Analysing the Learning and Social Experiences of Two Multicultural Children within a Kindergarten Setting

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Abstract: As Maltese schools are becoming multicultural this poses challenges to early years educators, the children, and their families. The main aim of this research is to analyse the social and learning experience of multicultural children within the same kindergarten context through a case study approach. Triangulation of data was carried out through interviews, questionnaires and sociograms. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the two kindergarten educators (KGEs) of the chosen children. Two sociograms were carried out in the two classrooms and questionnaires were collected from the four parents of the chosen children. From all the data gathered, three interrelating factors influenced the children’s learning and social experiences. These factors included influences within the child, the family environment, and the school environment. Through this research, the classroom environment was deemed to be the most important factor. This has implications towards teacher training, working in partnership with parents, and more awareness of policies.

Keywords: early years, multiculturalism, kindergarten education, case study approach.

Introduction

Multiculturalism is a complex phenomenon based on different dimensions: demographic, policy making and psychological, referring to the accepting or rejecting of the first two dimensions (Berry 2016). The introduction of multiculturalism and multicultural education began in the 1960s and 1970s in America (Goo 2018). The original plan of multicultural education was that children would be raised free from any irrational prejudices of their ancestors. Studies have shown that heterogeneous classrooms and schools aided in reducing radical problems and improving acceptance of diversity (McGlothlin and Killen 2010; Deeb et al. 2011; Juvonen, Kogachi and Graham 2018; Cefai et al. 2019; Skinner and Meltzoff 2019).

Since becoming a member of the EU in 2004, Malta’s population has become increasingly diverse. As stated by the NSO, by the end of 2018, 12% of the resident population were foreigners. This has brought a wave of changes in our country. The Education statistics of 2004 identified 40 countries from which pre-primary students in Maltese schools hailed (NSO, Malta 2010). During scholastic years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, Italian children were the largest group of foreign students from the EU in Malta’s primary and secondary schools and children from Libya were the largest group from non-EU countries (NSO, Malta 2021). Furthermore, State Schools in the South-eastern, Northern and Northern Harbour districts occupy the highest shares of migrant students, due to high numbers of migrants in such areas. These statistics show that Malta is becoming more multicultural.
In 2018, Maltese education shifted from a content-based to an outcomes-based system. This system includes the use of the Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment 2015) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, Ministry of Education and Employment 2012), being the main guidelines stipulating developmental milestones. Such curricular frameworks are aimed at helping teachers to monitor and evaluate the children’s development. The Learning areas and cross-curricular themes, within the NCF, state that the educator should learn about the histories, languages, cultures, and traditions of non-dominant groups within a classroom (p. 38). The NCF (2012) also encourages the need for accepting and living together with different values and cultures. According to Schembri (2020) the NCF is a response to the changes happening in Malta. Although these frameworks are in progress of becoming aligned with the acceleration of multiculturalism in the Maltese context, many still do not understand the implementation of these legislations. This research sets to find out if the current policies are aiding multiculturalism in the classroom.

There has been a drastic increase in migrant students in compulsory education, particularly in state schools. Cefai et al. (2019) found that children who were not proficient in Maltese or English were less likely to be included and suffer social exclusion, more likely to experience behavioural problems, and difficulties in accessing learning. They also claim that a substantial minority of children resist integration. Cefai and his colleagues recommend teacher training which gives educators the possibility to reflect on their own biases, become more competent in a linguistically diverse classroom, and additional resources to cater for language issues. Given these issues in the education system in Maltese, this research aims at finding out the social and learning experiences of multicultural children in the kindergarten classroom who cannot communicate in Maltese or English. Through triangulation of data from teachers’ interviews, parental questionnaires and sociograms developed from the drawings of the children, this research seeks to answer the question: What are the social and learning experiences of multicultural children in the kindergarten classroom who have problems communicating in the Maltese and English languages?

**Literature Review**

A fundamental right of children is to be exposed to a safe learning environment. Berry (2016) highlights the idea that cultural differences should be accepted, respected, and encouraged by all citizens. In agreement, Grech, Calleja and Cauchi (2010) stated that educators should foster an environment in which different cultures and ethnicities are recognised and cherished. Conversely, according to Cefai et al. (2019) in Malta, the sense of belonging to the school by non-Maltese and non-Catholic pupils is lacking and an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ ambience is present. This intergroup conflict (Tajfel and Turner 1979) has been studied in different communities and it shows the importance all humans give to group membership. Scholars such as Taylor (2020) are now looking at the child as an active participant of the community whereby through intergroup contact in schools the child might be able to effect change in the beliefs and attitudes of the community in an effort to improve social cohesion. Thus, not only the child benefits from a positive learning environment, but so does the whole community.

**Characteristics of the Child**

Some researchers consider temperament as an important characteristic of the child. Temperament relates to the behaviour traits that appear early and consistently and that later on develop into personality characteristics (Bates 1986). Thomas and Chess (1977) identified temperament based on nine dimensions: activity level, regularity of sleeping and eating patterns, initial reaction, adaptability, intensity of emotion, mood, distractibility, persistence and attention span, and sensory sensitivity. They explain the concept of the ‘goodness of
fit’ that the child’s environment needs to be attuned with the child’s temperament for a healthy adjustment. Thomas and Chess (1986) identified three temperamental patterns: easy, difficult and slow-to-warm-up temperament. Easy temperament is related to children who are rhythmic and have a predominantly positive mood and are quick to adapt to new situations. Difficult temperament relates to children who are arrhythmic, have a relatively negative mood and are slow to adapt. Slow-to-warm-up refers to children who have many initial withdrawal responses and are slow to adapt. Sometimes these children are labelled as shy.

Some research has shown that temperament predicts school adjustment and achievement. In a review on studies of temperament and school adjustment, Al-Hendawi (2013) research has been examining the role of temperament in education. In particular, academic achievement and school adjustment were among the first variables to be examined. Subsequently, several studies have documented associations between temperament and either academic achievement or school adjustment. However, no review of this literature has been conducted to obtain a clear understanding of the findings of existing research and the issues associated with them. Thus, the purpose of this article is to review the literature relating temperament to academic achievement and school adjustment. This review examined three areas in the study of temperament (a observed significant correlations in studies between children’s temperaments and school adjustment. She also found that studies reported a significant correlation between temperament, school adjustment and academic achievement. Negative emotionality (a dimension of temperament) was found to have a significant negative correlation with school adjustment. Students with negative emotionality have difficulties in regulating their emotions and this predicts challenges in the classroom and in building peer relationships. In her review Al-Hendawi also noted significant correlations between school achievement and two dimensions of temperament: persistence and activity level. A child who is attentive and persists on a task when faced with a challenge is more likely to obtain academic achievement. This shows that temperament is an important child characteristic that can impact academic adjustment and achievement.

Scholars have long debated the nature-nurture underpinnings of temperament. Initially researchers (Bates 1986; Goldsmith et al. 1987) agreed to the biological underpinnings of temperament, however later researchers also noted the impact of the environment over time. Research uncovered similar temperament across cultures. However, given the different value systems, e.g. in the view of punishment and impulse control in the US and China, as children develop and learn about expectations of their culture, Ahadi, Rothbart and Ye (1993) found different temperaments emerge. For instance, they found that in the US, children are generally low on Negative Affect whilst in China they are high on Negative Affect leading to more problems in socialisation. This argument confirms Mead’s (1972) theory that both nature and nurture impact behaviour.

Temperament can also affect the development of attachment and exploration. van den Boom (1994) found that temperament influences mother and child attachment since irritable infants seem to push the mothers away. However, when the mother received intervention, the child was classified as securely attached as the non-irritable infants. This suggests that if mothers can soothe their baby’s discomfort, then this can in turn affect the child’s temperament. Thus, although temperament seems to have a biological bases, the reaction of the main caregiver either due to culture or maternal skills, can affect the child’s social development and ability to explore and learn (Rothbart, Ahadi and Evans 2000).

**Home Environment**

The family structure impacts the cognitive and language development of the child. All family members are significant to the child’s education. The resource dilution hypothesis
suggests that the larger the number of siblings in the family, the less resources do parents have for each child (Downey 2001). This explains why children with fewer siblings do better at cognitive skills than children with more siblings. However, studies about the impact of older children on the younger’s child acquisition of the country’s language are inconclusive. Some studies found that having an older sibling was beneficial (Bridges and Hoff 2014). Other studies identify high cognitive sensitivity of the next-in-age older sibling as a moderator to the relationship between sibship size and vocabulary development (Prime et al. 2014). Large families do not lead to poor language development, but children show resilience if their siblings are sensitive to their cognitive needs.

Reading is one of the pillars grounding a good education. Studies found a positive correlation between independent reading and language acquisition, and a negative relationship between screen-time and language development, highlighting a biological basis for the importance of reading (Horowitz-Kraus and Hutton 2018). This shows the importance of reading to cognitive and language development. Palacios and her colleagues (2008) studied the difference between 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants in reading scores in early years. After controlling for race, maternal education, and other child, family, and school factors, they found that compared to 3rd generation children, 1st and 2nd generation improved reading scores at a much faster rate. The researchers called this ‘The Immigrant Paradox’ as they could not explain the outperformance. They suggest that the positive selection hypothesis might explain the drive for immigrants’ success. The positive selection hypothesis refers to advantages of migrants over non-migrants who make it successful in another country as opposed to the non-migrants who do not leave. Some of these advantages might be in their skills, motivation level, and ambition. The Immigrant Paradox and the positive selection hypothesis imply that immigrant children might have a driving force to work harder in overcoming obstacles to make it in a different country which gives them hope.

**Parental Involvement in Multicultural Schools**

Parents are a vital part in the building blocks towards a child’s education, especially in the early years. There are different opportunities and different levels of how parents can become involved in their children’s education: from helping with homework, attending parent-child conferences, volunteering in school, and fundraising to becoming researchers themselves and collaborating with the educators (Whalley 2017). In a tracer study, Whalley and her colleagues (2012) found that the cohort of children whose parents were strongly committed to their child’s education developed feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, they themselves were advocates for other children and their parents were their inspiration. Chan (2011) reports that families of immigrant children are very education-oriented and they might not be aware of the importance of play in the early years. They might demand more formal schooling (Bartlett 2015; Zhang et al. 2016). Vassallo (2014) interviewed 23 migrant parents who all highlighted the need for more dialogue and diverse means of communication since not all parents were digitally literate. He also found that migrant parents in Malta demand more academic work and more detailed feedback on the child’s academic progress. Whilst parents appreciated the adjustments that the school was making, they appealed for the importance of linguistic support. Vassallo calls for the need to teacher training programs that upgrade the teachers’ communication skills and suggests the hiring of translators, home-visits, and awareness of impediment to parental involvement.

Zilliacus and Holm (2009) stated that multicultural education is not just about acknowledging and including the student, but also about the teachers forming a good relationship with the children’s parents. However, some schools find it difficult to involve parents due to communication problems (Grech, Calleja and Cauchi 2010). In their study, heads of school
complained about the lack of experts and financial support in dealing with communication barriers to involve parents. Schools have called on the assistance of Jesuit Refugee Service, the services of complementary teachers, Learning Support Assistants, and initiatives such as the buddy system to ease the language barrier. Grech and colleagues also found that heads of school were making up for the lack of services by asking parents to translate frequently used words in their language for ease of access, using older children in the school as interpreters, and meeting with parents to establish if they want to celebrate their feasts. Some of the researchers’ recommendation are the provision of culture mediated services for parents, mentoring during HW time for parents who cannot help, employment of educators from different ethnic backgrounds, and offering language courses which are not part of remedial teaching.

**Teaching in a Multicultural Classroom**

Teacher training is very important when teaching within a kindergarten classroom. Zilliacus and Holm (2009) stated that teachers should be trained to reflect upon different cultures around them for a better teaching experience. Teachers develop coping methods such as code switching when possible to make sure that the children understand what is being taught as to create an inclusive environment (Vorster 2008). In a systematic review of 14 studies, Khalfaoui, García-Carrión and Villardón-Gallego (2021) found eight aspects that contribute to a positive climate in multicultural schools that can be grouped into two aspects: pedagogical and structural. Pedagogical practices refer to supportive teacher-student interactions, peer interactions and friendship, child engagement, teacher training on providing emotionally supportive environments and teacher-family trust-based relationships. Structural aspects include small peer groups and materials shared among children. These practices support learning and social development in multicultural early years schools.

Although there are various ways on how the KGE can create a sense of inclusion, sometimes there might be barriers which interfere in one’s learning experience. Vassallo (2019) believed teachers should act as mentors by empowering every individual’s abilities and being role models to their pupils. Wright (2020) found the need for a voice for students about their experience of multiculturalism which would lead to reducing prejudice and acceptance of the “other” in a multicultural society. Wright’s project was conducted with secondary-aged students in Malta. It would be interesting to find out how and if multicultural students in the early years are being given a voice or who is likely to act as their advocate.

The use of technology is the key to mitigate language barriers in the classroom. According to the social constructivist theory, through meaningful experiences, children construct their own meaning and this empowers them to learn a language (Vygotsky 1980; Kaufman 2004). Studies show that the use of technology for bilingual students improves engagement, independent learning and helps students build language confidence (Yunus et al. 2013; Maduabuchi and Emechebe 2016). Nonetheless, teachers need to be able to use technology to benefit the students. Darling-Aduana and Heinrich (2018)and intensity of use, of educational technology is associated with improved academic outcomes for English language learners (ELLs analysed the use of tablets in elementary schools for bilingual students and found higher maths and reading scores. For students who used it for three hours a week, the reading effect size continued to increase with intensity. The teachers’ technological skills played an important part in these results as they decided in which way and how often to use technology. Moreover, when the teachers were not skilled in technology use, they spent more time resolving technological issues than integrating technology with classroom practices. This sheds light on the importance of building teacher capacity in technology use and improving the teachers’ self-efficacy.
Teachers work best when they are supported by an inspiring leader with cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence refers to the ability to adapt to new cultures (Moua 2011). Research suggests that Head of Schools who have higher levels of cultural intelligence show higher levels of transformational leadership style which is vital to effectively manage multicultural environments (Keung and Rockinson-Szapkiw 2013). Darmanin (2020) suggests that the heads of Maltese schools need to move beyond feeling they have to accept different cultures and use Moua’s Cultural Intelligence Model of Acquiring, Building, Contemplating and Doing new strategies based on the cultural influences of the school they are leading.

**Methodology**

The aim of this research is to analyse the social and learning experience of multicultural children who experience problems to communicate in Maltese and English. A case study approach using triangulation of data was deemed the ideal approach for this research. According to Yin (2009), case studies are widely used when the research is trying to describe a phenomenon in its natural context. Adopting this approach led to an in-depth qualitative study about two multicultural children. Traditionally, direct observations and face-to-face interviews are used in qualitative research. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these methodologies were not feasible. Thus, the researchers adapted qualitative data collection tools to online interviews, indirect observations through the help of the KGEs and questionnaires.

**The Participants**

For this research, the participants chosen were selected using non-probability purposive sampling since the participants had to be multicultural and with a language barrier. To participate in this study, two sets of two multicultural children in two different classes were chosen. Table 1 summaries the demographics of the children under study. Although both Child 1 and Child 2 were born in Malta, neither of the children speaks Maltese or English. The parents of the children were chosen to take part to get a clearer picture of the children’s background and home environment. The two KGEs of the students, one in a school in the centre of Malta and one in the North were also asked to take part in this research to gain information about how they tailor their teaching methods to include these multicultural children within the classroom environment. This study was approved by the MCAST Research Ethics Committee (REC) and the MFED (Ministry of Education) Research Ethics Committee (MREC).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Years in Malta</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>KGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>KG 1</td>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>Libyan</td>
<td>KG 1</td>
<td>6-8 years</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>KG 1</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>KG 1</td>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
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*Table 1: Basic demographics of participants*

**Data Collection**

The parental questionnaires were distributed with the help of the KGE to the parents of the children and were returned in a self-addressed envelope to ensure confidentiality. Insight about the children’s background, home environment and the parents’ relationship
with the KGE was gathered from such questionnaires. The parental questionnaires were accompanied with a participation information sheet and a consent form for the parents and the children under their care to participate in this research. One questionnaire and consent form was translated into Italian to improve participants’ contribution.

Since direct observation of the children’s relationships could not take place due to the pandemic, so in-direction observation was carried out. A sociogram was constructed from information gathered within the classroom environment. To create the sociogram, the KGE asked the children to draw their best friend on a paper. Teacher 1 asked the students to draw a friend, whilst Teacher 2 asked the students to draw their friends. A sociogram was built with the findings to establish the social interactions between the chosen children and their classmates giving the researchers information about the social status of the students under study. Leung and Silberling (2006) called the sociogram a sociometry methodology used for “tracking the energy vectors of interpersonal relationships in a group” (p. 58). This sociometry is based on people making choice on who is friendly or not. In this case-study, the children will be making choices about the friendliness of the children in their classroom.

An online semi-structured interview was conducted separately with the KGEs. The teachers were provided with a participation information sheet and a consent form for this study. Research approval was also gained from the heads of school. Through the interview, the initiatives that the classroom teacher takes to include these children within the classroom routine were identified. Information about the children’s behaviour at school, teacher training, and awareness of policies was gathered.

Analysis

For this research, Thematic Analysis (TA) was used and we followed the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). The same researcher who carried out the interview transcribed, coded, and interpreted the data. Both interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and audio-visually recorded. During the first phase of TA, the researcher listened to the interviews to familiarise herself with the data, taking any necessary annotations. This helped her understand the experience of KGEs. In the second phase, the researcher transcribed and coded the interview in MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a software package used to analyse data. When both transcripts were coded, the main researcher re-read the coded interviews and re-coded as necessary. Upon completion, the codes were viewed through the MAXQDA creative coding tool which allowed the researchers to construct themes and subthemes visually using the codes that had been generated. This visualisation tool allowed the researchers to graphically display codes and group them into themes creating a visual map. Through this visual mapping, the researchers related the themes that were emerging to the sociogram, the questionnaires and the research question. In the next phase, segments of themes were retrieved from the data to check theme appropriateness. Data from the questionnaires were collated in tables to visualise and compare data from parents. The drawings from the students were coded into two sociograms, one for each class to determine the popularity of the chosen children. After this paper was written, this work was approved by the KGE participants to ensure they concur with the data interpretation of the reality of the children and their classroom presented here.

Results and Discussion

Major Findings

This study sought to explore the learning and social experiences of two sets of multicultural children in the same kindergarten environment. Through the data collection process, three
major factors that contribute to the learning and social experience of multicultural children emerged: characteristics of the child, the family environment, and the school environment. It was established that although the classroom environment is central to the learning and social experience of the child in kindergarten, the study shows the importance of the interaction between the family and the school environment, which is pivotal at this stage of the child's development. Also, it was found that although KGEs are equipped to exposing children to different languages, enhanced teacher training regarding multiculturism and technology use is needed. When it comes to parents’ relationships, a higher sense of community needs to be created. Lastly, the temperament of the child was not an important factor in determining the learning and social development of the children under study.

Analysis of Results

From the data collected, the social and learning experiences are both essential for children to develop holistically, especially since they are highly interrelated. It was established that the influences on the social and learning environment are based on different systems and levels that include the child, the family, and the school. These findings draw on the insights from Bronfenbrenner’s (1992) ecological systems theory that focuses on the interrelationship between the family and other nested ecological systems such as the school. Multicultural children do not exist in isolation, but they live in different systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The innermost level, microsystem, refers to the relationship of the child to their immediate surroundings – the family. The next context is the mesosystem which denotes an interaction between different microsystems, for instance the family and school, and shows how one microsystem will affect the other. The exosystem consists of remote social settings that can indirectly affect the child. For the immigrant child these could be the support network or broader society (Paat 2013). The macrosystem refers to values, cultural and religious beliefs, political ideologies, and laws of a society. According to Paat, the immigrant child is the least involved in the exosystem and macrosystem, thus the family of the immigrant child has a crucial role in the child’s development. Our study focused mainly on gathering information through the school which could be the reason why the theme of the school environment is central to our study. However, as can be seen from the analysis of the themes there is a lot of overlapping of the codes in the three themes, showing their interrelatedness. This interaction is depicted in Diagram 1.

Theme 1: The Child

Answers on the parental questionnaire indicated that Children 1, 3 and 4 seem to be easy children as they did not cry a lot when they were babies and they always enjoyed food. In contrast, Child 2 is considered as slow-to-warm-up as she did not cry when she was a baby but not always enjoyed food. The children's temperament affects the way that the children behave at school as Teacher 1 stated that Child 1 is very outgoing whilst Child 2 took her time to adapt to the classroom environment. This is in line with the research found on temperament as easy children are considered to be outgoing whilst slow-to-warm-up children tend to take their time to adapt to new environments (Al-Hendawi 2013).
Figure 1: The Interrelation of three themes

Temperament was not found to be linked to the child’s experience of the social and learning experience of multicultural children in this study. Teacher 1 believes that chosen Child 2’s siblings have taught her how to socialize with other children (Bridges and Hoff 2014). This contradicts the Resources Dilution Hypothesis (Downey 2001). From the interview carried out, it was established that the older siblings of Child 2 take the role of translators between the parents and the teacher. This shows that Child 2’s siblings are sensitive and willing to overcome this language barrier. They might be willing to help Child 2 to improve her English-speaking skills in the home environment, and so the cognitive sensitivity of the siblings is improving the social development of Child 2. Child 2’s family seem to be a good fit and they are impacting the child’s social development and ability to learn (Rothbart, Ahadi and Evans 2000). Considering Child 2 was the only child with a slow-to-warm-up temperament and also the only child with a sibling in this study, the function of temperament is inconclusive, and the role of siblings needs further investigation. This enmeshment of the child’s temperament to the fit of the family shows the interaction of the child’s characteristics to the family’s environment where both the child and the family influence each other.

The Sociograms of the two classes studied established that Child 2 and Child 3 are very popular in their class. This contrasts Cefai et al. (2019) as according to them Maltese schools have an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ ambiance when it comes to foreign students. Moreover, Teacher 2 describes Child 3 as being shy but the child’s interaction with the classroom provided positive results for Child 3’s social and learning experience. According to Teacher 2, a buddy made a significant impact for Child 3’s interaction in the classroom (Grech, Calleja and Cauchi 2010). Teacher 2’s emotional words highlight the work of a 3-year-old in helping Child 3 participate during circle time whilst singing the Hello song:
This boy, from this own will used to go near Child 3 and encourage him to do like us. For example, he used to go in front of his face, pull down his mask a bit so that he can see his mouth moving and he would tell him ‘Hello ... [Child 3] How are you?’ He used to go in front of his face! On his own will! This was really nice! (Interview with Teacher 2, Pos. 94)

The spontaneity of Child 3’s buddy shows the human nature of a child who wants to make a friend and is risking going against COVID-19 regulations of mask-wearing and social distancing to be able to communicate with a friend. This buddy was able to cross a bridge that adults are not able to reach. So, although Child 3 is showing a shy personality, the class environment – the buddy, influenced this classroom experience making him more attractive for other students to choose him as their friend.

**Theme 2: The Family Environment**

All parents marked the language skills as a challenge to their child's education in Malta. This is in line with Grech, Calleja and Cauchi’s (2010) findings of the communication problems with parents experienced by the heads of school in Malta. The current study shows that even parents and teachers find it hard to communicate. Moreover, all parents except for the parent of Child 2 marked Microsoft Teams as one of the preferred ways of communication. Microsoft Teams came in use as a response to social distancing measures due to COVID-19. This preference corresponds to the teachers’ explanation that parents of multicultural children prefer to use email or Microsoft Teams since they can use Google translate to help them communicate. Teacher 2 also highlighted the fact that at times the translation does not make sense, but she manages to decipher the message. According to Teacher 1, the parent of Child 2 probably prefers face-to-face communication since she is not IT literate and since her first language is Arabic. Given that Maltese is a Semitic language, the parent and teacher can understand each other when the teacher speaks in Maltese and the parent replies in Arabic. This shows the importance in the use of technological skills by the teacher and parent and the attunement of both parties for communication to take place.

Parents of Child 1 were the only parents claiming that they find it hard to form relationships with the parents of the children in the same classroom. Given that Italian students are the largest cohort of foreign students in Malta (NSO, Malta 2021), Child 1’s parents may have Italian friends living in Malta so they might not feel the need to socialize with parents coming from different nationalities. Quirico (2010) identified that Malta is one of the newer destinations for Italians who emigrated after the 2008 financial crisis. One can speculate that since parents are socializing with other Italian parents, the social experience of Child 1 during events outside the classroom environment might be with other Italian children. Thus, the child might not feel inclined to socialize with children from other nationalities during school hours. This might be the reason why Child 1’s English language skills are still very undeveloped. Thus, lack of contact with people outside the Italian community might be hindering the social and learning experience of this child.

From the questionnaires, it was established that Child 2 is more exposed to the English language as she watches English television and has five older siblings that are learning English at school. Contrarily, Child 1 and Child 3 have no siblings, parents only speak to them in Italian and Child 1 only watches Italian on TV. Child 4 is spoken to in Italian and Spanish by her parents but watches TV in English and Italian. It seems that Child 2 has a higher chance of improving her English language skills as she is exposed to the language both at home and at school, whereas Children 1 and 3 are only exposed to the language at school. None of the parents read books to their children and none of the children attend extra-curricular activities. This indicates that none of the children are given the opportunity to improve their English language whilst doing something they like. Given that reading
is one of the means of improving language development, studies would imply that the children in the study will struggle with English language development (Horowitz-Kraus and Hutton 2018). However, other studies suggest that since they are first generation immigrants they have a drive for success and will make it to surpass the language barrier (Palacios, Guttmannova and Chase-Lansdale 2008).

Online schooling increased the gap for parents who have a language barrier, are IT illiterate or have financial constraints. During online schooling the parents of Children 1, 3, and 4 made an effort to make the best out of the situation. These children do not have siblings so they do not need to compete for resources (Downey 2001). Whilst the parents of Child 2 usually try their best to support their child's education, they do not have the necessary resources to assist their child. Given that Child 2 has more than four siblings, the family did not have enough resources to connect him with his online teacher. The COVID-19 pandemic has left an impact on the learning and social experience of children such as Child 2 who lacked the financial resources for online schooling (Lancker and Parolin 2020). Bao and her colleagues (2020) concluded that due to the COVID-19 school closure, kindergarten children will lose 67% of their literacy abilities, 10.5% of which could be mitigated by daily reading. Unfortunately, all the children in this study are not read to and Child 2 lost the possible mitigation of being read to by the class teacher. Moreover, online schooling limited their socialisation with English and Maltese language speakers impacting their social and learning experience.

Online school also highlighted cultural differences in school expectations. Studies have reported that families of immigrant children request more formal schooling (Chan 2011; Vassallo 2014; Bartlett 2015; Zhang et al. 2016). Similarly, Teacher 2 noticed that the parents of Children 3 and 4 were pushing their children too much through online schooling. According to the teacher the children were frustrated because they could not understand the teacher due to the language barrier. However, the teacher is also knowledgeable that it is normal for 3-4-year-olds to be distracted spending a long time looking at the teacher on a phone or tablet. In her study of multilingualism in the Maltese primary schools, Panzavecchia (2020) found that teachers experiment with a lot of strategies in an effort to reach out to all their students, however teachers are demanding more structured ways of how to deal with these challenges. Some of her recommendations call for teacher training to target culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and share practices with other educators in Europe. Teacher 2 describes the challenge of online teaching with children who cannot understand her:

* I saw that the mother of Child 3 was getting frustrated that her son was distracted. She was telling him “Attenzione Maestra!” I tried to tell her its okay and not to worry and that it is normal to get distracted a little bit. But I could not tell her there and then because she does not understand me. It was useless telling her it is okay to get distracted, give him five mins and then we pull his attention back to us...It is useless telling her because she does not understand. So, I had to write to her on Teams so that she can use Google Translate, etc, etc.  
* (Interview with Teacher 2, Pos. 70)

In this quote we can see that all three parties, the child, the parent and the teacher, are frustrated because of the language barrier. We can feel the teacher’s struggle to help in the instance that she is needed, but she must use other means to get the message across. This scenario also helps us understand the demands that immigrant parents might place on their child in an effort for them to learn or because as other studies suggest, they are not aware of the importance of play in the early years.
Theme 3: The School Environment

The Classroom of Teacher 1 in the centre of Malta consists of 56% of students who are Maltese whilst the classroom of Teacher 2, a school in the North of Malta, has only 14% who are Maltese (NSO, Malta 2021). Locally, there are two policies related to Multiculturalism which are the ‘Respect for all framework’ and ‘Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta’. Although the teachers in this study are aware of the NCF (2012) and the LOF (2015) guidelines, they do not seem aware of these policies (Cefai et al. 2019). However, as Teacher 1 reports: “there is no one size fits all approach, as one needs to adapt according to the situation”. Teacher 2 agrees that it is useless having a policy that is not encouraged or reinforced. The education department needs to make sure that the policies set up are in line with the teachers’ ideologies or that they promote cultural intelligence (Moua 2011).

The teachers reported making use of various techniques to overcome the language barrier. Teacher 1 annually updates the visuals according to the children’s language. This is in line with the NCF (2012) as such document highlights the exposure of print materials. She sustained her answer by adding an example that during lunchtime, she shows the children a picture of a lunch box and says, “eat lunch”. Thus, the children can relate the picture to sets of words and actions. Similarly, Teacher 2 uses visuals to teach children about their emotions during circle time. This is important to help the children become emotionally intelligent (Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee 2000). Children also acquire a language through repetition and gestures. Teacher 2 describes how she uses her tone voice, vocalisation, actions, and gestures. Gestures whilst speaking helps the receiver understand the message and produce that speech by time (Goldin-Meadow and Wagner Alibali 2013). Another technique used by the KGE to eliminate the language barrier is learning a few words in each child’s first language. Teacher 1 learned a few words in Italian and made use of the Maltese language since Maltese is similar to Arabic. Teacher 2 makes sure that the children learn the ‘hello’ and ‘good morning’ in all the languages spoken in the classroom (Vassallo 2019). According to Teacher 1, such techniques were extremely effective in the children’s case as “both of the children are showing signs that they are willing to learn despite their language barrier”. Thus, in this study the use of these techniques to eliminate the language barrier are enhancing the learning experience of the two multicultural children.

Both teachers believe that they should work together with parents for the children’s wellbeing. Teacher 1 is aware that the parents do not read books to their children. Thus, she includes storytelling in the daily routine to expose the children to language learning in a fun manner. Teacher 2 reports how during a Staff Development Planning meeting it came to light that students in their school were leaving the primary school with very poor Maltese. They took the decision of investing in Big Books in Maltese and stuck flashcards on furniture with the Maltese and English name of the object in an effort to improve exposure to the Maltese language. This helps the children to acquire a language which forms part of their learning experiences.

Implications of Findings

It was established that educators should be offered more training on catering for multicultural children. The parents of the children find it hard to form relationships with other parents. So, the education system needs to take action and bring parents together, such as by creating events whereby all the parents and children would socialize. This case study has shown that one particular child is being left out. Thus, to enhance the social experience of the multicultural children within the classroom environment, more group activities can be implemented. The implications reflect Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological systems theory (1992), as these are in line with different systems presented by this theory. The children are present at the centre of the theory where different systems of relationships
affect their development. This study has shown the importance in the interaction of the home and school environment for kindergarten-aged children.

**Limitations**

Although the study conducted a thoroughly implemented research, there were certain limitations. Radi Afsouran and colleagues (2018) believe that case-studies are difficult to replicate since they cater for the unique qualities of the participants. Thus, it is highly unlikely that another researcher carries out the same study with the same participants. However, it may still serve as a guide to other educators and parents experiencing the same situation. This study provides little basis for generalization as case studies are made up of few participants, which also makes such study low in reliability.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to explore the learning and social experiences of two multicultural children in a kindergarten environment. The analysis data collected recognised that there are three interrelating factors that influence the learning and social experience of multicultural children: the child, the family environment, and the school environment. The analysis of the three themes showed that these three factors influence each other, and one factor cannot be explained without referring to the other factors. Thus, one can conclude that all the factors work simultaneously to influence the social and learning experiences of multicultural children.

The researchers recommend that given the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, a follow-up research with the use of more in-depth observation needs to be carried out to further observe the children's experience at school. Through observations more information about the children will be gathered giving more voice to the child. Since the questionnaire used with the parents was composed of closed-ended questions, future research, could focus on interviews with parents into the use of technological application that improve communication. Since this research just touched the subject of online schooling, analysis of the impact of online schooling as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affects multicultural children’s learning and social experience could be explored. To gain more information about the different school environments and about how they cater for multicultural children, a comparative study could be made where the learning and social experiences of three multicultural children enrolled in a state, church and, private school is compared and evaluated.
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A figure showing one of the children’s drawings and labelling by the teacher. Name was changed to maintain confidentiality.

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