



**Bridging troubled waters- Supporting the
Early Years Educator working across
cultures with migrant children and their
families.**

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Abstract

The rapid increase in globalisation has for recent decades prompted educators, not least Early Years professionals, to become increasingly aware of the challenges posed by migrant children in their classrooms. Increased efforts and initiatives have been the locus of criticism and teaching stratagems, which include family inputs, curriculum specialists but mostly teachers and other educators have been restudied. Though well intended, some strategies may be inadvertently reinforcing existing stereotypes associated with particular ethnicities that perpetrate existing social disparities. This paper reviews theoretical research on diverse ethnic parenting and examines their contribution within the Maltese Early Years context, and advocates for the inclusion of multicultural principles, which can assist early childhood educators in their quest to develop better insights on the diverse needs of multi-ethnic children and families.

Key Words: *Multicultural, Migrant, Poverty, Post-colonialism, Early Years*

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the concept of cultural diversity is shaping and influencing educational systems around the world (Griswold, Carroll, Naffziger & Schiff, 2013; Janmaat, 2012). Malta is by no means an exception. The rise of multi-ethnicity in Maltese classrooms has prompted local educators in particular Early Years professionals to question and reflect on pedagogies that harness the cultural capital brought about by pupils in their classrooms (Vassallo, 2018). Teachers' ability to respond to a multiplicity of cultures in their classrooms is becoming a salient feature in their repertoire of skills. Such ability is translated in terms of awareness of inclusive teaching methodologies, which include the appreciation of students' languages of origin or the presence of cultural articles in the classroom.

When such essential indicators are absent, teachers will be seriously damaging the love for

schooling of their children and this will undoubtedly have a negative ripple effect on future schooling (Valenzuela, 2010). When teachers are oblivious of the cultural underpinnings of learning or exclude a student's language baggage or cultural milieu from the classroom, they are unknowingly working against students' interest, thus demotivating students to learn. Moreover, research conducted by Bower and Griffin (2011) has suggested that teachers, instead of revising their pedagogical practices may experience the tendency to blame parents for lack of interest or involvement in their child's education. Various research (Eg: Chan, 2006; Ebbeck and Glover, 2000; Guo, 2004; Obeng, 2007) suggests that migrant families often possess a wide range of cultural and linguistic repertoires and therefore contribute to the various forms of capital to their host countries.

Migrant education programs across the world

Research across numerous countries (eg: Hlatshwayo, 2014; Goodburn, 2009) demonstrates that cultural differences cause significant difficulties towards the [assimilation](#) of students within the host country's system of education. This often leads to [prejudice](#) and [xenophobia](#) against migrant families, which in turn catapults students towards receiving unequal educational opportunities, which consequently limit future work opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2017). Students who don't feel welcome or wanted because of their migrant status are less likely to remain in school. Additionally, students who struggle with cultural adjustment often fail to form connections and make friends in school, which affects their academic achievement (Ming Chiu, Pong & Chow, 2012).

In the United States the educational [achievement gap](#) between migrant children and non-migrant children is persistent. Migrant students generally have lower standardized test scores than their peers in National tests (Marcus, 2002) and graduation rates also depict a lower achievement rate of an estimated 45-50 % (US Department of Education, 2015). In the population of Hispanic immigrants, graduation completion rates correlate to the age in which the student migrated to the United States. Grogger (2002), in his study of Hispanic immigrants found a correlation between the onset of immigrating and high school completion rate, with the latter being lower the earlier the migration. To help mitigate against such disparities the Migrant Education Program (MEP, n.d.) was constructed to provide support for children of migrant workers through educational services such as extended school days, summer programs, [ESL](#) classes, etc (Branz-Spall, 2003). The program focuses on economically disadvantaged children, and/ or those who moved across school districts for temporary or seasonal agricultural work. It seeks to:

a) Support high-quality and comprehensive educational programs for migrant children to minimize disruptions in curricular setups as they move from one state to another,

b) Ensures that migrant children are provided with appropriate educational services that meets their particular requirements in an efficient and effective manner,

c) Ensures that migrant children receive equal opportunities,

d) Helps migrant children overcome educational disruption, cultural and language barriers, social isolation, various health-related problems, and other factors that inhibit their ability to do well in school, by designing appropriate transition programs.

It must be stated that the MEP expanded its repertoire of services by including migratory fishing, meat-packing, and other agriculture-related jobs.

The Migrant Education School Readiness program (MESRP, n.d.) is a tailor-made program, which focuses in family literacy. Families with children aged between three to five are given support during the children's early development stages. The program provides positive parenting skills that nurture child's oral language and helps prepare the child to succeed in kindergarten.

A similar program to the MEP is The High School Equivalency Program (HEP, 2018), which assists migratory and seasonal farmworkers who are older than 16 years of age but who are not enrolled in High School and consequently will experience barriers when seeking employment or furthering their studies. The program therefore helps migrant students obtaining a high school equivalency diploma that meets the criteria established by the State. The program also assists students in upgrading their employment or to further progress in their studies.

Migrant Education in Europe

The European Union (EU) strongly asserts that education and training are of profound importance for the distribution of its citizens' economic growth and social cohesion (European Commission, 2018). Each individual state within the EU is responsible for its educational system. The role of the EU is however to support the provision of programs through policy cooperation (via the "ET 2020" framework) and funding instruments such as the Erasmus+ programme (Erasmus, 2018) and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF, 2018).

The EU is also helping to build a European Education Area to strengthen educational outcomes and learning mobility, promote common values and facilitate the mutual recognition of diplomas across borders. Education and training are a critical facet of the EU's broader socio-economic agenda. This agenda includes the [Europe 2020 strategy](#) (Europe 2020, 2018) and the [European Semester](#) for the coordination of Member States' economic policies. The strategy aims for the improvement of educational results: the reduction of school drop-out rates and the increase in tertiary education among 30-34 years age bracket. The set goals are targeted to be achieved by the year 2020.

While European countries have well-established education systems, there exists a strong inequality of access to schooling and quality of education for socio-economically disadvantaged communities across the continent, in particular for migrants coming from a low socio-economic background.

The SIRIUS Network (SIRIUS Network, 2014) operates in favor of the education of children and young people with migrant backgrounds. The Network focuses its efforts on the young generations of migrant families, primarily those coming from non-European countries, but also on ethnic minority groups. The network (composed of research centers, universities, associations

and civil society organizations, public entities and consortiums) focused on a three-year program aimed at improving educational opportunities to migrant students within the framework of EU legislation. It aimed at ensuring that children and young people from migrant backgrounds or minorities could raise their educational standards and outcomes at least at the same level than those from the National background. The Sirius Network (2014) proposes a number of policy recommendations for member states within the EU, which include:

- Reducing the concentration of socially disadvantaged learners in school settings,
- Promotion of multilingualism among all learners,
- Promotion of diversity in teacher training,
- Increasing the representation of people with a migrant background within the educational system,
- Creation of effective support strategies for newly arrived migrant learners.

For the education and training 2020 targets to be reached, all children, irrespective of their origin or residence status, have the chance to participate in free high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) facilities.

Migration in Malta

Situated right at the very heart of the Mediterranean Sea, the island of Malta has a very rich history of migration. 'The migrant', as a central figure in the Maltese narrative has experienced numerous changes in the deep conceptualization of citizens. During the 20th Century, when job opportunities in Malta and Gozo (Malta's sister island) were very poor, and many Maltese people were compelled to emigrate from their country and travel to Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries. The process frequently involved whole families who had to

translocate in search for a better life and for work opportunities. They had to deal with language barriers, understanding the various cultural and social norms of the host country and other never-experienced challenges (Mallia, 2015). The past two decades, however have witnessed a dramatic shift in migratory patterns, as Malta has transformed itself from being a country of emigration to one of immigration.

From the year 2002, Malta witnessed large flows of migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan asylum-seekers arriving from the horn of Africa. Later Malta also experienced the aftermaths of the Arab Spring and the ongoing conflicts in Syria, the consequences being ever increasing numbers of asylum seekers from these two countries. The ongoing proliferation of migrants by boat entry in Maltese shores has largely been the subject of hotly contested debates in the public and political discourse. This gives rise to the construction and implementation of plans intended to foster social inclusion of migrants.

The Local Educational Context: The National Curriculum Framework and the Early Years

The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (MEEF, 2011) highlights the importance of supporting continuous learning development, which occurs in the early years of schooling. The Maltese Ministry of Education strongly asserts that what happens during these Early Years forms the solid foundation towards future learning and development. It emphasises strong pedagogical approaches, which resonate with children's developmental stages, with classroom content presented in such a manner as to engage pupils into active and participatory learning. This was concomitant with earlier documentation (eg: MoE, 1999), which urged teachers to adopt pedagogies that develop knowledge, attitudes and skills, which originate from everyday tangible experiences. Thus, learning strategies are designed to

respond to children's interests and backgrounds while instilling an interest for learning. This will further create environments that promote communication and interactive styles of learning.

These important learning experiences have a profound and long-lasting effect on the development of children who become engaged in pursuing their interests, bridge on to new ones, sustain high levels of motivation, develop perseverance and learn to assume responsibility. Such outcomes are realised through an environment of trust and respect, which gives learners self-confidence and self-esteem in their abilities.

The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (2011), highlights the importance of parental input in Early Years education and states that parental input needs to be especially emphasised at this time. The influence of the home on children's personal achievements cannot be negated and the effects of home are tangible at a very early age...By having settings where the information is easily accessible as well as personnel who are readily available, parents and educators join forces in helping children develop into confident learners who can become active in their own learning.

Moreover, the Learning Outcomes Framework for the Early Years (MEDE, 2013) mentions the importance of considering culture as a salient feature in the quest to "free schools and learners from centrally-imposed knowledge- centric syllabi, and to give them the freedom to develop programmes that fulfill the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered national education entitlement of all learners..." (p.1). Such entitlement is common across many legislations in many European and Non-European countries. For example, in Scotland, the Scottish ministry emphasis that those involved in curriculum planning need to be conscious of their role in

connecting experiences and learning with student's culture.

Ball (2010) however, claims that notwithstanding all the emphasis being placed on "culturally based understanding on how children learn" (p.1), actual practice has been little more than rhetoric. Expediency, together with assumptions that early childhood education research conducted across western countries must be universally acceptable, promote the misconception that there exists "best practices" that everyone must look up to (Lubeck, 1998).

Migrant parents' perspectives on Early childhood Education and Care

Education among migrant parents is mostly seen as the vehicle towards the future success of their children (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). Many migrant parents view the years before formal schooling as the preparation towards future academic life (Bartlett, 2015). Asian migrant parents strongly believe that children are ready for schooling from a very early age (Zhang, Chandola, Bécares & Callery, 2016). Migrant parents who hold these views expect their young ones to immerse themselves in academic learning and tend to disregard the concept of learning through play. These expectations are reflected in a wide range of research among migrant parents in various countries around the globe.

For example, Obeng (2007), in her study on African Immigrants in the United States found that for parents, the care of young children by anyone other than themselves is not readily acceptable; that parents preferred to entrust their children to someone from the extended family rather than to external people. Entrusting a child to anyone other than a family member is non-normative in African Societies. An option frequently presented to parents as an idea, caregiving may not be actively embraced by migrant parents. The

concept, as understood by the westernized world, may not match the ideal way of bringing up a child in other societies. Obeng (2007) also contends that migrants arriving into countries may have reservations accepting school regulations and policies as these differ significantly from those of their country of origin. The same applies to school expectations and classroom practices. In fact, transitioning from home to school is easier for some migrant populations than for others. This could be due to different socioeconomic backgrounds and also to the ascribed roles to which children are attached since birth. There are also significant discrepancies as to the extent to which different migrant groups view free childcare opportunities.

On the same lines, studies conducted by (Chan, 2006; Guo, 2004), point out that parents would prefer their children to engage in more structured academic learning rather than having more play time. Parmar (2008) concluded that in the USA, migrant Asians and Europeans do not share the same views when interacting with their young children's activities at home. While Asian parents tend to elaborate on constructive play, parents of European origin opt for pretend play. Asian parents had the tendency to provide fewer toys than their migrant European counterparts. Asian parents always opted for toys, which they perceived as having a high academic value. They urged their children to become more involved in pre-academic activities. Migrant children, with limited opportunity to initiate play at home, may find it more challenging to engage in investigative activities and to engage in spontaneous play in the classroom. The consequence of such lack of initiative may be inadvertently perceived by Early Years professionals as the indication of a learning disability, or taking too long to settle, or as having marked difficulty with social interaction. Concurrently, parents of migrant children may wonder what their children are 'learning' because, in their own view of seeing matters, 'learning

through play' is not learning at all. Disparities in values and beliefs between Early Years professionals may discourage parents from being actively involved in their children's early childhood activities at school.

Importance of Teacher-Parent Partnership in the Early Years

Parental involvement in Early Childhood Education is a fundamental right and obligation. UNICEF (2008) stresses the importance of parents' right to be informed, comment on and participate in any decisions, which concerns their child. Research shows that parental participation in Early Childhood Education services enhances children's future achievements (Edwards et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2008).

The value of parental involvement in children's early childhood education and care and its positive ripple effect in relation to collaborative learning environments and future achievements is widely documented (Gonzalez-DeHass and Williems, 2012.; Harper and Pelletier, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2006).

Parental involvement is crucial in strengthening the bond between teachers and parents. Research indicates parental involvement in children's education has beneficial effect on students, and parents as well as to the educator (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Additionally, where parental involvement programs are established in early childhood programs, the benefits are apparent throughout the child's lifelong career (Sheridan et al., 2009). On a policy level, parental involvement in education is one of the stated goals in the 'No Child Left Behind Act' (2001) (Turney and Kao, 2009).

However, Early Childhood Education and Care (henceforward ECEC) research points that while some parents may be highly active in kindergarten setups for example reporting children's progress to educators (Nalls et al., 2009), parents whose cultural backgrounds convey teachers as respected authority figures tend to view the

idea of collaborating closely to teachers as inappropriate and consider additional or further interventions as disrespectful (De Gioia, 2013; Tobin et al., 2013; Ward & Goodliff, 2009). This does not mean however that migrant parents are restricted in the way they involve themselves in their children education. In fact, Harper and Pelletier (2010) noted that many migrant parents, whose interaction with teachers can be thought of as rather limited, may be engaged in numerous activities outside the ECEC setting. This involvement is frequently disregarded and untapped by teachers.

Migrant parents' perspectives of participation

Research conducted by Yakhnich (2015) in Israel, and Chan (2014) in New Zealand suggests that many migrant parents minimize their involvement in the early education of their children. Migrant parents often possess differing perspectives on parental involvement. Some believe that their involvement in early childhood education is vital for their child's academic and social progress, and strongly advocate for increased collaborative decision making. On the other hand, others might believe that their involvement might induce their child to be dependent on them and that their presence might increase their child's dependency on adults (Newman, 2002).

However, the importance of parent collaboration is not universal across all cultural systems. For Chinese migrant parents, for example, parent participation assumes a dimension, which is frequently misunderstood by educators. Chinese parents may have been brought up in a culture where there is very high respect for the teacher. Stemming out from the philosophy of Confucianism (which insists on respect for the elderly and teachers), the teacher enjoys much respect and trust (Zhong, 2011). Hence parents would expect teaching and learning to be highly teacher-oriented, and where authority is asserted in an

atmosphere of trust and respect. In Chinese culture, the teacher is seen as a source of wisdom, which is not to be questioned and almost rude to be challenged (Chan, 2006, 2009). Hence for some migrant Chinese parents the concept of working in close collaboration with teachers might be an alien concept. In fact, Chan (2011, p. 67) also discovered that Asian parents, instead of discussing disagreement with Senior Management Teams (SMTs) and school educators would prefer “to work with their children in their own way at home”. This was corroborated by earlier studies conducted in New Zealand by Guo (2005, 2006) who stated that notwithstanding Chinese parents’ high level of education, they still preferred not to participate due to lack of confidence. They (parents) believed that it was not right to overshadow the teachers’ work and strongly iterated that it is the teacher’s professional duty to take care of their children’s education and their presence would not be of any use. Besides, they felt prone to making mistakes whilst interacting with the teachers. Other parents who may have experienced negative encounters with teachers, or are highly critical of the mainstream educational system, may lack confidence in approaching teachers (Prior & Gerard, 2007; Ward & Goodliff, 2009).

Approaches for with diverse migrant families

Banks believes that for multiplicity of voices to be heard, the curriculum needs to be inclusive of “positive and personalized stories and narratives” (2006, p. 609). He insists that subject content needs to contain the differing cultural and language characteristics, values and ideologies, historical and current social development and problems of different ethnic groups (Banks, 2009). Minor community members with differing language and cultural backgrounds can be asked to join in school activities and share their narratives with school personnel. They can relate social problems, which

besiege their country of origin and speak about activities in their countries, which most educators in their host country are unfamiliar with. Their willingness to share their experiences, however is heavily dependent on the respect they feel from the members of the host country and the perceived extent as to how much the culture of the host country is similar to theirs.

Also, children who are hesitant to partake in activities suggested by the school or exhibit learning styles, which are different from the host country, should not be considered as less capable than their peers. In such circumstances educators need to take the opportunity to reflect, adapt and incorporate in their planning different pedagogical styles so as to not deprive students of learning opportunities. Educators need to be cognizant of the fact that some parents might prefer indirect participation at school. Such parents should not be counted as uninterested or dismissed as negligent (Harper & Pelletier, 2010). Teaching stratagems need to be restudied to include other pedagogies and not solely those based on play, as these might be alien to some migrant parents. Applying inclusive pedagogies across Early Years curricula would serve as a spring board towards better parental involvement and would serve to dismantle barriers and truly accommodate for the diverse needs of migrant families. It is not sufficient to have classrooms full of resources, which are only used during special occasions. They have to be infused in everyday planning and constantly varied to accommodate the cultural backgrounds of children.

Dumčius et al. (2013) contend that migrant parents frequently lack the requisite knowledge of the host country’s educational system and the language competence to deal with the everyday issues arising out of schooling. On similar grounds other authors (Harper & Pelletier, 2010; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Wong-Lo & Bai, 2013) specify that limited English language proficiency is the major

impediment for migrant parents to reach out for the attention of school personnel in case an issue arises involving their children. This often leads to lack of participation, which invariably has its undesired consequences. A study conducted by Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) reveals that parents who are thought to be non-participant in their children's learning have often been considered by teachers as oblivious, negligent and uninterested and do not consider the extent of which parents might be actively involved. The authors (*ibid*, 2001) also concluded that teachers did not feel the responsibility to proactively engage parents, but instead blamed parents for their lack of participation.

Differences in lifestyles, values, culture, and experiences between teacher and parents (Cardona et al., 2009) all hinder parental involvement. These differences make parental involvement more difficult for teachers and school administrators (Murry, 2014). Morris and Taylor (1998) point out that some parents may hesitate to bring up certain issues to teachers and school administrators because they fear that their children might be viewed negatively by their teachers. Ariza (2002) also illustrates that some migrant parents may view the encounter of different cultural groups a distressing experience. On the other hand, Denessen et al. (2007) found that the incongruity of non-verbal communication between cultures is the primary reason why teachers often avoid communication. They (*ibid*, 2017) illustrate that looking at each other in the eye, while conversing might be considered disrespectful in some cultures. This further supports the notion that not harnessing knowledge about other culture's values, norms of behaviour, communication patterns and lifestyles poses a barrier to parental involvement.

Methodology

The Maltese Educational system hosts within it three sectors that provide education for the whole

population of Early Years students and beyond. The Government sector holds around 68% of the total student population whilst church schools hold around 22%. The rest (10%) attend private schools. Hence the author felt it imperative to sample parents from the three sectors to ensure equity in representation.

Purposive sampling was used as a method of recruiting participants. This method allowed recruitment of participants, where random sampling fails to access participants with potentially important characteristics. The researcher sampled 23 migrant parents, from which 16 were from government schools, 5 were from church schools and 2 were from an independent school. Fifteen participants were female and eight participants were male.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher and took place in the comfortable setting of the family's home. Interviews were conducted in complete privacy from other family members to avoid narratives being contaminated from each other. The semi-structured interviews were constructed in a manner that allowed for free-flowing conversation. The author kept a calm composure and body language, which stimulated mutual respect and an atmosphere of trust. Participants were informed of their rights, primarily that they were entirely free to withdraw from the study at any time they wished to. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed at all times. The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded to allow the researcher to go back and rehear the conversation and to transcribe the interviews verbatim. Though the interview was meant to be semi-structured, a group of 'leading questions' were used to set off responses from participants. These were: 1) Were you ever invited to participate in school activities and in what way did you participate? 2) When you were involved in school did you communicate with your mother tongue or were you asked to communicate using

the English Language? 3) How do you describe your communication between yourself and the school educators, and 4) When you had queries about your children, how supportive were the staff towards your concerns? The questions were intended to examine the needs of migrant parents and identify ways in which childhood educators can be supported in this vital quest of effectively communicating with migrant parents.

Results and Analysis

Analysis was conducted using the assistance of MAXQDA -a qualitative data analysis software. Throughout the interviews, parents shared their perspectives of ECEC practices and spoke about what they found particularly helpful. Four themes emerged from the analyses: (1) the need for continued dialogue, respect and understanding (2) the need to promote cultural and linguistic diversity in schools (3) the promotion of supportive groups to enhance cooperation and (4) the need for individualized attention.

The need for continued dialogue was expressed by all (100%) of the parents interviewed. Eleven parents, however shared the need for diversified means of communication. This was concomitant with research conducted by Denessen et al. (2007) who insisted on varied means of communicating with migrant parents. School brochures, diaries, parent conferences, Individualized Educational Plans, social media and e-mails were perceived as opportunities to enhance communication with teachers. Not all parents, however were digitally literate and therefore appreciated written means of communication, even though deciphering the language was rather prohibitive and needed the assistance of a neighbour. Most parents (87%) insisted on the importance of being aware about everything concerned with their children, so that the parents would be able to discuss with the personnel the areas in, which the children needed support at home. Some parents

however (13%) believed that education should mostly be in the hands of teachers since they “certainly know better”. Some migrant parents (50%) also believed that school educators and parents need to share the same the same views on the concept of discipline. They found that discipline exercised at school is markedly different from the way they were “brought up”. From analysing the audio clips, it emerged that 78% of parents had managed to cultivate a strong partnership with school staff. Data analysis revealed that discourses between school staff and migrant parents is not always ‘plain sailing’. This suggests that while some teachers and parents had actually managed to establish a strong working relationship, others might still need to discover ways to forge new and effective relationships.

Data has shown that during meetings, migrant parents would have liked to receive more detailed information on their children’s academic progress. Some migrant parents (43%) complained that they would have expected more academic activities rather than “playing only”. This could be because they were unfamiliar with the ‘learning through play’ in Maltese schools.

The data showed that some members of school staff demonstrated cultural competence to some degree. They demonstrated to migrant parents the educational practices within the Maltese Educational System whilst showing respect to their different cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. Almost all parents (94%) stressed the importance of the school providing linguistic support to them. Parents also appreciated the various adjustments that the school had to make to allow for diversity in religious customs, food restrictions and clothing. They suggested that important school notices should be written in all languages residing in the school. Also, some migrant parents highlighted the fact that many activities held in kindergarten centres were universal across cultures. They insisted that schools should provide teaching in the children’s home language.

Four out of twenty-three (17%) parents interviewed said that their children found it difficult to speak English, Maltese and the home language concurrently. One parent expressed her concern about the possibility of her child not being proficient in their mother tongue, as this would render her (child) unable to communicate with her extended family back in their home town. Parents felt that when they hear their children singing songs in Maltese and in English but not in their mother tongue, they feel somewhat isolated within the community. On the other hand, one parent remarked that his children “have integrated really well” with their peers and expressed satisfaction that his daughters were tasting different kinds of foods. One migrant parent also spoke wholeheartedly at the need for “cultural adaptation” and spoke about strategies about how this can be done. She was particularly concerned about how religious aspects are tackled in the classroom and suggested that such “critical issues” need to be discussed amongst school educators and parents.

Ten out of twenty-three migrant parents (43%) elaborated on the importance of play, which is a vehicle towards integrating with other children and therefore other cultures. The others, however (47%) believed that there is “too much play” and that there should be “more emphasis on reading and writing”. This supports studies conducted by (Chan, 2006) and (Guo, 2004) who point out that some parents would prefer their children to engage in more structured academic activities rather than focusing on play time. Seven out of 23 parents (30%) stress the need for school personnel to be more diverse. These parents believed that having school personnel, who are conversant in their own language and culture would help in enhancing effective communication between staff and parents and mitigate against stereotypes and prejudices. They believe that teachers from minority cultures can be instrumental towards assisting migrant families. This differs from

research conducted earlier by Ariza (2002) who stated that migrant parents may be overwhelmed when they encounter a multitude of people from different cultures and may experience isolation.

Most migrant parents retold positive experiences of their culture being accepted by the majority culture but lamented that their home language was not supported in their child’s school. They also state that they had “reservations” about the Maltese Educational System. This supports research conducted by Dumčius et al. (2013), Harper and Pelletier (2010), Ji and Koblinsky (2009), Ladky and Peterson (2008), Sohn and Wang (2006), Wong-Lo and Bai (2013) who claim that migrant parents frequently lack the necessary knowledge about the host country’s system of education and feel alienated from everything that happens at school due to lack of linguistic competence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The paper has shown that there is an unprecedented need for educational stakeholders to acknowledge that different cultures hold different traditions, beliefs and values systems, communication and language patterns. These elements need to be effectively taken into consideration when planning for curricula and also to enhance parental participation in schools. The researcher hopes that the suggestions outlined below will facilitate the development of synergistic partnerships between families and teachers that will ultimately increase parent involvement and consequently children’s enthusiasm for learning.

Many educators, researchers and international development specialists acknowledge the geographic and cultural limitations of the research base that informs current child development theory, learning assessment tools, and program models. Öztürk (2013) mentions the importance of developing a community of educators who are particularly interested in Multicultural Education

and who have undergone training in teaching across diversities to help migrant parents and their children succeed. Such community of teachers would be able to challenge misconceptions about particular migrant groups and “openly embrace the needs of migrant parents by involving them in their children’s educational process” (Öztürk, 2013, p.15), taking into account their religious, cultural, linguistic and socio-economic background.

Teacher training programs need to be designed towards the upgrading of teachers’ communicative competence with migrant parents (Denessen et al., 2007). The input of other professionals such as school principals, community leaders and cultural mediators might come in handy. Together they can come up with a number of school activities designed to address the needs of the community of migrants present in their school. Such targeted activities need to be adjusted to accommodate migrant parents work schedules and might include English literacy workshops, orientation visits around the host country, exchange of cultural artefacts, culinary workshops, homework help, etc. A welcome sign in different languages placed beside the school entrance gives a clear message that everybody is welcomed at school. Also, the hiring of translators on special occasions such as parents’ days would be a service, which migrant parents will appreciate. Similarly, circulars and notices can be translated in languages, which represent the languages spoken by minority community members. Most importantly, however is the inclusion of special cultural and religious holidays in the school calendar. School educators need to be encouraged to make home-visits to the migrant parents. This will help to bridge ‘turbulent waters’, which might arise from time to time.

This cultural capital, brought about by migrant children, is the impulse that prompts early childhood educators to rethink their pedagogies to make the most

of this untapped potential. It is imperative that teachers are aware of the impediments, which migrant parents encounter as they accompany their young ones in their journey towards scholastic success. Primarily, those parents with limited English language proficiency cannot participate, since they have no option but to use the English language. Secondly, migrant parents feel that cultural barriers need to be bridged to allow for full participation, which is active and beneficial to all children within the school setup.

School educators in all their hierarchy (college administrators, directors, SMTs, teachers, LSEs counselors and others) would need to deliberately reflect on the best ways to contact families. Some migrant families, because of specific circumstances, might be alien to digital technology and might find it difficult to use social media to communicate. Hence, the author feels that it is up to the school personnel to use the more congenial means of communication appropriate to migrant parent and their children, taking into account the cultural and linguistic background of the families in question.

Educators in school might set up advocacy groups to help assist migrant families. These would ideally consist of members from the SMT, the teaching staff, leaders of migrant communities, local council members and others. This would help them to tap into resources and be empowered to advocate for themselves and their dependents. An advocacy group would serve as a consultancy team whose interest would include the facilitation of activities and setup of inclusionary school environments. This would be the prelude toward school environments, which are non-threatening - a place that nurtures an atmosphere of belonging and wellbeing. All parents desire that their children be successful at school and hence would welcome any advocacy, guidance and support from school.

A program similar to the MESRP, offering both centre-based and home-based services could be the next step to help empower parents to participate more fully in their child's education. Having migrant parents themselves visiting homes would serve as a "model" for other parents in their quest to develop essential skills towards more effective home-school connections.

Multicultural educators need to show interest in issues, which are central to migrant parents. It is vital for educators to connect with human beings who have experienced dangerous ordeals in their countries of origin. Moreover, early childhood educators should consider extending existing educational services for the sake of their migrant families and children. Educators may be the link for migrant families to make better use of local social services and health care providers. Educators can also provide translation services during parent-teacher conferences or volunteer at translating school website pages, circulars and newsletters. This would mitigate against language barriers and increase opportunities to extend connections to all families. Teachers may also provide strong advocacy in favour of resources to help migrant children and their families. It is the responsibility of SMTs to consider employing migrant teachers with diverse linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. This would send a strong message that diversity is truly embraced in the particular school.

School managers are in an ideal position to organise parent evenings, family outings, excursions, or healthy eating days, so as to provide migrant parents with more opportunities to raise concerns and issues about their children's learning and development so that children will benefit fully from the school's educational programmes. It must be stated that participation has to be on a voluntary basis and inclusive of those parents who prefer indirect involvement. Parents who opt for the latter should not be perceived as uncooperative or uninterested. Educators might need to explain that extra

effort or maybe a reframing of the educational value of the proposed activities. Knowledge of the school's residing cultures is essential for educators to fully engage migrants, thus ensuring their comfort to participate. This would be a vital element in the Maltese stakeholders' quest to "free schools and learners from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi, and to give them the freedom to develop programmes that fulfill the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered national education entitlement for all learners" (MEDE, 2013, p.1).

Migrants who are new to the country and those who do not have family and social networks are likely to feel isolated. Early childhood facilities and schools are the ideal places to cultivate family participation activities among migrant parents. Schools are the ideal breeding ground to initiate social networking and start developing a new myriad of experiences within the host country. In order to facilitate the education of migrants across Europe, the United States and other continents, a research committee composed of experts from different geographical areas would need to be set up. Their prime aim would be to evaluate the various programs (Eg: MEP and MESRP in the United States, and the Migrant Education Unit Program in Malta) in terms of their effectivity. Teams composed of both parents and educators may exchange visits across continents and share good practices with each other.

The MEP in the United States would be an ideal platform to propose strategies, which ensure that migrant children, from their very early years of education, receive equal opportunities and progress in their educational journeys with minimal barriers. Early Years Educators working across the European continent would benefit from strategies adopted by the MEP in the States. Together they can form a network of human resources and expertise aimed at overcoming educational disruptions, cultural and language barriers,



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social isolation, various health-related problems, and other factors that inhibit young children to do well in school. Cross border collaboration and networking between early-years educators would be highly beneficial to facilitate the transitional experiences of young children as they move into a world that offers them unique challenges and opportunities.

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