies in language proficiency could be considered a form of power, which facilitate or hinder their learning and communication with each other. This power is determined by social processes that bring together aspects related to ethnicity, class, gender, culture, time and space. Shifts in the ways that language is used to enable power and bring about social differences (Foucault, 1981).

### **Methodology**

The research has been conducted in two girls’ state secondary schools situated in the north of Malta. These are referred to as School A and School B. Both schools hosted a small number of migrant students ranging from a variety of countries. It is significant to note that the migrants who participated in the study were immigrants who were not stricken by war or other serious calamities that would make them eligible for refugee status. The students contributing to the data arrived from Serbia, China and the Philippines. For some of the migrant students who participated in the study the acquisition of English as a foreign language could have started prior to their settlement in Malta. In both schools there were students who had lived in England, Australia, Canada, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Italy, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Belgium, Albania and Mongolia prior to their arrival. Their parents migrated to Malta mainly for economic and employment reasons. Not all the migrant students’ families planned to stay in Malta permanently. A number of them had temporary visas and were trying to relocate themselves in other European countries. These students might not have been wholly interested in learning Maltese as they could not see its relevance to their lives. A few had relatives living in Malta. The authors’ observations, based on their interactions with students, led them to assume that the majority of Maltese and migrant students of their study belonged to a lower socio-economic class. As has been mentioned, the authors report that the migrant students of this study did not form a homogenous group (Galea, Tonna, & Cassar, 2011) and neither did the Maltese students.

At the time of the data collection there were no co-educational state schools in Malta. Two all-girls’ secondary schools were selected for the study, since the authors were particularly interested in how female students navigate their peer relations in school settings. It was challenging to gain access to schools, because heads of school were reluctant to grant

permission, due to highly politicised issues surrounding migration in Malta (Pisani, 2016; Mainwaring, 2012; Cassar, 2012). A number of schools refused the invitation to participate in the study. This might have been due to their reluctance to get involved in a research area that is linked with how the politics of migration operates in Malta. Migration is considered a sensitive issue that often provokes polarised, intense debates which have on many occasions proven to be highly divisive, controversial and even disturbing in Maltese society. A relationship of trust with the heads of school and school administrators of the two schools needed to be established, and once this was secured, other necessary permissions were obtained. The University of Malta Research Ethics Committee approved the study's proposal. The heads of school distributed an information letter to parents and those who gave permission to their child to participate signed a letter of parental consent. Teachers and students who wished to participate also signed consent forms. The data collection was carried out between February and May of 2010.<sup>1</sup> It consisted of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with 4 teachers (two from each school) and 6 students (three from each school). A qualitative approach was chosen because of its potential to provide rich, insightful and illuminating data. Qualitative interviewing has been employed to encourage participants to engage in meaningful conversations. Although their thoughts and perceptions could be abstract and invisible, qualitative interviewing could be useful for researchers attempting to make them accessible. The process of providing a deeper understanding of phenomena could be described as a social encounter (Schostak, 2006) in terms of:

... individuals directing their attention towards each other with the purpose of opening up the possibility of gaining an insight into the experiences, concerns, interests, beliefs, values, knowledge and ways of seeing, thinking and acting of the other. (Schostak, 2006, p.10)

The students' age ranged from thirteen to fifteen years. Three of the teachers are female and the other from School B is male. They did not teach the same subject, but held different areas of expertise. All the teachers were Maltese and their age ranged from late twenties to late fifties. The duration of the students' interviews lasted thirty minutes on average, while that of the teachers lasted around forty-five minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews with migrant students were conducted in English, while all the teachers preferred to speak in Maltese during their interview. Direct quotations from the interview scripts have been translated into English. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to safeguard anonymity.

In both schools all the lessons were conducted in Maltese, except, to a certain degree, for the foreign languages' lessons. For some of the subjects taught (Maltese Language, Social Studies, History, and Religious Knowledge) the textbooks were also in Maltese, while for the remaining subjects, textbooks and other curricular material were set in English. The migrant students of this study had the option of not following lessons of those subjects whose textbooks were in Maltese. For three of these subjects (Social Studies, History, and Religious

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper was collected by Dr Michelle Attard Tonna and the author and formed part of the research project *Young migrant women in secondary education: Promoting understanding and mutual understanding through dialogue and exchange*. This Project was coordinated by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (Cyprus). The Euro-Mediterranean Centre of Educational Research (Malta) was a partner organisation in this research project, together with other partner organisations from Spain, United Kingdom and Greece. The Project was funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals of the European Commission. Professor Simone Galea (University of Malta) coordinated the research carried out in Malta. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intpract/young-migrant-women-in-secondary-education-promoting-integration-and-mutual-understanding-through-dialogue-and-exchange>

Knowledge) students could choose to take the examination anyway, in English. Teachers reported that, generally, 2 to 4 migrant students in each class missed lessons. There was no official strategy across state schools on how to occupy the students who opted out of these lessons, which could amount to six hours or even more every week, but in the schools where the research was conducted, most of the migrant students remained in the classroom with the rest of their peers, engaged in some other activity (not set by the teacher/school). At the time of the data collection there was a “lack of specific policies regarding access to education for migrant students” (Galea et al., 2011, p. 107).

The questions asked to the informants formed part of a wider research project aimed at finding out the needs and experiences of young migrant women in secondary schools (see Footnote 1). During the interview, the migrant students were asked in which language they communicated at school with their teachers and their friends, whether they faced any challenges to communicate in Maltese and English, and how their peers reacted to them. They were also asked about their socialising experiences at school. The questions to the teachers were about how students interacted within the multiethnic environment of the school and how students coped with the challenges regarding language. The one-to-one interviews were conducted in School A and School B in a private setting. The data analysis focuses on power issues and dynamics involved in what the informants recounted. Thematic analysis was used to organise and interpret the data, by drawing out connections and inconsistencies from the corpus of data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Such an analytical method is useful for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). This approach “considered a method in its own right” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 4) is based on thematic coding that was undertaken after the initial patterns were noted. The authors identified three themes which emerged from both teachers’ and students’ responses; namely (i) deficiency in terms of language skills and proficiency (i) students’ interactions based on language (iii) students’ and teachers’ attempts at bridging language barriers. Aspects of the dynamics of power as they play out among students underlie the discussion of these three themes. Although each theme is outlined in a separate section in the Findings, a number of sub-themes are relevant to more than one of these three main themes. For each theme the findings from the students’ interviews are reported first, followed by the reporting of data emanating from the teachers’ interviews. Findings common to both sets of participants are also presented.

The study is confronted by a number of limitations. The knowledge it generates is incomplete and cannot be generalised to large populations of migrant students. There is the possibility that the study presents partial views of the informants’ perspectives and their experiences at school, due to the complex nature of personal experiences shaped by subjectivities that are constantly changing. Since the voices of the Maltese students are not represented in this study, the inquiry is based solely on perspectives viewed from the lens of migrant students and Maltese teachers. Nevertheless, the study elucidates how the research process itself can contribute to understanding the making of power relations among students.

## Findings

### A “Deficiency” Label

Most of the experiences concerning language were described as challenging by the migrant students and their teachers from both schools. Those students who could converse well in English stated that they were in a better position and that their proficiency in English initially helped them to integrate in the school community, until they eventually also learnt some

basic words in Maltese. For some migrant girls, learning English had been easier than for others because of the support they found from home and friends, and also because they were exposed to the language before travelling to Malta. Yet, for some others, their level of English proficiency was in most cases not adequate enough to help them communicate and follow lessons. The majority of migrant students who were interviewed stated that they were not conversant in English and Maltese before they travelled to Malta. A considerable number of them revealed that they had difficulties, of varying degrees, in learning both languages. They felt that they had no option other than learning them, if they wanted to cope with their new way of life at school. Language difficulties were most profoundly felt during their initial school experience in Malta, especially if they were not supported by the school and the few words they would have learnt were not sufficient to help them communicate.

Another barrier concerned examinations. The aspirations of some of the migrant girls were mingled with fear of not doing well. They stated that the language issue added more pressure during examinations, as they felt they could not perform to the maximum, due to problems in understanding the lesson notes and communicating their answers. This resulted in a certain degree of parental pressure:

**Researcher:** Ok... And why do you hate exams?

**Betty:** Because I have to study, and if I don't pass my mother will say something.

**Researcher:** She will be angry maybe if you don't pass.

**Betty:** Yes.

Students of School A referred to the hierarchical position held by the English and Maltese languages. Learning Maltese was not considered by a number of migrant students as enhancing the prospects of career opportunities, especially if they knew that they were not going to remain in Malta. This may be due to the fact that English is widely-spoken globally and can enable young people to travel and look for further opportunities abroad, while Maltese is limited to Malta and the Maltese community. Maltese students also have better career prospects in Malta if they do well in English. For migrant students learning Maltese only served their temporary need to integrate within the student community.

A number of migrant girls from both schools found it easier to learn Maltese than English, as this was spoken more frequently at school. They said that they learnt Maltese because their friends only spoke this language, so they felt it was necessary to learn it. Language was therefore considered instrumental in the formation of friendships. Existing similarities between Maltese and Arabic, both Semitic languages, made it easier for some students from Morocco to speak fluent Maltese. A number of migrant girls said that they were determined to learn Maltese. Rather than feeling discouraged by a foreign language, these girls took up the challenge of trying to converse in Maltese. Yet, within their school context, a double difficulty resulted because, although lessons were delivered in Maltese, the textbooks, assignments and examinations of some subjects like Mathematics and Science were set in English.

The migrant students in general were described by the teachers as being in need of more attention in class than the Maltese students. These teachers pertaining to both schools acknowledged that the language difficulties of these migrant girls did not inherently stem from themselves, but from their situation as a result of moving into a new country where the spoken language was foreign to them. The teachers framed some of the migrant students as



“weak” and a “deficiency label” was attached to them, because of their language difficulties. In School B a specialised class had also been set up so that migrant students could learn basic skills in numeracy and literacy in English and Maltese, so they could catch up with the rest of their peers. This provision confirms that the migrant girls were also finding difficulties in other areas of study because of their difficulty in understanding the language used to teach these subjects. The teachers of both schools said that those students, who did not follow lessons and remained in class were more likely to get bored and disrupt their peers. The need to regulate these behaviours was accentuated by the teachers. The students’ limited participation might have compelled them to assume forms of passive resistance. This could have involved challenging the expectations of their peers and teachers and opting for alternative experiences through their “disruptive behaviour”. Migrant students who were proficient in English were not reported by teachers as being part of the disruptive group.

### **Feeling Left Out**

Despite efforts by the school to facilitate language acquisition, language difficulties were still interpreted by the migrant students as constituting one of the major hurdles they faced to communicate and make friends. Such difficulties were in turn impacting on the friendship networks developing among these migrant girls. This is because getting to know new people at school tended to follow a common pattern for most of them. They reported that initially, when they were new to the school, a number of Maltese students approached them because they were curious and wanted to find out where they were coming from, and what background they had. This interest in the migrant girls was generated precisely because they were foreign and hence, “different”. However, as the girls claimed, once the novelty wore off, Maltese students quickly lost interest and returned to their previous friendship groups. Consequently, the migrant girls mostly tended to befriend those girls who either ranged from their own country of origin, or who were sympathetic enough to speak in English with them and help them communicate.

A number of migrant students from both schools reported feeling left out of some peer groups. A couple of racialisation episodes occurring in School B were even reported by the migrant students. These were related mostly to overt feelings of resentment from Maltese students towards them, and, in particular a bullying incident involving a migrant girl, who was not proficient in Maltese. Teasing about ways of speaking and one’s accent was also reported. A number of Maltese students regarded the migrant girls as innately incapable of communicating and eventually they were perceived as educationally deficient by them also and not only by teachers. In these situations, stereotypical judgements arose from perceived identities attached to the types of language use. Such incidents demonstrate that the school environment did not always prove to be receptive to the diversity that these girls offered.

**Dalisay:** Em the first day, em, it’s em, let’s say it’s difficult, em because the others sometimes they forget that I’m there and they used to speak in Maltese, so I need to always say that I’m there ...

**Researcher:** Because otherwise you don’t understand anything.

**Dalisay:** Ehe ... So I used to raise my hand and say I don’t understand it...They used to speak in Maltese and then the students used to speak in English ... and then when the students used to speak again in Maltese and I don’t understand them again ....

**Researcher:** And now? Has something changed?

**Dalisay:** Ehe ... Now I understand a little bit in Maltese because I live in Malta.

Teachers' repeated concerns revolved around a "language barrier" identified as one of the obstacles which hindered the integration of migrant students at school. The teachers interviewed claimed that simply following lessons tended to be problematic for some migrant students and that consequently classroom interaction was limited. The teachers reported that a number of Maltese students felt frustrated when their teachers spoke in English to the migrant students, and they complained about it. Some of the Maltese students were not so keen to switch to English during lessons or when speaking to the migrant students. They insisted on not speaking in English:

Because sometimes the Maltese, they are scared or they don't like to speak in English ... not all of them, but you will find a few. They say, do I have to speak in English because of her? She should learn Maltese. (Ms Puli, School A)

### **Traversing "Language Barriers"**

Language barriers were tackled in different ways by students and teachers. A number of Maltese and migrant students stated that they translated to each other during friendly conversations occurring outside the classroom. Collaboration and sharing of ideas also took place during lessons. A migrant girl from Serbia said that Maltese girls were curious to know and learn a few words of her native language. The ways that teachers traversed "language barriers" were fraught with challenges. The teachers of both schools emphasised that they were often required to prepare supplementary material to replace the textbooks, and give additional support to migrant students after the lesson. A number of teachers from both schools reiterated that they were not trained to address linguistic diversities, or how to plan and create resources and deal with "language problems". In order to facilitate communication and learning, teachers stated that they tended to code-switch between both languages. Code-switching emerges from interaction and is "an alternation in the form of communication that signals a context in which the linguistic contribution can be understood" (Nilep, 2006, p. 17). The teachers reported that having to code-switch all the time and repeat what they or the students had said was very time-consuming and tiring. It is difficult to know the exact nature of codes prior to interaction (Nilep, 2006), as codes occur spontaneously and are made relevant by the people who engage with them. Despite these efforts, divisive factors amongst students still operated. Some of the teachers tended to diversify among Maltese and migrant girls. One of the teachers of School A referred to Maltese students as "our students" and as "my students", without making the same reference to the migrant girls. Such remarks could foster a sense of otherness and polarisation.

Despite the minor antagonisms arising from ethnicity and language use, present among students, the teachers of both schools reported that there were numerous instances during classroom interactions when migrants were not perceived as being fundamentally different from Maltese students. The authors observed that there was evidence of students' peer circles made up of both Maltese and migrant students within the same groups (Galea et al., 2011). The importance of such groups was highlighted by both teachers and students interviewed. These exchanges were generally encouraged by teachers:

I encourage the foreign students to try em, use some words from their own language, I would try to learn them myself as well and I would try to repeat the words of the language of their country, their country of origin, to the Maltese. And in this way we would be sharing amongst us. So, for instance, a word which means a particular something, ok, we Maltese would tell the foreign students how we say it in Maltese, and then they would tell us how they say it

in their own language and in this way we would be sharing... So I think it is a very nice thing. (Mr Falzon, School B)

This mutual exchange was possible in spite of the divergent linguistic abilities of students, located within the multiethnic classroom. Mr Falzon encouraged initiatives on the part of teachers to bring students together and support them by appreciating diversity and multicultural identities. He made it clear that migrant students in general, were not particularly prone to being marginalised and isolated, because they were capable of making their way through the school's social networks and that gradually, they were capable of mastering skills in the new languages that could help them form relations at school. Some migrant students were described by their teachers as being extremely keen to follow lessons, as being "highly motivated", "competent" and "fast learners", who considered learning English an advantage and an academic achievement which could help them communicate better with their teachers and peers. These students assumed a certain degree of responsibility for their own learning and some got better grades than Maltese students. Their endeavours to do well at school might have been directed towards asserting their own importance and show that they were more than "just" any other student. Despite their initial lack of knowledge about Maltese culture and traditions, a number of migrant students were described by teachers as being capable of helping Maltese students with school work, especially those who were struggling with learning the English language. Migrant students who were more fluent in English than the Maltese students, like the Canadian students for example, were considered an asset to the latter by teachers, in regards to the learning of English. These constituted only a minority of migrant students, but in any case, they were regarded as facilitators in the teaching of English:

For the Maltese students this could be a wonderful opportunity to ... listen to English because English is important. So for these foreign students who communicate well in English ... they are offering this opportunity ... they will increase em the English speaking skills. (Mr Falzon, School B)

Mr Falzon emphasised that for both Maltese and migrant students, learning English and Maltese could offer them ways to assert their individuality, while also interacting with each other in positive ways. He emphasised that learning both languages enables students to form part of the school community and also assert who they are. In this way socialization and individualization support each other.

### **Discussion**

The adaptation of migrant students at school in their host country entailed a multi-layered process marked at times by a sense of discontinuity and by a series of disjunctures. The transition entailed becoming familiar with a new educational system that presented them with the possibility of learning new languages and exploring new avenues for learning in this regard. No particular differences related to the power dynamics operating amongst students were found between the two schools. Migrant students in both schools faced challenges related to communication, and in both schools Maltese students needed to adapt to the presence of migrant students. In general, the necessity to learn and speak Maltese and English forced the migrant students to see themselves through the school community's representations. The indication that more attention and visibility by migrant students were desired, presumably in order to better grasp what was being said in class, could perhaps have stemmed from the need to feel part of the class. In the case of Dalisay, "forgetting that she is

there” might imply that there could have been students dominated by isolation, marginalisation, voicelessness, non-representation and even powerlessness. In other educational institutions in Malta girls feel the need to share their feelings of shyness and loneliness with each other and together reflect on their perceived lack of self-esteem (Cassar, 2013). For Dalisay and some other migrant students, feelings related to being ignored and left out could have possibly operated as a means of control on the part of the dominant culture, since “solitude is the primary condition of total submission” (Foucault, 1995, p. 237). Alternatively, for Dalisay the opposite could have been the case; namely that minimal control was being exerted over her learning. People inside institutions are subjected to surveillance and to the “gaze” (Foucault, 1995) by those who assume a position of power over them. From this perspective the subjects are constructed as objects of power. In the everyday life inside institutions “inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is everywhere” (Foucault, 1977, p. 195). In the case of Dalisay, it seemed that the “gaze” was not part of the standards of normality. The “gaze” seemed to be lacking in some instances, and as a result she hinted that she felt insignificant, and the need to assert her presence seemed to have been felt. Students and teachers could have operated their own forms of “gazing” amongst each other, by selecting what they considered as more worthy of attention.

In a number of instances, boundary maintenance amongst students resulted from their differences related to language and from their diverse school experiences. This defined the migrant students as “them” in comparison to “the rest of the school community”. Although both schools were driven by an ethos which boasted of the ability to celebrate different ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, the migrant girls reported incidents which suggest that some of the Maltese students, and some teachers, were not conscious of the benefits migrant girls could bring to school. Migrant students who were excused from following certain lessons could have been disadvantaged when compared to their peers. Although being exempted might have put less strain on the migrant students, it could have promoted segregation and exclusion. Being allowed to miss lessons might have sabotaged migrant students’ entitlement for a full sense of belonging in class by being made invisible. It could have offered them a temporary escape from the school’s rigid routine, or it might have alienated them from learning. This arrangement might not have always worked in their best interest, because it could have created power differences amongst students, based on their linguistic skills or lack of them. Labels that described migrant students as being “academically weak” could also have generated power differences among students based on how they were classified according to their linguistic abilities. Power results from its “overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault, 1995, p. 27). The study highlights the tensions some of the migrant girls experienced as they sought to challenge the labelling, which constructed them in “deficit” terms because of their lack of proficiency in the host country language/s. Other research conducted within the Maltese education system which explored the degree of integration of “third country” students suggests that communication problems did not merely result from language issues, but were embedded in dynamics involving students’ individual personality and subjectivities (Falzon et al., 2012, p. 38).

A number of migrant girls did not seem to be affected by negative sentiments surrounding them. Rather than victimising themselves, they claimed spaces for themselves within the school community. In general, as they introduced and disclosed aspects of their migrant self to the authors, they did not accentuate feelings of fear, shame, anxiety and embarrassment but were positive and appreciative of the cooperation they found within the school. They reiterated that rather than being indifferent to their needs, Maltese students showed empathy

and strove to communicate in English in order to help them integrate and adjust better, and this eased their transition into the new school. These positive affirmations could have resulted from a number of factors such as their personal perspectives, their resilient personality and from their sense of obligation and gratitude towards the host country. Although in general migrant students were constricted by the limitations of language, they demonstrated that this did not signify some form of incapacity to speak, learn and perform well in class and in the schools' social environment. Some of the migrant and Maltese students' attempts at building peer relationships at school however seemed to have been affected by differences in language proficiency. These seemed strong and feasible in some instances and somewhat "messy" in others.

In general, the desire of migrant and Maltese students to mix together and share commonalities was somewhat evident. Efforts to overcome "language barriers" within peer circles and students' adaptation within them could have involved a search for belonging. From this perspective, the authors feel uneasy to locate the migrant students as "powerless" and the Maltese as "dominant", because both struggled with language issues, and both were subjected to an overwhelming reliance on British textbooks (Sultana, 1997). None of the migrant students said that they exclude Maltese students from their peer groups. Nevertheless, it could have been possible that a number of Maltese students felt inferior to the migrants and therefore positioning the former as "superior" would be misleading. A number of migrant girls who were more proficient speakers of English than their Maltese peers, could have felt silenced and isolated, not because their linguistic skills in Maltese were not effectively developed but rather because of their advanced proficiency in English. Differences in language proficiency therefore could function as means through which collaboration and friendship among students could be fostered, but it could also entail power practices based on rivalry. Betty's concerns about examinations draw attention to another issue that could have instigated competition among students. Examination results could play a role in establishing or undermining power amongst students. Those who performed well in examinations as a result of their reading and writing skills, could have been ascribed a privileged status by their peers and teachers. Their perceived superior position could even jeopardise those who struggled to do well.

The strategy to befriend peers who spoke the same language might initially have been functional, as it could have provided the necessary support needed by the majority of the migrant students. Yet, it might have inhibited the same students from attempting to learn the new language and from integrating within the Maltese student community. This could have eventually contributed to their marginalisation. Maltese girls who possessed limited proficiency in English could have equally felt excluded and at a disadvantage. The objection by a number of Maltese students to speak in English might have resulted from a sense of uneasiness on their part. They might have felt estranged from the English language or they might have resisted it, because of its association with the middle class. The "fear" of Maltese students to speak in English, mentioned by Ms Puli could have been linked to their perceived incompetency to speak a foreign language in which they were not fluent. Being faced with their own incapability of interacting with the migrant students could have positioned the Maltese students as inferior. Their insistence to speak solely in Maltese could also reflect their preference to undermine the English language, even at the cost of distancing themselves from linguistically diverse students.

Improvements in both Maltese and migrant students' proficiency in the foreign languages they learn at school could enable shifts in their quality of peer relationships. Power relations

within educational institutions are dynamic, involving power practices that make and shape reality. Power shifts from one entity to another due to its “fluid” nature (Foucault, 1972). Other changes in the everyday life of the school, brought about by events such as examinations, could also enable shifts in power. Examinations are central to the techniques that render students objects of power and classify their abilities in ways that could contribute to their marginalisation and subversion (Foucault, 1977). A system of assessments, grading and examinations “establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them” (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). Therefore, it is apparent that examinations impose a compulsory visibility by holding subjects in a “mechanism of objectification” (Foucault, 1995, p. 187).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicate that schools could benefit from the creation of learning communities which accommodate diversity and strive towards cohesion and harmony. This could be accomplished by providing students with the required support and resources, rather than regard the needs of linguistically diverse students as a deficit, or worse still, as a difficulty which can distract the teacher from delivering lessons in an efficient manner. On a wider scale, the authors recommend the setting up of policies about the integration of migrant students by the European Union’s institutional bodies that accentuate diversity in educational processes. The acknowledgement of students’ cultural differences is not enough. Teachers require the possession of strategies and skills to employ students’ socio-cultural knowledge in the classroom (Lee & Quijada Coercer, 2010). School textbooks and other curricular material could serve as a tool to reflect a multicultural society. When representations of migrants are distorted or made to be relatively absent, the chances of learning could be negatively affected. The findings of the study suggest that although some teachers interrogated students’ power relations that were present in their multiethnic classrooms, they had no clear teaching strategies about how to draw on their students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their perceived competency as teachers was in general marked by a sense of ambivalence and bewilderment with respect to the multiethnic classes. Nevertheless, nearly all of them seemed to make a conscious effort to integrate all the students during lessons and most of them seemed to regard the linguistic abilities of their students as a form of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), irrespective of the level these were at.

The recommendations of the study point towards the need for strategies, based on adequate resources and strong parental involvement, which lead to educational opportunities that support pedagogical practices based on multiculturalism. It would also benefit students if the whole school community puts into practice its ethos regarding inclusion and demonstrates, in a practical manner, that migrant and native students can integrate within the school by becoming aware of each other’s struggles and achievements as a result of their language difficulties. There is not a single programme that could provide the best learning context for all learners (Hornberger, 1998) and optimal learning contexts can be defined only in terms of their specific circumstances. Enabling power to students in the multiethnic classroom entails respect for the different trajectories in which they would like to partake. Successful social and academic integration of migrant students of linguistic minority require spaces which recognise and develop shared power practices within the school. This implies pedagogical practices which are structurally embedded and tied to understandings about the effects of the dimensions of power. The authors therefore mitigate against school settings which equate educational opportunity with language proficiency, as this could compel migrant students to carry the full burden of adjusting to their learning conditions at school.

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