Moral Education in Maltese Kindergarten State Schools: A Focus Group

Isabelle Zammit
Corresponding Author: Isabelle.Zammit@mcast.edu.mt
Institute of Community Services, MCAST

Abstract: Malta has become a diverse country and educators are facing challenges in adapting their pedagogies to their current students. Given that parents were opting their children out of Catholic religion lessons, the ethics curriculum was introduced in the primary and secondary classroom. However, no direction was given regarding moral education in the kindergarten classroom with children aged 3-5. This study seeks to explore how kindergarten educators are transmitting morality in their classroom and what impacts these transmission practices. This descriptive research used cluster sampling. Seven kindergarten educators whose ages range between 30-60 participated in two two-hour focus groups representing the diverse demographic and needs of the students in the colleges of Malta and Gozo. Given the flexibility and organisational approach, thematic analysis was used to code the focus groups. The major findings are that teachers' beliefs followed by school climate are salient factors in the impact on moral educational strategies. Moral education was mostly imparted through the teaching of society's moral norms and different forms of inclusion. This study suggests that future research investigates the impacts of teachers' beliefs on the children's identity and studying how children's religious identity impacts their prosocial behaviours and relationships in the classroom. This study sheds light on policies for training programmes and moral education in the kindergarten state schools.

Keywords: kindergarten; early years; moral education; social psychology; Maltese state schools; focus groups; thematic analysis

Introduction

Moral education involves the formation of a child to behave according to a particular society's moral standards, for instance through praise, punishment, and modelling, as well as the teaching of moral inquiry in justifying moral standards (Hand 2017). In some educational systems, for instance in the UK, there is a distinction between religious education and religious formation. In religious education children learn about different religions, whereas in religious formation they learn about the beliefs of their family. However, this distinction does not exist in Maltese schools (Baldacchino 2017). Both in religious education during school hours and in after-school catechism lessons, religious formation is imparted. Since 82.6% of Maltese people identify as Catholic (NSO Malta 2023) and religious education in Maltese schools is compulsory, it is accepted that teachers impart Catholic beliefs as justifications for moral standards. It should be noted that although it is called religious education, it is in fact Catholic Religious Education (CRE) (Darmanin 2013). However, as Malta is becoming increasingly diverse, parents have started opting their children out of religion classes.

The constitution of Malta (Laws of Malta, Constitution Article 2[1]) proclaims that the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion is the religion of Malta; however, gradually more people
in Malta are not practicing this religion. Recently, with the introduction of divorce (2011), the legalisation of same-sex marriage (2017), and the current discussions about abortion (2022-2023), the Catholic Church in Malta seems to be losing its cultural supremacy, especially with young people of a higher education level. Non-believers constitute 5% of the population, of which 11.8% are between the ages of 26-35 years and 9.1% hold a tertiary level of education, and 26.6% of 16-25 year old indicated that religion is not important in their life (Marmarà 2022). However, the Catholic Church gave the Maltese people a shared identity of what is to be Maltese (Montebello 2009). Before this loss of control, Maltese citizens could not understand morality outside the scope of a Catholic morality.

Despite the constitution of Malta, the island has experienced a change in demographics and a change in values. In 2009, 54% of ethnic minority students were Christian, 25% Muslims, 3% Far Eastern Religions, and 8.5% were not religious (Calleja et al. 2010). Non-Maltese students more than doubled in five years (Micallef 2018). Presently, one in five people in Malta is a foreigner (Camilleri 2022), and one out of every ten students is non-Maltese, with the population of African and Asian students contributing to the increase between 2012 and 2017 (Micallef 2018). However, due to the Data Protection Act, information about religious affiliations is not gathered from schools. Malta’s accession to the European Union, globalisation, and mobility changed not only Maltese demographics, but also the beliefs of the Maltese and the new Maltese people (people who have been living in Malta for some time) on the island (Giordmaina and Zammit 2019). In fact, only 40% attend mass every Sunday (Archdiocese of Malta 2018). These changes in demographics and values contributed to the need for a change in schools (Giordmaina and Zammit 2019).

The constitution of Malta (Laws of Malta, Constitution Article 2 [3]) declares that the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith as compulsory education in Maltese state schools. However, since parents started opting their children out of religious education, the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment 2012) introduced the option of an Ethics Education Programme for those opting out of CRE. In fact, between 2014-2015, the Education Department piloted the first ethics curriculum starting from Year 1 up to the final year of secondary school. The ethics programme was meant to deal with these diverse religious beliefs encouraging students to critically reflect on different beliefs (Mizzi and Mercieca 2020). The ethics programme teaches students values such as honesty and fairness that are shared values in multi-cultural societies, aiming for students with different beliefs to feel “as members of the same moral community” (Wain 2016). However, critics of the ethics programme consider it as a form of ethical violence given it is based on Western values (Mizzi and Mercieca 2020).

Notwithstanding the effort to cater for diverse beliefs through the ethics programme in primary and secondary schools, no option was offered in kindergarten classes (children aged 3-5), putting students, parents, and educators in an unknown space regarding moral education. The intent of this study is to investigate what kind of moral education is currently being passed on to students in Maltese kindergarten state schools, given that there are no clear policies that kindergarten educators (KGEs) should follow, as well as to understand what the impacts on this practice are.

**Literature Review**

**Development of Social Identity**

For the child to function in the social world, the child needs to be able to categorise individuals and divide people into groups (social categorisation), for example by gender, ethnicity, or religion. According to the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1979),
when the child identifies with a social group, this identity becomes part of their self-concept. The group provides a sense of self-reference for the child as to how they perceive themselves, as better or worse, when compared to members of other groups (intergroup comparisons). If the comparison is favourable, a positive social identity is perceived. Otherwise, the individual will either leave the group or strives to make the ingroup positively distinct. Complementing the importance of the context for the development of social identity in the SIT, the Social Identity Developmental Theory (SIDT) (Nesdale 2004) integrates developmental processes. By age 3, children are aware of belonging to a group (Connolly et al. 2002) and by age 5 group awareness shifts to group preference (Taylor et al. 2020). By age 6, the strength of their ingroup identification predicts outgroup prejudice (Nesdale et al. 2005).

Although social identity is important for the functioning of society, it prompts the development of ingroup bias, intergroup competition, and discrimination in favour of the ingroup. This leads to the development of psychological essentialism whereby children think that all members of a group have unchanging attributes (Gelman 2009), for example that all Catholics are good people. Psychological essentialism is associated with the development of stereotyping and prejudice in children. For instance, a study in Northern Ireland, which is historically known for “The Troubles” (1968-1998) that divided Catholics and protestants, found that children with lower religious essentialist beliefs were more likely to direct empathy towards children not sharing their religion (O’Driscoll et al. 2021). This shows the importance of group processes in developing prosocial behaviours (Zammit and Taylor 2023).

The development of social identities is relevant to Malta. How do Maltese children whose religious education consists of religious formation develop their social identity? Does this lead them to be prosocial to people from different religious groups? Experiences of peer rejection in early childhood leads to aggressive behaviour in adolescence (Dodge et al. 2003). So, it is imperative for the educational system to make sure that no child feels excluded based on religious beliefs. Given the change in values and demographics in Malta, supporting the educational achievement of all students is a priority (Ministry for Education and Employment 2014). Supporting all students includes children with a different religious identity to achieve an inclusive society (Ministry for Education and Employment 2019). Consequently, the development of morality is imperative in a society that promotes peace and protects citizens’ welfare.

Development of Morality

Morality has been defined as “obligatory concerns with welfare, rights, and justice, as well as thoughts, emotions, or actions based on these concerns” (Dahl 2018: 234). Children who develop morality show that they care about fairness through their thinking, feelings, and behaviours. The development of morality, referred to as the “moral core”, is where initial moral capacities that assist infants in judging behaviour as right or wrong, develop, for example helping, harming, fairness, and group loyalty (Hamlin and Woo 2022). Studies have shown that three-month-old babies prefer helpers over hinderers (Hamlin and Wynn 2011), six-month-olds show preference to bystanders who intervene over neutral ones (Kanakogi et al. 2017), and ten-month-olds negatively evaluate aggressive actors (Kanakogi et al. 2013). This research suggests that humans have an innate predisposition to favour actors that help others achieve their goals.

Moral behaviours appear by age 3 (Dahl 2018). Although as early as 14 months of age infants can help others (Warneken and Tomasello, 2007), this is sympathy not morality-based. The sense of “we”, at age three, leads to the development of the obligation to cooperate (Vasil and Tomasello 2022). The cooperation theory of moral development asserts that
when children understand normative standards they shift from “prosocial beings to moral beings” (Tomasello 2018: 261). Contrary to what has been taught, children are not behaving morally to follow adult instruction or to receive rewards and avoid punishment (Kohlberg 1984), but due to the development of collective intentionality (Tomasello 2018). Recent evidence has shown the emergence of morality in early childhood much earlier that had been postulated by Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg which was in late childhood. Amongst others, Tomasello, Dahl, and Smetana et al. (2018) present evidence that morality emerges in the third year of life. Given that three-year-olds in Malta are in kindergarten classrooms, it is important to find out about the delivery of moral education in the Maltese classroom.

**Moral Education**

Teachers can use different ways of teaching moral education. There are two kinds of moral education: moral formation and moral inquiry (Hand 2017). In moral formation, the adult issues prescriptions about the expected behaviour until these prescriptions are internalised and the child can self-regulate their behaviour and self-prescribe moral standards. Through moral formation the child is rewarded for compliance and punished for non-compliance to moral standards. This could lead to penalty-endorsing for moral standards later in life. Hand insists that these direct methods of moral formation need to be accompanied by indirect methods such as the modelling of behaviours and reactions to compliance and non-compliance of others by an admired figure and deliberation of real or hypothetical moral dilemmas. Hand claims that such methods are affective and behavioural but not cognitive as they do not allow the children to think about their actions. He advocates the use of discussions, real and hypothetical, as imperative for children to understand the complexities of morality. He labels this process moral deliberation as often it is not clear what the situation requires from us, and we need to be able to think and weigh our moral standards before we act. Hand elaborates that there are two ways in which the adult can elicit moral inquiry: either through directive moral inquiry where children are persuaded that something is considered wrong, or through non-directive moral inquiry where the adult remains neutral without trying to persuade the children so that the children can arrive at conclusions of what should be prohibited on their own.

Moral inquiry rather than moral formation is advocated. An adult might try to pass on moral standards through moral formation only, however, when the child will ask ‘why’ questions, the adult will have to justify the moral standards (Hand 2017). Hand states that one needs to be careful that moral teaching is not indoctrination. He believes that there are basic moral standards that a society needs in order to be able to function, these “include prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extortion, lying and cheating, and requirements to treat others fairly, keep one’s promises and help those in need.” (Hand 2019: 529). This implies that these are the standards that should be discussed at school. Clayton and Steven (2019) point out that if all students should know these basic moral standards, then this means that indoctrination may be needed to make sure people live in a peaceful society. However, Hand argues “indoctrinating children is incompatible with education” (Hand 2019: 532). This calls for the need for the educator to be available to answer children’s questions regarding moral standards.

Although researchers and educational practitioners are advocating a constructivist approach to moral education, advocates of moral formation (traditional character formation) are still contradicting these methods and using the theory of socialization, giving parents and teachers an active role in teaching moral values (Arthur 2014). Nucci and Turiel (1993) show that concepts of morality, such as stealing, do not depend on religious faith, indicating that moral education can be achieved independently of the religious affiliations of students. Moral education should be delivered through a climate of care and trust in the classroom and teachers should respond depending on the children’s personal, moral, and
conventional domain behaviours (Nucci and Powers 2014). A climate of trust is important for the development of a sense of community that predicts pro-social behaviours in schools (Battistich 2008). The Child Development Project was a school programme aimed at promoting pro-social development in elementary schools. The programme components consisted of: fostering cooperation through collaborative learning and cooperative games, mundane helping activities, modelling positive behaviour, activities that improve interpersonal understanding such as role playing, and positive discipline (Battistich 2008). Positive discipline was based on caring relationships, minimising adult control, promoting autonomy and decision-making skills. Social exclusion leads to a climate of mistrust. Thus, establishing a climate of trust in schools requires a school culture of inclusion (Nucci and Powers 2014). Moreover, a climate of dialogue as opposed to direct methods of moral formation give children the opportunity to reason non-moral justifications (Killen and Rutland 2011).

An integration of social-emotional learning and moral education is imperative for the child to learn how to manage social relationships and emotional experiences (Elias et al. 2014). Social-emotional learning emerged as a shift from the prevention of mental illness to the promotion of social competence. Programmes such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL 2003) integrate themes of morality, competence, coping skills, positive service, and developmentally appropriate learning. ‘Learning to Live Together’ is a programme for early childhood educators with a special focus on caregivers’ attitudes and beliefs to acceptable behaviour (Rosenthal and Gatt 2010). Such programmes move away from moral education linked to a time-tabled slot to a whole school approach where the caring and trust climate are carried over throughout the day, across years of schooling. This helps fostering the idea of a school as a community of heterogenous students with different beliefs working together. However, is it possible to achieve consensus on what moral education should entail in a heterogenous society in which values are changing? Do the values and beliefs of teachers’ impact moral education?

Impact of Teachers’ Beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs can influence children’s learning. There are two forms of religious beliefs: individual religious beliefs which are based on religious scriptures and personal religious belief which are formed through life experiences (Mansour 2008). Mansour maintains that personal religious belief is the single most important factor impacting the performance of science teachers. A strong correlation between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching of subject that requires belief (Özay Köse 2010) implies that there is a relationship between teachers’ beliefs and the type of education imparted.

Moreover, there is a distinction between two teachers’ beliefs: personal beliefs which are judgements they make in everyday life, and professional beliefs where they judge issues related to schooling practices, resources, and inclusive education, and so on (Pohan and Aguilar 2001). Sometimes these beliefs can conflict with each other. Research shows a positive correlation between personal sensitivity and culturally sensitive professional beliefs (Schroeder 2008). Studies indicate that teachers might be more sensitive to diversity issues professionally than personally, showing the need for more research, particularly in a monothetic country (Cardona 2005). Cardona’s study also shows that teachers with little or no teaching experience were more open to diversity of beliefs in the professional context than teachers with seven or more years of teaching experience. This might imply that new teachers are able to keep their personal beliefs aside more than teachers with 7 to 14 years of experience.

The changing demographics of Malta and the change in values provides challenges to educators that need to adjust their pedagogies to suit the new realities. Adaptive metacognition moves teachers away from a routine and helps the teacher solve problems
in adapting goals, building the teacher's identity (e.g. wanting to be a good teacher) and clarifying the teacher's values (e.g. wanting to be in control) (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005). Adaptive metacognitive programmes, such as Critical-Event Based Learning Environment (CEBLE) involve a learning cycle where the educator (a.) faces an event (e.g. a change in Malta's demographics and values), (b.) generates answers to questions (e.g. Do you have any information about how to deal with moral education in this event?), (c.) seeks different perspectives on the subject (e.g. children, parents, academics, educational leaders), (d.) uses these perspectives to generate solutions, and (e.) evaluates the effectiveness of these solutions and shares knowledge and experiences with other educators (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005). This suggests that adaptive metacognition is not just related to the educators' reflective learning but to an educational approach to change.

**Educational Policies Dealing with Moral Education in Maltese Schools**

If we want children to benefit from schooling not just in the academic sphere, educational policies need to identify, challenge, and reconstruct teachers' beliefs (Pohan and Aguilar 2001). The National Curriculum Outcomes Framework (LOF) (Ministry for Education and Employment 2012) is Malta's policy document that claims to be a response to a changing Malta and address the shift in the changing of traditional values and globalisation. The LOF was implemented during the scholastic year 2018-2019. The LOF adopted an outcomes-based approach in which outcomes are less prescriptive and more related to the students' knowledge and ability at a given time (Schembri 2020). LOF is a reflection of the European Reference Framework (European Commission and Member States 2007) where one of the core skills of the social and civic competence theme is to show tolerance. In his work of how the LOF is responding to a changing Malta, Schembri concludes by asking if the teachers really understand what the LOF is trying to accomplish and calls for teacher training to develop inclusive climates. Additionally, Pohan and Aguilar (2001) claim that increasing multicultural knowledge of teachers is not enough unless the educators have a corresponding set of accepting beliefs about diversity. This shows the importance of reconstructing teachers' beliefs not just providing them with training.

Maltese schools need transformational leaders to empower educators. Transformational leadership is the ability of a leader (e.g. head of school) to recognise the potentials of employees (e.g. teachers) and develop their motivation in shared goals (Burns 1978). This type of leadership contrasts with the transactional leadership where the relationship between the leader and the employee is to get things done. The transformational leadership role in a head of school mediated the relationship between cultural intelligence and a healthy school climate (Velarde, Ghani, Adams, et al. 2022). In practice, heads of schools who are open, accepting, and respecting of different religious and moral beliefs, and cultural differences create an environment conducive to teaching, where students are receptive to learning. This sheds light on the importance of the educational system to create leaderships programmes that foster cultural intelligence and transformational leaders.

**The Current Study**

This descriptive study investigates the subjective experience of kindergarten educators teaching in a society with changing demographics and values. Rather than test specific hypotheses, two research questions shape the focus group discussions designed to explore the impacts on the type of moral education transmitted to the students and how kindergarten educators are transmitting moral education in their classroom. Inferences are to be drawn from the data by the educators being the experts of discussing their classroom life and challenges in delivering moral education to a society that is changing.
Method

Participants

This study was approved by the MCAST Ethics Committee (E06_2020) and the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (R06-2020 255). Data was collected in September 2020. Cluster sampling was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling was also used to tap on more prospective participants. In this multistage cluster sampling, the researcher first identified the ten different colleges in Malta and Gozo as the target clusters (Cresswell and Cresswell 2017). Second, an email was sent to ten random Heads of schools of ten different colleges to ask for permission to distribute the participation information sheet to kindergarten educators. That recruitment did not result in any participants. One head of school did not understand the purpose of the study as they replied that they had no foreigners in their school, and another head of school denied participation because the school only consents to quantitative research. Third, a post on social media was put up to recruit participants and participation was encouraged through snowball sampling. Fourth, participants were excluded if there was already another participant from that college. One participant had to be excluded since permission to participate was not granted by the head of school because the name of the participant was not divulged. Finally, when permission from the heads of schools was secured and participant consent forms were agreed to, the participants and the researcher agreed on dates for the focus group. Three participants did not turn up on the day of the focus group. Six females and one male kindergarten teachers whose ages ranged from 30 to 60 years participated in two two-hour focus groups. Participants hailed from colleges in north, south, and east of Malta, as well as from Gozo.

Data Collection

The author moderated two semi-structured focus groups which were held online through Microsoft Teams. Participants gave permission for the focus group to be audio-visually recorded. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions, challenge and agree or disagree with each other (Braun & Clarke 2013). The focus groups were transcribed verbatim in Maltese (the language used in the focus group) through MAXQDA by the moderator to ensure authenticity and contextuality of the conversation is maintained. The visual recording aided the researcher in noting non-verbals and overlapping conversations which would not have been possible through audio recordings alone. Names and references to the school were removed to ensure anonymity.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis through a six-phase approach (Braun and Clarke 2012, 2019). First, the researcher saw the focus groups, transcribed both of them, and watched the focus groups again to critical analyse the meaning of the data. Second, when the researcher was familiar with the data, different phrases/segments of the focus groups were coded and labelled with a mix of semantic and latent level of meaning, inductive and deductive approach. Third, the codes were loaded on the creative coding facility of MAXQDA that allows for codes to be visually organised to generate themes. Fourth, the themes were checked against the coded segments. This allowed for some segments to be recoded and themes to be renamed or fine-tuned. Fifth, each theme was described to clarify its scope. Finally, the analysis below was produced.
Results and Discussion

Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate two research questions: What impacts practices on moral education in kindergarten classes in Maltese state schools? How are kindergarten educators teaching moral education in Maltese state schools? The two core themes are theory-driven (deductive) reflecting the research questions, whilst the sub-themes and codes are a mix of inductive and deductive approaches (Table 1). The major finding was that teachers’ beliefs is a major factor that impacts how moral education is imparted in the kindergarten (KG) classroom. Moral education is mostly passed on through teaching Maltese moral norms and different forms of inclusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Themes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sub-themes/codes corresponding to the Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Impact on Moral Education (223)</td>
<td>Factors that impact how moral education is delivered in the kindergarten classroom</td>
<td>• Teachers’ beliefs (74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• School Climate (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Decision Makers (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Family background (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Children’s understanding (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Malta (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Moral Education Strategies (76)</td>
<td>Strategies used by the KGEs to impart moral education</td>
<td>• Teaching moral norms (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Implementation of inclusion (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Practicing different beliefs (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• No emphasis on different religions (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Respecting different beliefs (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parental involvement (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reference to religion to explain culture (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Hidden religious messages (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• KGEs’ sharing of practices (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Not catering for different needs (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Moral inquiry (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Table of main themes and sub-themes. Numbers in parenthesis show the frequency of use of the sub-themes/codes.

Analysis of Results

This study is classified into two core themes. This analysis will show how the core theme of moral educational strategies is dependent on the core theme of factors impacting moral education (refer to Table 2 in the appendix for further detail). Consequently, analysis of the core themes is interrelated. This study found six different factors that impact moral education. Figure 1 shows how these factors become intertwined to produce a colourful result on moral education imparted in the KG classroom. Given that more than 200 codes were related to the impact core theme, this core theme was categorised into sub-themes, and sub-themes were set into codes. The frequency of use of these factors (sub-themes) is indicated in Figure 1 showing that teachers’ beliefs is the most salient factor to determine the type of moral education delivered. This factor is followed by three equally important
factors: differences in school climate, decision makers, and family backgrounds. These factors will be analysed below.

**Figure 1**: Six factors (sub-themes) impacting moral education (Core Theme 1). Numbers in parenthesis show the frequency of use of the sub-themes. For further details regarding the coded sub-themes refer to the Appendix. (Designed by PresentationGO)

The sub-theme of teachers’ beliefs is related to the beliefs KGEs have that impact how they deliver moral education. This theme points out to (a.) beliefs related to moral education like the need for training, (b.) the origin of their beliefs, such as personal history, (c.) types of beliefs, for instance the need of imposing personal beliefs. The order in which these beliefs will be discussed reflects the frequency of importance given by the educators.

Educators across the focus groups reiterated the need for guidelines and training in the teaching of moral development. In the words of one of the participants:

... we need direction as it seems that everyone is doing what they please. To a certain extent this liberty and lack of direction is not good because if there is no direction everyone will take a different path, and this is not fair.

This participants’ comment synthesised a discussion where one educator spoke about celebrating different beliefs, whilst another participant was highlighting the need to respect the constitution of Malta regarding Catholic beliefs. The liberty that the participant referred to is in relation to these polar teachers’ beliefs that impact practice. The participant also highlights that if teachers are not given the appropriate training this is unfair on the students as some children might feel they belong to the school whilst others are excluded. Feelings of exclusion can impact the child’s identity and lead to the development of group comparisons. Moreover, divergent educators’ belief can hinder educational teamwork. Given that in a classroom KGEs and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) need to work together, if these educators hold different beliefs, they might disagree on their strategies for moral education. For instance, a participant points out that although she might not agree on a response given by her colleague, she feels restricted in her actions even though she knows that the teachers’ response is excluding another child.
Since teachers have different beliefs and different levels of religiosity/morality, the education department needs to ensure that Maltese students and their different beliefs are still respected. Teachers should be trained to teach all students regardless of their differences in race, ethnicity, religion, gender, language or social economic status, otherwise these differences will lead to inequalities in education (Chiner et al. 2015). To be able to do this, teachers need to value these differences and be able to support their students (Pohan et al. 2009). The more teachers are aware of their belief system, the more they can control their own actions and interactions and help students overcome barriers that might impede academic success (Su-Chuan 2009).

The educators’ personal history played a role in the formation of the teachers’ beliefs. Personal history was related to childhood experiences of the educator, such as fearing religious figures, how they were taught moral education, their experiences as a minority group, and experiences in different schools as educators. Participants could vividly recall childhood experiences of being traumatised, for instance with pictures of Christ the Redeemer. In Malta, this refers to a graphic statue of the Redeemer in Senglea depicting Christ’s bleeding face with the crown of thorns. These childhood experiences of fear and exclusion sensitise educators to realise that using such pictures to entice children to obey moral standards might have psychological consequences. Research shows the effectiveness of professional development to sensitise teachers to student differences can change teachers’ beliefs about classroom interventions they can use (Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld 2008). Programmes such as ‘Learning to Live together’ give educators an insight into their own overt and covert beliefs and its impact on their practices (Rosenthal and Gatt 2010).

Some participants did not seem to differentiate personal beliefs and professional beliefs. Participants who felt strongly about their religious practices felt it was natural to impose their beliefs, as one participant said that, even though she is aware of children with different beliefs in her class, she sings with her students as song

is like an indirect prayer because Gospel songs are so nice and there is always a message in them ‘God is good all the time’...They are nice and children enjoy them.

This practice of hidden religious messages shows that teachers’ personal beliefs are impacting their professional beliefs (Pohan and Aguilar 2001). Teachers can benefit from training in using adaptive metacognition. Given the heterogeneity of classrooms, and the change in Maltese demographics and values, teachers need to adapt themselves and their environment to ensure students’ inclusion (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005).

The school climate also determined moral education. From the focus groups it resulted that the schools within the same college had different catchment areas of student population which lead to different levels of homogeneity in students’ religious beliefs. Different populations steer the schools to adapt in the way teachers look at different children with different beliefs. As one of the participants pointed out during on of the focus groups:

...we believe that we celebrate. We do not just respect, we celebrate together. If I feel included in the celebration of someone else, then that means that I feel that I am part of that community and I think that is the reason why in our case [of the school] although we have a substantial number of different beliefs, we do not have that much conflict as one would think. Because we like to celebrate everyone.

This adaptation and acceptance of people who are different is supported by a number of studies that found that the more students interact with children who are different from them, the less likely they are to be prejudiced against them (Badea, Iyer, and Aebisher 2018; Cameron, Rutland, Brown et al. 2006; Lynn Mulvey, Boswell, and Zheng 2017; McGlothlin
and Killen 2010; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, et al. 2005; Skinner and Meltzoff 2019). These focus groups indicated that it is not a specific college that impacts practices, since KGEs pointed out differences between schools in the same college, but it is the heterogeneity of the student population and whether the teachers considered that as a threat or a potential for more celebrations that impacted the type of moral education imparted.

This study notes the use of possessive pronouns, for instance referring to “our religion” in reference to the Catholic religion and “their religion” in reference to Islam, or “our country”, “our feasts”. Participants also made frequent use of first-person plural form, for example “not like us”, underlining group comparison and categorisation processes. These instances have been coded as the “us and them mentality”, where through the use of this grammatical discourse, the educators are unconsciously highlighting their prejudicial beliefs. This was put into words by a participant saying that: “some of their beliefs [parents’ beliefs] are imposed on us which is not right... if you go to Rome, do as the Romans do”. Such politically motivated narratives serve to promote ingroup membership (Fasce, Adrián-Ventura and Avendaño 2020). This finding of putting the onus on the student/families to fit in rather than on the system’s need to adapt is in line with findings in recent local research (Chircop 2022). This thinking sustains the power of the majority. When a majority group that feels threatened by the outgroup (e.g. threat to the Maltese identity) endorses such ingroup historical narratives, it maintains a sense of continuity to the ingroup identity (Smeekes, McKeown and Psaltis 2017). This shows the importance of working on these narratives perpetuated by educators when working on intergroup relationships and inclusion in a school.

This divisive school climate is linked with the teachers’ belief that different religions refer to foreigners. This could be a result of the enmeshment of the Maltese identity with Catholic religious identity (Montebello 2009). In fact, teachers pointed out that they often had to use religion to explain customs, such as the feast of St. Paul. A participant mixed up the concept of moral education with a yearly multicultural celebration at school. Moral education is not about celebrating different cultures once a year, but helping the child question right from wrong (Hand 2017). Unfortunately, due to the enmeshment of these identities, Maltese identifying with different religions, for example, Muslims, experience discrimination and marginalisation in today’s society (Chircop 2014).

Members of the Senior Management Team (SMT) were twice as much more likely to be regarded as decision makers of moral education than the educators themselves. Participants agree that when the head of school changes, the head of school might impose different beliefs and practices. As a participant highlighted:

. . . it depends on the head of schools, e.g., in our case ... when the new head of school arrived, she tried to set up new practices, and I was the first one together with my colleagues to tell her that we have never done this.

Other educators mention instances where the head of schools imposed their belief structure. There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and school climate (Allen, Grigsby, and Peters 2015), showing the need for transformational head of schools in Maltese state schools.

The impact of the family background is encapsulated by an educator comparing family beliefs to vegetarianism:

This is the same as the opinion of parents in my classroom who would like their children to be vegetarians, [and they tell you] look my child does not eat meat. I’m not saying that this is the same as religion...this will also affect me, not in a bad way. But I would
like to know parental beliefs, whether about vegetarianism, veganism, or Muslim, so that if the child does not eat ham, whether because they are vegetarian or Muslim, the important thing for me is to know if it will affect my class. So, I think that parents are likely to tell us about their beliefs because it will affect their children and me ...and not because they want to tell me about their religion.

This quote shows acceptance of parental beliefs on a transactional level. Parental involvement does not seem to be on a partnership level. Parents seem to be giving orders to educators who execute them without question. Parents, educators, and students are not engaged in moral inquiry. Educators are satisfied with categorising students in a box, for instance as belonging to a particular religious affiliation or eating practices, and no one dares engage in a discussion about these categories. Although the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) National Policy recognises the need of “engaging parents as partners in their child’s educational journey” as one of the three principles of ECEC, in practice, moral education is not discussed with parents (Ministry for Education 2021: 5). Perhaps discussing moral education and religious diversity with parents is a taboo subject given the lack of research in how this is carried out. Discussing religious diversity in state/public schools has even been label as a hot potato issue in Australia (Byrne 2009). If moral education is considered as an inquiry into basic moral standards that society needs to abide with, then moral education should not be a controversial topic to discuss with parents. However, given that currently moral education involves moral formation, it poses a threat to being discussed. The educational system should provide safe opportunities for bridging moral inquiry between school and home through a positive school climate.

These four main factors of teachers’ beliefs, school climate, decision-makers, and family background are impacting moral educational strategies. This study found that strategies consist mainly of teaching moral norms, implementation of different forms of inclusion, and parental involvement which has been discussed as being limited.

In line with literature, KGEs are indeed teaching shared moral norms through moral education (Hand 2019). Educators agree that moral education in KG consists of teaching about right and wrong, respect, inner peace, showing empathy, sharing, caring, love, friendships, forgiveness, and gratitude. As a participant suggested:

These are not my values because I am Catholic. They are values you find in every religion...We cover them throughout the day through the activities and the children are not even noticing.

This is consistent with programmes such as CASEL (2003) and ‘Learning to Live Together’ (Rosenthal and Gatt 2010) that stress the importance of integrating moral education with social and emotional learning that takes place across curricular. Such programmes cannot be put into practice without the support of a head of school with transformative leadership skills that supports educators’ adaptive metacognitive processes.

Opportunities for adaptive metacognition help educators deal with changes in their environment. Although there is agreement on the content, only one participant uses moral inquiry. She uses social stories or traditional stories such as Jack and the Beanstalk and asks questions such as “Was Jack right to steal?” This elicits a discussion about right or wrong. The educator did note the differences in the discussion in classrooms with children approaching three years compared to four-year-olds. This reflects developmental research that situate the emergence of morality at three years (Dahl 2018; Smetana, Jambon and Ball 2018; Tomasello 2018). This educator is aware of her cognitive processes and is adapting them to deal with the changing demography and values of her students (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005).
Educators use different strategies to show inclusion and deal with the challenge of different beliefs in their classroom: some ignore different beliefs, some use neutral practices, and a few promote acceptance of different practices and beliefs in their class. A participant describes her strategy in response to different beliefs:

... when children talk to me, I try to listen...maybe I do not emphasise it. It depends on the situation as well, if all students are Catholic, my tendency would be to continue the conversation and listen to what they have to say since everyone has the same belief. If it is a student with different beliefs, I listen to what they have to say, and I let it go.

Letting it go here suggests that the child's argument is not followed up. Ignoring different beliefs can be equated to the colour-blindness ideology to racism. Just as in colour-blindness' racial attitudes, where people do not see a person's colour and believe “that race should not and does not matter” to succeed (Neville et al. 2000: 60), ignoring different beliefs can lead to blindness that a person’s religion does not matter, that people of different religions have the same likelihood to succeed. Just as through this ideology people of colour are blamed for their failure to succeed, failure of people from minority religions to succeed might be seen as their fault. Research shows an association between All Lives Matter, racism, and colour-blindness (West, Greenland, and van Laar 2021) suggesting that as people who are colour-blind are racist, equally if different religious identities are ignored, religious intolerance can ensue. Thus, not following up a conversation or a child's argument about different beliefs is a missed learning opportunity for the classroom. Interestingly, this educator also discussed excellent use of moral inquiry in the KG classroom in other instances of the focus group. This ambivalence alludes that this educator is comfortable using moral inquiry to question moral standards but not to promote understanding that different beliefs exist. This could be either due to the power of the ingroup and efforts of self-preservation, insufficient knowledge/resources in helping young children acknowledge/question different beliefs, or fear of the parents' response and/or SMTs response to discussing the taboo subject of different religions.

A few educators opted to use universal symbols and moral standards. For instance, instead of making the sign of the cross, they open their hands and give thanks for the food. In this case, the educator emphasised the moral standard of being thankful and showing gratitude rather than a particular religion over another. When a parent tells the educator that they practice a particular religion, the educator responds that in her class she talks about love. Parents do not find any objection since all religions convey the value of love and gratitude. Such methods are effective in modelling acceptance, however, these methods might not lead the children to think about their practices and discuss their actions (Hand 2017).

Whilst some educators are inhibited to acknowledge different beliefs, others embrace different beliefs and practices. For instance, in a school where half of the students’ population is Muslim, the teacher makes the effort to say the prayer in Arabic with the Muslims as well as the Catholic prayer in Maltese. This participant described her response to when a student asked her about the Diwali celebration during circle time.

I went on to read and search with them [the students], finding out why they [e.g., Hindus] have colours. And then when you start seeing that the students are interested, without knowing, you start getting interested as well. Then we learned from this. We found out what they did in the Diwali, [to the students] look even we do these things, so let's celebrate them together. Then I ended up, e.g. I did a tuff tray with coloured rice and for them [the students] it was like we are celebrating the Diwali.

Perhaps owing to the heterogeneous student population or to the transformational leadership of the head of school, this educator was not afraid of the taboo of discussing
different beliefs. Nor was she afraid of parental response, even though none of the students in her class celebrated Diwali. This educator does not feel threatened by the outgroup, perhaps a result of intergroup contact through the heterogeneous school (Badea, Iyer, and Aebischer 2018; Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, et al. 2005). Without being aware, this educator is going through the CEBLE cycle of noticing an event, researching to answer questions, and generating solutions (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005).

When generating solutions, such as using moral inquiry, it is important to share the learning experiences with educators. This is the final stage of the CEBLE learning cycle (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005). Although not prominent in the focus group, educators admitted that they learned most through educators shared experiences. Sharing positive practices helped educators deal with moral education for children with different religious formations. At the end of one of the focus groups, one participant concluded:

*Look how much we learned from each other. Sharing of practices, everyone recalling their experiences. This [the focus group] is something really positive because we are all learning from each other—from our hands-on, our experiences. This is the best feedback—this that we are doing now [the focus group] much better than a talk.*

This is a call from educators to produce professional development programmes that focus on adaptive metacognition that assist educators in reconstructing their beliefs, reflect on practices that are based on solutions and that provide opportunities for those practices to be evaluated and shared (Lin, Schwartz, and Hatano 2005; Pohan and Aguilar 2001). The focus group showed that KGEs are doing what they believe is best for the children and their families, yet they know that the context is changing and they are not prepared for it.

**Conclusion**

One limitation of the study is that some colleges in Malta were not represented. This limitation was the result of gatekeepers, timing, and context of the study, and the lack of voluntary participation. Heads of schools acting as gatekeepers might protect their staff from research burden or insulate practices so that they remain within the school. The focus groups took place late in September when the teachers are at the end of their summer holidays and busy preparing for the beginning of the scholastic year. This might have hindered some educators from participating in the focus group. The topic of moral education might not have been relevant for the KGEs to volunteer to participate in the study. It is hoped that this study intrigues KGEs to find out more about moral education practices.

This study found that teachers' belief is a salient factor for the type of moral education delivered and that moral education is imparted through moral norms and different forms of inclusion. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of training programmes for heads of schools and teachers. Action research can help the education department tailor professional development programmes to address the need of a change in moral education in KGE to reflect the changes experienced in Malta. Future research should investigate the impacts of teachers' beliefs on the children's identity. Future research should focus on the transmission of morality from the parents to the children and how this transmission might affect the child's relationship with the outgroup children.

This study sheds light on four implications for the four stakeholders in moral education. First, this study proposes training programmes for heads of schools to be transformational leaders, to notice potential in their staff, and be able to work together for a common goal for each student to feel part of the school community that promotes a healthy school climate.
Second, this study recommends training programmes for educators. Training programmes such as the Critical-Event Based Learning Environment (CEBLE) promote educators’ adaptive metacognition to prepare educators for changing realities. Third, schools need to work with parents not only as a source of information about their morality. A positive school climate should instil trust and care, as well as awareness of potential threats to religious identities that the families might experience. Opportunities for intergroup experiences will reduce outgroup threat. Lastly, children in Maltese classrooms should be exposed to moral inquiry from an early age. Children should be encouraged to ask questions and no subject should be considered a taboo if the child is curious to learn. Only through questioning can we prepare the child for the unknown future.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants who took their time to contribute to this study and open a window to their classroom. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Rose Falzon for her methodological guidance and Dr. Maria Cardona for her research support. They were both pivotal for the planning of data collection. Gratitude is also expressed to Ms. Ann Marie Cassar, ICS Director, for believing in the value of this study as part of my workload.

References


Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2013. Successful qualitative research a practical guide for beginners. SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, CA).


### Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Codes corresponding to the sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Beliefs (74)</td>
<td>Teachers’ beliefs about moral education and how it should be delivered in KGE</td>
<td>• Need for training and research (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal History (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Divergent educators’ beliefs (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Religion mixed with culture (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Imposing personal beliefs (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Different religions = foreigners (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Importance of Spirituality (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Beliefs about inclusion (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of teachers’ knowledge about different religions (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficulty coping with multi-faith (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Moral values of the teacher (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher not in control (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of investment in KGE (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School climate (40)</td>
<td>This refers to the school climate of care and trust or exclusion and distrust within schools.</td>
<td>• Homogenous vs. heterogenous schools (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Us and them mentality (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Celebrating other religions (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Within college differences (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Makers (35)</td>
<td>Decision Makers refers to agents who decide on Moral Education in the classroom.</td>
<td>• Senior Management Team, SMT (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• KGEs (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• College Principal (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Educational Officers, EOs (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning Outcome Framework, LOFs (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• No direction from SMT (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• No direction from MEDE (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family background (34)</td>
<td>Impact of the family background on moral education practices in school and in the classroom.</td>
<td>• Child’s religious background (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parental beliefs (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mixed families (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Village beliefs (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Illiteracy barrier (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Language barrier (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s understanding (22)</td>
<td>Teachers’ report of how much children can understand moral education.</td>
<td>• Children’s level of understanding (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Importance of age (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta (11)</td>
<td>Influence of the country’s specific values and demographics that are impacting moral education.</td>
<td>• Malta changing (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Constitution of Malta (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Power of the church (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Table of core theme 1 of the impact of moral education and the corresponding sub-themes and codes. Numbers in parenthesis show the frequency of use of the codes.