

Social and Academic Preferences of Migrant Students in a Secondary School: The View from Within

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A Short Note about Myself

- ▶ I am an assistant head of school.
- ▶ Part-time Ph.D student at the University of Warwick.
- ▶ Currently starting my sixth year of University studies.

Why this research?

- ▶ This research stems from my interest in inclusive education.
- ▶ This is one facet of my PhD dissertation.
- ▶ When we talk about inclusivity, we should also seek to integrate students with linguistic and/or religious differences from the mainstream.

Where was this research held?

- ▶ This research was held in a secondary school situated in Malta.
- ▶ Five migrant students took part in this research.
- ▶ This research took place between October 2018 and June 2019.
- ▶ All the five students were in year 9.

What is immigration?

- ▶ According to Farrugia, 2007, immigrants are those who move to Malta for employment purposes, to escape hardship, conflict and persecution and also to seek a better life.

The families of migrants

- ▶ Migrants come alone or with their families.
- ▶ This affected schooling in the Maltese Islands, leading to a new reality.
- ▶ Children of migrants, more often than not, attend government schools.
- ▶ The latter have been the most impacted by this new change in Maltese society.

Education in Malta

- ▶ Maltese government schools are grouped into colleges.
- ▶ They are now all co-ed schools.
- ▶ Both boys and girls, move seamlessly together from kindergarten until the end of their compulsory education in year 11.
- ▶ The five migrant students involved in this study were the total number of migrant students in this year group.

Background to the research

- ▶ I wanted to see how these students perceive their education, thus giving them a voice.
- ▶ The Eurydice Brief (2019) explicitly states that educators should focus on developing migrant students' language skills and promoting their learning in general.
- ▶ In most European education systems, migrant students are falling behind native-born students (Eurydice Brief, 2019).

Research Question

- ▶ To better help educators in being in a better position to promote the migrants' personal, social and emotional development the following question was asked:
- ▶ *How do migrant students perceive education and the school support given to them?*

Methodology

- ▶ In order to answer the research question, I decided to use a qualitative approach.
- ▶ My means of collecting data was through participant observation and informal conversations.
- ▶ Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) state that participant observation is vital as it allows the researcher to gather first-hand material.
- ▶ Informal conversations are also salient means of getting information as the subject is not under pressure or stress.

Epistemology



Crotty (1998) defined epistemology as 'how we know what we know' (p.8).



This inspired me to view my position as an opportunity to build a relationship between myself as a researcher and these students.



I applied the epistemology of constructionism.

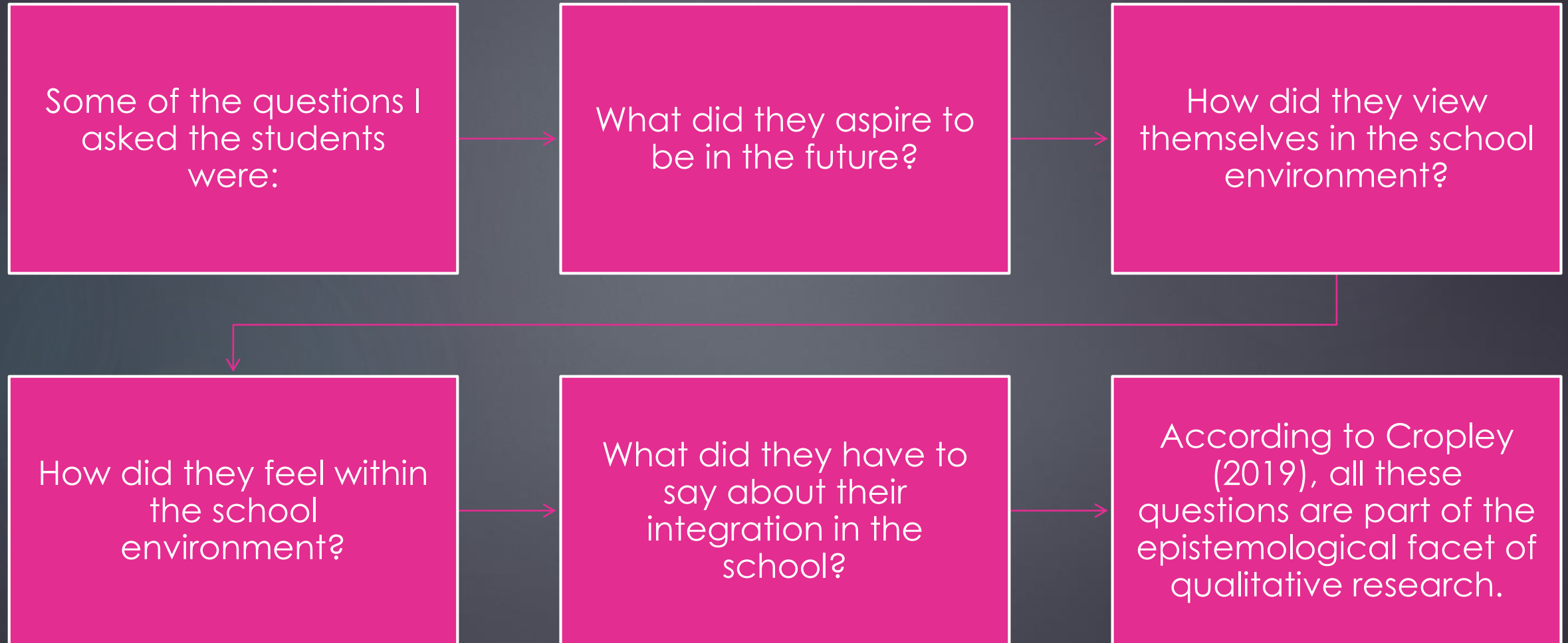


I did this because I believe that meaning is derived from one's engagement with the realities of the world.



I could do this by personally experiencing interactions with students attending on both formal and informal occasions.

Questions asked



Ontology

- ▶ Cropley (2019, p.36) speaks of ontology as being the view that each person actively “constructs”, an individual “reality” out of his or her own particular experiences, as each person’s reality is different.
- ▶ In addition, he states that when people interact with others, they shape reality.
- ▶ Thus, reality is ‘socially constructed’. In other words, Cropley sees individuals as “actors” who “construct” the world they live in.
- ▶ I sought to investigate the essence of the social phenomenon of my subjects and how the students could have a better future.

Positionality

1

I was aware that because of my position, the students might not have been telling me the truth. So I did not base my research on one informal discussion.

2

After one scholastic year talking with them, I was sure that what they were saying was not made up.

3

Students had the tendency to repeat the same things.

4

I spoke to parents to see if they corroborated with what their children said.

Who are the students? (1)

Student 1: Her parents came from Syria 20 years ago. She was born in Malta and speaks fluent Maltese. She is very well-behaved and respectful.

Student 2: She is from Ethiopia and came to Malta 5 years ago. She has a low-economic background. She is happy at school and is very popular because she is good in sports.

Who are the students? (2)

Student 3: This Italian boy came to Malta two years ago. He has managed to grasp Maltese and understands it quite well.

Student 4: He is a Syrian boy who was born in Malta. He is very well behaved and ambitious. He aspires to become a doctor.

Student 5: She is from Bulgaria and arrived in Malta in June 2019. She is a very respectful and well-behaved student. She has problems with understanding English but she tries very hard.

Findings

- ▶ The findings can be mainly divided into two:
- ▶ The migrant students' views on teachers and learning support educators
- ▶ Their views on their peers and the school environment in general.

Views on teachers and learning support educators

Students feel safe at school.

The majority feel integrated and find the environment of the school they attend to be very accepting.

The students had words of praise for the teachers.

Teachers described as being very caring.

Students also had words of praise for the learning support educators, whom one student described as '*an angel*'

Views on teachers

- ▶ Teachers are seen as the students' main supporters.
- ▶ They did several things to help these students:
- ▶ Teachers continually switched from Maltese to English and vice-versa.
- ▶ Teachers also conducted extra lessons during breaks so that the migrants could catch up.
- ▶ This was also found by Falzon et al. in (2012) in their study of the Maltese educational system.

Views on Learning Support Educators

01

One student mentioned that the learning support educator present in class used to translate for him in the first few weeks.

02

Another student said that the learning support educator explained the lesson all over again to make sure that he understood.

03

She also made sure that he had friends with whom to spend the break.

Integration through sports



Sports has been mentioned to be a good means of integrating students (Pisani 2018, Galea et al. 2011, Nguyen 2017, Spiteri 2020)



This was also seen in my research.



One particular girl told me that she had joined in the games organised during mid-day break, in which she excelled and through which, she became popular.



She realised that her participation in sports helped her to make new friends.

Relationships with their peers

- ▶ Migrant students did not articulate any conflicts and felt accepted by the other Maltese students.
- ▶ They said that Maltese students were welcoming and very friendly.
- ▶ Italian migrant said, '*the boys are fun*'. He has been accepted and spends his weekends with his Maltese school-mates
- ▶ The Bulgarian student has also been accepted by her friends, and likewise, she spends her free time in the week-end with her schoolmates.
- ▶ The other three Muslim students did not talk about their weekends.

Integration of students from an Arabic background

- ▶ These students expressed a slightly different situation from the others who had an European and Christian background.
- ▶ The fact that Maltese is of Semitic origins helps a lot in their integration in school and they quickly grasp the language and speak it fluently. This has already been pointed out by Pisani (2018).
- ▶ However, due to cultural restrictions, they do not seem to integrate with Maltese students after school hours.

Issues faced by Muslim students

- ▶ The cultural dilemma here is very real, as their way of dress (Nguyen, 2017, p.36) and culture sometimes hinders them from integrating wholly within the system.
- ▶ Integration outside school is less present.
- ▶ None of the Muslims girls spoke about any extracurricular activity.
- ▶ In fact, the Muslim students do not like to speak about their home environment.

Hindrances to Integration

- ▶ There were still a handful of students who made life difficult to all these migrant students, who did not help them to adjust, but rather hindered their integration.
- ▶ However, all migrant students whom the author talked to did not let this set them back, but they moved on from this and proceeded to surround themselves with a circle of friends.
- ▶ This shows a lot of resilience, something which Spiteri (2020) also discusses in his paper.

The Role of Migrant Parents

- ▶ The findings from Falzon et al (2012) suggest that the parents of migrant children take an active role in the education of their children.
- ▶ In the case studied, most of the parents of the migrant students are not involved, mostly because they are busy working. This situation was encountered also by Spiteri (2020) in his studies of a similar situation.
- ▶ I sought to counter this by communicating with their parents by telephone. In most cases I found them very receptive and cooperative.

Limitations of this study

- ▶ I observed only the migrant students in year 9.
- ▶ The study was undertaken in one school.
- ▶ It covered students from one catchment area. The area is important as it can affect the number of migrant students in a particular school.

Conclusion


- ▶ In 2012, Falzon et al. argued that teachers needed more training on how to deal with migrants. This issue has by now started to be addressed but this does not mean that work in this field should stop. Training and support to staff in schools should continue.
- ▶ More knowledge about migrants and migration would help to erase any stereotypes that staff and students might have with respect to the different nationalities.

What should be done?

- ▶ Migrant children are still facing many challenges and will continue to do so. These challenges are best addressed by having clear national policies in place (Eurydice, 2019; Caruana and Francalanza 2013).
- ▶ There is the need for school guidelines. The cases studied show that migrant realities are specific as the students come from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, a one size fits all policy, is not recommended.
- ▶ A general national framework should be in place, but schools should have leeway to set their own guidelines and policies. These would prepare better the school staff for the new environment made up of diverse cultures, some of which are new to Malta and which may be different from one school to another.

How to be successful?

- ▶ The proposed guidelines work only when the number of migrants in a year group is small. At least, in the cases analysed, the fact that the number of students was small definitely facilitated their integration.
- ▶ When the number is small, gender is not an issue for the integration of the students.
- ▶ For sure, the school environment plays a role and such a success needs also to be analysed within the background and policies of the school.

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- ▶ More studies need to be done about migrant students.
 - ▶ I hope that this study gives policy makers an insight into how these students are feeling.
 - ▶ There should be a small amount of students in a year group so that their needs are better catered for.
 - ▶ In this study, the students are enjoying their school experience.

Thank you
for your
attention!

