# A Paradigm Paralysis? Boys and Early Literacy Learning in Three Maltese State Schools

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**Abstract:** Within the global context of concern about 'boys' underachievement', this article highlights sections of my doctoral study where I investigated the reading and writing experiences of five- to six-year-old boys in three Maltese state schools. The purpose of this enquiry was not to solve the widely discussed phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' but rather to create new understandings related to the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' in a Maltese context through a mixed methods phenomenological research investigation. Young boys' voices, several stakeholders' perspectives and the lived experience of three groups of five- to six-year-old boys during schooled reading and writing practices were investigated through an online questionnaire, classroom observations, individual interviews, and focus groups. This article presents the core findings which suggest that the three main concepts explored were inclined to biased and constricted worldviews that resulted in the majority of the young boys experiencing undesirable reading and writing practices. Subsequently, the overall conclusion implies the risk of a 'paradigm paralysis' in the fields of gender, literacy, and early years education in the local context, and offers new conceptualisations towards an educational response.

**Keywords:** Boys' underachievement, early literacy, school readiness, mixed methods phenomenological research

## Introduction

Two key social targets in education are achieving equity in education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2007, 2014a, 2014b) and eliminating gender disparities in literacy attainment to ensure the development of a literate society (Education for All [EFA], 2006).

Nonetheless, rising political concerns and debates based on evidence related to (some) underachieving boys and (many) successful girls in literacy standards persist within several educational institutions and academic research worldwide (Cobb-Clark & Moschion, 2017; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Mifsud, Milton, Brooks & Hutchison, 2000a, 2000b; National Literacy Trust, 2012; Niklas & Schneider, 2012; OECD, 2002, 2003, 2010, 2014c). Conversely, research findings and statistics also show that some groups of boys are high achievers and tend to hold higher self-esteem to learning (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW], 1992; Francis, 2006).

In the Maltese islands, national and international statistics repeatedly show that boys are most likely to lag behind girls in literacy achievement (Borg, Falzon & Sammut, 1995; Mifsud et al., 2000a, 2000b; Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016). It can be argued that despite the global educational efforts to reach every child's full potential through quality education as from the earliest years (United Nations, 2015), there seems to be a hidden problem with some boys and literacy, and this is what made me want to investigate the phenomenon further. This publication will reveal some young boys' stories and make their voices heard behind the local statistics on the persistent gender gap in literacy attainment in Malta.

The article begins by outlining the study before I move on to presenting aspects of the literature based on three interlinking key concepts that underpin my work: boys' underachievement; early literacy learning; and school readiness. These three concepts were viewed through the lens of several theoretical perspectives including posthumanist, emancipatory, socio-cultural, experiential education and childhood theories, attuned to my epistemological stance of pragmatism in mixed methods phenomenological research. A brief explanation of the methodological approach and a snapshot of the significant key findings will follow.

**Purpose, context and research questions**

The main aim of the study was to create new understandings on the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' through young boys' lived reading and writing experiences in three Maltese state schools. Particularly, it aimed to delve deep and uncover the schooled reading and writing experiences of five- to six-year-old boys through: a questionnaire sent to all state school literacy and classroom educators

working in the early primary years sector (Years 1 and 2); observations in three Year 1 classrooms; focus groups with parents and boys; and interviews with three Heads of School, three Heads of Department (Literacy) and three Year 1 teachers. Fieldwork was conducted in three co-educational Maltese state schools situated in different geographical positions on the island, and reputed to have children coming from diverse backgrounds. The research questions were as follows:

Over-arching research question:

> *Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?*

The following sub-questions have guided the design of my enquiry:

> *What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?*
> *How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?*
> *What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?*

**'Boys' underachievement', literacy and the Maltese context**

This section briefly examines Maltese trends over the past several decades, discusses where the gender gap in literacy stands today and asks: "To what extent do males in Maltese schools 'underachieve' in their literacy acquisition?"

Borg et al. (1995) investigated the sex differences and achievement of 3460 pupils in the 11-plus examination conducted in Maltese schools. It resulted in girls outperforming boys in Maltese, English and Religion; however, the most marked differences were in the two languages. Similar statistical findings were identified through the first-ever Malta National Literacy Survey (MNLS) in March of 1999 (Mifsud et al., 2000b). Almost every child born in 1992 and

attending state, church and independent schools (4554 children; six- to seven-year-olds) participated in this study. The survey revealed a gender gap in literacy attainment (also evident in the pilot study in 1998) (Mifsud et al., 2000b). Girls scored incomparably higher than boys both in the English and also Maltese languages. Three years later, in 2002, the same National Literacy Survey was repeated with the same cohort of pupils who were then in Year 5 (Mifsud et al., 2004). Once again, in this second major study, girls outscored boys in both English and Maltese literacy tests. In addition to two National Literacy Surveys, Mifsud et al. (2004) reported a successful value-added study, which matched the data from the 1999 and 2002 surveys. The data matched amounted to 97% of the pupils involved in both surveys (4239 pupils from 96 schools in Malta; 2131 girls and 2108 boys). Maltese boys' and girls' progress throughout this span of time was parallel; however, the difference in attainment in favour of girls was retained. The gender gap did not widen but neither did it show signs of closure; boys attending primary schools were still falling behind girls, and the gap was not fading over time (Mifsud et al., 2004). This raises the question as to whether such findings impacted on stakeholders' perceptions and boys' early literacy learning in Maltese schools.

In 2009, the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] study results reported that from all participating countries, Malta had the widest gender gap in literacy achievement (MEDE, 2013a). The PISA of 2015 reported that girls outperformed boys in all 72 participating countries, and Maltese girls exceeded the mean reading score of Maltese boys by 42 score points (MEDE, 2015). The international issue of gender imbalance in educational achievement was also maintained in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [PIRLS] 2011 (MEDE, 2013a), where 3598 Maltese students participated comprising of almost all 10-year-old students in the country. Maltese girls outscored boys by 18 points in the English test and 25 points in the Maltese test (MEDE, 2013a). Malta placed 40th out of 50 participating countries in PIRLS 2016 (MEDE, 2016). Students fared significantly worse than the 2011 reading test and female students consistently outperformed male students in both reading processes and purposes (MEDE, 2016). The establishment of the National Literacy Agency, the engagement of Heads of Department (Literacy), literacy support teachers, the implementation of school literacy programmes, and introduction of Family Literacy Programmes were all aimed to develop further literacy provision on the islands - but when the gender gap and the 'underachieving' boys are concerned, the question

remains. Following the statistical evidence and efforts to eradicate the gender gap, it is still important to ask, "are all Maltese boys having a solid start to fulfil their potential as stated in one of the aims of the National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2012)?"

To date, there is no single explanation of why some boys lag behind in literacy attainment (Cobb-Clark & Moschion, 2017). The reasons for such differences are diverse and complex (Younger, Warrington & Williams, 1999). For example, Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert and Muspratt (2002) suggested that the situation can be explained in terms of neuroscientific studies, availability of role model in schools, socio-cultural and socio-economic circumstances and educational experience. The principles underlying theories behind gendered literacy differences need to be identified and connected to develop implications for classroom practice in the early years. The data presented is compelling in identifying gender as a critical variable to be considered in the teaching and learning of literacy skills. National and international test results highlight potential difficulties with the literacy competences of individual children, particularly some boys, however, their interpretations are not sufficiently reliable or useful for parents, educators and policymakers to act upon. Limited research has attempted to tap into the educational experiences of young boys in Maltese state schools in conjunction with the complex issue of gender differences in literacy attainment.

**Early Literacy Learning**

Literacy is the key to children's success in life, and a crucial indicator of their contribution to a literate society (EFA, 2006; Green, Peterson & Lewis, 2006; McPike, 1995). The early childhood years, from birth to age eight, have been established as a critical period for learning and literacy development (Bee, 1992; Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 1993; Willis, 1995). There are differing views of how literacy is defined and approached in the early years. On the one hand it is argued that literacy is narrowed down to the schooled practices that focus on "the ability to decode, encode, and make meanings using written text and symbols" (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p. 5, see also Bartlett, 2008), while on the other literacy embraces a holistic educational view that aims to contribute to the development of modern literate societies (Ahmed, 2011; Bonello, 2010; Carrington & Marsh, 2005; Davis, 2013; EFA, 2006; Kress, 2003; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Marsh et al., 2005; Roberts, 1995). A global literacy shift occurred

at a quick pace, however, the extent to which this shift is evident in a Maltese educational context and how young boys react to it is still to be discovered.

Effective literacy pedagogy is entrenched in research into how young children develop and learn (Cigman, 2014). In early years education there has been an emerging shift in the theoretical perspectives on children's learning, particularly in 21st century research (Nolan & Raban, 2015). This paradigm shift moved from the 'ages and stages' developmental perspective (Piaget, 1962; Steiner, 1996; and Montessori, 1967) to the view of the cooperative role of the adult as a co-constructor of learning and scaffolding learning in the child's Zone of Proximal Development while also valuing the social and cultural effect on the child's learning, more associated with Vygotsky (1978), but also with Bruner (1986) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theories and assumptions that are formed influence the thinking, beliefs and actions of all stakeholders in education, including educators in classrooms, on how young children learn (Raban et al., 2007). The question that needs to be asked is: "Which version of the theories concerning young children's learning has ECEC in Maltese state schools tended to draw on and how is this impacting boys and literacy learning?".

Several scholars claimed that play is the medium through which young children learn best (Cigman, 2014; Elias & Berk, 2002; Hornbeck, Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Hui, He & Ye, 2015; Nutbrown, 2014; Piaget, 1962; Rogers & Lapping, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Siegler, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002; Vygotsky, 1966). Nonetheless, recent research showed that early learning standards and achievement outcomes such as the worldwide evidence on the gender gap in literacy increased academic pressure and jeopardized the role of play in early learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Hall, 2005; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009; Nutbrown, 2018; Wohlwend, 2008; Wood & Atfield, 2005; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). For example, the use of workbooks, worksheets and rote drills during phonics reading instruction promotes the notion of 'ages and stages' to teach the identification of sounds and words to all children at the same time and in the same way, increasing the likelihood of producing a negative impact on their motivation and involvement in literacy instruction (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Turner, 1997; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman & Owocki, 2005). In conjunction, it has been recently reported that many children are experiencing a lack of writing enjoyment (Clark, C. & Teravainen, 2017). Schooled literacy practices that fail to recognise the importance of emergent

literacy will end up with young children performing reading and writing decontextualised tasks such as copying without authentic purpose (Cigman, 2014; Nutbrown, 2006). Such evidence has implications for how the existing literacy gender gap might be addressed, and for the teaching of reading and writing today and how this is impacting on young children's experiences of early literacy.

**School readiness**

The definition of 'school readiness' is presently underpinned by highly contrasting views in the literature, as this paper will demonstrate. Meisels (1999) and other scholars (Allen, 2001; Graue, 1993; Graue, 2006) define 'school readiness' under four major conceptualisations: "idealist/nativist", "empiricist/environmentalist", "social constructivist" and "interactionist", which will now be discussed briefly.

The *'idealist/nativist'* view portrays children as being ready for school when their level of development is ready thus eliminating the role of the environment in enhancing a child's readiness. The *'empiricist/environmentalist'* view of readiness is mostly determined by what children know (such as the alphabet, colours, and shapes), followed by their behaviour, including an ability to sit still. A *'social constructivist'* (Vygotsky, 1978) perspective sees school readiness in social and cultural terms, with the focus not on the child but more on the context in which the child operates; this depicts a child to be ready for one family or community and not the other. The *'interactionist'* perspective focuses on the child, the environment and the ongoing interaction between them to help all children nurture their positive dispositions to learn. This perspective portrays children as being ready to learn and supports the importance of early experiences and relationships between the school and the child (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). This view is also supported by several early childhood advocates, organisations and researchers (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years [PACEY], 2013; Shaul & Schwartz, 2014; UNICEF, 2010).

Contemporary issues of a cohesive understanding of 'school readiness' might promote the endurance of early literacy practices based on outdated traditional pedagogies (Britto, 2012). Young children's attitudes and dispositions towards learning, such as curiosity and perseverance, are important and these can only be promoted if schools and families look at children's preparedness for school not as a race but in a meaningful, holistic

way that meets their individual needs (Denton & Germino-Hausken, 2000). The diverging 'school readiness' perspectives discussed in this article reaffirm Whitebread and Bingham's (2011) contention that whoever rushes young children into the formal learning of literacy to get them 'ready for school' must be misguided.

The overall literature review presented in this article is underpinned by theoretical tensions, conflicting interpretations and debates that attempt to conceptualise 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' with particular focus on how reading and writing is approached in the early years, and 'school readiness' in the educational agenda. Ultimately, the philosophical ties that underpin this literature as a whole had important implications on my epistemological position and the choice of my research design as will be succinctly discussed in the next section.

**Methodology**

In an attempt to unpack the concept of the complex phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' within Maltese early years education, the study employed the 'convergent parallel' mixed method design as a basis for Mixed Methods Phenomenological Research [MMPR] (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The theoretical freedom in the ontological and epistemological stance I adopted within this MMPR study - underpinned by pragmatism and also influenced by posthumanism - proved vital in producing fresh knowledge and understandings without the restrictions of 'pure' paradigms that could have silenced voices that supported me in achieving more comprehensive answers to my questions.

An online questionnaire was sent to all early primary classroom teachers and literacy teachers (complementary teachers and literacy support teachers) who work with children in the early primary grades of a Maltese state school (Years 1 and 2; children aged five to seven years) to set the scene and understand the bigger picture better. In adopting a phenomenological approach through data collected from three Maltese state schools, I endeavoured to "discern the essence of participants' lived experiences" in relation to boys and their reading and writing experiences in the first year of compulsory schooling following two years of Kindergarten (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018, p. 35). Phenomenological data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quantitative data were also obtained by using the five-level descriptors of the

Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994), a tool for systematic classroom observation through direct observation to provide more detailed and precise findings, minimise researchers' bias, and increase the validity of boys' lived reading and writing experiences (Mayah & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Three Year 1 teachers (teaching five- to six-year-olds), three Heads of School, and three Heads of Department (Literacy) from each state school participated in individual interviews to allow for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions on 'boys' underachievement', and their individual experiences with young boys, reading and writing throughout early primary school. For the same purpose, parents and their young boys in each of the three chosen classrooms were invited to take part in focus group meetings. Two focus groups were conducted in each school setting; one with five- to six-year-old boys and another with the parents of boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

The online questionnaire's close-ended responses were automatically analysed through the Google Forms document throughout the process of data collection. In this study, the observed boys' levels of involvement during schooled reading and writing practices and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were reduced to numeric counts to inform the rest of the quantitative and qualitative data (Bazeley, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leave, 2006). The qualitative data chosen was quantified as follows:

- Observations: scores were assigned to the theoretical model of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994) – five-level descriptors - and a rubric was developed to score qualitative responses on a five-point scale, i.e. the number of times each level of involvement appeared in the reading and writing activities observed.
- Three open-ended questions in the online questionnaire: manually counting the number of times a theme or code appears in the data using NVivo 11.

In 2006, Teddlie and Tashakkori referred to this process as 'conversion' and highly considered it as one of the design features in mixed methods research. Several themes emerged from the open-ended responses of the online questionnaire. Each theme was binarised by assigning a score of one or zero for each individual in the sample. The final set of statistical data was earmarked for transformation into Excel bar graphs for independent analysis, and later on for triangulation purposes during the final interpretation stage. Qualitative data were analysed through Thematic Analysis [TA] (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016). Individual interviews and focus group

discussions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The computer software programme, NVivo 11, was then used to assist with categorising, coding, and data storage. The emergent patterns and themes were directed by the data - inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) - these were related to the conceptual ground of the study, and consequently, potential themes developed. After the first two distinct points of the analysis procedure were finalised, I worked to merge and interpret the final results to answer my main research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Substantiating the overall findings acquired through the research process with the literature relevant to the conceptual grounds of my study allowed for the creation of new and insightful understandings concerning young boys and literacy in Malta (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Denscombe, 2008; Hanson, 2008).

**Overall key finding: A paradigm paralysis?**

The analysis in this article is based on the core findings of the study concerned which lie in the combination of the several methods used to respond to the three subsidiary research questions and answer the overarching research question in the most accurate way possible: *Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?*

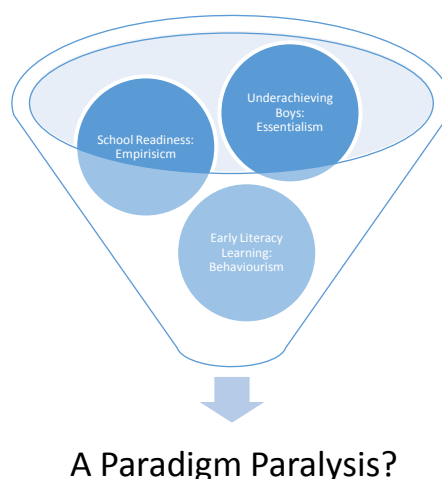Boys and early literacy learning in three Maltese state schools



**Figure 1. Paradigms that underpin the merged findings concerning the conceptual ground of my study**

Figure 1 shows how the paradigms that underpin the merged findings relate to each of the three concepts that framed this study, and how these are currently influencing some boys and literacy learning in Maltese early primary schools.

Firstly, findings revealed new understandings of the concept of boys' underachievement, and the need for the rethinking of the concept rather than trying to find the one solution to eradicate the problem. This does not mean that the findings found the solution to the problem of the gender gap in literacy. Instead, it helped in creating new dimensions in ways we could reposition the boys and literacy agenda from an ECEC perspective. Evidence provided further insight into how internalized assumptions based on socio-historical constructions of gender and social class and the way literacy is perceived by different stakeholders have shaped, and plausibly continue to shape, the experiences of young boys' early literacy learning in three Maltese state schools, and their identity position as un/successful readers and writers. Merged findings revealed conflicting interpretations and a significant degree of essentialist worldviews in the way the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is conceptualised. This may have implications on the existing and future literacy learning of young boys, if these are adopted as acceptable explanations to educators and other professionals in our education system (Alloway et al., 2002; Fine, 2010; Hempel-Jorgensen, Cremin, Harris & Chamberlain, 2017; Langford, 2010; Youdell, 2004). The key finding here was that, as a reaction to the hegemonic intellectual discourse on 'boys' underachievement', participants often produced essentialist accounts; i.e., all boys or boys only. It can be argued that such popular hegemonic accounts, limited explanations of 'boys' underachievement', and the exposed tensions and never-ending debates, may serve as the driving force needed for more nuanced understandings, inquiry and change in the way boys are presently being conceptualised within the field of early literacy learning in a Maltese context.

Secondly, by tracing back to boys and literacy learning in the early primary years, this study revealed that literacy tends to be narrowly defined in early years educational practice within Maltese state schools (Anning 2003; Marsh, 2003; Pahl, 2002; Luke & Luke, 2001). While several stakeholders showed that they are aware of broader definitions that embrace the importance of play, emergent literacy, multimodal literacies, and a balanced literacy approach in ECEC, such practice was minimally observed. This was replaced by teacher-

led, implementation of phonics programmes that promoted drilling and formal instruction to teach conventional reading and writing underpinned by behaviourist theory where young children are viewed as passive learners (Figure 2). Similar results to the ones presented in Figure 2 were obtained from observations conducted in the other two Year 1 classes situated in different Maltese state schools.
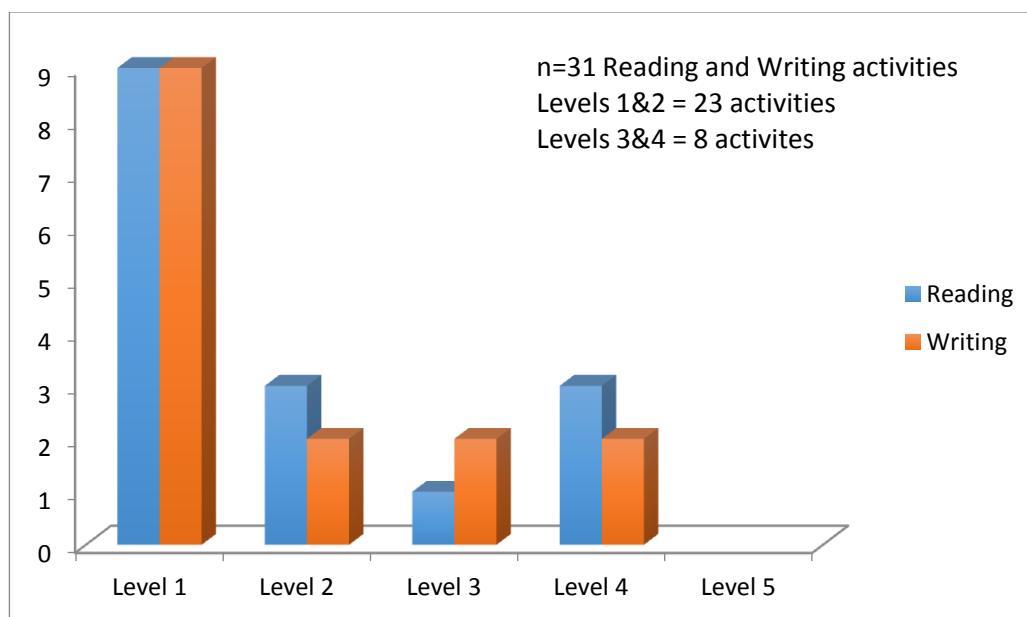


**Figure 2. The level of involvement in learning of five- to six-year-old boys during reading and writing practices in one of the three Year 1 classrooms (Level 1 being the lowest).**

Moreover, most of the five- to six-year-old boys spoke of how the existing, formal approach impacted negatively on their involvement in learning and attitudes toward schooled reading and writing practices:

> *Jien niddejjaq noqgħod nagħmel dawk il-kliem kollha, noqogħdu nitkellmu /s/ /o/ /d, u niddejqu ngħidu l-ittri aħna.*
> *I get bored doing all those words, we have to say /s/ /o/ /d, and we get bored saying the letters. (Mark)*

> *Għax għajnejja, ma nistax il-ħin kollu nħares lejn dak (interactive whiteboard), inħossni qisni norqod imma hekk.*
> *Because my eyes, I cannot look at that (interactive whiteboard) all the time; I feel like I'm sleepy but that's the way it is (pointing at the interactive whiteboard on the picture). (Tim)*

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*Jien niddejjaq għax għandna bżonn ngħidu l-ittri u nċapċpu. Nilħaq ngħejja.*
*I get bored because we have to say the letters and clap. I get tired. (Lee)*

*I feel sad doing that because I don't like writing much. There are lots of letters, lots of different letters. I like letters but only one letter (pointing at the sad face on his card). (Luca, English first language)*

*Non mi piace perché ci sono tre, e non ci riesco a farle tutte.*
*I don't like it because there are three lines and I don't manage to write them all. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)*

*Ma tantx ħadt gost nagħmilhom għax idejja juġgħuni.*
*I did not really enjoy doing them because my hands hurt. (Mark)*

*Jien ma nħobbx nikteb.*
*I don't like to write. (Tim)*

Similarly, Hempel-Jorgensen et al. (2017) found that children's desire to read was also affected by teachers' perceptions of reading as a technical skill which influenced their practices and dismissed the significance of reading as a meaning-making experience. In a study of three high school boys and their encounters with literacy, Sarroub and Pernicek (2016) concluded that narrow definitions of literacy, the meaning of being literate, frustration with school academic structures, relationships at home, and undesirable experiences with teachers, functioned together and resulted in struggles with reading. Consequently, the overall evidence suggests that a strong case may and should be made for a rollback in formalised education in the early years of Maltese primary state schools. This claim is supported by Bodrova and Leong (2007) in reminding us that the Vygotskian approach helps us to view literacy in a broader context:

> *… this approach shows us why the dropping down of the first-grade curriculum into kindergarten and preschool will be doomed to failure, if all we do is make sure that children memorise their letters or practice their phonemic awareness. (p. 199)*

Thirdly, merged findings revealed a common 'rush' to prepare 'unready' five-to six-year-old boys to the 'race' of formal schooling from Kindergarten to Year 1 and by memorising letter sounds and names, blending and decoding

text, writing letters in the correct formation, and spelling correctly both in the Maltese and English languages. Several stakeholders claimed that this created sharp transitions particularly for most young boys' early literacy learning between Kindergarten and Year 1. Literature shows that it is important to maintain smooth transitions and continuity in the curriculum between the different early years settings (Lombardi, 1992).

Consequently, merged findings concluded that most conceptualisations of school readiness within Maltese state schools were grounded in an empiricist view, where young boys were seen to be ready for school based on what they *know* (letters sounds, decoding, use of literacy checklists, etc.) rather than being viewed as young male citizens who are all ready to learn. In contrast, the "interactionist" perspectives that are in line with the developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1952) portray the child as being ready to learn; thus, the focus shifts to the child and the interaction between the child and the environment, with the aim of nurturing all children's positive learning dispositions. Young children do not need to be measured against any school readiness standard at the same time as they all develop at a different pace (Woodhead & Oates, 2007).

Finally, in concluding the answer to the overarching question, the merged findings funneled down to questioning whether a 'paradigm paralysis' effect is restraining stakeholders and policymakers within the Maltese early years education system. It might be that the effect is strong enough to impede actions to be taken, rethink and reposition existing conceptualisations on 'underachieving boys', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness'. Findings show that a limited vision, mainly grounded in three positivist disciplines, is currently impacting negatively on most of the boys' attitudes and involvement with reading and writing in this enquiry, cheating them from developing their full potential as readers and writers in the most crucial years of literacy development (Bradbury, 2013; Early Years Matters, 2016; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). Research has proven that attitudes and beliefs of self-efficacy, self-concept and self-esteem in relation to the ability to learn are formed in the early years (Bandura 1992; Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoreson, 2002; Tickell, 2011). Facing this challenge might be key to introduce a new virtuous circle; one that embraces diversity and equity, and views young boys and girls as ready to learn and be nurtured into lifelong readers and writers.

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I would argue that the overall findings presented in this article are one example of what I am trying to convey within the argument of broadening views and shifting from a 'paradigm paralysis', if this is the case. It is sheer proof of what could be gained and learned when contentious concepts in education that might seem impossible to overcome are viewed in broader dimensions, and explored in an attempt to address old and new challenges for the benefit of our youngest citizens.

**Implications for policy and practice and considerations for future research**

These findings have important implications for policy related to ECEC and language and literacy learning of young children in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Existing 'hegemonic essentialism' and 'resistant essentialism' (Ferrando, 2012) that prevailed amongst stakeholders' claims on the group of 'boys' and literacy should be seen through a posthumanist and emancipatory lens to promote a dynamic literate world for all children in a Maltese context. Brooker (2005) suggested that "rethinking the characteristics we value in children would require us to rethink the entrenched cultural bias shown in our provision of learning" (p. 127). Perhaps, it is time to unsettle ourselves from comfortable hegemonic or change-resistant discourses and merely continue to pay lip service to what is fair and just. Instead, should we not move to a position where we try to actually provide a literate educational journey that is receptive and inclusive in its everyday practices?

Early learning is a highly integrated process that goes against a compartmentalised curricula where learning is subject-based (Bruner, 1986; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1962). The National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2012) for zero- to seven-year-olds in Malta promotes a curriculum that is based on child-centred pedagogy and an integrated approach that scaffolds young children's learning into higher levels of competence. As the findings presented show, this is not yet in place due to the present downward pressure of academics and literacy testing leading to an excessive focus on conventional reading and writing practices. I acknowledge that it might appear daunting for educators to take up the challenge and transform existing practices, influenced as they are by dominant gendered discourses, an excessive emphasis on high-stakes assessment and a formalised system based on prescriptive syllabi in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is always the possibility for capacity building through regular co-participative approaches within school contexts. Providing such opportunities may increase the space for teachers'

'creative learning conversations' (Chappell & Craft, 2011), reflexiveness and criticality to recognise the construction of their identities, pedagogical opportunities to think differently (Barbules & Berk, 1999) and to develop a better understanding in relation to gender and schooling (Pennycook, 2011). The deconstruction and critique (Surtees, 2008) of hegemonic discourses, the re-envisioning of the image of the early childhood teacher and teaching (Ryan & Grieshaber 2005; Moss, P., 2006) and the examination of the "effects of power" through reflective assignments (Sumsion, 2005, p. 196) may be further supported in pre-service ECEC programmes in Malta.

Moreover, the provision for capacity building within schools and reflective assignments within pre-service teacher training might empower qualified and student teachers to explore gender (Weaver-Hightower, 2003) and re-envision, resist and transfigure (Tan, 2009) existing unjust practices and policies also through the understanding of well-defined theoretical frameworks that foster the future development of literacy pedagogy, including 'creative pedagogy' (Jeffrey & Woods, 2009) and 'productive pedagogy' (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Lingard, 2005; Lingard et al., 2001). Such meaningful, collaborative, creative and playful pedagogies do not just aspire to raise attainment but also prioritise the quality of learning through imaginative and immersive play (Boden, 2004; Craft, 2001) that contribute to socially just outcomes and support both teacher and learner agency through a continuum of pedagogical strategies (Craft, 2010; Griffiths, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015; Jeffrey & Woods, 2009; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Marsh & Vasquez, 2012).
Correspondingly, schools must value children's literate identities (Marsh, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) and their home literacy practices where reading and writing experiences have shifted as a consequence of young digital 'natives' (Prensky, 2001) engagement with popular culture and digital texts (Bonello, 2010; Dyson, 1997, 2002; Marsh, 2003, 2007, 2010; Marsh & Millard, 2005; Marsh et al., 2005). Marsh (2007) argues that educational institutions need to respond to broader socio-cultural changes through new pedagogical approaches and a literacy curriculum that provides all children with meaningful opportunities "to develop the range of skills, knowledge and understanding that will become increasingly important to both employment and leisure in future years" (p. 279).

In addition, a change at a policy level is urgently required. There remains the need to standardise existing early childhood education policies (MEDE, 2006)

and specifically ensure that new literacies and the word 'play' are given their due significance in all areas of learning and development, including literacy. Policymakers must recognise research, as this study disclosed, that indicate that five- to six-year-olds seem to be developing negative views on reading and writing, and experiencing a lack of involvement in learning as a direct result of the existing start to formal education at the age of five. Consequently, it is vital that those responsible for any mandated circulars and policy documents related to ECEC, early literacy learning and transitions across the early years cycle in a Maltese context base their claims on evidence-based research (Bradbury et al., 2018) that preferably includes the voices of young children (Levy, 2011; Nutbrown, 2018).

Careful thought should be placed on the increasing performative pressures influenced by international comparison test results and policies dominated by assessment-driven paradigms. For example, the mandated use of developmental models such as the literacy checklists used in early primary schools in Maltese state schools (DQSE, 2009) might be giving more prominence to a short-term change of external measurable outcomes rather than the needed shift in pedagogical process. Such scripted instruction materials grounded in a cognitive psychological approach (Ehri, 1987, 1995) may further support the evident emphasis on decontextualised literacy practices, rigid curriculum content and the way literacy learning is being valued and taking place within the three Maltese early primary classrooms involved in this study. Such restrictive centralised measures might narrow children's learning and development due to an excessive focus on grades and ages and decrease their motivation towards literacy learning as they are regularly assessed against lists of specific descriptors as a homogenous group of learners (Mottram & Hall, 2009; Nutbrown, 1998).

Early literacy learning should be more about building connections between teachers and learners and developing language and literacy skills through an active and playful approach that allows all children to increase their level of participation, and develop at their own pace within an environment where educators support and scaffold their learning in meaningful ways (Levy, 2011; Marsh, 2005; Marsh & Vasques, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2007). Bradbury et al. (2018) argue that, "children are more than a score. They will learn successfully when we stop measuring their every step, and develop more rounded ways to ensure they receive the quality education they deserve" (p. 14). Findings presented in this article show that the focus on the

acquisition of set English and Maltese literacy skills in the early primary curriculum might be a great deal to ask of some five-year-old or six-year-old boys.

Outcomes further suggest that the quality of ECEC service provision (European Union, 2014) can and should be improved and consequently support the proposed implementation strategy for the early years in Malta that aims to address issues of monitoring and supporting quality provision, initial and on-going training (giving importance to: the implementation of the early years LOF 0-7 years; planning; and appropriate assessment and documentation of children's achievement), dissemination of information, transitions, governance, administration and organisation (Sollars, 2014). The successful implementation of such a strategy could be key to develop and strengthen the reassurance needed for a wider range of stakeholders, including administrators, policymakers, educators and parents to have one common shared vision and understanding about what constitutes quality ECEC, particularly within the fields of gender and literacy (MEDE, 2012). It might be the first step to changing mindsets and debunking constructed claims and assumptions on boys' underachievement, early literacy learning and school readiness.

Findings from the study concerned corroborate recommendations based on the need to think differently and collectively to allow for a unified openness to reimagine and overcome (Osgood, Scarlet & Giugni, 2015). Further studies can explore how existing reading and writing practices are impacting girls, and both boys and girls simultaneously, to create deeper understanding and challenge existing hegemonic discourses in the field of gender and literacy within a Maltese context. Moreover, having discovered how a more playful, balanced literacy approach, popular culture and technology positively impacted young boys' perceptions of reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools, further research must now look more closely at the role broader conceptualisations of literacy and more creative and socially just pedagogies play in young children's literacy learning. This information would provide policymakers, school management teams, educators and parents with further understanding on how reading and writing could be promoted to sustain the motivation and engagement of all young boys and girls in the early primary years that is key to learning. Finally, it is hoped that such findings inspire future research in ECEC that aims to access the voices of young children as a reminder to all that they also have the right to be heard in educational research.

**Conclusion**

Loris Malaguzzi stated that, "things about children and for children are only learnt from children" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 30). We need to remember that children become readers and writers not simply to master the skills involved: reading and writing need to include the social, emotional, linguistic, physical and personal development of all children. Moreover, such literacy needs to address the real life of young children outside school; only through this assembly can we improve boys' and girls' literacy, and to generate equitable opportunities that support them in becoming lifelong readers and writers. We need to foster exciting reading and writing experiences to avoid existing slumps in culturally and linguistically diverse boys' and girls' educational journeys.

Findings have shown that schools can be responsible for demotivating some young boys from becoming passionate about reading and writing. The suggested rethinking and repositioning of worldviews might be key to moving forward within the existing formal schooling system at the age of five, traditional schooled reading and writing practices, and several stakeholders' hegemonic discourses on boys before it is too late. Through a posthumanist, emancipatory and pragmatist lens, the study in question strengthened its theoretical foundations as it gave rise to "inconceivable ontological possibilities, which stretch our universe-centric perspective" that could be key to blurring "the boundaries" in the hope of bringing about the paradigm shift critical to the success of all children (Ferrando, 2012, p. 10). Education reformer and one of the initial philosophers of pragmatism, John Dewey (1916), succinctly captures the essential message of this thesis: "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow." The voices of most young boys in this study confirmed that after a century Dewey's (1916) words remain credible:

> *Jien ma niħux gost (nikkopja minn fuq l-interactive whiteboard għal fuq il-pitazz bir-rigi) għax inkella ngħejja nikteb ħafna, idejja tibda tuġgħani ħafna (jipponta lejn il-minkeb u l-pala ta' jdejh).*
>
> *I do not like it (copying from the interactive whiteboard to my lined copybook) because I get tired of writing too much, my hand hurts very much (pointing at elbow and palm of the hand).*
>
> (Mark, five- to six-year-old boy, Sawrella School)

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