



AN ENQUIRY INTO YOUNG CHILDREN'S
PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING, ABILITY AND
SCHOOLING AS AN UNCOVERING OF A TEACHER'S
PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

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**An enquiry into young children's perceptions of
learning, ability and schooling as an uncovering of a
teacher's pedagogy and practice**

By

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Statement of Authenticity

I, the undersigned, do hereby declare that this work is authentic and that I am the author of this thesis: *An enquiry into young children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling as an uncovering of a teacher's pedagogy and practice*. I do further confirm that this study has never been published in any other institution before.

March 2017



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Abstract

An enquiry into young children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling as an uncovering of a teacher's pedagogy and practice

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This thesis aims to examine, document and narrate young able children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling as a means through which a teacher's professional identity, pedagogy and practice are unveiled. The focus is on understanding the impact that a teacher and a group of young able learners (who have the potential to reach high levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour) have on each other's identities, learning and experiences together with an examination of the kind of inclusive practices that are effective in stimulating the minds of young able children and ultimately meeting their diverse learning needs.

The research study, located within an interpretative, social constructivist paradigm in its attempt to construct meaning and knowledge inductively, adopted a qualitative approach through narrative inquiry as teacher and learners were given a voice through the construction of intertwined narratives that were later analysed and interpreted. Data was collected through a variety of tools that included the use of a reflective diary, visual narrative and participatory methods with children.

The data yielded three main themes about aspects of the teaching and learning process that seem to influence the learning trajectories of six young able learners – the importance of *supportive learning contexts* for meeting the needs of highly able learners, the impact of *powerful interactions* with others and with the environment, as well as the notion of *identity construction* that seemed to form an integral part of their daily interactions as learning dispositions were acknowledged, inclusive practices adopted and, as a result, positive learner identities were developed and enhanced. Moreover, this thesis brought forth a number of interesting points and suggestions aimed at policymakers, educators, teachers and researchers working and researching with and for children regarding the relevance of learning about one's professional practices by listening to children's voices as well as the effectiveness of adopting a constructivist, inquiry-based and participatory approach to learning for the development and nurturing of the diverse needs and abilities of young able children in mixed-ability classrooms.

Key terms:

children's perceptions

young able learners

intertwined narratives

teachers' professional identities

learner identities

Dedication

To my treasures
Sebastian and Valentina

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1 Introduction and Background Chapter to the Inquiry

1.1 Introduction

“To be able to tell your own story as a teacher alongside those stories of the students allows for an interlocking of understandings. Stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world while at the same time they shape and construct the narrator’s personality and reality. We know and discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.7)

This research study adopts a qualitative approach through narrative inquiry to explore, document and narrate young able children’s constructions of learning, ability and schooling as a means through which an early years’ teacher’s pedagogy and practice are unveiled. The interplay between myself, as a teacher of a mixed-ability classroom and a group of six year old able learners is analysed and interpreted to highlight ways in which children’s perceptions can be used to uncover my pedagogy and practice as a teacher-researcher, to examine notions of identity construction, as well as to explore issues related to effective provision and inclusive practices that meet the diverse needs of young able children who have the potential and emerging abilities to reach higher levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour.

In Chapter One (section 1.1), I provide an overview of the structure of the thesis and details about each chapter followed by a description of the rationale and the context for this narrative inquiry in section 1.2.

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I present aspects of my personal and professional journey as student, teacher and researcher, placing my experiences within a social, historical and cultural context to draw attention to those perspectives and approaches that have influenced my learning and professional trajectories, and ultimately the direction this inquiry took. This serves as a background to articulating my positionality and justifying the approach taken for this research study.

Chapter Three presents different theoretical perspectives together with a critique of the literature that explores and informs my research area. The review is divided into four main sections: *Theories of Learning, Development and Ability* in section 3.2, *Emerging Ability, High Potential and Giftedness in Young Children* in section 3.3, *Inclusive Pedagogies and Practices*

for the Emergence of Abilities and Talent Development in section 3.4, and *Teacher and Learner Identities* in section 3.5.

Following the review of literature, Chapter Four addresses issues related to the methods and methodology used to conduct this qualitative inquiry, puts forward the research design together with the philosophical perspectives and interpretative framework on which this inquiry is built. The following three research questions which guide the course of this study are asked:

Research Question One: *What are young able children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling?*

Research Question Two: *What do young able children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling reveal about a teacher's own pedagogy and practice?*

Research Question Three: *In what ways, if any, does a teacher and a group of young able learners aged six years in a mixed-ability classroom impact each other's experiences, performance and identities?*

Chapter Five presents the data in the form of 'interpreted narratives', one for each of the six participants that took part in this inquiry. Each narrative is written in two voices – my voice as their teacher followed by a narration of their experiences of learning, ability and schooling through their eyes. The intertwined narrative that resulted from the piecing together of data collected throughout the study also introduces each participant.

Further meaning and interpretative analysis to the research questions that guide this inquiry are sought in Chapter Six. It includes a discussion of the processes involved in making meaning and interpreting the narratives. Subsequently, the chapter also analyses, interprets and discusses the main themes that emerged from the inquiry as a teacher's pedagogy and practice are uncovered through an examination of her learners' perceptions. The chapter is concluded with an exercise in addressing the three research questions asked at the start of the inquiry.

Chapter Seven summarises the main findings of the research inquiry, tackles issues related to the limitations as well as implications for future research and educational practice in the wider

community, presents its contribution to knowledge in the field and offers some concluding thoughts.

1.2 Rationale and Context for this Narrative Inquiry

The aim of this thesis is to explore how young able learners' perceptions and experiences of learning, ability and schooling can be used to shed light on the pedagogical choices and practices adopted by their teacher, in an effort to understand and highlight the impact that teachers and learners in mixed-ability classrooms have on each other's identities, learning and experiences, as well as to examine the kind of inclusive practices that are effective in stimulating young able learners' minds, motivating and engaging them, and ultimately meeting their learning needs. This is to be achieved by seeking both the children's and their teacher's perspectives and experiences, thus giving them both a voice through the construction of intertwined narratives that are then themselves analysed and interpreted.

In Malta, so far, no national educational policy has been issued regarding inclusive practices that promote and nurture the emergence of abilities and talents in learners who have the capacity to reach high levels of performance. What are the implications of a lack of mention of this specific group of learners in our policies? Is it a question of 'principle' in the sense that policy makers do not believe in categorising students and labelling them as 'highly able' or 'gifted'? Does this imply that already existent practices are being adopted effectively to enhance the learning experiences of all, including children with potential to perform at high levels in different areas of the curriculum? Do educators and policy-makers believe that our students are already immersed in 'smart contexts' that support talent development? Or is it the fact that up until now, our competitive, exam-oriented system coupled with an early adoption of streaming practices was deemed to be effective in separating the 'very able' from the rest of the students? Or perhaps, does this imply that policy makers believe that ensuring every student meets minimal expectations should take priority over special provision or attention to the needs of the highly able?

As already mentioned above, such an investigation would require a deep immersion into the history, culture and other important factors that might have influenced this lack of attention to the issue and analyse the dominant discourse practices that would have impacted on the beliefs, attitudes and actions of policy makers, educators and other professionals working

with potentially very able students in Malta. My contention is that, despite claims to mixed-ability teaching, differentiation practices and inclusion of all students in regular classrooms, little in actual fact is being done in this respect.

An important point is the fact that, currently, no specific training on inclusive pedagogies that foster talent development is being provided in either initial teacher training or ongoing professional development offered by the government or other educational institutes in Malta. Research has shown that teachers' attitudes on giftedness and potentially very able children are positively affected by specific training in the area and such teachers demonstrate an expanded view of giftedness (Brown et al., 2005). Consequently, one would conclude that, in a situation where little or no mention of the issue of 'high ability' or 'talent development' is provided in teacher training, a lack of awareness coupled with a series of misconceptions is expected to exist in teachers' beliefs and attitudes on this issue in our schools.

One of the purposes of this research is to challenge and extend the educational debate around teachers' and learners' identities and how these impinge on one another as well as how such identities impact the learning process. The study also aims to understand and discuss the implications of listening to children's voices and using their constructions and interpretations to inform and assist teachers as professional practitioners who constantly reflect critically upon their own pedagogical choices and professional identities in order to improve their practice and ultimately create meaningful educational experiences for their students. The aim is also to contribute to the debate on how best to acknowledge and provide for students who are able to reach high levels of performance in various areas of endeavour so that they can flourish as capable learners in our classrooms.

In this way, my background as a practitioner-researcher with a passion for reflective practice and with a persistent need to examine deeply my own professional practice has impacted on the design for this inquiry as has my belief in the centrality of relationships in schools and classrooms. I knew from the start that I wished for this inquiry to help me find my voice as a teacher working with young children and eventually for my inquiry to give primary school teachers a voice, an identity as well as validation as professional practitioners. Moreover, I also aimed to validate, represent and share the perceptions and views of very able children as I sought to find ways of working with them respectfully to enhance their learning trajectory,

all along guided by Nutbrown's notion of respectful educators – capable learners (Nutbrown, 1996), Sutherland's conception of effective provision before any attempts at identification of high ability are made (Sutherland, 2008) as well as Barab and Plucker's view of 'smart learning contexts' for 'smart learners' (Barab & Plucker, 2002).

1.3 Conclusion

Following an overview of the structure of the thesis and an exposition of the rationale and context behind this inquiry in this introduction to the thesis, I will now provide an account of those personal, professional and cultural-historical factors that have influenced my own learning and professional trajectories and have triggered an interest in the area being researched. This will be presented in Chapter Two where the purpose and objectives of having a background chapter to the study are also explained.

2 As the River Flows: A Personal, Professional and Historical Journey

“You can never step into the same river; for new waters are always flowing on to you.”

Heraclitus of Ephesus – Greek Philosopher (540-480BC)

2.1 Purpose and Objectives for a Background Chapter to this Study

What personal, professional and collective histories intertwine to trigger an educator’s need to reflect upon, examine and question aspects of her own practice? The very nature of a teacher’s role, with its centrality on human relationships, asks for a certain degree of self-reflection, without which a teacher’s educational practice would degenerate into a merely technical and impersonal venture. However, as in my own case, a teacher may decide to delve deeper into the reasons behind the philosophical, pedagogical, ethical and practical decisions that shape her daily encounter and activity with young children in her classrooms and this undoubtedly calls for an understanding of the numerous factors in her life and career that have played a significant role in leading her to this point. In this chapter, intended to serve as an introduction to my study, I will portray aspects of my personal and professional journey as a student, teacher and researcher and place these experiences within a historical, social and cultural context in a way as to provide a background to those epistemological, philosophical and pedagogical perspectives that have impacted, and are still influencing, my research study and journey as a practitioner-researcher.

2.2 Analogy of a River

When I think about the journey that has brought me to this point in my career, the image of a river instantly crops up in my mind. Perhaps because I am an ‘islander’ myself and thus feel a personal connection with water or perhaps because, as a student, geography was one of my favourite subjects and I can still recall my secondary school teacher talking about how little streams join the main river and how that river ultimately flows into the open sea, I tend to associate my current role and position as an early years educator, trainer and researcher to a flowing river that has originated from numerous tiny streams that represent the different voices, experiences and knowledge that have, over the years, had an effect on my personal and professional growth so far.

A natural course for a teacher-researcher who has undergone post-graduate studies at a masters’ level is to pursue her research further towards a PhD level. But, as Carr (2007) points out, one cannot simply decide to carry out educational research without first posing the

following questions: 'What is education?' and 'What is research?' More often than not, Carr (2007, p.275) continues to point out, educational researchers "... seem to allow questions about the conception of education that should provide the intellectual basis for their inquiries to be answered by default". I do not wish to be one of these and thus, I will attempt to answer these important questions hereunder through my use of the metaphor of a flowing river prior to embarking on this inquiry.

2.2.1 Beginnings: The Source of a Flowing River

I was born in the late seventies in a relatively large village in the south of the Maltese Islands and, like most children who lived in this village, spent my primary school years in the local government school. My earliest recollection of my school days is an unfortunate incident that happened when I just started school at the age of four. I was considered (or expected to be) a well-behaved and obedient eldest sister of three children and, when one day my kindergarten teacher decided to put me standing by the wall as a punishment for talking to a friend of mine, I felt a string of negative emotions that ranged from shame to embarrassment to disbelief. This was only the first to a series of unhappy recollections that seemed to characterise my earliest encounters with teachers and schooling. From then on, I adopted a rather passive attitude to education and sought to stay out of trouble by becoming somewhat invisible. Nevertheless, I can say that I fared well (not exceptionally well, just well enough) through my years of schooling and the fact that I seemed to get good results without putting too much effort into it assisted me to gain some confidence that undoubtedly was instrumental in helping me cope and veer through primary and secondary school without any significant mishaps.

But these seemingly uneventful years left their marks on my self-concept as a learner and on my perception of schooling and education in general. The most significant scar was the feeling of insignificance that accompanied most of us students who, probably due to a large school population, rarely received any personal feedback or encouragement from teachers to pursue a particular area of study or talent. Moreover, at the time, our educational system in a post-colonial era had to strike a balance between the urgent need to educate its most valuable resource (its people) and the persistent duty to abide by the values of a dominant and omnipresent Catholic Church that still held a fairly rigid view of women's role in society.

Also, the political scene at the time was unstable and educational decisions and policies centred on the needs of a growing economy. As Sultana (1997, p.335) points out:

“Human capital theory approaches have been influential in Malta from the post-war period to the present day, irrespective of whoever was in government, and as is evident in the various Development Plans that closely link education with economic progress.”

Thus, education was considered to be a means to an end rather than an end in itself, and teaching was mainly geared towards the passing of the national examinations for those who were academically able and vocational training for those who did not make it through the examination sieve into the Junior Lyceum schools that catered for the brighter portion of the student population.

Working-class parents usually did not place as much importance on schooling as, at the time, it was still felt that as soon as students finished compulsory school at the age of sixteen, they would find a job to help out with the family finances and secure a better future for themselves and their future family. For as long as I can remember, the belief that a girl’s ultimate aim was to marry, raise children and be a good housewife, mother and daughter accompanied most of the decisions that I took up to the summer before I entered university for my undergraduate course. This belief was perhaps more a result of what I used to hear from the women around me who were suspicious of those women in our village who ventured to enter the world of work even though they were married and had children. The women in my life were the ones who seemed to want to perpetuate their own pattern of oppression and submission inherent in a working-class family background. Their position could also be seen from a different angle – it was their way of rejecting the dominant discourse of privileged knowledge. However, I believe that theirs was a reproduction of a largely sexist society that still claimed that women’s destiny is “to bear the offspring of chosen men ... and to take care of human infancy.” (In Kitzinger, 1999, p.6). Being by nature more of a conformist rather than a rebel, these prejudices had a strong impact on my own beliefs and presuppositions of how my life would unfold.

So what has made me pursue my studies despite socio-cultural influences pulling me in the opposite direction? What factors have played a role in making me the first young woman in my large extended family to enter university? I remember that summer of 1994 as if yesterday – the sleepless nights, the relentless voice inside me telling me not to give up on

my studies even though I was not sure why I wanted to go to university, the ambivalent feelings of fear and hope within me, and my father's promise to help me out financially should I wish to marry as soon as I finished university – his way of supporting me in my decision to refuse a number of interesting job opportunities and follow my/his dream! In the end, I decided to study but, even in the choice of career, I must say that I was influenced by the prejudices and beliefs about a woman's place in society – a teacher was a safer option and an otherwise comfortable job for an aspiring mother and wife!

2.2.2 Tributary Streams: Knowledge, Emancipation and a Love for Learning

"... educational practice has a history and to be initiated into this practice is always to be initiated into the historical traditions through which our understanding of education has been reproduced and transformed over time." (Carr, 2007, p.276)

Looking back at my undergraduate years at the University of Malta, I feel that this experience has empowered me both through my encounters with the different people I met as well as through the process of education itself. In a way, the diversity amongst the student population and the teaching staff in the Faculty of Education (even though Malta is a very small island, there are inevitably significant differences between people who come from different socio-cultural, educational and economic backgrounds) opened up alternative ways of life and new possibilities and opportunities for women who, like me, have always accepted their traditional role in society. Undoubtedly, the women I encountered belonged to a different category of women from what I was used to. They became my role models and I could see that I could start dreaming. Up till then I hadn't allowed myself to wish for anything else than what (I thought) was expected of me. But that is when I began to dream bigger dreams ... for me, for the children that I would teach and for the children whom I would bear when it was the right time.

I began to think seriously about education and its emancipatory power particularly for women and children coming from a working-class family background. I loved each and every moment of my journey throughout my undergraduate years, despite a tendency to adopt an observant role in the first couple of years. However, by time, I began to gain more confidence and thus take a more active and participant role during lectures. Moreover, I would devour any interesting book that I would come across in an effort to make up for the lost time when I had not yet discovered my passion for literature and learning in general. The motivation to strive for excellence came late in my years of education and, looking back, I can pin a number of

factors that have caused this delay in realising my potential. Amongst these were undoubtedly the utilitarian nature of the educational system in which I was brought up, the lack of motivational measures that could have been used to instil in us a love for learning, the sexist practices that presented certain disciplines and knowledge as male-oriented and undesirable or unsuitable for girls; the large number of students that seemed to make it impossible for teachers to 'see' us as individuals instead of mere numbers, and the textbook oriented, exam-focused pedagogy used in our times that promoted rote learning to the detriment of critical and creative thinking. This is not to say that all fellow students experienced the same thing, and surely there are a number of other more personal factors that have contributed to my relatively ordinary school experience. Undeniably, this is my own interpretation of the events that happened to me and that led me to this point. Experience has shown me that teachers do play a significant role in determining whether students will ultimately develop a love of learning and a motivation to excel.

By the end of my four years of undergraduate studies, I felt I could conquer the world and was ready to make a difference in the lives of the children in the classrooms that I would teach. My personal history together with the knowledge gained from my studies would be instrumental in my formulation of those educational principles that would underpin my practice: namely, that I would seek to not merely teach subjects but to 'see' my pupils as individuals, to transmit my love of learning and hopefully encourage their gifts and talents to flourish while supporting them to think critically, be creative and take risks in their learning. A saying that comes to mind, which somehow is also connected to the analogy of the river, talks about teaching a hungry man how to fish rather than give him a fish to eat. And that is what, back then, I wanted to do for my pupils, and today, as I move closer to two decades since my first year of teaching, I still believe in providing learners with the tools necessary for them to be autonomous and motivated students with a love for learning and for life in general.

As Paolo Freire (1994) writes in his opening words to his book called 'Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed' we are living in a world that frowns at the idea of a *utopia* or *dream*, a world that is pragmatic and that is surrounded by a sense of hopelessness, a world that "... would have us adapt to the facts of reality" (p. 1). Notwithstanding this situation, Freire holds that "... the educational practice of a progressive option will never be anything

but an adventure in unveiling.” (ibid. p.1) and that “... we need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water.” (ibid. p.2) Although hope alone will not get us far in our pursuit towards educational equity, excellence and quality, “... hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice.” (ibid, p.2)

My first challenge prior to entering the world of teaching was to choose between the stability and familiarity of teaching in a state school (as I myself had always attended state schools) or the promise of more progressive methods but a quite demanding environment and the unsecure job stability of an independent school.

I opted for the latter as I wanted to gain experience in a different and less bureaucratic environment. I hoped to be able to put the innovative pedagogy I had learnt about into practice without having the restraints of a largely centralised and bureaucratic state school system. Whilst teaching in a state school would somehow allow me to be instrumental in providing children coming from diverse socio-economic family backgrounds with a different, more positive and meaningful educational journey than the one I had as a primary school pupil myself, teaching in an independent school with a reputation for high quality education, progressive methods, a more liberal view of knowledge and a commitment to the development of lifelong learners offered a more attractive and promising learning experience for me as a new teacher.

My plan was to spend a few years teaching in an independent school before moving back to the state school sector armed with more confidence as an experienced and knowledgeable teacher to face the challenges of adopting innovative pedagogies in a more rigid and traditional educational environment. Somehow I felt I owed this to the children coming from a similar home background to one day go back to teach where I was myself educated. However, the idea that I did not as yet have enough confidence and strength to struggle against an educational system that still had strong ties with its post-colonial human capital mentality, its use of traditional teaching methods and its failure so far to strike a balance between society’s demands and the individual’s needs somehow pushed me to postpone this moment again and again. Two years ago, I finally made the move to a higher education institution where I work and train young people who wish to enter the world of child care provision.

Having worked in two independent schools with children who came from middle-class family backgrounds, I must say that I developed an evolved view of children in the sense that after working for more than ten years with children coming from a more comfortable financial situation, usually sons and daughters either of parents who have a profession or a business, or children of immigrants who work on our island, I realised that after all, children are always children, irrespective of which socio-economic or class background they come from. Despite coming from a more advantageous family background, the children I have worked with still need teachers who love them, value them, 'see' them, listen to them and educate them not because of who their parents are, or because their parents are paying for their education, but simply because they are children who come to school to grow and develop as happy, capable, autonomous and lifelong learners. The advantages they may have access to due to their family's socio-economic background do not imply that they do not need caring, responsible, creative and effective teachers to facilitate their learning journey. Moreover, these children may have financial, cultural and material benefits over their peers from less-advantaged family background, but they are surely not immune to social, psychological, health and emotional problems that, at times, taint their innocent and presumably protected existence.

Throughout my teaching experience, in two different independent primary schools, I have experienced a school ethos that seeks to provide children with a holistic, caring and quality education that is relevant to their lives, that values their individuality while at the same time encourages them to be part of their communities, that believes in them and encourages them to flourish without being prejudiced or discriminatory on the basis of gender, class, ability or race, and that ultimately instils in them a love of learning and a love and respect for life. Great efforts are made to remediate literacy and numeracy difficulties, both on a whole school level and on the individual classroom teacher's level. The need to assist in the remediation of children's learning difficulties fuelled my decision to focus on literacy development in my post-graduate studies at masters' level - in an effort to obtain more expertise and tools that I would use to provide adequately for children who, for some reason, experienced difficulties in the development of their literacy skills. In both schools, children who seem to experience learning, behavioural or emotional difficulties that prevent them from engaging fully in the learning process are also catered for through the provision of appropriate measures used in an inclusive setting. Parental involvement is an important aspect of the education of these

children and every effort is made to ensure holistic development. This is not to say that the educational process in independent schools is smooth and faultless. There are a number of issues and difficulties that arise from time to time such as a school's financial difficulties to cope and keep abreast with the ever-changing new technologies, teachers' salary increases, challenging behaviour, parents' at times excessive and unreasonable demands, lower birth-rate that effects the yearly new intake of students and so on and so forth.

However, as in most schools around Malta, it seems that rarely has any effort been made to examine the relevance and quality of educational experience that the ones with the potential to excel in one or more areas of endeavour are having. Somehow, this seems to be the last on the priority list of Maltese educational institutions' agendas. It is generally felt that these pupils are being catered for adequately but, having taught in mixed-ability classroom for over a decade, I know that the development of emerging abilities and talent is not regarded as part of the educational aims of an early years' classroom or primary school.

This is an issue close to my heart, and has been on my mind since my undergraduate years. I have thought deeply about the reasons behind my interest in potentially 'gifted' or high-ability/ highly talented children. I was a bright kid, not excessively bright, just good enough to grasp concepts quickly and work through written tasks (which constituted the main teaching style adopted in my years of schooling) quickly. However, the lack of teacher encouragement I experienced during my primary and secondary school years and the fact that I entered university purely by chance (and as a response to the persistence of a stubborn father who, luckily, had higher expectations for his eldest daughter) rather than as part of an educational plan or as a result of an intrinsic love for learning made me reflect on the role that schools in general and teachers in particular have on the opening or closing of doors of opportunities irrespective of gender or home background.

Three episodes come to mind – at the age of eight, I remember having to spend long periods staring and waiting quietly for the whole class to finish their work and being 'demoted' to a lower-ability class for a whole week (we used to be streamed according to ability from the age of seven) for having sent a note to a friend of mine during one of these long moments of unproductive periods. Another one is the memory of a four-year old child I knew during my undergraduate years who could read Roald Dahl's 'Mathilda' to herself but who nevertheless

was expected to follow the same literacy programme as her classmates (who in turn were still learning the sounds of the letters). As expected, she spent her primary school years following the same language curriculum as the other. But the most shocking part of it is that none of her teachers knew she was reading the great writers of classical and contemporary literature, simply because she liked to keep her 'gift' to herself so as to keep a low profile. She was lucky enough to come from a home background that stimulated and made up for this lack of recognition and encouragement to develop her potential to the full. More recently, a comment passed by a teacher who was teaching one of my past students (whom I considered to have great potential to achieve highly in most areas) made me reflect on the unreasonable expectations that we, as teachers, may have regarding children of high potential when she spoke directly to the child and said: "You may be exceptionally good at numbers and reading, but you surely behave like a baby!" Then looking at me she said: "If he were as bright as you depicted him, he would surely behave himself!" evidently unaware of asynchronous development as a possible characteristic of high ability children.

2.2.3 The Course of a River: Waters that Reach its Mouth

To continue with the metaphor of the river, the multitude of little streams that have joined together to form tributaries that eventually materialised into a main flowing river which, in turn, represents my journey as a teacher-researcher have led me to a point where I need to stop, look back to understand the course of this journey and reflect in a way as to be able to subsequently move forward in the direction that this river of ideas, values and aspirations will take me.

What are the aims of education that guide my practice and research? What do I ultimately want my students to attain or make out of their educational journey in my classroom and in our school? What is my vision of schooling, pedagogy and education? What is my role in the teaching and learning process? When do I feel I have succeeded as a teacher and facilitator of the learning process? Do I value and celebrate certain attitudes, behaviours and attainments over others? These are not easy questions to answer as there are things beyond language that cannot be completely expressed through words, "... questions of meaning, knowledge and power..." (Billington, 2002, p. 34).

Nevertheless, for me the ultimate aim of my role as an educator is to provide a safe and democratic learning environment that is built on the principles of quality education for all,

equity and excellence, a classroom environment that values the uniqueness of each individual child, that encourages them to strive for excellence, that provides opportunities for fun, challenging and meaningful learning experiences and that fosters the development of gifts and talents in all pupils, irrespective of gender and socio-economic background. All of this should naturally lead my pupils towards a direction that will eventually make them autonomous and lifelong learners.

As a woman and educator with an interest in feminist thinking, I can even start questioning my own agenda and the dominant discourses that may be influencing my vision of the role I should take – in my quest to transmit a love of learning to my students, am I putting forward values that belong more to a middle-class family background and refuting the beliefs and attitudes pertaining to a working-class environment? And in so doing, am I subconsciously or consciously trying to deny my own roots? Or do I value the emancipatory and social justice aspect of education? Is this an attempt at promoting a democratic and fair society that aims to provide all children with equal opportunities to a quality education that opens a million and one possibilities for them to be able to eventually choose autonomously the direction of their life rather than participate in the perpetuation of the roles adopted by their families for generations simply to accommodate the labour market's need for a division of labour?

My pedagogical repertoire has evolved over time from the use of differentiated teaching to cater for the different needs and academic abilities of the children in my classrooms to a more constructivist, theme-based, inquiry-based and active learning approach that characterises my most recent pedagogical developments. Over the years I have moved away from the idea of presenting different materials (usually handouts or differentiated activities) to extend the highly able or support the ones who were experienced learning difficulties, to a more inclusive approach that uses the idea of themes and topics that are relevant to the children's lives as the basis of a child-centred, high quality constructivist methodology that benefits all learning styles, abilities and potentials. My pedagogy has been greatly influenced by constructivism (both as an educational philosophy and an educational strategy), Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD), by feminist ideology towards the need for all children to experience high quality education irrespective of gender or class, as well as by innovative ideas such as Wallace's (2002) use of the TASC wheel (Thinking Actively in a Social Context)

that teaches children to work in teams and to follow stages in a problem-solving wheel when working on a project.

2.2.4 Waters that Flow into the Open Sea: a Sea of Difficulties or Opportunities?

I have tried to answer the question ‘What is education?’ posed in the beginning of this chapter but have barely touched upon the second one ‘What is educational research?’ As a practitioner and researcher, educational research is that kind of inquiry that enables an educator to examine his or her practice, reflect upon the principles, values and influences that inform that practice and improve and transform it as a result of this reflective journey. Undoubtedly, one’s definition of educational research reflects one’s positionality and view of the world – and mine is inclined towards a more interpretative, qualitative and practice-based research approach.

Carr (2007) puts forward a conception of educational research that revives the Aristotelian concepts of *praxis* and *phronesis* and suggests that “... educational research ought now to be construed as a postmodern continuation of pre-modern practical philosophy” (p.281). Referring to the writings of Gadamer (1975), Carr (ibid.) points out that:

“... practical philosophy is simply the name of the tradition of inquiry which, by promoting historical self-consciousness, enables each generation of practitioners to make progress in achieving excellence in their practice, and, by so doing, ensure that tradition through which it is sustained progressively evolves.”

This view of educational research appeals to me and is revealed in my need for self-reflection, my tendency to question and delve into the origins of a particular assumption or belief that sustains my practice, and the will to engage into a self-reflective and inquisitive journey that allows me to reconstruct my practice with the ultimate aim of reaping educational and motivational benefits for the students I teach. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p.38) point out, feminist researchers would be contradicting their own positionality as well as participating in their own oppression by adopting “... a positivist, uninvolved, dispassionate, objective research” (2007, p.38). Consequently, and in line with feminist and postmodernist practical philosophy, I am choosing to become a reflective practitioner and researcher - this shall enable me to broaden and deepen my ability to reflect on my action and, as a result, “... discover and restructure the interpersonal theories of action” which I bring into my professional life (Schon, 1983, p.353) and transform my practice in an effort to foster

children's various gifts and talents whilst making sure that the standardised curriculum is being presented and covered.

"... research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action. There is no question of 'exchange' between research and practice or of the 'implementation of research results, when the frame or theory-testing experiments of the practitioner at the same time transform the practice situation. Here the exchange between research and practice is immediate, and reflection-in-action is its own implementation." (Schon, 1983, p. 308)

My journey as a reflective practitioner and researcher will allow me to connect the knowledge acquired through the careful and thorough study of the "...hegemony of expert voices and theoretical perspectives encountered in the educational research literature" (Song & Taylor, 2005, p.142) with my professional knowledge as a competent practitioner who is reflecting and making an inquiry into the epistemology of practice by carrying out "... an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation." (Schon, 1983, p.68). An 'experiment' here does not refer to the implementation of a new programme or curriculum – it is merely a way of describing the pedagogical approaches that I regularly adopt in my practice.

My ultimate aim is to explore, narrate and document my story and my journey as a classroom teacher through the use of a research journal as the main research tool and placing me and my pedagogy at the focus of the study whilst collecting stories about children's response and development as learners in my classroom. In this manner, I choose to espouse reflective practice as a methodology with narrative inquiry in an effort to reflect, give meaning and make sense of my professional values and knowledge as well as my pedagogical choices through the use of stories and anecdotes that provide an insider's view of what actually happens in a classroom of young learners where diversity, talents and gifts are recognised, valued and celebrated. All this will be sought and developed through an examination of young able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling – I will thus look at my pedagogy and practice through the children's eyes and explore notions of identity, impact on each other's experiences of learning and schooling and inclusive practices.

The use of narrative inquiry as a source for teacher reflection, learning and growth has increased in the past years as it provides the opportunity for teachers to learn, support and

collaborate with colleagues while documenting their own learning within the educational context (Lemon, 2007, p.182). As a practitioner, I experience curiosity, respect and a motivation to learn about other teachers' views and stories particularly when they depict the reality of classroom life. For me and for many others, as Ellis (1997 in Song and Taylor, 2005, p.160) clearly points out:

"A story's 'validity' can be judged by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible; the story's generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience."

Through the use of narrative inquiry, teachers learn to question what has often become part and parcel of the learning environment just like a piece of clutter that has no decorative or practical use becomes part of one's furniture. Central to my quest to examine my pedagogical approach is the concept of setting up a classroom that challenges both me as the teacher and my learners in an effort to explore innovative ways of presenting the content and skills promoted and prescribed by the national and the school's curriculum while maintaining engagement and cultivating learners' gifts and talents.

2.3 Conclusion

My narrative can go on and on, and I can try to delve deeper into those personal, professional and historical experiences that have shaped my beliefs and values in education to a point as to push me towards this decision of adopting the role of a reflective practitioner and narrative inquirer who is embarking on a self-reflexive research journey into the kinds of pedagogical approaches that stimulate and foster the emergence of abilities and talents in the early years, whilst listening to children's voices to inform her research. Nonetheless, I feel I can resume this narrative in my reflective journal as I write down my observations, stories and anecdotes related to my research area whilst examining my pedagogy, patterns that arise related to the emergence of gifts and talents together with observed effects on learners' performance and motivation. For the moment, I wish to conclude this background chapter with a quote taken from Paulo Freire - one of the most important proponents of education and its power to emancipate people:

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." (Freire, 1970)

3 Literature Review

3.1 Purpose and Objectives for the Literature Review

My purpose for completing this literature review is to discover and learn from what is already known and what has already been documented and researched about young able learners' experiences and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling and the kind of pedagogies and practices teachers choose to adopt to meet the diverse needs of children who have the potential and abilities to reach high levels of performance in different areas of endeavour. Additionally it is intended to establish connections with my area of research as well as find gaps that need to be addressed in the literature. This will enable me to engage in a dialogue with the key theorists and experts in the field and subsequently develop my own perspective and contribution to current theory and practice. The review is divided into four main sections: theories of learning, development and ability, the notion of emerging abilities and talent development in young children, inclusive pedagogies and practices for the provision of challenge in the early years and teacher and learner identities. It is felt that by delving into these four distinct but intertwined areas, I will increase my current knowledge both as a researcher and practitioner in the field of general education, obtain new perspectives on the issue of providing high-quality learning experiences for the unique needs of young able learners within inclusive settings, have a deeper understanding of the links between teachers' professional identities and positive learner identities and, most importantly, provide a theoretical background for this research study.

3.2 Theories of Learning, Development and Ability

Before delving into an exploration of what is understood by potential, ability and giftedness in young children and the kinds of inclusive pedagogies that facilitate the emergence of abilities and talents, I feel it is necessary to examine the theories of learning and development that underpin the principles behind recommended inclusive classroom practices for the benefit of all learners including potentially able ones. Thus, in this section of the literature review, I will put forward the major theories of learning that have influenced my pedagogical choices in recent years and the most important theoretical perspectives on intelligence and ability. Throughout the process, I also aim to analyse discourses of ability, intelligence and knowledge in the light of the fact that such discourses (consciously or unconsciously) impact

educational policy and practice on a general level as well as individual teachers' attitudes, beliefs and pedagogical choices.

In order to be effective, teachers need to first understand how to facilitate and pave the way for their pupils to learn by adopting educational strategies that reinforce how children naturally learn (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005). This can only be achieved by teachers who have a firm knowledge and understanding of the learning and developmental processes. However, knowing about these theories is not enough if teachers and educators aim to provide effective and meaningful learning experiences to the students under their care. They must also be aware of how these theories of learning translate into classroom practice. In this way, for instance, although adopting traditional methods characterised by teacher-led activities, direct instruction and rote learning might ensure 'effective' classroom management and the passing of end-of-year tests, it does not mean that the pupils will apply the skills, attitudes and knowledge acquired in different situations or problems - notwithstanding the fact that the latter is regarded to be a very important and desirable educational outcome that ultimately turns pupils into lifelong learners. Another example is the following - findings from brain research indicate that we learn best when challenged but not stressed. This has important implications for the role of emotion in learning as teachers should ensure that a safe, fearless but challenging learning environment is created (Sousa, 1998 in Muijs and Reynolds, 2005). This finding also reaffirms Vygotsky's emphasis to scaffold a child's learning in the 'zone of proximal development.'

An interesting prerequisite to becoming a well-informed, perceptive and effective teacher is to reflect upon those past experiences, thoughts and prejudices that have impacted on the way we perceive learning and learners in general together with our conceptions of intelligence, ability and achievement. This awareness, coupled with the pedagogical choices we make, will influence the roles we take (either as transmitters of knowledge, organisers and attention-getters, or guides and facilitators), the kind of interactions we develop with the learners and their families as well as the kind of teaching and learning that occurs within our classrooms. Moreover, it will also determine to what extent learning remains a domain of the classroom environment or whether, through the use of innovative pedagogies and advanced technology, it is extended and expanded outside the classroom walls. In connection with this point, Galitis (2008) argues that teachers, whilst working to improve learning

outcomes of all students, are torn between the power of formal educational discourse and policy on gifted education and their personal beliefs.

Billington's notion of 'theoretical fluency' comes to mind – he suggests that confident practitioners who are capable of reflecting upon their own practice and changing it where necessary do so by keeping in touch with the reforming and evolving nature of theories of development that inform our thinking about the children and young people we work with. However, it is not enough to possess a knowledge and view of children and of how they think and learn. Billington (2006) calls for a way of thinking about the children we work with that distinguishes between knowledge of children generally and our interpretations of the child in front of us. He proposes that professionals working with children should constantly reflect upon their practice, the kind of interactions that occur between the adult and the child as well as the way they speak of, speak with and write about them. He also encourages practitioners to compare and contrast the descriptions that practitioners construct of the children we teach and the descriptions that the children might construct for themselves. This also connects with Sutherland's (2008) focus on the impact of teachers' and learners' own constructions of learner identities on the development of gifts and talents in the early years with their inevitable lifelong consequences.

What does research in the fields of psychology, education and neuroscience tell us about the way children learn and think and how is this reflected in the way the teaching and learning process has evolved over the past two decades? What do children today need to learn and how is this to be achieved? In a paper entitled 'Teaching in the 21st century: a review of the issues and changing models in the teaching profession' (Eduviews Report, 2008), it is pointed out that:

"Students across the achievement and socioeconomic spectrum need and deserve motivating, supportive instructional environments, engaging content, and the opportunity to learn in settings that support collaboration with peers, teachers, and the larger world community. Students today live digitally every day... There is a disconnect between the way students live and the way they learn, and student engagement ultimately suffers. Closing this gap is a challenge for our current school systems."

In the same paper, pupils are described as "... tech-savvy, multi-media, multi-tasking digital natives" and this clearly collides with the experience of their "digital immigrant teachers". The distinction between the two worlds is crystal clear – what is not always so evident for teachers, is the possibility to see this as an opportunity rather than a difficulty. Teachers are

being asked to be open to new ways of teaching by acknowledging their pupils' learner and digital identities in order to bridge this gap and to gain the expertise, skills and confidence needed to grow in their profession and be effective partners in the learning process.

3.2.1 Influential Theories of Our Times

Some of the most influential theories of learning that have shaped education in the past decades include, Piaget's cognitive developmental theory with its emphasis on the link between maturation and stages of learning, Vygotsky's focus on learning through social interaction and, more recently, new insights proposed by the link between cognitive theory and brain research. Moreover, Vygotsky's notion of mediation in his socio-cultural theory of the mind has evolved into what is known as CHAT, that is, cultural-historical activity theory. All these theories attempt to explain the learning process and the complexity and dynamics of the processes of interaction that occur when individuals are engaged in a learning activity – an appealing characteristic in the ones mentioned here is the role of social interaction as a salient feature of an activity that ultimately brings about learning. These theories underpin a number of pedagogical strategies and principles that will be presented in the fourth section of this chapter and that provide a theoretical background to a constructivist methodology that encourages inquiry-based and active learning approaches in the primary classroom – a teaching and learning approach that enhances the learning experience of all learners and challenges even the ones with high potential by putting the learner or the activity as the main focus of the learning processes.

3.2.2 Piaget and Vygotsky

Piaget's contribution to learning and developmental theory was his emphasis on the role of maturation in children's cognitive development, in that learning occurs at different stages of development as children develop and increase their ability to act on their environment and to learn from their actions, thus altering their thought processes along the way. Piaget also includes 'social transmission' as another factor in cognitive development – as children act on their environment, they also interact with others and therefore learn from them depending on their stages of development. However, the focus in Piaget's developmental theory is the child as an individual with genetically programmed dispositions and abilities that unfold as the child moves from one developmental stage to another. For Piaget, development precedes learning and learning occurs as we interpret the world through mental schemas, assimilating

new information or adapting to using new skills. Piaget's theories have been influential in both the fields of education and psychology and still stand the test of time as they are regarded to be a useful way of looking at the way children think, learn and develop.

Whilst agreeing that learning occurs by interacting with our environment, contrary to Piaget's focus on maturation as a prerequisite for learning, Vygotsky holds that learning precedes development in that our present state of development is changed and enhanced when faced with new tasks that are just out of reach of our current abilities. Thus, a major disagreement between Piaget and Vygotsky is the fact that the latter did not believe that maturation in itself could make children achieve advanced thinking skills. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children's interaction with others through language leads to higher levels of conceptual understanding as they internalise new information and skills. This viewpoint clearly calls for a pedagogy that encourages learners to think and talk about their thinking processes, to engage in classroom activities that promote the use of language as a means of teaching, communicating and learning from and with peers, teachers and other adults.

One of Vygotsky's main contributions to learning theory is the concept of scaffolding in the zone of proximal development. This refers to the ways in which a child interacts with a more knowledgeable or skilled adult or peer to learn to do something that the child cannot yet accomplish alone. The adult/ peer provides 'scaffolds' that bring the child's knowledge to a higher level by intervening in the zone of proximal development. The scaffolds are no longer necessary once the learning process is complete. It is clear that Vygotsky believed highly in the role of teachers, adults and peers as being crucial to the learning process. His theory demonstrates that "... what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow – that is, what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.87)

According to Vygotsky, "good learning" is that which is geared towards the higher level of a child's zone of proximal development and therefore "which is in advance of development" as:

"... learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the viewpoint of a child's overall development. It does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process but rather lags behind this process."

Winstanley (2010, p.107) points out that one of the reasons why some high-ability learners might experience a lack of challenge at school and consequently underachieve or become disengaged from the learning process is the fact that the

“...underlying assumptions of the English curriculum are broadly based on the sequential nature of Piagetian understandings of how children learn and develop cognitively; this can deny younger pupils the opportunities for exploring more abstract ideas. Able children can easily accelerate beyond concrete experiential learning and can cope with abstract ideas.”

Although such a claim can be said to be true for most, if not all, national curricula, whether implementation of the national curriculum becomes a barrier to challenge for the potentially gifted learners or whether its content and educational aims are turned into opportunities for learning and engagement in mixed-ability classrooms depends largely on the roles teachers take in the learning process and the pedagogy they adopt to implement the curriculum aims. Creative teachers with a sound knowledge of learning and developmental theories will be able to effectively engage and stimulate their pupils by providing learning experiences that, as Vygotsky (1978) suggests, are examples of an education that:

“...must be oriented not towards the yesterday of child development but towards its tomorrow.”

This has implications for educating the young able children in mixed-ability classrooms in that teachers need to be able to adopt more dynamic strategies that do not focus merely on the delivery or depth of the content outlined in the national curriculum but that, more importantly, emphasise a pedagogy where pupils are encouraged to learn by thinking through what they are learning about not in isolation but in conjunction with peers and adults. According to Wallace and Maker (2009), schools must aim to promote the development of children’s thinking through ‘thinking-centred’ learning by considering ways that ensure all children are engaged in activities that require them to think and problem-solve. Such schools are deemed ‘smart’ in that they offer a pedagogy and an ethos that is inclusive of all learners whilst maximising opportunities for differentiation according to diverse learners’ needs.

3.2.3 CHAT: Cultural-historical Activity Theory

Both Dewey and Vygotsky have triggered the emergence of a family of theories that attempts to provide an account of learning as the outcome of participation in socially organised, goal-oriented activity. This family of educational theories and practices includes socio-cultural studies, community of learners and community of practice, distributed cognition, situated learning and cultural-historical activity theory. These theories attempt to provide

methodological grounds for investigating processes by which social, cultural and historical factors shape human functioning, including development, learning and knowledge.

This line of theoretical perspectives and research was initiated by Vygotsky and a group of Russian psychologists – namely Leont’ev and Luria – at the beginning of the twentieth century. Socio-cultural, constructionist and activity thinkers place social and environmental factors at the centre of all activity that leads to learning and development through participation in culturally mediated activity characterised by the use of tools and artefacts. Socio-cultural theory emphasises semiotic mediation through speech whilst activity theorists focus more on the activity itself as the main unit of analysis. By interacting with their environment and with others, learners construct meaning and knowledge while, in the course of their development, human beings also actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them (Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010). Activity theory, in particular, promotes the idea that learning occurs across multiple contexts and that knowledge is created in communities that distribute learning resources so that they are made available to learners whose cognitive, affective and moral development is being formed in the process of social interaction. In this respect, ‘personality’ is no longer seen as belonging to the individual but rather as created socially so that mind develops in the joint mediated activity. The dynamic interaction between people, their culture, their history and their upbringing impacts the way individuals use and understand language, communication and media (Engestrom et al., 1999).

Burman (2008), who is critical of child-centred education conventionally linked with Piaget’s work, distinguishes between traditional child-centred approaches that tend to remove the child from its social context and to focus on the ‘whole child’ with his/her needs and difficulties and the new post-Vygotskian paradigm of ‘activity theory’ that differentiates between learning and development through an attempt to analyse in detail the multiple actors and contexts that bear a new activity which, in turn, leads to learning. Burman suggests that whilst the former presents a ‘... naturalised, individualised model of childhood which confirms social privileges and pathologises those who are already socially disadvantaged’, the latter “... perhaps offers one route away from some of the impasses that the child-centred pedagogy seemed to impose”. Engestrom (1993, p.64) regards cultural-historical activity theory as being “the best kept secret of academia” in that it offers the possibility to overcome some of the contradictions and divides that have plagued theory and practice besides

reinstating more humane forms of practice. Vygotsky himself (1934/ 1986) expressed his dissatisfaction with the separation of intellect and affect in the study of human functioning, pointing out that one of the major weaknesses of psychology was that it made:

“...the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of ‘thoughts thinking themselves’, segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal need and interests, the inclinations and impulses of the thinker.” (p.10)

Roth and Lee (2007) present an exposition of CHAT – cultural-historical activity theory – and showcase it as a potential framework for surmounting a range of “troublesome dualisms in education: individual versus collective, body versus mind, subject versus object, and theory versus praxis.” By placing activity as the minimal unit of analysis, activity theorists take a more holistic approach to the study of human functioning and each pole of a dualism becomes an expression of the same unit rather than an opposite and more/ less important category. Moreover, it

“... promises to lead to an integration of research that heretofore has often been kept separate, such as the sociological and psychological prerequisites of educational achievement. A researcher using CHAT therefore does not separate the poverty or culture of urban students’ home lives from conditions of schooling, consideration of the curriculum, problems of learning, or learning to teach under difficult settings.” (p.218)

As a practitioner in a school environment working with groups of children and collaborating with colleagues and parents in an effort to enhance the learning experiences and the lives of the children we ‘teach’, I cannot but feel a magnetic pull towards the ideas that are being developed in socio-cultural and cultural-historical activity perspectives, situated learning models and distributed cognition approaches that promote a kind of learning which is socially-mediated and participatory. Many a times have I observed the ways in which learners have increased or multiplied their ability to learn and their willingness to participate actively by collaborating with each other, with younger or older pupils, with a number of teachers as well as with their parents (during in-class parent-child activities) whilst constructing knowledge through the use of the tools (psychological and technical) and artefacts available in the learning situation. The processes that occur in such situations and as a result of these activities cannot be easily analysed and described due to their complexity and the dynamics of the interactions between people, activity and artefacts as individuals are influenced by and, in turn, themselves transform their knowledge, learner identities and culture. More often than not, such collaborative efforts led to further activities within as well as outside the

classroom walls as teachers, pupils and parents linked the learning that occurred during an isolated activity to previous knowledge and past learning situations and subsequently extended the learning further through a variety of related activities.

The possibilities for integrated research, analysis and practice that CHAT offers tickle my curiosity; such possibilities undoubtedly lead me to consider aspects of it as guides for the method and framework for both the epistemology and analysis of the classroom activities and pedagogy that will be central to my research study. In an investigation of the multiple factors in a teacher's pedagogy that support the emergence of gifts and talents in young learners, there is great scope for amalgamating different areas of human study including sociology (socio-economic background and culture), psychology (motivation and learner identities), educational theory (learning theories, assessment, pedagogy), and philosophy (aims of education) amongst others. With regards to the more practical analysis of the activities that occur in and out of the classroom context, as a researcher-practitioner I will be able to explore and examine the multiple connections and interactions that lead to successful participation, learning and possibly engagement in talented transactions.

3.2.4 Neuroscience and the Role of Emotion in Learning

Brain research and the neurosciences in recent years have been informing education and learning theory, confirming theories such as aspects of Vygotsky's learning theory whilst providing new insights into areas that have previously been relatively unexplored or based on speculations. An important finding relates to the role of emotion in learning. As already mentioned above, research suggests that the brain learns best when a balance is struck between high challenge and low threat since the brain needs to experience a degree of challenge in order to activate emotions which trigger a process that leads to learning. Without an element of challenge the brain tends to relax and consequently does not engage actively in learning. On the other hand, an extremely stressful situation will lead to anxiety and, in return, trigger a 'flight' response, which also doesn't allow the brain to function effectively. According to Sousa (1998 in Muijs and Reynolds, 2005) a physically safe environment which reduces strong levels of stress is particularly important to create opportunities for learning. I have already pointed out that these findings connect with Vygotsky's ideas on scaffolding and learning in the zone of proximal development (1978).

Damasio (1994; 2003; 2004) has also written about findings in brain research that link learning and cognition with our feelings and emotional well-being. Billington (2006) suggests that, although such findings do not state anything new but simply confirm a lay-person's already existent intuition that a child's emotional state will influence his ability to learn, educators and professionals working with children must acknowledge and make such connection more explicit in their professional encounter with children and young people. These findings have important implications for classroom practice and pedagogy. There is a clear connection with the idea of building 'smart contexts' through the development of safe, enriching and supportive physical environments that supports learning in general and talent development in particular.

3.2.5 Discourses of Ability, Learning and Knowledge

An important element in my attempt to investigate aspects of a teacher's pedagogy and interaction with her learners that foster the development of emerging abilities and talents in the early years is an ability to question, criticise and even refute reductionist accounts of ability, knowledge and giftedness. One way of doing this is through a discourse analytic approach which questions any claims to knowledge, addressing "...such claims within the context of the particular manner of their social production together with the associated phenomena of the processes of language-production." (Billington, 2002, p.33)

As a researcher and practitioner with a socio-cultural and constructivist orientation to learning theory, ability and knowledge, I cannot but question traditional conceptions of learning and knowledge that view ability and intelligence as possessions or constructs residing within the individual. Despite a broadening of the notion of intelligence from a general intelligence that is innate and can be measured using standardised tests to a more dynamic view of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and a definition of intelligence as a capacity for problem-solving and for the creation of products that are valued within one or more cultural settings, assessments in our schools are still oriented towards the measurement of individual capabilities through the use of pen and paper tests. An account of learning that is socially mediated and knowledge that is socially constructed challenges the idea that a child's competence and talent can be quantified using single IQ tests or end-of-year achievement tests. It also sheds light on existent dominant discursive practices that dictate how learning and knowledge are organised, the ways in which outcomes are measured and the ways in

which such measurement leads to the categorisation and ranking of learners into privileged, mainstream or marginalised groups.

Assessment practices in schools must be scrutinised and issues of power, category and oppressive forms of governmentality must be considered. The idea of adopting assessment methods (whether single intelligence testing or using multiple criteria) to identify the gifted or potentially highly able child for eligibility to special provision must also be contended. Schulz (2005) argues that 'giftedness' has become part of mainstream discourse in education and has grown into a prominent educational movement that operates as a compensatory function of mass education so that individuals who are underachieving or disengaged from the learning process are provided for through a variety of inclusive as well as special programmes. Gifted education also has the function of intervening for certain children 'at risk' of behavioural and emotional disorders (Rimm, 2003; Silverman, 1997). In her paper, Schulz explores the politics of 'identity construction' through gifted practice and argues that gifted education, despite claims to inclusive practices, perpetuates competition and individualism whilst defying the principle of social justice in education. In particular, Schulz talks about dominant discourse in gifted practice that seems to portray the gifted child as a marginalised individual in need of intervention on the one hand and as a national asset "... born to provide for tomorrow's nation" (p.126) on the other.

"The disparity between gifted education's claims to equality and the uneven social outcomes it produces, are located in its core beliefs. I argue that these beliefs advantage children who, by way of class status and socio-cultural privileges, are predisposed to display greater proficiency in all subject domains, especially those that yield the greatest market-value. At the same time, gifted education's core beliefs encourage divisive practices, which separate the student populace into homogenous groups thereby supporting society's hegemonic power relations: the top two or five percent of elite students are united and promoted through the education system and beyond, while the majority are dispersed toward less valuable subject positions in the marketplace." (Schulz, 2005, p.125)

Bird (1999), in an article on 'Feminist questions about children's competence', treats competence as both adequacy of performance and a child's good use of talents but points out that notions of competence and ability can be "... a very cultured and gendered concept: a child's gifts or disadvantages may be in the eye of the beholder" (p.21). She emphasises the fundamental role of family and school support rather than individual differences in determining a child's performance.

Barab and Plucker (2002) point out that conceptions of learning and ability are still highly influenced by traditional notions rooted in Cartesian dualism that tend to separate the learner from the learning context and that treat ability and knowing as psychological constructs pertaining to the individual minds and therefore separate from their social and environmental contexts. In their article on cognition, ability and talent development, the authors provide an opportunity to move away from the grip of dualistic thinking and to reflect on a number of contemporary theoretical perspectives that place "... individuals and environments as the minimal ontology for describing knowing and learning." (pg.166) Central to their argument are the beliefs that:

"... ability does not reside (and talent development does not occur) in the head of the learner, but is best conceptualised as a collection of functional relations distributed across persons and particular contexts through which individuals appear knowledgeably skilful. Through these relations, and the context in which these relations are actualised, individual and environment are functionally joined and in some cases talented transactions occur (Snow, 1992). Personal identities are also constituted through these relations, especially those identities (and sets of relations) that the learner perceives as meaningful."

Based on the above beliefs that put forward more dynamic and situated approaches to knowing and learning, Barab and Plucker argue that talent in terms of potential for high ability and performance can be seen as an opportunity available to all via "smart contexts" that support talent development. In other words, educators must facilitate the development of "smart contexts" designed to support meaningful student-environment interactions that consider the learner as an active agent who coproduces meaning and context. They propose a perspective on talent as a person-in-situation development located essentially in the active relations of individual and environment. A critical challenge for teachers and educators is to develop effective structures in which situated and participatory learning takes place through the interaction of individual, physical environment and socio-cultural relations. They also distinguish between learning that creates 'inert' knowledge that hampers the development and potential engagement of talented interactions as it usually bears little relevance to the student's life outside school and the kind of situated learning that can be transferred to other situations both within and outside the classroom walls. They further emphasise the role of social and cultural influences on who is deemed to be highly able at a particular moment in time and in particular situations or contexts. This leads the authors to point out that:

"... the responsibility of the educator is to establish contexts for learning that support individuals in becoming more adept at functioning as part of multiple systems. Although content knowledge is necessary for successful participation, educators must place increased emphasis on the context through which

talented transactions are engaged and on increasing the potential of individuals to engage these transactions.” (Barab & Plucker, 2002, p. 175)

During my undergraduate studies, more than a decade ago, I had already embarked on an exploratory journey to examine how Maltese primary school teachers meet the challenge of providing appropriate educational opportunities for gifted learners within the regular classroom (Camilleri, 1998). Back then, I was already aware of the lack of educational focus by both legislators and teacher trainers on this group of learners. Having undergone four years of teacher training without encountering any offered opportunities to learn about effective pedagogy for the inclusion of high-ability pupils in the regular classroom, it seemed evident to me that somehow there is an underlying misconception that our exam-oriented educational system is already geared towards the achievement and success of brighter pupils. Therefore, at the time, I felt the need to look into teachers’ perceptions of gifted children as well as their classroom practices in relation to differentiation of instruction for this specific group.

Amongst the conclusions and recommendations that resulted from an analysis of a survey sent to all state, independent and church primary schools in Malta (with a response of 42.7% of study participants) as part of the first stage of the above mentioned study were the need for: a more flexible and context-based curriculum as opposed to an exam-oriented rigid system that tends to limit the amount of differentiation provided in primary classrooms, teacher training that enables teachers to gain confidence and expertise in providing enriching learning experiences geared towards recognition and encouragement of talent development as well as more basic and applied research in the field of education for the gifted with a particular focus on effective practices for the needs of gifted learners within the regular Maltese classroom scenario. Moreover, the idea of a more inclusive educational system that ultimately encourages the development of children’s unique talents and abilities was highlighted. This initial interest in the field of ‘inclusion of the gifted child’ provided the impetus for further examination of the issue of equity and excellence vis-à-vis high-quality pedagogy and curriculum for potential giftedness or high ability.

After an exposition and analysis of a number of learning and development theories that try to explain in different ways how children learn and develop, I now move on to the next section

in which I will attempt to delve into the concept of emerging abilities in young children, by initially putting forward traditional as well as more recent ways of explaining and examining the notion of high potential and emerging abilities in children, followed by efforts to challenge issues of labelling, identification before provision, exclusion practices and perpetuation of traditional notions of high ability and achievement.

3.3 Emerging Ability, High Potential and Giftedness in Young Children

This section discusses notions of potential, ability and giftedness in young children with a focus on definitions and characteristics, the nature and nurture debate, identification and provision in the early years, the unique learning and socio-emotional needs of young able learners and effective practices in the fields of gifted education and general education. It is important to point out that the literature sought out was that pertaining to young pupils with emerging abilities in the pre-school, kindergarten and early primary grades (up to 8 years), as my research study focuses on six to seven year old high-potential learners in a second-grade mixed-ability classroom. Even though, for a variety of reasons that are discussed throughout this piece of research, the actual use of the label 'gifted children' is refuted and replaced by the notion of emerging abilities, talent development and potential for reaching high levels of performance, it was felt that an exploration of what is traditionally known as the field of 'giftedness' would be instrumental in starting a discussion about that group of learners in an early years classroom who have the potential to develop at more advanced rates than their peers and reach high levels of performance.

3.3.1 Definitions and Characteristics of Young Gifted Children

"The gifts of nature are infinite in their variety, and mind differs from mind almost as much as body from body." (Quintilian, in Porter, 2005, p.3)

The field of gifted education has been inundated with debates over issues of definitions and conceptions of giftedness. Education for the gifted and talented has a relatively long history in the United States of America and thus, a great deal of literature and research into the field is located within a US context (Brown et al., 2005; Colangelo, 2003; Plucker & Callahan, 2014). Although other countries, including European ones, developed a keen interest in the study of giftedness at a later stage than the US, they have nevertheless gained momentum over the past two to three decades as can be observed from the rich literature base available on giftedness and gifted education as well as the various associations, centres and university institutes dedicated to this aspect of education (Bailey et al., 2008; Barab & Plucker, 2002;

Eyre, 1997; Freeman, 2007; Heller et al., 1993; Koshy & Casey, 1997; Morgan, 2006; Sutherland & Stack, 2014, Wallace et al., 2010). Irrespective of the cultural contexts, provision and educational planning efforts for learners identified as potentially gifted is more often than not based on a conception of the nature of giftedness (Yun Dai & Coleman, 2005). In their review on effective interventions for gifted and talented children, Bailey et al., (2008, pg.4) identify the links between the ways in which countries conceptualise giftedness in learners and the kind of provision they offer, which ultimately result in a varied terminology in the way 'gifted children' are referred to and the string of terms that one finds in literature such as 'gifted', 'talented' and 'more able learners'. Plucker and Callahan (2014) also outline the way that definitions and conceptions of giftedness have evolved over the decades in line with theoretical advancement of constructs such as creativity and intelligence. Amongst the numerous examples they provide, Plucker and Callahan (2014, pg.391) explain how:

"many early intelligence theories, whether unitary or more multifaceted,, emphasized the importance of the individual as the unit of interest and were largely psychometrically derived. Creativity theories from that era had similar characteristics. Early approaches to giftedness followed a similar trajectory, focusing largely on psychometric, unitary conceptions, such as that of Terman (1926) and Hollingworth (1942). Many successful programs for gifted youth, such as the Talent Search programs, were initially based by Julian Stanley and his colleagues on these psychometric conceptions."

Historically, there was a hierarchical view of giftedness and talent which benefited the intellectually and academically gifted (usually adopting the underlying view of giftedness in terms of a high IQ score) over other forms of talent outside the academic sphere such as the creative arts and sports. However, as Porter (2005, p. 4) points out, the diversity between individuals demands for a wider view of ability and intelligence in that "...our abilities define who we are as people, so artistic expression is as central to the artist's personhood as academic achievement is to the intellectual."

It is important to keep in mind that very able children do not form a homogenous group. They differ in a variety of ways and exhibit a wide range of individual differences. Passow (1994, p.4) gives the following descriptions to illustrate the multidimensional nature of giftedness. Some children may be slightly above average while others may be so unusual and far above the average as to be extremely rare. Some individuals may be potentially talented in one single area while others may appear to have a multitude of talent potentials in a number of areas. Some may have the motivation to realise their potential while others may lack the will and interest to develop their talents. Some learners may be high academic achievers and

quick absorbers of information and knowledge while others may be slower to acquire knowledge but may use new knowledge creatively. Some children may manifest exceptional abilities at an early age, while others may be “late bloomers”. Most importantly, cultural differences and common educational practices are also influential in terms of which talents are more likely to be recognised and nurtured by different cultures.

Definitions of giftedness abound, and, due to the multi-dimensional nature of giftedness, they very often refer to different aspects and perspectives of what constitutes giftedness. A main distinction exists between an already manifest gift or talent in a particular area of endeavour (ranging from intellectual giftedness to interpersonal ability) and giftedness in terms of childhood potential that must be nurtured in order for it to flourish. The US federal Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act adopts the following definition of giftedness:

“Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

Porter (2005) acknowledges the difficulty to come up with an infallible description of what it means to be a gifted young learner. However, she argues that effective provision for this group of learners is not possible without the use of a working definition and therefore proposes the following one:

“Gifted young children are those who have the capacity to learn at a pace and level of complexity that is significantly in advance of their age peers in any domain or domains that are valued in and promoted by their sociocultural group.”

Renzulli presents a ‘three-ring’ conception in which he considers three factors that are important to the development of gifted behaviours – above average ability, creativity and task commitment (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).



He distinguished between general (such as processing information and abstract thinking) and specific abilities (like the capacity to acquire new knowledge and perform in an activity) within the above average ability ring. By creativity, Renzulli means the fluency, flexibility, and originality of thought, openness to experience, sensitivity to stimulation, and a willingness to take risks. He also argues that if a child is not committed to the task being carried out, excellence will not be achieved. Renzulli equates task commitment with motivation turned into action and includes perseverance, endurance, hard work, self-confidence, perceptiveness and a special fascination for particular topics or subjects. Monks (in Monks, Katzko & Van Boxtel, 1992) has added a social dimension (which includes the family, the school and the child's peers) to Renzulli's model in which he suggests that the environment of the pupil is significant in determining whether the child's potential will be fulfilled. Eventually, Renzulli (2002) expanded his conception of giftedness to include personality and environmental factors as background factors influencing gifted behaviours.

Giftedness is also described in terms of 'asynchronous development' because gifted young children might develop intellectually, emotionally and physically at different rates to their chronological age (Silverman, 1997). This view holds that gifted children demonstrate greater discrepancies among the several areas of development than average students. The Columbus Group (1991 in Buckner, 2009) developed the following definition of giftedness based on the premise of uneven development in gifted children:

"Giftedness is 'asynchronous development' in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders

them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally."

Gardner (1983) is among the researchers and theorists who have had considerable impact on our understanding of giftedness and intelligence. His theory of multiple intelligences has been accepted worldwide and is viewed by classroom teachers as a useful starting point for attempting to identify gifted behaviour among their pupils (Koshy and Casey, 1997, p. 27). Gardner recognises eight relatively separate forms of ability or intelligences and holds that each individual possesses a unique blend of these eight intelligences – namely linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Concepts of intelligence in relation to giftedness shall be discussed in more detail further below.

The existence of numerous definitions and models demonstrates the complex nature of giftedness. Consequently, the quest to formulate a list of characteristics which is common to such a diverse population is not simple. Nevertheless, the literature presents a variety of lists of characteristics of gifted behaviour. These lists assist classroom teachers and parents to improve their accuracy and judgment when making referrals and constitute one of the criteria used to identify pupils' potential and abilities. Thus, these checklists provide a framework for the observation of high ability. Porter (2005, p.8-12) presents a comprehensive summary of common indicators of advanced development in young children which include cognitive/ thinking skills, learning styles, speech and language skills, motor abilities, artistic expression, musical skills, social skills as well as emotional and behavioural characteristics.

Some of the characteristics that tend to feature in most checklists are early achievement of developmental milestones, keen observation of the environment and active eliciting of stimulation from their surroundings, the ability to learn new ideas and concepts quickly, a show of dislike of repetitive and closed tasks, intrinsic motivation to strive for excellence, perfectionism (in the sense of having high standards), inclined to choose unusual methods of working, early comprehension and advanced speech in terms of vocabulary, grammar and clear articulation, highly developed empathy for others and sensitivity towards social issues and injustices (Koshy & Casey, 1997; Porter, 2005).

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the above conceptions of high ability and giftedness tend to describe talent or potential as set of traits that reside in an individual's mind. Although reference is made to the child's context or environment, the individual remains the focus of these theories. Barab and Plucker (2002) criticise such depiction of high ability and argue for a reconceptualisation of what constitutes ability, intelligence and talent development. In particular, they acknowledge the transactional nature of processes of interaction between the individual and his/her environment in that individuals, the environment as well as socio-cultural relations all have the potential to be impacted and transformed by the interaction. Rather than portraying talent as a 'possession' of the individual child, Barab and Plucker suggest that talent may be viewed as an outcome of persons-in-situations - in this way, talent development can become an opportunity available to all pupils rather than to the selected few. This issue is explored further in the sections on the nature versus nurture debate as well as the one on theories of learning and ability.

As I read and write about definitions and characteristics of gifted young children, the image of Peter¹, with his radiant smile and big blue shining eyes, comes to my mind. Peter had just turned five when he came to my class, a few years ago. I was the classroom teacher of a group of first graders with mixed-abilities in a school with a reputation for fast and high academic standards. It also happened to be my first year of working in that particular school. Peter, son to Maltese parents who had moved to England for work-related reasons, had received his first years of schooling in a British environment and had just come back to Malta together with his parents and three siblings. As the year passed by, I couldn't but help observing his advanced language skills (in terms of vocabulary, literacy development and comprehension), his keen interest and fascination with words, his perseverance and willingness to perform highly (in most subjects), his tendency for perfectionism, his curiosity and natural ability to investigate, explore and delve deeply into topics of interest as well as a deep and mature emotional intelligence manifest in his highly developed empathy for others (both adults and peers) and his heightened sense of fairness. He settled into our routine and pace of work with little difficulty and never complained even though his mother admitted to a very different system between what Peter was used to in his previous school and what he was now experiencing. The five-year old boy would frequently bring to school his favourite

¹ The names of children mentioned in my writing have been changed to protect their identity.

books (in his own words 'I cannot possibly choose a favourite book because there are too many fantastic ones!') and read them with great fluency and expression. His peers would sit around him and simply watch and listen, fascinated by Peter's ability to read so well and with such expression that his words seemed to come to life as they came out of his mouth.

And then there was Philip, who differed from Peter in many ways but happened to be in the same class and who was also a child I perceived as particularly able. At first glance, Philip looked like a big boy with a constant runny nose whose motor skills were still developing as he moved in peculiar ways and seemed to lack coordination when walking and running. It took Philip quite long to settle into classroom routine and seemed to stare intensely into my face and remain silent when I kindly asked him to sit or work with his peers or simply asked about how he was feeling or what he was thinking about. However, behind this facet of a five-year old boy of average motor development and somewhat different behaviour, there lay a boy of extraordinary intelligence and unique gifts and talents. He was left-handed and held his pencil in a unique way but managed to form his letters neatly and accurately. He was undoubtedly a perfectionist in the presentation of his written work and in the accuracy he gave to oral answers. On the other hand, he wasn't much organised with his belongings and usually forgot to follow the usual classroom procedures unless reminded about them. Philip was indeed what you would call an all-rounder in that he performed highly in all subjects and usually knew the concepts covered before they were even presented. His vast general knowledge and attention to detail were impressive – he was well conversed on topics such as space, ancient history and geography. Gradually, as Philip's confidence and ease with the group increased, he began to demonstrate a keen sense of humour with a fascination for children's jokes, funny stories and sounds. His reading skills were well beyond his age and he could read and comprehend practically anything you presented ranging from fiction to fact, with a preference for the latter. Philip was remarkably sensitive to issue of social injustices, natural disasters, death and famine in underdeveloped countries. His violin teacher, a well-known violinist in the Maltese musical scene, also talked highly of Philip's rapid progress and high potential and talent for music. I was also very surprised to witness his athletic capabilities during our Fun Day.

The above two examples of potentially very able learners demonstrate the complexity of identifying young children of high potential due to both the heterogeneous nature of young

gifted learners as well as the discrepancies that might exist amongst and within children's different areas of development.

3.3.2 The Gifted-Child Paradigm and the Talent-Development Paradigm

An ongoing debate over the issue of whether nature or nurture (or both) play a predominant role in the development of emerging abilities and talents still persists and can be summarized as falling somewhere within a continuum between two distinct paradigms: the gifted-child paradigm and the talent-development paradigm. The former is guided by a more static, status-defined model that distinguishes between the gifted in general and the non-gifted or degrees of giftedness (usually identified through psychometric testing). The latter, on the other hand, presents a more fluid and contextualised approach whereby the focus is on "effective nurturing as a productive educational strategy" in a way as to achieve optimal growth for high-level expertise and creative productivity in those who demonstrate the potential for exceptional accomplishments in different areas of human endeavour (Yun Dai & Coleman, 2005).

Intelligence, ability, giftedness and cognition have up to a few years ago been considered to have a strong genetic component that limits the extent to which an individual can develop his/her abilities and competences. This notion of natural endowment in the field of gifted education can be traced back to the early works of Galton (1869/1978) and Terman (1925), both of whom assumed that intelligence is genetically inherited and can be measured and quantified. We have moved a long way from such early conceptions of intelligence and, as mentioned earlier on, notions of ability, intelligence and cognition are pointing us towards a more contextualised interpretation of what constitutes gifted behaviour or high potential.

In a special issue on *Nature, Nurture and the Development of Exceptional Competence*, Yun Dai & Coleman (2005) present three distinct arguments that frame the debate on the interplay between nature and nurture on the development of gifted ability. The first point of view, *the nature versus nurture* argument, tends to place a greater emphasis on genetic inheritance and a conception of giftedness as a 'fixed and static personal trait', without which no fair amount of effective provision can lead to exceptional performance. However, there seems to be no way of knowing for sure whether one excludes the other. Debates and research are still being carried out to determine whether and to which extent genetic inheritance sets limitations on the emergence and manifestation of exceptional ability in a

fundamental way. The second viewpoint, *the nature and nurture* interplay, puts forward the idea of a balance between personal traits and the role of the environment on the development of high ability. Moreover, it stresses the tendency for talented people to advance their own development by making or acceding to choices that nurture their gift or talent. Yun Dai and Coleman (2005, p.376) point out that characteristics such as intellectual curiosity and precocity, novelty seeking behaviour and marked empathy and concern over human conditions in young gifted children facilitate the development and recognition of exceptional ability. Although such choices may initially be unconsciously made, they eventually may become more deliberate and self-sought. Finally, *the nature in nurture* point of view focuses on the influence of culture and context in the recognition and promotion of certain areas of human endeavour in that "...the concept of giftedness is fundamentally context-bound; competence changes when context changes." (Yun Dai & Coleman, 2005, p.377).

It is evident that current lines of thought are pointing towards a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the role of nature and nurture in the development of gifts and emerging abilities. Gardner (1997, p.10) points out that:

"All individual growth reflects constant and dynamic interaction between an organism, with its internal programs, and the environment, whose constituent properties are never wholly predictable... These dynamic interactions continue throughout active life, giving shape and meaning to an individual's existence and ultimate accomplishments."

Nowadays, giftedness in young children is likely to be seen more in terms of potential or promising accomplishment. Sutherland (2008) talks of 'emergent abilities' in young learners and emphasises the importance of developing positive learner identities in potentially gifted and talented young learners. She places a great responsibility in the hands of early years educators who are considered to be instrumental in fostering positive learning dispositions as learner identities can change depending on the learning context. Children's own beliefs about high ability will be influenced and at times changed by their interaction with other children as well as with the significant adults in their lives. Teachers and educators, who consciously or unconsciously transmit their own beliefs on what constitutes high ability, can impact positively or negatively on a child's learner identity and therefore foster or hinder a child's emergent ability from developing further.

Gagne's (2003) has developed a differentiated model of giftedness and talent in which he distinguishes between 'natural' human abilities (which can be observed in very young children who have had no systematic training or practice) and fields of talent or above average human activity (which have developed as a result of the impact of a number of intrapersonal and environmental factors on the aptitude domains). His model of talent development defines as 'gifted' those children who have the potential to perform highly in one or more domains and as 'talented' those children whose performance has already reached a high level.

By placing a student's learning at the centre of his model, Gagne is ultimately giving schools a significant role in determining the extent to which a highly able learner will transform his 'gift' into exceptional performance. This model draws attention to the need to provide appropriate and challenging learning situations to further develop the abilities of 'talented' learners. It also alerts teachers to the needs of gifted underachievers – students of high ability who have nonetheless not translated their potential into performance. An interesting component of Gagne's model is the notion of 'chance' in that although children can have little control over their socio-economic family background and the extent to which a home environment can stimulate and enhance their high ability, on the other hand schools and teachers can increase a learner's 'chance' to develop and enhance his/her potential by adopting an inclusive approach that nurtures and celebrates diversity in learners including giftedness.

As already pointed out in the previous section, Barab and Plucker (2002, p.178) question traditional notions of intelligence, ability and cognition and argue that:

"... the place to look for talent is not in the head, or in the environment, but in the variables of the 'flow itself'. Talent, or evidence of being knowledgeably skilful, is thus considered present when individuals, frequently using multiple resources and always interacting as part of the sociocultural world, demonstrate their propensity for forming particular relations."

They provide a theoretical framework grounded in more recent perspectives including those from ecological and cultural psychology, situated cognition, distributed cognition, activity theory and legitimate peripheral participation to argue that high ability and talent should not be regarded as "... constructs possessed by individuals, but, instead, as sets of relations that are actualized through dynamic transactions." This notion of dynamic transactions and

complex processes of interaction between the child and the world around her² (which includes the physical environment within which she grows up, the experiences and activities that shape her development and the people she comes in contact with has evolved from Vygotsky's concept of mediation who, in turn, has developed a theory within which social, cultural and historical forces play a part in development including that of psychological processes.

The talent-development paradigm, therefore, presents a valid argument for high-quality education and high-level curriculum for all learners to provide enriching and stimulating learning opportunities where gifts and talents may flourish and develop. One thing is worth looking into: an enriching and challenging learning environment may be one of the determining factors in the development of emerging abilities and talents in young learners. Teachers have the power to influence a child's learning journey and therefore disagreements such as the above cannot be allowed to alienate educators from their important task of providing for the learning and socio-emotional needs of all pupils including the potentially very able ones. The nature-nurture debate is undoubtedly necessary and worth looking into for a sound theoretical background. It is my belief that, given the lack of concordance on the extent to which nature and nurture influence a child's learning trajectory, one is pushed towards a focus on effective provision and an enriched learning experience for all as a more productive and sensible educational strategy, particularly in the early years when high ability is still emerging and learner identities are beginning to develop.

3.3.3 Identification in the Early Years

Viewing high ability as a multi-dimensional concept has had a considerable and unavoidable impact on the choice of assessment procedures for identifying potential giftedness. Methods of identification based solely on intellectual assessment as measured by traditional intelligence tests have been extended to include multiple criteria. This includes the use of standardised and non-standardised instruments, process and performance indicators, and multiple sources of data such as self-, teacher and peer nomination.

The use of multiple criteria for the identification of high ability in primary classrooms will undoubtedly be effective to recognise gifts and talents in students whom Gagne considers to

² The pronoun 'he' or 'she' is used interchangeably to refer to a young child or learner.

be 'talented' (see above). But what about those learners who for some reason haven't yet unmasked their ability or whose gift is still emerging? As I have pointed out earlier on, the characteristics of children with high potential or abilities may only be exhibited if the child is exposed to a stimulating and enriching educational environment which encourages "...creativity, originality, divergent thinking skills, interest and motivation." (Van Boxtel, 1992, p.32). What about children who come from deprived home backgrounds or who simply do not get a chance to develop their gifts due to a lack of opportunity or recognition by the adults around them? Moreover, taking into account recent perspectives on learning and development (see previous section), one must acknowledge the mutual influence of both individual and supra-individual factors in human learning and development in that human beings actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them (Daniels, 2001).

The idea that adequate and challenging educational provision must precede identification of high ability or potential giftedness has been gaining ground for the past decade. In a study to examine the implementation of project-based learning as a means to increase levels of attainment and to validate potential in students who are typically underserved in gifted programs in the U.S.A., Hertzog (2005, p.248) puts forward the idea that:

"The necessity to develop special assessment tools to recognise potential may be diminished in classrooms where teachers are constantly seeking to recognise the talents of the students within the context of their everyday learning activities."

Sutherland (2008, p.59) points out that when educators and teachers adopt a traditional approach to the identification of giftedness, they are looking for what children can already do and, consequently, identification is based on already acquired skills rather than on learning and learning potential. She suggests that:

"If we accept that the search for ability in the early years is, by its very nature, a search for emerging abilities, then we have to adopt a different approach from the traditional model... Identification through provision would seem to offer a more holistic and inclusive approach ... Starting with provision means all children can be offered the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do."

Findings from a ten-year longitudinal study carried out by Schofield and Hotulainen (2004) in Finland to determine whether early identification of gifted learners could successfully predict later academic excellence, show that although students identified as being gifted at the age of six continued to demonstrate high academic ability throughout their educational journey, these same students did not value their academic abilities. This attitude was the result of an

educational system that stresses uniformity and a system that does not encourage the development of rich learning contexts where gifts and talents are nurtured and celebrated.

Gross (1999) adopts the analogy of 'small poppies' to describe the experience of highly gifted children in the early years. She talks about the 'cutting down to size of children who develop at a faster rate or attain higher levels of achievement than their age-peers'. One of the major causes that lead schools and educators to value uniformity over heterogeneity is the lack of teacher training in the field of giftedness which results in a perpetuation of misconceptions about cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted pupils. Consequently, young learners quickly realise that high ability and precocity is frowned upon by adults and peers and therefore adjust their behaviour to conform and feel accepted.

"Intellectually gifted young children are much less acceptable to the general and educational community than are their physically gifted age-peers, and their efforts to develop their talents are too often greeted with apathy, lack of understanding, or open hostility. It is time that we acknowledge and address this bias so that all our small poppies may lift their heads to the sky."

In an article on the early development and education of highly able young children, Freeman (2007) argues that in early childhood, potential for high ability is enhanced through environmental influences that include encouragement, example and the provision of materials and facilities. Furthermore, as children grow older, they require learning contexts that allow for 'playful enquiry' where they are able to ask questions, search for ideas, experiment and look flexibly at concepts from different angles. Freeman also emphasizes the centrality of personal relationships for young able children to fully prosper and develop at their own pace and to their full potential.

3.3.4 Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children

"We want more for our children than healthy bodies. We want our children to have lives filled with friendship and love and high deeds. We want them to be eager to learn and be willing to confront challenges ... We want them to grow up with confidence in the future, a love of adventure, a sense of justice, and courage enough to act on that sense of justice. We want them to be resilient in the face of setbacks and failures that growing up always brings." (Seligman, 1996, p.6)

Gifted individuals are first and foremost children who have the needs, aspirations and vulnerabilities of all children growing up. They are social beings who, like all beings, thrive in environments that value them for who they are but feel threatened when misunderstood or excluded because of their differences. When children enter school, they usually come armed with lots of expectations and enthusiasm. Young children, who up to school entry have been praised and encouraged every time they exhibited exceptional ability or potential in their

speech, performance or talent, probably have even higher expectations of things they will learn and do at school. Unfortunately, they soon experience the 'cutting down' practice of 'tall poppies' which either pushes them to hide their talents so they don't stand out in their group or to seek attention and recognition in other ways, such as playing the fool or engaging in disruptive behaviour (Leyden, 2010).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when giftedness was mainly attributed to exceptional intellectual ability, it was prevalently believed that gifted individuals were more prone to become 'social misfits' or insane (Webb, 1993, p.525). For many decades, researchers have sought to study the particular socio-emotional needs and problems of gifted children and to eradicate the underlying myths around them. Some of the challenges that seem to be linked to the nature of giftedness are high sensitivity, involvement, perfectionism and self-critical reflections due to gifted individuals' highly attuned nervous systems in their brain that contribute both to advanced learning and to an increase in their emotional sensitivity and intensity (Piechowski, 2003; Porter, 2005). Problems stemming from their environment are usually a lack of understanding and support by the people around them.

Difficulties may arise when gifted children try to fit in an environment that does not value and recognise high ability or potential – the following quote illustrates the unrealistic expectations put on gifted children when schools fail to provide them with appropriate educational experiences:

"Putting the highly gifted child into a normal classroom may be likened to putting a natural runner at the beginning of a running track on which every step is carefully painted and numbered. He is told to run the track, putting his feet into each proper space in turn. When he tries to run that way, he stumbles, falters and loses his natural rhythm, balance and stride." (Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982, p.234)

The difficulties that children who are identified as 'gifted' at a young age tend to experience due to misconceptions about their giftedness and a lack of willingness by adults and peers to accept and celebrate differences cannot be undermined. One of the recurrent themes in the literature on gifted children is the social, emotional and behavioural problems that children who exhibit exceptionally high potential or ability may experience as they develop (Eyre, 1997; Leyden, 2010; Porter, 2005). On the one hand, children whose gifts and talents are not recognised and provided for may become alienated from school and underachieve. As a consequence, they may be forced to mask their talents to conform or develop other more acceptable ways of fitting in, which, in turn, might not be appreciated by teachers. On the

other hand, children who are identified as 'gifted' at a young age might experience a variety of problems which still lead to social, behavioural and emotional problems. Teachers who are unaware of the asynchrony in a gifted child's development might frown upon behaviour that might come across as 'childish' compared to that child's advanced intellectual capabilities or as rebellious in the case of a child who asks 'too many' questions.

In the first scenario, a child who demonstrates an ability or potential to reach high levels of attainment in a particular area of endeavour is left unidentified and, as a result, the child becomes bored, frustrated and alienated from school. However, one must delve into the real source of the boredom and frustration that this child is experiencing: is it truly a consequence of unidentified giftedness? Would the same child underachieve in a 'smart context' that might not promote formal assessment of 'giftedness' per se but organises learning in a way that fosters talent development? Does a child really need a label to deserve a rich and stimulating educational experience? What about a school ethos that encourages all its students to strive for excellence by providing varied and appropriate challenging experiences whilst supporting and scaffolding learning so that all children experience success? Would there still be room for underachievement within such an environment?

In the second scenario, a child is identified as 'gifted' but his teachers are unaware of the fact that different areas of development may develop at different rates. This child achieves higher levels of attainment than his peers in academic subjects but (just like his classmates) engages in undesirable behaviour when interacting with his friends, making use of his keen sense of humour to 'play the fool' in order to fit in. The discrepancies between a gifted child's intellectual development and his social development may lead to the use of reproach and contempt by teachers who expect 'more' or 'better' behaviour from a gifted child. In this case, is the label assigned to the child following formal assessment of his academic abilities helping him to be included or is it leading to unreasonable expectations from the adults around him particularly with regards to his social and emotional development? In Freeman's longitudinal study (1991) of the development of a large number of children identified as 'gifted', it was documented that some of these students experienced problems and challenges as they moved through childhood and adolescence as a result of being labelled 'gifted'.

Upon an examination of the literature on the social and emotional needs of gifted children, I feel a stronger belief about the importance of a stimulating and inclusive learning environment that does not necessarily identify and label giftedness in the early years but provides plenty of opportunities for children to develop their gifts and talents. Billington's advice for professionals to respect and value a child in his uniqueness by reflecting upon how they talk about, relate to and write about the child in front of them comes to mind (Billington, 2006). Educators and professionals are encouraged to 'see' each child for who he really is not for who he is expected to be. Part of a teacher's role becomes one that ensures the creation and design of the learning environment in a way that encourages independence and creativity while fostering and celebrating diversity among learners as a natural and desirable outcome rather than as a burden or 'handicap', thus a push towards 'complimentary' rather than 'compensatory' pedagogical approaches in terms of inclusive practices (Watkins et al., 2014; Smith, 2003). Within such a climate, it seems sensible to suggest that the practice of labelling be questioned and only adopted if such a label will ensure appropriate inclusive provision. This issue will be explored further in the section on inclusive practices.

3.3.5 On Labelling: Discourses of High Ability and Giftedness

It has been argued that the process of labelling in the domains of education and psychology serves more the institutions and professionals who demand that children be assessed and their behaviour explained rather than the children themselves. A label can have wide-ranging and lifelong effects upon the lives of the children who are assigned that label as well as the adults around them (Billington, 2000). Labelling has become a focus of governmentality on the lives of children, an effective means of greater control of the population and, as Foucault (1979) points out, an issue of power over populations that need to be regulated.

"Psychologized discourses circulating within the system of education have made important contributions as acts of government which, for example, with increasing tenacity, enable the identification and pathologization of children ... who are allocated a social disability in whatever form, physical, mental or emotional." (Billington, 2000, p. 24)

How does the issue of governmentality relate to the notion of giftedness and high ability? Adopting the arguments presented by Billington and Foucault, one would be tempted to refrain from advocating for the recognition of and provision for a complex trait such as 'potential giftedness' in children – in fear of causing an upheaval in the lives of children who,

if given the right opportunities, may do things that are deemed 'exceptional' or 'extraordinary' in the eyes of the professional adults around them.

Schulz (2005) argues that gifted education, despite its claims to include the gifted child in the educational system, is in actual fact more geared towards a competitive and individualistic approach that ultimately defies the social function of education. My professional interest in the field of gifted education has always been tainted by an uneasy feeling about the issue of labelling a child as gifted or potentially gifted. For a child to be labelled as 'gifted', s/he must usually be assessed by an educational psychologist after being nominated by teachers, parents and peers. This implies a possibility for a certain kind of 'giftedness' to be recognised, whilst leaving out other similarly important gifts. Also, standardised tests usually measure what a child can already do and therefore such practices usually favour children who have already been advantaged by rich learning experiences. Measuring a child's capability through standardised tests will also leave out a number of disadvantaged or underachieving children who, if provided with the right kind of educational experiences, might prove to have high potential to perform in a number of areas. Moreover, in the early years, early identification will probably target the more confident children with advanced speech and leave out children whose ability to manifest their talent is still developing or hidden.

Gates (2010) raises a number of questions regarding the social consequences of the label of 'gifted' and advocates a renewed call for change in the way gifted students are labelled, suggesting that the field of gifted education should learn from similar changes made in special education. In recent years, the latter has promoted the practice of calling children by name and not by disability – instead of referring to students as 'disabled', educators now talk about these same children as students who exhibit learning disabilities. The shifting terminology has brought the child back into focus rather than the disability, thus moving away from a deficit model. However, this has not yet taken place in the field of gifted education. Schools continue to categorise children through the use of labels that allow the 'gifted' to gain access to special classes and groups whilst leaving out others who may be equally gifted in the same or other areas of endeavour. This practice has inevitable social and affective consequences on both the ones identified as 'gifted' and those who are not.

“The way children are labelled begins to define who they are and influences how they feel about themselves. However, a child is a person of many facets, one of which may be giftedness... Students who exhibit giftedness too often are expected to act and/or perform differently from their peers based on this one facet alone ... It is therefore important for educators to help ensure that children who exhibit giftedness see themselves in a way that includes their giftedness as a part of their more holistic selves, rather than a defining characteristic.” (Gates, 2010, p.202)

In the Maltese context, children are not labelled ‘gifted’ at any age – as a matter of fact, currently there exists no formal institution or policy within our educational system that tackles the issue of ‘giftedness’ per se as one can observe from the historical background and information regarding legislation and recent development in policy documentation in section 3.4. One must analyse the reasons behind this lack of ‘recognition’ or mention of this facet of children as capable learners. One would be tempted to assume that such a position implies an educational system that implicitly promotes the development of gifts and talents through existent inclusive practices that provide challenging and appropriate learning experiences to very able children. I have posed this question earlier on in this review of literature but, as already pointed out, such an analysis would require a separate investigation into the historical, cultural and educational influences that would have led Maltese educators and policy makers to intentionally or inadvertently adopt such a position with regards to children with gifts and talents in our schools. Nevertheless, I would like to pose and reflect upon the following questions: What are the implications of a lack of mention of this specific group of learners in our policies? How are Maltese training institutions preparing teachers vis-à-vis inclusive pedagogies that foster talent development in our schools? Are teachers in mixed-ability classrooms creating learning environments that can be defined as ‘smart contexts’ for ‘smart kids’? Are Maltese learners encouraged to discover and develop their gifts and talents or hide them? Is it actually possible to promote talent development in an environment that is characterised by diversity in terms of ability, needs and identities?

My aim for advocating for more inclusive classroom settings that promote talent development is definitely not to encourage the practice of assigning labels to children with gifts and talents in an educational system that does not yet do so. However, professionals in our educational institutions generally and classroom teachers specifically must receive adequate training to be able to create enabling school and classroom environments that facilitate the development and nurturing of gifts and talents in all children. Such training seems not to be available yet and without awareness of the issue of giftedness in all its

complexity, it is hard to believe that Maltese schools are currently catering for the needs of all learners, including those with high potential or ability. I believe that there are ways of promoting more inclusive practices for children with emerging abilities and talents without resorting to restraining practices of governmentality mentioned earlier on. This issue will be explored further in the next section on inclusive pedagogies.

3.4 Inclusive Practices

3.4.1 Definitions of Inclusion

What does the term 'inclusive practices' refer to? Stainback and Stainback (1990) define an inclusive school as one which:

"... educates all students in the mainstream ... providing [them with] appropriate educational programs that are challenging yet geared to their capabilities and needs as well as any support and assistance they and/or their teachers need to be successful in the mainstream. But an inclusive school also goes beyond this. An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the community in the course of having his or her educational needs met" (p.3).

This definition implies a positive attitude towards diversity, embedded inclusive practices within the regular curriculum and an equality of opportunity to all students. Inclusion does not simply refer to the physical inclusion in the mainstream but to a general attitude of belonging where differences are not accentuated but are seen as an integral part of what makes a school community what it is – a community of learners rich in diversity of experiences, knowledge, interests and skills which are all relevant to the development and advancement of each child.

Proponents of the 'universal design for learning' approach to inclusion argue in favour of a process that considers the needs of all students in the classroom -including those with special educational needs, linguistic diversities and varied learning styles – from the outset of the planning stage and designing curriculum, instruction and evaluation with sufficient flexibility so that each student benefits (Turnbull et al. 2004). Universal design as a concept knows its roots to architecture – where design focuses on making buildings and public spaces accessible to all people. Universal design for learning draws on the success of the latter by presenting a curriculum that is accessible to all learners through augmentation or alteration of content and performance levels, adopting pedagogies that are consistent with students' most effective ways of learning, and evaluating how well students learn what a teacher has taught them

through a flexible process of adaptation that enables students to successfully demonstrate their learning. Preservice teachers as well as learning support assistants in Malta are presented with such a model of inclusion during their training where the focus is on enabling all students to progress in the general curriculum. Upon an exposition of *universal design for learning* in relation to the education of 'gifted children', Turnbull et al. (ibid., p. 210) point out that:

"Gifted students' unique characteristics require that the depth of a teacher's content coverage should correlate to the aptitude and level of the students' sophistication. In addition, in order to address possible motivation, attention and behavioural issues, good teachers should relate their instruction to their students' interests. Good teachers address their students' learning needs and related characteristics through universally designed learning."

This definition suggests that curriculum and instruction should include an element of flexibility and adaptation to meet the diverse needs of all learners in a classroom and that learning should be relevant to students' interests and experiences. Both suggestions are valid and a requirement for a truly inclusive pedagogy. It is my contention, however, that a prerequisite to the inclusion of children with potential to achieve high levels of performance within the regular classroom is to provide rich learning opportunities for all prior to any attempts at identification of giftedness are made. Schools must be encouraged to move away from practices that encourage the identification and labelling of 'gifted children' before actually having provided an enabling environment that enhances the chances for all learners to demonstrate their potential capabilities in different areas of endeavour. When effective provision precedes identification, a greater number of pupils will have the possibility to discover and develop their gifts and talents irrespective of their home background, cultures and life experiences.

"Inclusive education practice should be developmentally and culturally appropriate where any necessary specifically tailored support is the taken-for-granted ingredient of planning for all children's learning. Where this is achieved ... early education at its best is, de facto, inclusive education." (Clough & Nutbrown, 2004, p.196)

According to Nutbrown and Clough (2004), inclusive processes can be embedded in the early years curriculum, pedagogy and services designed to ultimately enable *all* children to discover and gain confidence in their own capacity for learning, thus giving every single child the opportunity to be the best they can be. The notion of inclusion in the early years context has moved from being directly linked to the integration of children with special educational needs to a more wide-ranging encompassing whole-school ethos that is seen as "... the drive

towards maximal participation in and minimal exclusion from early years settings, from schools and from society.” (ibid., p. 3) In this way, education within the emerging inclusive paradigm is concerned with the development of the whole child and schooling is seen more as a social activity where learners build on their knowledge, in ways that appeal to them as individuals whilst relating to others (adults and peers) within a safe and stimulating environment. Whereas up to a few years ago, the practice of inclusion was largely reductionist in nature, categorising and segregating learning difficulties and giftedness as phenomena in themselves that needed special intervention, Dyson et al (2002, p.7) describes inclusive education in the new paradigm as:

“...not so much concerned with provision for one or other group of students as for student diversity per se. The issue for schools is not that they have to accommodate a small number of atypical students into their standard practices, but that they have to respond simultaneously to students who all differ from each other in important ways – some of which pose particular challenges to the school ... inclusion is not simply about maintaining the presence of students in schools but about maximizing their participation in specified aspects of the school.”

This is undoubtedly in line with Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1994) thoughts on education as empowerment, as a process that becomes a ‘practice of freedom’. Although Freire did not explicitly use the term *inclusion*, his liberating, problem-posing, critical, dialogical, participatory philosophy of transformative education proposes an alternative vision of education based on values on inclusion, empowerment and love. In his eyes, it is imperative that teachers, as facilitators of learning, guide their students to a mode of learning that enables them to exercise their freedom. Education needs to be relevant to the context in which it takes place and relevant to the actors participating in the learning.

3.4.2 On Equity, Social Justice and Inclusion

How can schools ensure that all learners have access to a quality education that encourages them to flourish and participate fully in the learning process? What principles must be valued in order to guarantee social justice within the educational sphere? Does the idea of ‘equal opportunities for all’ imply the availability of the same curriculum for all students? How can schools ascertain that learning is relevant to all children irrespective of race, class or gender as opposed to the perpetuation of social inequalities through the promotion of a certain kind of knowledge – that of the privileged? In what ways can the notion of an enabling learning environment for the development of gifts and talents be linked with that of social justice? Issues of inequalities in the provision of physical resources, inequalities in basic relationships

between children and their families and inequalities in the curriculum have been at the centre of ongoing debates by philosophers of education coming from different schools including critical theorists, liberalists and feminist philosophers (Noddings, 1995).

The argument I present in favour of an enabling environment that encourages the development and fostering of talents in all learners includes the idea of ensuring that all schools, irrespective of level, locality or catchment area, are provided with the necessary resources (both human and material) to create a safe, attractive and stimulating learning environment that is accessible to all and that reflects the different cultures of the school population. Such an inclusive educational setting would help eradicate the inequalities currently existent in most educational systems where the 'best' teachers and resources are given to the higher achieving or more elite schools that cater for children coming from richer backgrounds. Such unjust practices result in the perpetuation of social injustices on different groups, particularly those coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds. By practising an ethics of care, making sure that all children have access to adequate and attractive school facilities under the care of dedicated, knowledgeable and effective teachers and school staff members, schools would be providing equal opportunities for all learners to discover their capabilities, interests and talents and therefore helping them (including children coming from deprived home backgrounds) to have a chance at becoming the best they can be.

Additionally, an enabling environment would need to create connections between the home and the schools for two main reasons (amongst many others): first, as a means to make learning relevant by starting from where the child is at and taking into account the experiences, interests and knowledge the child brings along to school. Secondly, one must assess the kind of relationships that children would have built with their family members – whereas many children benefit from healthy, strong relationships with one or more adults who provide emotional support so necessary to maintain a child's growth and confidence, unfortunately there are families who, due to the hardships they experience or the negative outlook towards life and a lack of trust in people and the world, may fail to establish good relationships that support their children's healthy emotional, intellectual and moral development. Bronfenbrenner (1979), who locates the school setting within the wider network of settings inhabited by the child, rightly points out to the importance of supportive

links between the different settings (called *microsystems*) that the child experiences for maximising his/her progress and development.

In connection to the above argument, schools must practice what Freire calls a 'pedagogy of hope' so that "... the educational practice of a progressive option will never be anything but an adventure in unveiling." (Freire, 1994, p.1) This ties in perfectly with the educational philosophy that guides my practice as a researcher-practitioner – that of seeking to not merely teach subjects but to 'see' my pupils as individuals in their own right, to transmit my love of learning and of life in general and to hopefully encourage their gifts and talents to flourish while supporting them to think critically, be creative and take risks in their learning.

Mortimer Adler (1982) recommends in his *Paideia Proposal* that all students should have the same curriculum at least through primary and secondary schooling. At face value, this may come across as an attempt towards the eradication of social injustices – as a matter of fact, Adler himself advocates for the same education for all as a basic requirement of democracy. What do liberal philosophers, so concerned with the concept of justice, equality and equity have to say about such a proposal? Dewey, at times labelled a 'pragmatic liberal', proposes that a true democratic community must want for all its children what the wisest of parents would wish for his own child (1916). What would that be? Would a parent of a large family wish and provide exactly the same things for all of his children? Or would it be more likely that such a parent would provide different things for different children? In his educational writings, Dewey invariably insists that the method of inquiry is far more important than the content which is being taught. Therefore, this suggests that children can be allowed to pursue areas of interest and topics that tickle their curiosity and that genuinely interest them. The teacher would take the role of facilitating the learning, encouraging the exploration of topics through different media and techniques depending on the different learning styles of different students. Such a pedagogical approach will be explored further in the section on innovative pedagogies.

3.4.3 Gifted Education and its Place within Inclusive Education

"We are sentient, dynamic beings capable of change: but we can be trapped not only in the learned sense of what we are not, but also in a powerful negative mirror image of ourselves that we perceive emanating from others. Yet, we can be released through enabling interactions with those special mentors who offer constant and strong scaffolding that we are, indeed, of great worth and significance as individuals with potential." (Wallace, 2008)

Despite claims by a number of gifted educators that children who demonstrate a potential for high ability cannot be adequately catered for in regular classrooms, the educational trend nowadays has pushed many educational systems around the world to serve all students, including those with gifted potential, through the provision of educational alternatives within regular classrooms. As pointed out in the literature review above on the notion of giftedness, numerous factors intertwine to ultimately enable young learners with emerging abilities to bring these potential gifts and talents to fruition, thus transforming high potential into high achievement (Porter, 2005; Wallace, 2010). My argument supports the idea that schools can play a significant role in determining whether children with gifted potentials are given the opportunity to discover, develop and nurture their emerging gifts and talents or, on the other hand, to repress or hide them.

“Making the leap from promise to its fulfilment [giftedness] requires not only ability, but also ancillary personal attributes, along with enriching and opportunistic life experiences, all of them reinforcing each other in a rare and subtle combination.” (Tannenbaum, 1991, p. 27)

Wallace et al. (2010) have carried out multiple case-studies in twelve schools with the aim to highlight the practical strategies that successfully enable the transformation of pupils' *high potential* into *high achievement* within inclusive settings. The schools that participated in the studies all adopted a policy of inclusion that sought to provide rich and varied opportunities for all pupils in an effort to unmask, nurture and celebrate diverse gifts and talents within the school population. The schools believe that all pupils have gifts and talents (which in turn may vary both in kind and in potential) that need to be discovered and nurtured. The findings point to the importance of a creative and flexible curriculum full of opportunities for children to experience learning that is challenging, motivating and engaging as well as educational systems that promote and value pupil voice and optimal individual progression in the development of personalised and differentiated learning. Moreover, there is a strong sense of ownership and commitment by all stakeholders including administration, teachers, parents and pupils too. Another important characteristic of the schools involved in the studies is the creation of “a safe environment within an ethos and climate of high aspirations, expectations and respect.” (Wallace, 2010, p. 4) It seems that when specific attention is given to the needs of more able pupils in a school, there is often a general increase in the level of expectation of all pupils which results in higher achievement overall, not just for the ones with gifted potentials.

Buckner (2009) carried out a case-study of young gifted learners in a multi-ability classroom to analyse how they experience schooling during their first year of primary school. The themes of high parental involvement, social relationships, enriching learning environment, student-directed learning and asynchronous development emerged as a result of the study. Buckner points out that these themes can provide invaluable insights into adequate provision for the needs of gifted students in the early years within multi-ability classrooms. Amongst her recommendations, Buckner suggests that the classroom setting should be designed in a way as to encourage creativity, personalised learning through opportunities for personal exploration and study, independence and choice of activities. Moreover, such an enriching and stimulating classroom environment should facilitate the emergence and nurturing of gifts and talents in young learners who may initially not be regarded as particularly able.

Barab and Plucker (2002) also promote the idea of inclusive settings that are designed to support meaningful student-environment interactions and that provide numerous opportunities for *all* learners to discover their gifts and talents. The notion of the development of effective structures in which situated and participatory learning takes place through the interaction of individual, socio-cultural relations as well as interaction with the physical environment is best understood within a cultural-historical activity theoretical framework (as outlined in the section on *Influential Theories of Learning*). The view that task-related interaction between learners promotes learning and understanding has been widely documented (Patrick et al., 2005; Webb, 1983) – however the idea that learners interact not only with their teachers, mentors and peers but also with tools and artefacts in ‘smart contexts’ developed purposely to facilitate any potential engagement in talented transactions has only been gaining ground in educational literature over the past decade (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010).

Sutherland and Stack (2014) outline a legislative move within Scotland from a ‘needs-based’ model to one focused on the rights of the child in terms of inclusive practices where education becomes a right for all and where provision for gifted learners (as well as for other groups) is embedded in the curriculum so that, like any other group of learners, they are given access to adequate and challenging learning opportunities through a curriculum that is flexible, adequate and responsive (pg.81). The need for a more inclusive approach to education and the catering of individual needs as part of a whole school approach that promotes and ensures

meaningful learning opportunities for all learners seems to already be part and parcel of international educational agenda. Notwithstanding this, it is contended that there exists a discrepancy between the principles and vision embraced by policy development and actual practice in schools (Smith, 2003; Watkins et al., 2014).

More than a decade ago, in an article on the education of more able learners, Smith (2003) set out to examine whether inclusion as an approach worked for more able learners by analysing whether and to what extent was the legal and policy framework in Scotland supportive of appropriate provision and inclusion for this group of learners as well as for all learners. Smith pointed out that for true inclusion to work for all groups of learners including the more able ones, it is imperative that there is more clarity regarding the notion of inclusion and that educational systems move away from a compensatory model of inclusive education focused on filling in gaps or correcting perceived deficits (pg.201). He identified a number of barriers inherent in the educational system that seem to prevent Scottish schools and educators from embracing a more inclusive approach to the meeting of the diverse needs of all learners. Such barriers include, amongst others, the underdeveloped research base on inclusion and on the place of more able learners within the educational system, structural factors that serve more to exclude and segregate on the basis of differences and deficits rather than to include, limited resources as well as a drive to raise standards (pg.206).

On a similar note, and as recently as 2014, in their external audit report on the current situation of Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta, Watkins et al. (2014) conclude that many factors within the Maltese educational system reinforce an integrative approach for *some* learners rather than inclusion for *all* learners and criticise the current system for failing to fully meet children's right to equity and full participation for all because of the lack of concordance between policy and practice. They further comment on the fact that although the overall education policy in Malta specifically embraces a rights-based approach to inclusion, both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) are not fundamental to national legislation and thus at times this results in an infringement of rights for some learners (Watkins et al., 2014 pg.61). In addition to ensuring that inclusive education becomes an integral part of all legislation for education in Malta to be more consistent with the UNCRC and UNCRPD, the audit also recommends that training is provided to all stakeholders to

ensure implementation in practice of more inclusive practices so that teachers, policy makers and educators are able to maximise learning opportunities for *all* learners through the development of more flexible curricula, assessment frameworks and pedagogical approaches that engage students and stimulate their minds (pg. 14).

3.4.4 Inclusion and the Maltese Context

3.4.4.1 *History and Background of the Educational System in Malta*

This section sets out to provide some background information about the educational system in Malta and the relevant policies and acts that impinge upon provision, pedagogy, inclusion and practice in our schools.

Characterised largely by formal structures that include banding, streaming and selection, fairly traditional methods, a highly centralised system and the firm belief that homogenous groups provide the best context for learning, the education system in Malta has only recently began its move to more inclusive approaches and co-educational schooling (Eurypedia, 2014). Because the skills of its population are the best resource for this country due to limited natural resources, Malta spends around 5.9% of its GDP on education with the aim to encourage economic growth, improve productivity and contribute to the personal and social development of its citizens in an effort to reduce social inequalities. This is slightly above average in terms of expenditure for European countries (Watkins et al., 2014, pg.24).

An attempt to introduce comprehensive schooling in the early eighties led to an increase in families choosing to send their children to church or independent schools since these had retained selection, and consequently streaming and the 11 plus examination were re-introduced and remained for another two decades. Efforts to embrace more inclusive approaches to education over the past few years led to the eradication of the 11 plus examination and the introduction of mixed-ability teaching across the board. However, because of the difficulties and diverse needs of the student population, banding was introduced in 2014 as a temporary means to face some of these issues.

3.4.4.2 *Recent Developments in Education in Malta*

Recent developments and changes in education in Malta include the reorganisation of structures within Maltese schools to promote decentralisation and increase cooperation

amongst schools and collaboration with parents and others through the document *For All Children to Succeed* (2005). An amendment in the Education Act (2006) for Malta, enabled our system to be reorganised into the current college structure with each of the ten colleges around the island consisting of a cluster of secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. These became 'learning communities' that extended outside the school community. The following year, as a member of the UN member states, Malta also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) and efforts were thereafter made to include all marginalised groups of learners in a broader conception of inclusion.

The drive towards the development of inclusive schools in Malta has gathered momentum over the past decade, particularly with regards to a move toward the 'inclusion' rather than just the 'integration' of children with special educational needs (Bartolo, 2007). The National Minimum Curriculum, issued in 1999, promoted a nationally shared vision for a quality education for all and for equity and entitlement in compulsory education in Malta. It embraced a student-centred approach that provided a holistic learning experience to all learners:

"The ultimate aim of the National Minimum Curriculum is to develop an educational ethos that stimulates the development of students' potential without undermining the principles of solidarity and co-operation. (NMC, 1999, Principle 1)

To this end the educational community must develop a system that identifies, from an early stage, the potentials and needs of all students. As a result, programmes can be developed that maintain students on course to continuously achieve progress. (NMC, 1999, Principle 2)"

This provided the basis for further progress and improvement of our educational system. However, it soon became clear that there was a need for profound changes in terms of educational structures, aims and methods. Having joined the European Union in 2004, Malta needed to take into consideration important policy documents issued by the European Commission, including the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework (2006/962/EC); the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) and Europe 2020 – A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth (COM (2010) 2020). For the first time, Malta also took part in the TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA international studies, which highlighted some important facts about the achievement or lack of it of Maltese students in comparison to their European counterparts. Generally, it became evident that although our high achievers compared well with those from other

countries, there was an unacceptably high level of low achievers with 37% for Mathematics and 59% for Science in TIMSS, 36.3% for PISA Reading Literacy, 33.7% for PISA Mathematical Literacy, 32.5 for PISA Scientific Literacy and 45% for PIRLS of the national population (DQSE, 2015).

A new National Curriculum Framework was thus launched, becoming legally binding in 2012 following consultation with different stakeholders. This framework was intended to develop further the educational aims and targets of the NMC, whilst keeping in mind European policy-related documents mentioned above as well as results obtained by our learners in international studies. The NCF (2012) provided the foundation for important educational transformations to begin to be effected in the Maltese educational system, with the aims to empower all learners to work toward their full potential as lifelong learners through more flexible and diverse routes to learning, to address the gaps in our system that in some cases have led to low achievement, absenteeism and early school leaving, and most importantly, to create a Learning Outcomes Framework that would enhance inclusivity, citizenship and employability. Presented within a lifelong learning perspective, the NCF pushed for more equity and decentralisation in the structures of our system, treating each stage in the compulsory years as equally important.

In 2014, a new *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014- 2024* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) was presented with the objective to address all cycles of education from early childhood into adult and lifelong learning by integrating the existent frameworks and strategies, including the *National Curriculum Framework*, the *National Literacy Strategy for All*, *A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving* and the *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* and working towards four overarching goals in line with European and international benchmarks. The latter consist of the following aims: to minimise the gaps between boys and girls and amongst learners attending different schools, increase learner achievement and raise the bar in competences in literacy, numeracy and science and technology; to support the education of children at risk and reduce the number of early-school leavers; to increase participation in lifelong and adult learning, and to improve the rate of learner attainment and retention in further, vocational and tertiary education and training.

Most recently, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education for Malta launched a Learning Outcomes Framework, originally proposed by the NCF (2012) as the keystone for new approaches to learning and assessment. The aim of the LOF (2015) is to provide more freedom in the development of programmes that move away from centrally-imposed content-based syllabi towards a framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes. The Learning Outcomes Framework present ten levels of achievement for a differentiated learning context where different students within the same classroom would progress at different rates through these levels of attainment. Although still in its early stages of implementation, this framework seems to provide a more inclusive approach that would ultimately benefit all learners, including the gifted and more able learners. The latter are mentioned in the general information page on the official website for this framework as follows:

“It is to be noted that in Level 10 there are a number of Learning Outcomes intended for Gifted and Talented students. For most of the subjects, these learning outcomes are an extension of Attainment Level 9 and will be covered with students when they reach the end of compulsory schooling. However, each Attainment Level has Learning Outcomes which can be extended further, and suggestions for this will be included in the Pedagogy and Assessment section of each subject.” (DQSE, 2015; about the Learning Outcomes Framework tab).

3.4.4.3 On Inclusion of Children with Emerging Gifts and Talents

An important challenge for educators and teachers working with children in inclusive settings is to have high expectations and aspirations for all their pupils notwithstanding the diversity between learners’ abilities, potentials, life experiences, culture and identity and to design enabling environments that encourage children to develop their creative talents whilst constantly being overshadowed by policies and practices that demand standardisation, accountability and the attainment of core competencies.

The educational climate of standards and accountability in Malta is reflected in the ‘National Policy and Strategy for the Attainment of Core Competencies in Primary Education’ developed by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (January 2009). Whilst such legislative measures are intended to ensure that all learners meet minimal expectations and therefore that ‘no child is left behind’, school administrators, teachers and educators must be committed to provide all learners with the best possible quality education to achieve excellence. This implies the need to recognise, celebrate and provide for diversity between learners in mixed-ability classrooms within an inclusive framework based on the principles of equity, excellence and quality education for all.

Keeping in mind all the above, one cannot but wonder why so far little has been said or done with regards to adequate and challenging provision for those learners who not only manage to master the core competences with little difficulty but are doing things beyond what is expected for their age or have the potential to do so if provided with the right kind of rich and challenging learning experiences. If the principles of equity and social justice hold for learners who might need support and additional help to master the Core Competences, then these important and universal principles should also validate learners who, given the opportunity, may reveal a potential to develop their emerging abilities and talents in one or more areas of endeavour.

As such, 'gifted children' are mentioned in the policy document entitled *Creating Inclusive Schools: Guidelines on the Implementation of the National Minimum Curriculum on Inclusive Education* (Ministry of Education, Malta, 2002) as follows:

The implementation of this principle (i.e. Inclusive schools process) is based on the acknowledgement of student diversity arising from any factor and not just disability (as e.g. also giftedness):
"An inclusive education is based on a commitment, on the part of the learning community, to fully acknowledge individual difference and to professing as well as implementing inclusionary politics. This concept recognises the full range of educational interests, potential and needs of students. (NMC, Principle 8)

There are two other instances where reference to children who exhibit high potential or ability is made through the terms 'gifted child' or 'giftedness' in this policy document. Despite the will by the policy makers to cater for diversity and to consider 'gifted students' as having *individual educational needs*, in reality, little is done to provide the right framework and environment in which children with the potential to develop gifts and talents can flourish and strive for excellence. In a fairly rigid climate, where teaching is a one-fit-for-all endeavour, where teachers do not receive any formal training in effective inclusive provision for highly able pupils, where teaching strategies are largely based on teacher-led and teacher-initiated activities, where the focus seems to be on the raising of standards of low-achieving pupils, there is little room for the development and celebration of gifts and talents in primary school children.

Section 6.19 of a report entitled 'Inclusive and Special Education Review' (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2004), is dedicated to '*Gifted Children*'. This section is

being reproduced hereunder to illustrate the current view and awareness of the notion of gifts and talents in our educational system:

“A policy of inclusive education should also provide for children with intellectual abilities that are well above the norm, or gifted children. Not only is no such provision to be found in Malta, a very difficult task in itself, but there seems to be no identification of such circumstances. Systematic screening is not yet in place.

It is unlikely that, whereas some other societies reckon that around one in one thousand students tend to be gifted, there is not a broadly similar incidence in the Maltese islands. That implies that there may be around 70 gifted students out of the total of students receiving their education in State and other schools. Whereas this number may not be statistically significant, no person is a number and every individual’s worth is important to the person and to society in general.

The lack of knowledge regarding, and provision for, gifted children because they are not adequately identified, reinforces the Working Group’s endorsement of a widespread view that multi-disciplinary screening at key stages, and differentiated teaching throughout have to be extensively reinforced. This should be catered for in the Parallel Programme.”

The above summary of what is the situation in Maltese schools points out to the need for more experts to examine the issue of promoting the development of gifts and talents in our schools from a wider and more inclusive perspective as opposed to a reductionist and traditional view of giftedness as a ‘condition’ in itself that can be summed up to a number of ‘70 gifted students in the whole school population’. Being ‘gifted’ should not be seen as a solitary and innate condition identifiable through standardised and psychometric tests that concentrate mainly on numeracy and literacy. It is this narrow view of what constitutes ‘giftedness’ that has resulted in this notion being completely left out of the educational agenda in the Maltese islands. In order to eradicate existent misconceptions on high potential and giftedness, one needs to establish a body of experts who advocate for more inclusive schools and classroom settings that enable a wider range of abilities, gifts and talents to be revealed, developed and nurtured from the start of schooling all through the years of an individual’s education. Moreover, for such an approach to be truly inclusive, holistic and in line with the principles of equity, excellence, quality education for all and social justice, I strongly believe that it needs to challenge issues of labelling, identification before provision, exclusion and perpetuation of traditional notions of high ability and achievement. It is interesting to point out that the Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe, 1994) has issued a recommendation paper on the education of gifted children, thus officially recognising this group of learners as having special education needs that require legislation and policies to ensure that, like with any other group, they receive adequate educational opportunities to develop their full potential. Specific mention is also made to the

need for research and in-service training to also target the educational needs and provision of highly able learners in schools.

The external audit on Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education highlighted the fact that Maltese mainstream policy documents seem to have integrated issues of diversity and inclusion and that the National Curriculum Framework (2012) in our country specifically endorsed 'education for diversity' as part of its general principles and as a cross-curricular theme within the framework. This implies that our curriculum, at least in theory, together with other policy documents provide a backdrop and a right direction for the consideration of a range of needs including those of the gifted and talented (Watkins et al., 2014, pg.73). However, the audit calls for an embedding of national quality assurance and accountability mechanisms at a school and classroom level to ensure that all learners are supported to work towards their full potential through effective curricular implementation since, according to their review, this is only partially being carried out.

One could conclude that if one is to take a rights-based approach to inclusive education, based on recommendations by important policy-related documents such as the ones mentioned earlier on and also in line with recent educational trends to embed inclusive practices for all learners in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, the educational system in Malta, with its reforms and drive to meet the individual needs of all learners rather than adopt a one-fit-for-all programme, is already well-equipped for the education of the gifted and talented at least at policy level. The difficulties and tensions lie in ensuring that such inclusive ideas are translated adequately in practice at the school and classroom level so that children who are able to reach high levels of performance and attainment in different areas of endeavour are provided with the right environment to flourish and develop their talents, skills and competencies.

3.4.5 Inclusive Pedagogies that Foster the Development of Gifts and Talents in Young Children

I have examined the notion of inclusion as it evolved over the past decades. I now intend to focus my attention on the kind of pedagogy that is adopted in truly inclusive classrooms that strive for educational excellence for all learners. But first, it is necessary to ask: What is

pedagogy? It definitely has to do with teaching and learning. It refers to methods adopted by teachers to 'teach' their subjects or to bring about learning. It also implies the idea that students cannot be simply taught by what is traditionally known as the transferring of knowledge from the knowledgeable expert to the untrained student – the processes involved are complex and, as Davies (1994) argues, they reflect one's views on society, human learning, knowledge, power and education. Davies (1994) proposes a definition of pedagogy as:

"any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another".

Although the above definition focuses on an individual level of analysis, Davies also suggests that there is an explicit relation between the social world and educational practice in that the kind of pedagogy adopted by a learning community in general and by a teacher in particular reflects a vision of society, human nature, knowledge and production (ibid., p. 26). Bernstein (1996, 1999) also outlines pedagogic practice as a fundamental social context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place and defines pedagogy as:

"... a sustained process whereby somebody(s) acquires new forms or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice and criteria, from somebody(s) or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator." (Bernstein, 1999, p.259)

The above definitions partly explain some of the changes that have occurred in educational practice including pedagogy. Piaget's stage model of cognitive development has been most influential in the development of pedagogical practices used in schools and, indeed, the structure of schooling itself (divided into stages according to one's age group) is based on the notion of maturation. His notions of assimilation, accommodation and adaptation have also played an important role in understanding how children think and learn. As Burman (2008) points out, Piaget is also viewed as the 'originator of child-centred education' who was in favour of the emergence of more progressive methods to replace rote methods of teaching, drilling and practice. However, Burman criticises this model of learning for its focus on individualism and she further argues, that child-centred pedagogy '...perpetuates a model of learning that accords with a liberal model of society – as composed of rational, freely choosing, isolated, equal individuals' (ibid., p.265).

On the other hand, Vygotsky's work on development as a consequence of learning, on the roles of teachers or adults in the learning process, on the notions of scaffolding and that of creating appropriate zones of proximal development have given rise to different models of

pedagogy that focus on the learning 'activity' as involving multiple actors interacting with others and with tools and artefacts in the environment that ultimately brings about learning. These models are based on a cultural-historical approach to education which views learning as a result of an activity that promotes the co-construction of knowledge by multiple actors and that draws attention to the interaction that occurs between learners, to the active involvement of learners as active agents in their own development and to the emergence of the mind in the joint mediated activity of people where it is co-constructed and distributed (Daniels, 2001).

Elements of Vygotskian theory are also present in constructivist theory which, in turn, can be translated into educational practice through teaching strategies such as the connection of new ideas to prior knowledge, modelling, scaffolding, coaching, exploration and problem-solving activities guided by elements of choice, flexibility and adaptation to the learning situation and the learners (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005). These elements are usually present in educational programmes designed with gifted children in mind (Camilleri, 1998; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Eyre, 1997; Gross, 1999; Muijs & Reynolds, 2005; Porter, 2005). However, a pedagogy based on a constructivist approach to learning through the use of inquiry-based, emergent and project-oriented curriculum has also been applied in general education classrooms because of its potential for developing thinking and cooperative learning skills (Hertzog, 2005; Wallace, 2002; Wien, 2008; Winstanley, 2010).

Curricula and instruction in schools today are changing as a result of a number of factors including new insights from research about the learning process. Traditional methodologies are usually equated with a teacher-led, whole-class teaching and direct instruction with a focus on textbooks and a conservative view of children. Innovative strategies adopt a more active view of learners with a focus on the learning process, pupil-centred and pupil-initiated activities, a theme-based integrated approach and a view of multiple intelligences as opposed to a single general intelligence. Vosniadou (2001) puts together a list of principles that are found behind most innovative programmes in schools around the world based on research from diverse areas of psychology – amongst which are active involvement, social interaction, meaningful learning that is linked to real-life situations, promoting self-regulation and reflectivity, relating new information to prior knowledge, the transferring of knowledge and so on.

What does the literature on gifted education have to say about effective practices that benefit highly able learners in general education? In an article that synthesizes curricular voices from both the field of gifted education and general education, Hockett (2009, p.415) suggests that experts in both fields connect high-quality curriculum to authenticity (true to real-life problems and situations), outcome-driven and meaningful instruction, flexibility for individual differences (that includes possibilities for learners to make choices and access to a qualitatively different curriculum) and challenging curricula both in content and pedagogy. Both fields promote the use of integration as a means of making the curriculum more authentic. Having higher expectations for all learners in mixed-ability classrooms irrespective of culture, identity and individual differences is also highly recommended. Hertzog (2005, p.249) suggests that:

*“...the combination of the **inquiry-based** activities with a structured way to capture students’ engagement and curiosity may raise teachers’ expectations of potential, which ultimately may lead to closing achievement gaps between groups of students.”*

Young learners usually start school with plenty of enthusiasm – they have high expectations of what school life is about – after surmounting their initial reluctance or fear to separate from their parents, they become attracted to the idea of learning through fun activities whilst socialising with other children their age. They look forward to learn in a colourful environment full of interesting things. They are also attracted by the idea that school will provide them with challenges that stimulate their minds and that quench their thirst for novelties and discovery. Young children are usually highly motivated to learn to read and write to be just like their older siblings, parents or friends. This is undoubtedly my experience of the children in my life and the young learners who have entered my classrooms since I started teaching. So why do some of these children lose their interest in learning, become disenchanted and alienated as they move across the school years?

Over the past decade, in my profession as a teacher of young children, I have observed the ways in which children have changed and evolved – although today’s children are essentially still the same as the ones who entered my classroom ten or twelve years ago, and in many ways resemble the ones I remember when I myself was six and seven years old, yet they differ in a number of ways. Similar things interest the children of this generation as the ones of a decade, a quarter of a century or a half a century ago – playing, making friends, socialising, learning, being good at something and so on. What changed are the ways in which they do

things, the ways in which they socialise, the things they play with, the way they experience the world. Apart from the political and social changes that inevitably effect children and society in general, the integration of technology in an increasingly media-rich society have definitely left their mark on children and childhood (EduViews Report, 2008).

Keeping in mind the above argument, what kind of pedagogy would a twenty-first century primary school teacher working with learners coming from diverse family backgrounds and who have different experiences, interests and talents need to adopt to live up to young children's expectations and motivation to learn? What elements of an inclusive learning environment are essential to ensure an inclusive and effective pedagogical approach that not only guarantees the reaching of standards in basic skills but also kindles young learners' fire for learning about the world around them? What skills need to be developed and promoted so that children are provided with the tools necessary to succeed in today's and tomorrow's society whilst enabling them to discover and develop their emerging gifts and talents?

One of the major changes in education has been the move towards a more child-centred approach to learning – whereas up to a few decades ago, the teacher was at the focus of the teaching and learning process, one can freely say that there has been a shift of attention to the learners themselves who are seen to be at the centre of the learning process. The roles teachers used to take were those of experts, of transmitters of knowledge whose duty was to fill 'the empty vessels' or the 'tabula rasa' of the children in front of them. Nowadays, teachers are taking the roles of 'facilitators of learning' whose duty is to present tools and skills that will ultimately enable learners to become flexible, lifelong, autonomous learners whilst collaborating with others. One can also add the likelihood of teachers learning from their learners, thus becoming learners themselves in the process – tech-savvy children are usually capable of solving their own problems with technology or finding ways of carrying out research or discovering new things through their 'expertise' with the media, at times surpassing adults' capacity to use technology.

The field of gifted education in many countries outside Malta has moved from the traditional approach of identifying giftedness through the use of standardised tests as a means of selecting students for specialised pull-out programmes for the gifted (based largely on results obtained in terms of IQ scores) to the use of multiple criteria for identification and the

'inclusion' of students identified and labelled as 'gifted' within regular classrooms. Opportunities for enrichment activities adapted to their level of competence are presented as a means to cater for their special educational needs. As has been argued in the section on inclusion above, practices such as the latter ensure the physical inclusion of highly able pupils with their peers but exclude them from the learning process as they tend to work in isolation through the more advanced content given to them rather than integrate them fully in the teaching and learning process.

More recently, the idea of providing rich and enabling classroom environments that reveal and nurture a wide range of gifts and talents in all learners before actually making any attempts at identifying and labelling children as 'gifted' or 'highly able' has begun to flourish in different places around the world (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Gentry, 2006; Gross, 1999; Sutherland, 2008; Wallace et al., 2010). Such an inclusive approach would provide all learners, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a chance to develop any hidden, suppressed or emerging abilities in an effort to compensate for a lack of rich, stimulating learning experiences in their early childhood years. This is undoubtedly in line with Freire's thoughts on exposing children from marginalised backgrounds to the dominant forms of knowledge and ways to access it not to undermine or belittle those forms of knowledge pertaining to their own background but to give these children an opportunity to experience challenge and to strive for excellence. From this perspective, education as transformation is seen as a means of empowerment that will eventually enable them to move forward and not become entrenched in a cycle of poverty, low expectations and lack of choices in life.

The idea of providing quality education for all within regular classrooms has been highly debated. The gifted education literature has proposed the adaptation of methods used in specialised gifted programmes for mixed-ability classrooms (Hertzog, 2005). In so doing, primary school teachers would move away from a tendency to focus their instruction on the average or below-average child. The argument in favour of high-quality curricula and inclusive pedagogies for all learners is founded on the principles of equity and social justice. A democratic society must provide educational excellence for all and therefore classroom teachers must ensure that adequate challenging and stimulating learning experiences are provided for all students in the classroom. In a qualitative study aimed to examine the

implementation of project-based learning as a school-wide initiative to increase levels of achievement and to recognise potential in a population that is typically underserved in gifted programs, Hertzog (2005) advocates for the creation of general education classrooms that are responsive to potential giftedness by actively engaging students in their learning. In her research, she outlines how the instructional changes that occurred across the whole school altered teachers' perspectives of their students and their total classroom environment.

Wien (2008) presents an exposition of how the notion of 'emergent learning' and 'emergent curriculum' that is exemplified in the Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi, 1996) can be applied to primary classrooms. In 'emergent curriculum' both children's and adults' interest and values are taken into account.

'In emergent curriculum, teachers plan in response to the group's interests and concerns, and curriculum expands into genuine inquiry, as children and teachers together become participatory co-learners who attempt to understand some aspect of real life. This understanding occurs through multiple ways of learning and creating (in drawing, dance, clay, wire, and so forth) so that new cultures of identity and classroom citizenship develop from it.' (Wien, 2008, p.1)

'Emergent learning' presents an original creative approach to curriculum design that enables primary school teachers to change a linear fragmented standardised curriculum into an integrated, participatory, inquiry and arts-based approach. It promotes developmentally appropriate practice as well as inquiry-based constructivist teaching. A key feature of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is an image of children and teachers as capable, resourceful, powerful protagonists of their own experience (Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 1998). In emergent learning, the course of the curriculum is not prescribed at the outset – as a matter of fact, it emerges over time – 'that is, its trajectory develops as a consequence of the logic of the problem, the particular connections that develop as participants bring their own genuine responses to the topic and collaboratively create the course to follow out these multiple connections' (Wien, 2008, p. 5). Because emergent curriculum focuses on the genuine interest of children and teachers, motivation has a prominent role in the emergence of the curriculum – and it is guaranteed by the fact that all of us, adults and children, are highly interested in answering our own questions and exploring our ideas.

The concept of challenge is definitely essential in promoting educational practice that strives for excellence. It has been pointed out earlier on that the ideal context for optimum learning to take place is an environment in which a balance is found between high challenge and low

threat – thus creating a context in which children feel safe to experiment, inquire, discover, take risks and learn. As Winstanley (2010, p.105) points out, the provision of challenge by classroom teachers helps to identify high ability learners and, as a consequence, a ‘...common feature of less successful schools is that they have a fixed approach as to who constitutes the highly able cohort and then they restrict challenging activities to that group, failing to allow some pupils to shine.’ Three key ideas about appropriate challenge that emerged from research carried out in a number of schools are cognitive challenge through appropriate questioning, thinking skills and philosophy with children, and independent project work (see Wallace et al., 2010 for details of the multiple case-studies carried out in twelve school to analyse the strategies that successfully enable pupils’ high potential to be transformed into high achievement).

One means of developing independent and personalised learning across the curriculum whilst at the same time working in collaboration with others is the TASC Framework conceived by Wallace (2008). Wallace mentions aspects from the thoughts of three important thinkers as the theoretical framework upon which TASC Framework is built: Vygotsky’s notions of language, mediation and negotiation of understanding, Sternberg’s focus on learners’ active engagement with relevant problem-solving activities as well as Bandura’s influence about the role of the affective relationship between teachers and pupils together with his idea that learning is socially constructed through group interaction rather than an individual venture (Wallace, 2004). When the TASC Framework is adopted to explore a particular topic, children are encouraged to brainstorm, think creatively, make choices, reflect, evaluate and share their findings with others whilst working through a number of stages outlined in the TASC Wheel. Wallace (2002) has also adapted the TASC Framework for implementation in the early years – an approach that encourages the development of independent thinking and decision-making, ownership and personalised learning whilst being engaged on group projects that explore meaningful topics of interest. I have personally applied the TASC Framework in my teaching for the past three years and I can say that I have rarely seen a group of young learners (six and seven years olds) work so diligently and independently, asking questions and finding their own answers to these questions through a variety of activities they themselves come up with. The high motivation, independence and engagement can be easily observed during

these learning experiences and provide ample of opportunities for a teacher to observe and experience the flourishing of emerging abilities and talents.

The pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies outlined in this section all point to the arousal of curiosity in learners who engage willingly in meaningful activities that promote their active contribution throughout the whole learning process. Curiosity is what challenging activities are designed to awaken in young children and because all pupils thrive on challenge and because challenge facilitates the revelation of gifts and talents, I feel it is appropriate to end this section with the following quote:

“Curiosity is hardly ever idle. What we want to know, we want to know for a reason. The reason is that there is a hole, a gap, an empty space in our understanding of things, our mental model of the world ... when the gap is filled, we feel pleasure, satisfaction, relief.” (Holt, 1982, pg. 87-88 in Winstanley, 2010)

3.4.6 Teacher Education and its Role in Inclusive Education

For all learners in schools to have access to suitable and challenging learning experiences that stimulate their minds, engage them in the learning process as active participants and encourage them to discover and develop their emerging gifts and talents in different areas of endeavour, teachers and educators have a crucial role to play in terms of ensuring that the conditions for deep and meaningful learning are in place at the school and classroom level. This can only happen if teachers, who ultimately are the ones to put curricula, ideas, strategies and new policies into practice, are provided with professional learning opportunities in order to help them increase their knowledge base and develop new instructional practices (Adey, 2004; Borko, 2004). In this section, one will explore the notion of teachers’ professional development to identify the links between teacher training and education, continuous professional development and inclusive practices for all learners including the gifted and talented.

Professional learning and development is part and parcel of a teacher’s job in advancing the quality of the teaching and learning process as it is deemed to be the basis for professional growth, guarantees or increases the chances of effective practices as well as of higher levels of learning and performance for both educators and their learners (Hirsh and Hord, 2008). The idea of ‘teachers as learners’ who engage in ongoing training and learning opportunities has been gaining ground particularly in a climate of lifelong learning promoted by the Maltese National Curriculum Framework (2012) and by the ever-changing policy initiatives both locally

and internationally. For instance, the importance of teacher training and professional development in Malta is highlighted in both the *National Literacy Strategy* (2014) and the *Learning Outcomes Framework* (2015) for such initiatives to be successfully implemented at the college, school and classroom level. This idea is also echoed in an article written by Adey (2004, pg.13) who outlines the need for extensive programmes of professional development for teachers when new approaches to teaching and learning are introduced. In designing a professional development programme, Adey (2004, pg.14) further suggests that time and conscious effort are two factors that are influential for real change to happen, and also includes the notion of 'human interaction' between the trainer and the teachers in helping the latter to shift their values, beliefs and attitudes. The important role of demonstrations and coaching on the field i.e in the school and the classroom are also mentioned.

The external audit on Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta conducted in 2014 by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education places a lens on the limited training opportunities, both initial and in-service, that are presently available to adequately prepare stakeholders (including SMT, class teachers, LSAs and kindergarten assistants) to implement inclusive education as an approach for all learners. Respondents to an online survey carried out as part of the external audit feel that little attention is given to diversity issues and inclusive education as a complimentary rather than a compensatory approach to the education of all learners. They further reiterate that current training opportunities, both initial and ongoing, reinforce a 'medical-deficit model, with little attention paid to inclusive pedagogical practice' (pg.50). There is also a general attitude that inclusive education is not the responsibility of all educational professionals but is more connected to the role of the Learning Support Assistant who seems to be taking up most of the weight of ensuring that learners with special education needs are included. Thus, priority is not given to adequate and ongoing training for all teachers and school leaders. It is thus not surprising that one of the recommendations of this audit is for the provision of focused and adequate training in inclusive education for all stakeholders including policy makers, leaders, teachers and other professionals.

Sutherland and Stack (2014 pg.85) identify continuous professional development as an important aspect of *Scotland's Framework for Inclusion* as it encourages teachers to improve their pedagogy and practice throughout their career. It is believed that through training,

teachers acquire new knowledge about provision for all learners including the highly able and develop or change their attitudes towards different groups of learners to ultimately provide effective learning opportunities through school and class-based initiatives. Borders et al., (2014) also assert that teachers need to learn to recognise strengths and areas that require attention for gifted learners so that they can then choose appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies to enhance their learning and development. In order to accomplish this, teachers are encouraged to attend relevant workshops and other forms of professional training in the field (Borders et al., 2014, pg.143). Robinson and Dailey (2014, pg.185) illustrate the important role of the teacher in implementing inclusive practices that foster talent development. They suggest that for this to happen effectively, teachers need time to adapt instruction and to ensure that the diverse needs of gifted learners are taken into consideration during planning and assessment. Furthermore, Robinson and Dailey (2014) recommend the support of an instructional coach who would mentor teachers in the implementation of strategies and modifications required for effective provision, thus using coaching and mentoring as part of their professional learning process.

The significant role of the teacher in creating stimulating learning environments (Barab and Plucker, 2002) and successfully implementing innovative strategies and inclusive practices (Hirsh and Hord, 2008) cannot be contended. Research suggests that teachers who attend professional development in differentiation of instruction in inclusive schools believe they are more efficacious in meeting the needs of all learners in their diverse classrooms (Dixon et al., 2014, pg.123). This study also indicates that participation in professional development sessions produces higher levels of effectiveness in implementing differentiated instruction.

In a recent article on 'Education of gifted students in Europe', Sekowski and Lubianka (2015; pg.84) suggest that in addition to ensuring that teachers possess a thorough knowledge and understanding of the essence of giftedness and gifted education as well as the ability to identify students with high potential, emphasis in teacher education and in-service training should also be placed on providing learners with a rich and stimulating 'curriculum of opportunity' where students make their own choices and thus experience ownership of their learning so that they learn to discover and nurture their own strengths and interests.

In her article on using Vygotsky's theory to meet the literacy and content area needs of gifted students in the 21st century, Zambo (2009) highlights the need for teachers to have the capacity and skills to promote talent development, through the provision of a complex and inspiring curriculum that includes technology for them to see that learning occurs within what Vygotsky termed the learners' zone of proximal development (Zambo, 2009, pg.271). She stresses the point that educators would be doing a disservice to their students by addressing the challenges of an evolving society and world geared towards the future using 'yesterday's perspectives' (ibid., pg. 272). She recommends a shift in focus from teaching and teachers to learning and learners, adopting a broader approach that encourages collaboration, connection and learning communities. An example the author uses of a sixth grade teacher of a mixed-ability classroom, that included a group of gifted learners, illustrates the importance for teachers to continually improve their 'praxis' through the seeking of further training in areas related to the content that is being covered, the use of reflective practice where teachers constantly reflect and revise the strategies they use and the kind and variety of opportunities they provide learners with, as well as the keeping abreast of developments and research through participation in events and online forums organised by various related associations and organisations (ibid., pg.275-278).

On a similar note, findings from the systematic review of appropriate interventions that enhance the educational achievement of learners identified as gifted and talented in the UK show that 'the quality and character of group interactions' in collaborative and group activities significantly impacted the effectiveness of provision – within a positive classroom climate, the role of the teacher is deemed instrumental in promoting and maintaining healthy group interactions as one effective way to support the education and development of the gifted and talented (Bailey et al., 2008, pg.33). It goes without saying that for teachers to be able to enhance learning through collaboration and social interaction, they need to be provided with opportunities for professional learning.

In her study on teacher professional learning in Malta, Attard Tonna (2012) provides a guiding tool for developing continuous professional development which includes appropriate *contexts for professional learning* (where networks, teacher dialogue and reflection are supported and endorsed), *connected learning* (where CPD is aligned with policy and national standards and strong links are forged between all education stakeholders) and *ownership of*

learning (where teachers become active participants in their own learning). In this way, teachers, as reflective professionals, become more willing to learn for themselves and develop an expertise of their own as they are encouraged to make sense of their own knowledge, understand the various factors that influence their practice, assess the effectiveness of their work and take steps to develop and enhance it. Linked to the role of teacher education in inclusive education for all learners, one could say that using such a framework for CPD would enable teachers to seek and demand opportunities for training in adequate implementation of inclusive practices that would benefit all learners including those who are able to reach high levels of performance and achievement in different areas.

3.5 Teacher and Learner Identities

3.5.1 Conceptions of Teacher identity

The concept of teachers' professional identity is a relatively recent one in educational literature compared to the vaster area of *identity formation*. Definitions vary and the distinction between the elusive notion of *self* and the more concrete one of *identity* is not always clear – as Beijard et al. (2004; pg.124) point out in their review of professional identities of teachers, "it remains unclear how the concepts of 'identity' and 'self' are related". Rodgers and Scott (2008) explain that the notion of teachers' professional identity is built on four distinct assumptions, mainly that identity formation is based upon the interplay of various forces that include the social, political, cultural and historical; that teachers develop their identities not in isolation but in relationship with others and thus *emotions* play a role in the construction of identity; that identity is not fixed and stable but ever-changing and multiple; and finally, that as identities are formed through teachers' stories and experiences over time, there is a construction and reconstruction of *meaning*.

"Embedded in these assumptions is an implicit charge: that teachers should work towards an awareness of their identity and the contexts, relationships, and emotions that shape them, and (re)claim the authority of their own voice. This calls upon teachers to make a psychological shift in how they think about themselves as teachers. Contexts and relationships describe the external aspects of identity formation; and stories and emotions, the internal, meaning-making aspects." (pg. 733)

Beijard et al. (2004; pg. 109) connect the concept of professional identity to various issues that all impinge on the formation of teachers' identity – these include teachers' self-concept, the various roles that teachers have to adopt, other people's expectations of who and what a teacher is or should be like, as well as teachers' own beliefs and values based on their

personal and professional experiences and practices. Professional identity formation is largely viewed as “an ongoing process of integration of the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ of becoming and being a teacher” (pg. 113).

3.5.2 Definitions of Teachers’ Professional Identity

The concept of ‘identity’ is generally defined in different ways in research and literature within the social sciences and philosophy. Mead (1934 as cited in Beijard et al., 2004) linked identity to the notion of the ‘self’, linking its formation to the social context in which social communication is present, thus arguing that one’s self can only be developed through transactions with the environment (pg. 107). Gee (2001) described identity as a continuous, dynamic process of interpreting and viewing oneself as a particular kind of person and being recognised as such within a specific context.

Within the educational sphere various definitions abide, all of which point to different aspects within the notion of identity. Volkmann and Anderson (1998) describe teachers’ professional identity as a dynamic and intricate balance between teachers’ professional self-image and the roles they feel they have to play inside and outside the classroom. Bejaard (2006) gives a sociological dimension to teachers’ identity when maintaining that identities are formed in interactions with others as well as a cognitive, psychological aspect when arguing that teachers express their professional identity in their own perceptions of ‘who they are’ and ‘who they want to become’ as a result of this interaction. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) emphasise the influence of context on the identity of teachers, linking the way teachers perform and practice as professionals to the events and experiences in their professional lives.

According to Day (2007), a key factor in teachers’ sense of identity is the interplay between the personal and the professional, the private and the public as teachers strive to be effective as professionals working with children and young people. Other important key variables in teacher identity are commitment, motivation, job satisfaction and self-efficacy, which in turn are also influenced by the extent to which teachers’ needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are met. The multifaceted nature of teachers’ professional identities is also featured in some studies (Clandinin et al., 2006; Cooper & Olson, 1996; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Clandinin and Connelly (1999) hold that the working lives of teachers are characterised and shaped by their numerous stories which they call 'stories to live by' and these stories, in turn, compose teacher identity. According to them, teachers make sense of their roles and practices by drawing upon the stories they live, tell and retell. From a narrative perspective, identities are "narrative constructions that take shape as life unfolds and that may ... solidify into a fixed entity, an unchanging narrative construction, or they may continue to grow and change" (pg. 95).

3.5.3 Knowledge, Context and Teacher Identity in Narrative Studies

An important aspect of narrative inquiry is the exploration of how identities are constructed and enacted through a closer study of individual stories, personal accounts of experience and an examination of the messiness, complexities and ordinariness of real life. Through the 'telling' of personal stories, identities may be formed as researchers and participants, who co-construct these narratives, make sense of events, actions and practices in their personal and professional lives – in many ways, narratives organise human action by creating unity and order to people's experiences within particular contexts (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Riessman, 1993).

As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) investigated teachers' experiences in schools through narrative inquiry, they figured out that as teachers spoke of their personal practical knowledge and professional knowledge and the contexts in which they worked and developed, they were also describing how such knowledge and contexts were also shaping their identities of who they were and who they were becoming. Through their inquiries into teachers' lives, the researchers developed the concepts of "stories to live by" and "professional knowledge landscapes". As a term and a narrative concept, 'stories to live by' brings about an understanding of "how knowledge, context and identity are linked and can be understood narratively" (pg. 4). As teachers live and tell their 'stories to live by', there is a continuous struggle for narrative coherence and in the reliving and restorying of their lives through narrative, teachers create new ways of being and interacting with others, including the children they work with, which in turn result in changes in their practices (Clandinin et al., 2006). The notion of 'professional knowledge landscapes' refers to the knowledge that teachers acquire from their professional and personal experiences within educational

contexts that include relationships amongst objects, people and places, and that are then expressed in their practices (Anderson, 1997).

In a study of primary school teachers' career stories aimed at understanding teachers' professional development, Kelchtermans (1993) argues that the narrative-biographical approach (characterised by five general features namely narrative, constructivistic, contextualistic, interactionistic and dynamic) where teachers' stories are collected, interpreted and analysed, is a sustainable and workable method for investigating teachers' professional development from their own subjective perspective. Through her analysis of the narrative data gathered during the study, the researcher reconstructed a *professional self* for each of the ten primary teachers who participated in the study. This consisted of teachers' personal conception of themselves as well as their *subjective educational theory* built around their own values, beliefs and knowledge acquired throughout their career experiences (pg.444). Kelchtermans further analysed these two notions and identified important recurring themes such as feelings of vulnerability and strive for job stability. She concludes that her study explains how teachers develop their professional identities as they integrate knowledge acquired during critical phases, events and experiences in their career and how they develop their own personal teaching style and way of being within educational environments. In her view, to understand the professional lives of teachers, one has to 'get the story' through a teacher's own eyes (pg.454).

3.5.4 Learner Identity: learning, potential and identity

Whereas, as mentioned above, the concept of 'teachers' professional identity' has recently featured in educational literature and become an area of interest for researchers investigating teachers' professional development, that of 'learner identity' is still a relatively unexplored notion. However, there have been multiple instances where educational theorists and writers have, either directly or indirectly, referred to the construction of learner identity in educational contexts. Freire (1970) talks about a *fixed self-identity* that effected peasant farmers' ability to learn and advance, through the perpetuation of their own internalised oppression. In his account, Freire (1970) explains:

"So often do (the oppressed) hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness." (p. 49)

In his work with them, he sought to liberate them from a limiting self-concept that was borne out of the prejudices against them, using what he called 'praxis' which is described as 'reflection and action on the world in order to transform it'. In their work on *experiential learning*, Alice and David Kolb (2009) have observed that many people have a fixed view of themselves and do not see themselves as learners or as capable of learning – this is what seems to hinder a person from being open to learn, grow and develop his own potential skills, potentialities and abilities since learning demands one's conscious attention, effort and 'time on task'. People who do not acknowledge their capacity to learn will not make these efforts. Similar to the idea of 'learner identity', Dweck (2000) also put forward the notion of *self-theories*, differentiating between people who view their attributes and abilities as fixed and unchanging, and those who think that they are able to incrementally learn as well as to change and develop.

Falsafi (2010) examines how people recognise and construct themselves as learners, adopting a sociocultural approach to understand and explore the individual as a learner who dynamically interacts within the social contexts s/he inhabits. Her definition of *learner identity*, borne out of an analysis of conceptions and definitions available in current literature is the following:

"... the individual's sense of recognition as a learner based on the constantly re-constructed meanings about herself as a learner with a higher or lower level of disposition and capacity to learn in different kinds of contexts and situations".

Sutherland (2008) argues that young children are in the process of developing learner identities during the early years and that these can change depending on the learning context. Most importantly, she holds that early years professionals working with young gifted and talented children may have a huge impact on the development of positive learning dispositions, which leads to positive learner identities. These can only be constructed through the creation of positive learning environments.

Following the emergence of the narrative concept of 'stories to live by' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999), and an exploration and understanding of the connections between teachers' knowledge, contexts and professional identity, Huber et al. (2003) began to ask new questions about children's stories to live by, stories stemming from children's perceptions, knowledge and context. Their focus moved from teachers' stories to live by to children's identity-making.

The researchers realised that often teachers' stories to live by become a context or backdrop for children's construction of their own stories, which in turn shapes their identities. The dynamic interactions between various elements in the school landscape (including teachers, pupils, management team, other staff, subject matter, artefacts and resources, and the milieu itself) leads to the composition of teacher and learner identities, of stories to live by, which is also central in the process of curriculum making within educational contexts (Clandinin et al., 2006).

3.5.5 Children's perceptions and constructions of learning and ability

The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) promoted the idea that children's views about matters that concern them should be sought. This undoubtedly led to an increase in seeking to explore and understand children's perceptions and constructions about their experiences of issues and topics that have a direct impact on their lives (Christensen & James, 2008; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003). With the changing views of children and childhood, namely the move towards more respectful ways of working with children, of acknowledging and validating the fact that children are active participants and active agents (Corsaro, 2011) in our societies, came a marked interest in giving children a voice. Thus, educational and sociological research into the lives of children began to include examinations of the views, perceptions and constructions of children as learners and active participants in the teaching and learning process, using 'participatory methods' that enabled children to be involved more directly in research (Christensen & James, 2008). Educators and practitioners working with children were being encouraged to work from the standpoint of what Nutbrown (1996) calls 'respectful educators' who hold a positive attitude towards the children they work with and view them as 'capable learners'.

Studies that examine children's perceptions vary in methods adopted, and range from more traditional methods where children's perspectives are sought through the use of inventories and scales constructed intentionally for this purpose, to the use of data collection methods where research is done 'about' and 'on' children to the more recent initiatives to seek children's views through activities that are child-friendly, that facilitate children's participation and that replicate those activities normally used in classroom and school settings to encourage children's active participation in their learning. Although all investigations aim to provide a fairly good and authentic idea of children's perceptions on matters that concern

them, some are nevertheless built on adults' agendas rather than those of the children themselves. As researchers' views about ways to work and research with children evolved, the creation of participatory methods that are more accessible to children and that allow them to set their own agendas in research began to be seen. Nowadays, the use of participatory methods that provide the right framework for children's voices to be heard, acknowledged and valued is becoming increasingly more prominent in educational research and various efforts have been made for research into children's lives to be carried out *with* them rather than *about them* (Christensen & James, 2008; Freeman and Mathison, 2008; O'Kane, 2008). It is worth mentioning at this point that a review of educational literature that specifically focuses on eliciting young able children's constructions of learning and ability clearly exposes a gap in this research area. Most studies investigate older learners' perceptions of learning and those that include younger children as participants depart from a different standpoint and focus on various aspects of a young child's learning experiences as can be seen below. However, such studies are worth examining for the lessons that can be learned from their methodological and epistemological perspectives.

In a study designed to elicit kindergarten children's perceptions of achievement as well as perceptions of their achieving peers, story beginnings accompanied by a picture were used (Jin Li and Qi Wang, 2004). The study was conducted with children from Euro-American and Chinese cultures and, as a result, findings confirmed researchers' predictions about possible differences in children's constructions of learning, achievement and their achieving peers. Despite the young age, it was observed that kindergarten children had already developed rich conceptions of and attitudes towards ability and achievement as they would have internalised the beliefs and values about learning and achievement in their respective cultures.

In an exploratory study aimed to examine how a group of primary school children (identified as underachieving in school) perceived themselves as learners both inside and out of school, it was observed that children experienced learning differently based on whether learning occurred within the school context or outside of it (Singal & Swann, 2011). Participants in the study seemed to associate knowledge and understanding acquired at school with a dependency on the teacher and generally spoke in terms of deficit – what they didn't know or couldn't do. On the other hand, outside school learning experiences were regarded as being more challenging, requiring active participation and collaboration. This study certainly

pointed to the importance of listening to children and understanding their own experiences of learning from their own point of view so that the gap there seems to be between learning inside and outside school is bridged.

Sobel et al. (2007) conducted two studies to investigate how three to six year olds understand the process of learning as they grow and develop through their early years. The rationale behind these studies is a suggestion that the way children perceive learning events may have a direct influence on their general engagement in learning and thus an impact on their current and future academic achievement as well as on their developing conceptions of their own or others' ability or drive. Results indicated that preschool children's experience of the learning process (3 to 5 years) is potentially built around a particular mental state i.e. desire to learn whereas older children (4 to 6 years) integrate a wider variety of mental states such as desire, attention and intention. The two studies indicate important links between children's developing concepts of learning and their metacognitive awareness as they demonstrate that young learners are able to explain learning events at a young age.

Maatta & Jarvela (2013) adopted participatory approaches to involve young children aged six to eight years in reflective discussions about their perceived self-efficacy and confidence in specific learning situations. They mainly used videotaped classroom activities to elicit children's responses and stimulate their memory with regards to the confidence they experienced during particular learning situations. Results from this study support the need to seek children's own views about their learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs, thus validating 'young children as active informants of their experiences in different classroom-learning situations' (pg. 321). In addition to this, they also shed light on how teachers of young children can promote self-efficacy by scaffolding children's confidence through the creation of interactive learning contexts whereby learners interact with their teacher and/or peers or with the task itself as they carry out specific tasks.

Miujs (1997) conducted a longitudinal study with over one thousand primary school children aged between 9.5 and 10.5 years to research children's self-perception in mathematics, language and school subjects in general using an adapted self-esteem inventory as well as specially constructed scales. Results indicated a strong significant relationship between academic achievement and academic self-concept, thus correlating performance and

achievement with one's identity as a learner. In a study aimed to investigate the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement, pupils' conception of themselves as learners and academic problem-solvers was sought through the use of a simple 20-item scale called the Myself-as-Learner Scale (Burden, 1998). It was observed that the key elements of a positive self-perception as a learner and problem-solver are the following: *confidence in a variety of learning and problem-solving situations, a conscious and careful learning style, enjoyment in problem-solving, lack of anxiety and an aptitude in verbal ability and fluency* (pg.300). The use of the MALS was deemed to be valid as a strong coherent measure of academic self-concept and findings seemed to point to the notion that the 'weakest relationship between academic self-concept and achievement appears to occur in the middle of the achievement range rather than at the extremes' (pg. 302).

Freeman and Mathison (2008) encourage researchers to consider different possibilities in re-considering roles children can play in research about their own worlds. Using a social constructivist approach, they propose that children's constructions and the formation of their knowledge happen within a social context, are created in collaboration and negotiation with others, and thus each individual's knowledge claims, including children's views and ideas, are legitimate and valid in their own right. They hold that children's everyday lives and experiences shape their sense of self and also their views and constructions of the people and world around them. Culture and location are also instrumental in the development of their views and identities. An understanding of children's experiences and perceptions occurs through the analysis and interpretation of 'their words, images and actions in their interactions with others and with ...researchers' (pg. vi).

Graham et al. (2012) conducted a study with pre-teenagers aged 12 to 13 years to examine their feelings about the prospect of being identified as very able in two distinct subjects, mainly Modern Foreign Languages and Physical Education. Questionnaires were used in order to gain a broad perspective of pupils' perceptions of being identified as gifted/ talented. Generally, findings showed that learners expressed very positive feelings about this prospect. This indicated that a sense of achievement is a key motivating factor in pursuing specialised subjects but also showed that learners view high ability from a fairly stereotypical standpoint, depending on the area of endeavour.

Questions of identity-making that are elicited from explorations of the interwoven lives of teachers and learners have also been asked in various qualitative research ventures (Clandinin et al., 2006; Huber, 1999; Huber et al., 2012). A narrative inquiry was conducted in an inner-city year 3 / 4 classroom to investigate how children of diverse backgrounds and life-experiences composed their identities as they interacted with others within the classroom and school contexts. The narrative researchers were ‘intrigued by the multi-layered unfolding of stories surrounding us’ (pg. 306) as they explored adults’ roles in shaping the ‘continuity’ of the children’s identities as a response to children’s efforts to maintain a ‘narrative coherence’ in their *stories to live by*. The inquiry also shed light on questions that unfolded as the study was being carried out – questions that ‘awakened’ the researchers to how children viewed them in relation to them, who they were in children’s stories to live by as well as the kinds of classroom spaces that they might intentionally negotiate and create alongside children to ‘enable their identity-making in ways that point them toward futures of possibility’ (pg. 314).

3.6 Conclusion

This literature review presents a detailed overview of theoretical perspectives and educational research on four distinct but interconnected areas that together inform and provide a theoretical background for this research inquiry, namely *theories of learning, development and ability, emerging abilities and talent development in young children, inclusive pedagogies that address the needs of young able learners* and finally a section on *teacher and learner identities*. The next chapter will elaborate on the aims of this study and outline the research design, approaches and methods used to carry out this narrative inquiry.

4 Methods and Methodology

4.1 Introduction and Outline of the Chapter

This chapter aims to present the method of inquiry used to conduct this qualitative study together with the philosophical underpinnings and interpretative frameworks on which this inquiry has been built. This study is located within an interpretative, social constructivist paradigm in its attempt to construct meaning and knowledge inductively and in its approach to understand the participants' perspectives and experiences. It also embraces elements from feminist thinking in its approach to understand social phenomena such as identity, ability, pedagogy and educational practice.

This research study was conducted in a primary classroom with a group of six to seven year olds with the aim to document and narrate a teacher-researcher's journey as she uncovers her own professional identity, pedagogy and practice. This was in turn achieved through an examination of her pupils' constructions of learning, ability and schooling. It was felt that narrative inquiry would be effective in capturing both a teacher's and her learners' voices whilst presenting a thick and rich picture of the interactions and connections that occur as they go about their everyday lives in a young learners' classroom. The six narratives constructed out of this study are presented in the next chapter in the form of case studies.

Overall, this chapter provides an overview of the methods I used to carry out my research study together with a justification for my choice of methods. It also discusses the methodological issues that are key to my study. The attempt is to put forward, in the broadest possible terms, the method and the process through which knowledge about the area being explored is constructed. The focus in this chapter is largely on understanding the rationale behind the choice of research paradigms, methods and procedures adopted in an attempt to increase and perhaps challenge current theoretical understandings of certain educational phenomena tackled within this research.

This discussion is divided into a number of different but interconnected sections. Following the introduction and outline to this chapter in section 4.1, the research design and purpose are presented in order to justify the approach taken to conduct the study and to substantiate the use of a qualitative framework over other methods of inquiry. Section 4.3 puts forward a description and an analysis of the focus of this research study as a way of narrowing down a

generic interest in the area of giftedness in young children into a more specific research interest that, as a researcher I felt, was worthy of exploration and analysis. Subsequently, the research questions are introduced in Section 4.4 and issues pertaining to the formulation and reasons behind their development are discussed. This is followed by an exposition of my positionality as a researcher through the philosophical assumptions and the theoretical positions that underpin my study in a section about the epistemological and ontological beliefs that guide my research. In section 4.6 I present the methodology namely narrative inquiry followed by details about the methods used to achieve my objectives for the study in section 4.7 – the use of a reflective diary, visual narrative through photographs and participatory methods with children. Their relevance to this research study will be exposed. Section 4.8 deals with the procedures taken to conduct the study and it also includes an explanation of how participants were selected and how data was collected throughout the different phases of the study. The role and identity of the researcher within this research study is discussed in section 4.9 followed by an exposition of the ethical issues pertaining to the proposed qualitative study. The chapter is concluded with an explanation of the dilemmas and challenges that the researcher faced during the course of the research study.

4.2 Research Design and Purpose

As with all research projects, choosing a design for this particular research inquiry has definitely proved to be a complex matter and, in agreement with Cohen et al. (2007), this process of planning and selecting a research design that would best facilitate a thorough exploration of the area of study I was interested in was largely guided by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’. Creswell (2008) points out that a researcher’s own assumptions and views of the world, her professional training and development, her experiences (both personal and professional) together with issues concerning the procedures of the study in terms of data collection, analysis and interpretation are all influential on the kind of approaches used to conduct a research study.

As outlined in the positionality chapter (chapter 2), a number of educational theories and educational thinkers have shaped my professional identity and this has certainly influenced both the area that I deemed worthy of exploration and the angles and approaches taken to conduct the inquiry. Amongst other issues, I sought, for instance, to understand more fully the notion of ‘giftedness’ in young children and to challenge traditional approaches to the

provision and identification of highly able or potentially gifted children. My professional experience in mixed-ability classrooms as well as my own experience as a student during my childhood urged me to look into the kind of social environments that would be more conducive to learning in terms of powerful connections and positive relationships that may facilitate or boost very able learners' educational experience. In this way, the study's theoretical framework draws on the Vygotskian sociocultural tradition which views learning and development as mediated through interactions with more knowledgeable or more experienced persons (Schaffer, 2004). I was more interested in the interpretation of contextual factors linked to the situation within which I was working and researching as a means to understand very able learners' interpretation and experience of their schooling as well as their constructions of notions such as ability, motivation and learning as they developed their learner identities. My view of children as 'active agents' in their social and cultural worlds who contribute both to the reproduction of the social world as well as to changes in society that arise through the new cultures created by the children themselves has also directed me towards an exploration of young children's perspectives on issues related to their own learning trajectories (Corsaro, 2011).

On the other hand, I was less inclined to use numeric data and quantitative research methods to research my area of interest since my view of the world takes me away from a positivist, quantifiable understanding of educational issues to a more interpretative, social constructivist perspective which ultimately positions this study within a situated learning and constructivist paradigm.

It is thus evident that those personal and professional training and experiences that have shaped my views of the world, particularly in relation to my place within the educational sphere, support my choice of embracing a qualitative, naturalistic approach to this study. By adopting a qualitative approach to researching and documenting the stories of a group of young learners as a way of revealing a teacher's professional identity through her pedagogy and practice, I intended to turn the hunches and insights that one develops over the years through experience and practice into a narrative inquiry of our learning journey (both mine and that of the participants). Apart from constructing a teacher's narrative, this study therefore aimed to also include young learners' voices to illuminate and enhance the

discussion by using their perspectives and experiences of the world of schooling and learning to uncover my pedagogy as a teacher-researcher.

Through qualitative educational research, one aims to clarify educational issues linked to the teaching and learning process. In describing naturalistic approaches to research, Cohen et al (2007) affirm that a more subjective undertaking to the study of people's behaviours enables a researcher to understand individuals' interpretations of the world around them as a means to deal with their experiences in specific contexts. This, in turn, results in a demystification of social reality because it is presented, explained and understood through the eyes of different participants who themselves define the social reality. In accordance with this, Coleman et al (2007) state that the focus in qualitative research lies in the local phenomenon not in the universal and that qualitative researchers do not search to apply the findings universally because it is then up to the reader to decide whether the results concord with his or her situation as he or she constructs meaning based on his or her contextual factors. That is what this study aimed to accomplish – rather than seeking to generalise findings and study a phenomenon in the wide educational arena, this inquiry was more focused and located within a specific local context. In this qualitative study, individual participants' interpretations and meanings are explored within the social reality and social context in which they unfold. Creswell (2008) summarises qualitative research as:

“... a means of exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.” (Creswell, 2008, p.4)

4.3 Research Focus

In order to establish the focus of this study from among different possibilities in terms of routes or lines of inquiry that may seem justifiable and worthy of investigation, a researcher needs to identify areas that are of particular interest to his or her professional development and analyse what it is that he or she is specifically concerned about, the angle from which one is to enquire and delve into the subject, and the kinds of information that the researcher intends to collect in order to explore the topic thoroughly as well as in an academically rigorous and relevant manner.

As an educational researcher with a keen interest in the centrality of relationships and the role of educators in enabling students to develop positive learner identities and to live meaningful learning experiences during their years of schooling, I was consciously aware of the lack of attention (particularly in the early years) being given in Maltese primary classrooms to learners who were potentially able to reach high levels of performance. The notion of 'giftedness in young children' is what set this research process going. However, as will be outlined later in the chapter, it acted simply as a spring board from where this research study took off because, in reality, my fascination with teachers' role in helping unveil gifts and talents in young children ultimately led to a deeper and more philosophical questioning exercise into the notions of teacher-pupil interactions and how both teachers and learners constructed knowledge and understanding of their worlds as they interacted with one another.

Wisker (2008, p.51) points out that although the research cycle may start with a particular experience, problem or question, in due course it will contribute to knowledge construction about the area of interest with which the research is concerned but it may also lead to other knowledge including self-knowledge on the part of the researcher. This point summarizes the course of my research study since my enquiry into very able children's constructions and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling served as an 'uncovering' of my own professional identity as a teacher-researcher (at the time when the data was being gathered) in addition to the construction of further knowledge and understanding about children's views on matters that concern their school learning experiences.

Building on the research purposes presented in the previous section, I realised over time that my main concern was largely about the notion of teachers and learners and what their everyday classroom interactions and connections revealed about each other especially with regards to the development of teachers' professional and children's learner identities. Therefore, I built my research questions around this line of inquiry.

4.4 Research Questions

I started this research journey with the intention to explore meaningful ways in which teachers acknowledge and nurture giftedness in young children within the regular classroom. As I explained in my positionality chapter, I strongly believe that individual differences in an

ecologically diverse classroom cannot be taken lightly and that a conscientious and effective teacher who aims to reach each and every learner in her classroom must also take into consideration the notion of providing challenging learning experiences to children who are potentially able to reach high levels of achievement in all areas of endeavour or in specific ones. From the very beginning of my research journey, I formulated a number of research questions that changed over time as my focus moved from a specific interest in the notion of 'giftedness' in young children to the more democratic and inclusive concept of teachers' roles in embracing pedagogical approaches and educational practices that aim to unveil and nurture emerging abilities in young learners to the development of positive learner identities from the early years and children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling.

My interest in the concept of giftedness in young learners has fuelled my decision to carry out this research project albeit from a different angle to the one originally conceptualised. My research trajectory has been characterised by a constant clash between the notion of giftedness as perceived by the gifted education literature that I was being exposed to in my readings and my evolved view of learning, ability and talent that is a result of years of reflection, professional development, classroom experience and interaction with educationalists, educators, teachers, parents and students. More recent theories of learning and ability, my feminist values and sense of equity and social justice together with my professional experience in primary classrooms have directed me towards a reconceptualisation of the notion of emerging abilities, gifts and talents in young children – one that is based on sociocultural and situated learning perspectives which promote an idea of learning and cognition that are distributed and situated. Consequently, when as a practitioner-researcher I speak of high ability, talent or giftedness in young learners, I feel I must talk about 'persons-in-situations' and 'talented transactions' that cannot occur in a child's mind in isolation but only as a result of interaction and participation in socially mediated and socially created experiences (Barab & Plucker, 2002).

Over the past decade, in my profession as a teacher of young children and as a mother of two children, I have observed the ways in which children have changed and evolved – although today's children are essentially the same as the ones who entered my classroom ten or twelve years ago, and in many ways resemble the ones I remember when I myself was six and seven years old, yet they differ in a number of ways. Similar things intrigue the children of this

generation as the ones of a decade or a quarter of a century ago – playing, making friends, socialising, learning to be good at something and so on. What seems to be changing are the ways in which they do things, the ways in which they socialise, the things they play with, the way they experience the world and make sense of it. Apart from the political and social changes that inevitably effect children and society in general, popular cultures as well as the integration of technology in an increasingly media-rich society have definitely left their mark on children and childhood (Marsh et al., 2005).

Keeping the above argument in mind, I was intrigued to find out the kind of pedagogies that a twenty-first century primary school teacher working with learners coming from diverse family backgrounds and who have different experiences, interests and talents need to adopt to live up to young children's expectations and motivation to learn. I asked myself numerous questions, some of which eventually formed part of the main research questions identified for this study. Initially, I wished for my study to shed light on those salient elements within an inclusive learning environment that are essential to ensure an inclusive and effective pedagogical approach that not only guarantees the reaching of standards in basic skills but also kindles young learners' fire for learning about the world around them and demonstrating it through whichever medium they feel most comfortable with. I wanted to delve into those skills that need to be developed and promoted so that children are provided with the tools necessary to succeed in today's and tomorrow's society whilst enabling them to discover and develop their emerging gifts and talents.

Needless to say, this research interest could be studied from different points and angles of inquiry but in the end I opted for an exploration of the views of the main protagonists of the teaching and learning process i.e. an investigation of the children's own constructions of aspects that influence or are influenced by their learning trajectories as a means of revealing their teacher's professional attitude, identity, pedagogy and practice. In this way, it was felt that rather than solely focus on elements within a classroom environment that are conducive to learning and talent development as perceived by a teacher-researcher, it was the point of view of the learners directly involved in the research study that were to enrich and render a more complete perspective to the investigation.

From the start, I was also deeply aware of the crucial role of a school climate of high expectations and aspirations (embedded in an ethos that demands commitment and excellence and that encourages flexibility in curricula and inclusive pedagogy, creativity and critical reflective practice as well as teacher autonomy and teacher collaboration) on the professional development of teaching staff and the development and fostering of ability and talent. The local policy context of accountability, standardisation and regulation (DQSE, 2009) as well as the crude policy framework related to high potential, talents and gifts (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2004) were also taken into account during the process of the formulation of the main research questions.

It has been a long process, one filled with uncertainty and trepidation, yet today I understand that such a roller-coaster ride was essential for a thorough exploration of the different notions that I aimed to study. It seems that although the areas which I wanted to explore were varied, they were nevertheless connected in that they all pointed to a teacher’s attempt to uncover and understand her practice, her pedagogy and ultimately her identity as a professional working with young children.

4.4.1 Formulating the Questions

Figure 4.1 shows a list of key terms that I had a particular interest in at the start of the study and that I jotted down before formulating the research questions. These key terms were divided into three groups. The first set of terms belonged to issues relating to teachers and their profession, the second set of terms deal with learners whilst the third set is linked to the connection between the two.

<p>Learners potential giftedness ability intelligence learner identities talent development capable learners individual differences children’s constructions</p>	<p>Teachers reflective practitioner effective teachers practitioner-researcher pedagogical choices educational practice professional identity teachers as learners facilitator of learning</p>	<p>Teaching and Learning Process inclusion powerful interactions teacher-pupil relationships ecologically diverse classrooms early years 21st century pedagogy motivation engagement</p>
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Figure 4.1 Formulating the questions

These key terms helped me to focus on the area of study I wished to explore. They certainly indicated my interest in the centrality of relationships between teachers and learners in a

classroom and in the idea that the teaching and learning process is characterised and built upon social interaction amongst the protagonists within a school and a classroom environment. They thus pushed me towards a social constructivist framework which emphasizes the importance of the role of both culture and context when attempting to understand what is happening within our classrooms and schools. Learning viewed through this constructivist lens is a social process and knowledge and reality are constructed socially and culturally through human interaction (Kim, 2001).

These key terms, combined together, identified my research study as qualitative rather than quantitative in their call for depth rather than breadth (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Cohen et al. 2007). The key terms generally placed an emphasis on social relationships, human experience and reflective practice. In this sense, a qualitative approach was warranted in that only through a deep examination of the participants' perceptions and a reflective observation of their interactions with each other and with their learning environment (in terms of the learning space and the tools used to engage in the learning process) would it be possible for me as the researcher to examine and make sense of the research questions I formulated. No numeric data would be able to truly explain and render justice to the complexity of the notions being explored.

My ontological and epistemological beliefs (which will be further explained in section 4.5) have had a considerable effect on my study and rather than adhering to my original plan to examine elements in an inclusive learning context that facilitate the recognition and nurturing of high potential in six year olds, I have been pulled in an unexpected direction that, nevertheless, now feels true to that which I have always yearned to explore – using very able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling to uncover and unveil a teacher's professional identity through her pedagogical choices and through her professional practice. The set of research questions identified for this study have been formulated purposely to allow the researcher to probe sensitively into the focused research area and examine human experience in all its complexity. The three research questions are connected and consistent with one another, build on each other and thus constitute a coherent whole.

4.4.2 Presenting the Questions

Research Question 1:

What are young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling?

This question aimed to examine the perceptions of a group of six-year-olds about notions and concepts that were closely linked to their experiences of learning within a school context, namely their constructions of learning, ability and schooling. I sought to understand and recognise the thoughts, views, beliefs and values of a group of learners whom I perceived to be potentially very able learners through the use of participatory methods with children. These learners had been selected over the course of the scholastic year as students who, in their own individual and unique way, had been reaching high levels of performance in all or some aspects of the curriculum. I wished to seek and document young children's views and perceptions of their emerging abilities, their learning environment, the people and other elements that impacted on their learning and identity. I wanted to understand how they made sense of the learning processes through their classroom participation and interaction with others (adults and peers) and with the environment as well as through their own responses and voices as they took part in conversations with me (as the teacher-researcher) and with their peers, which then led me to my second research question.

Research Question 2:

What do young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling reveal about a teacher's own pedagogy and practice?

I firmly believe that young children have particular understandings of their world and that an analysis of adults' observations of children's behaviour, their learning and their experiences can lead to a close but nevertheless unauthentic view of children's perceptions. From the start, I was deeply attracted to the idea of seeking children's views and perceptions to further explore aspects of the teaching and learning process and, eventually, I was directed towards the possibility and realisation that children's constructions in themselves could be used to understand and uncover the professional attitude, practice and identity of a teacher-researcher engaged in a process of reflective inquiry.

Therefore, through the second research question, I wanted to look through the lens of the young learner in my classroom at my own practice, my own pedagogical choices, and ultimately my professional identity. Understanding how children construct knowledge and experience of the learning process would serve as an exercise in self-reflection. I sought to figure out what the young learners in my classroom had taught me about my own profession and my own journey as a teacher in such a way that their stories, their narratives would be regarded as ‘mirrors’ of my own professional practice.

Research Question 3:

In what ways, if any, does a teacher and a group of young able learners aged six years in a mixed-ability classroom impact each other’s experiences, performance and identities?

In this final question, I wished to explore in more depth the different ways in which my daily work and interactions with this group of young able children may have influenced their process of identity-formation as well as their perceptions and views of learning, ability and schooling – and in turn how these children’s constructions, responses, attitudes and motivation in class may have impacted on my own identity as a teacher of young children. Thus through this question, I placed a spotlight on how the lives of a teacher and her young learners intertwine and bring about change and growth as the process of teaching and learning evolves.

4.5 Epistemological and Ontological Beliefs

A number of epistemological and ontological beliefs, some of which have already been alluded to earlier in this chapter, informed this research study. It is said that the ways in which one aligns oneself in terms of philosophical underpinnings and theoretical positions will surely have a profound effect on how knowledge and interpretations of the area being studied are acquired or constructed, as well as how they are then communicated to others. Particular research methods are adopted based on such epistemological and ontological beliefs because they reflect directly the researcher’s view of the world, of human behaviour and experience, and of the nature of knowledge (Cohen et al. 2007).

Clough and Nutbrown (2012) present a perspective of social research that departs from a particular position, that has specific purposes and that seeks to convince its audience of the

claims made – thus one cannot separate a research inquiry from its political stance. A qualitative researcher, perhaps more than one adhering to quantitative methods of inquiry, must in a way emphasise and be explicit about the subjectivity, flexibility and multi-layered forms of investigation that are characteristic of qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cohen et al., 2007; Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Qualitative data generation and analysis aspires to understand rather than explain meanings through interpretation, which in turn seeks to clarify, enrich and make the perceived phenomenon meaningful as new aspects of its totality are discovered (Cohn, 2005). Willig & Stainton-Rogers (2008) argue that:

“It is important to bear in mind that interpretation ought to be concerned with understanding rather than with explanation, and, as such, it should not aspire to the production of certainties, of definite knowledge and facts, of last words... interpretation means amplification of meaning, an exploration and clarification of the many strands of meaning which constitute the phenomenon of interest.” (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p.9)

As I have already explained in the introduction to this chapter, this study is largely built on a social constructivist approach to knowledge and learning as well as on elements from feminist thinking in its attempt to ‘... give voice to its participants and to allow their own perspective and understanding of their experiences to be foregrounded’ (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). These philosophical beliefs underpin the whole of the study from its conception to its design, from the formulation of the research questions to the process of data collection and interpretation, all of which are sensible to the context in which the inquiry is carried out. As argued in the background chapter (chapter 2) of this thesis, the researcher’s own positionality, her personal and professional histories and her standpoint undoubtedly colour the way in which this inquiry is conducted, the way in which data is generated and eventually interpreted. Here the ‘personal’ becomes ‘political’ in that individual experience and relationships reproduce or challenge the status quo through qualitative research projects (Parker, 2005).

Throughout my teaching career, I have observed how children thrive in an environment that supports and challenges them to learn, explore, discover, strive for excellence and have fun. At times, these same children unfortunately lose their love for learning simply because they are moved to an environment where the focus shifts on what they cannot do, what they do not know or what they cannot learn. Working with young children for more than a decade as well as raising my own two children, I have developed insights and hunches about those

elements in an ecologically diverse classroom of young learners that can foster children's inquisitive nature on the one hand or literally crush their motivation to learn and taint their learner identities when education and schooling become impersonal, remote and irrelevant to children's lives.

These thoughts and reflections grew as a result of the knowledge I acquired through my studies in the field of education, through my experience as a practitioner in early primary classrooms, through my observation of other teachers within the schools where I have been teaching as well as those schools that I have visited over the past ten years for a number of professional reasons. My own experience as a mother of two young children as well as my personal experience as a lifelong learner (from my first experience of schooling through to today) have also influenced the way I view education, schooling and my role as a teacher-researcher. I have portrayed aspects of my personal and professional journey as a student, mother, teacher and researcher in a background chapter to the study where I placed these experiences within a historical, social and cultural context in a way as to provide a background to my research study and journey as a practitioner-researcher.

At this point of my career, particularly at a stage where I was feeling the need to move towards a position of leadership in schools and/or trainer of undergraduates aspiring to become educators, I felt I wished to explore these intuitions and gut feelings deeper because I considered teachers and educators to have a great responsibility towards the learners that come to their classroom each year and also to those who do not. I also humbly hoped for my study to be a source of inspiration for school leaders and teachers of young learners by providing a good-enough example of a school ethos and classroom practice that not only develops all children's basic skills and helps them to reach required levels set by local standardisation policies, but also facilitates the development and flourishing of high potential and emerging abilities in young capable children.

By adopting a qualitative approach to research and documenting my own journey as well as the stories of a group of young learners over a scholastic term, I intended to turn these hunches and insights into a narrative inquiry of our learning journey through a reflective exercise that builds a teacher's narrative by taking into consideration young learners' voices as they try to make sense of the world. In this manner, through my attempt to understand

the subjective world of a teacher and her pupils, I adopt an interpretive view of social research as opposed to a positivist approach where numeric data is collected rigorously and then analysed scientifically and where research design is largely experimentally controlled.

Driven by a deep respect towards children as capable learners in their own right (Nutbrown, 1996) and as 'active agents' in their social and cultural worlds (Corsaro, 2011), and also supported by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), I wanted to give young learners a voice by seeking to validate their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling. I felt that, in line with children's rights to be free to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their own lives, by taking into consideration and trying to understand what the children in my class had to say about school and learning, I would in actual fact be looking at my own reflection of who I have become as an educator and practitioner working with children over these years of teaching. The further I went into this research journey, the more evident the necessity for inviting and allowing the participants of this study to take a more prominent role in terms of actually interpreting their words and actions as a clear indication and expression of the kind of teacher/educator/practitioner that I've grown to be.

4.5.1 Constructivist Approach to Learning

The pursuit to establish a foundation of certainty for knowledge embraced by traditional epistemology has dominated the scene for decades. However, this idea of a foundation for all knowledge, a kind of knowledge that is absolute, true and objective has been challenged by philosophers, like Dewey and others, who have adopted a more naturalistic approach that puts knowledge on a higher position than truth and that is built on the premise that all knowledge is constructed through experience (Dewey, 1938). The latter posits an active view of learners and places 'knowers' and the known in one world of potential experience.

Dewey's notions of experience and practical knowledge (including that of teachers whom he views as 'minded professionals'), together with his sense of inquiry, form a sound epistemological foundation for narrative inquiry as a kind of reflective endeavour. As a matter of fact, the main proponent of 'reflective practice' as a research methodology (Schon, 1983) was himself a Deweyan scholar.

The theoretical framework of this research study informed the formulation process of the research questions in that it implied that learning, in its wider meaning, is a constructive process and that knowledge is constructed actively by the learners as they strive to make sense of their worlds. Both my methodology as a researcher and my pedagogy as a practitioner in the field of education reflect a constructivist approach to knowledge which holds that human beings construct knowledge and meaning from experience and from relationships between things, people and events (Wisker, 2008).

In similar ways, the values, beliefs and assumptions that underpin my choice of research area, methodology as well as research questions together with the educational strategies that I adopt in my professional practice are a combination of years of experience, a result of my personal and professional histories that have shaped and are still shaping who I am as an educator of young learners and a researcher of my own practice. Therefore, this inquiry is built on the premise that knowledge and understanding of professional practice is constructed through interactions and through human experience. This is also in line with Dewey's notion of teachers' practical knowledge as a sense of knowing carved out of experience (Dewey, 1938). There are numerous ways in which a qualitative researcher may decide to interpret and make sense of the experiences of the participants in a study. At this point, it is essential to highlight the fact that I was myself a participant of this inquiry i.e. a participant-researcher in addition to the group of young learners who happened to be in the Junior 2 class that I was teaching during the period when this study was being conducted. Hence, it can be argued that by subscribing to a constructivist perspective, the researcher acknowledges the role that herself and her students, as active participants of the ongoing action that was unfolding throughout the inquiry phase, played in the construction of their social world and the meaning they assigned to these constructions within the context of a primary school and, more specifically, a Junior 2 classroom.

As study participants, they were actively involved in the production of their social reality as they experienced and took part in the teaching and learning process. It is believed that the study participants, who like all young learners enter one's classroom armed with their own experiences, values, beliefs, expectations and view of the world, were responding positively or negatively to a teacher's attempt to support and facilitate their learning. Within such a constructivist perspective, it is safe to state that the participants affected and were being

influenced, to a smaller or larger degree, by the interactions and experiences that occurred prior to, during and after the study was concluded.

This brings to mind the ideas presented by sociocultural thinkers who argue that by interacting with their environment and with others, learners construct meaning and knowledge while, in the course of their development, human beings also actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them (Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010). From a sociocultural perspective, children's constructions and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling are mediated by their social and cultural experiences, in the sense that as they interact socially, they formulate their understandings and behaviours by drawing on the values and beliefs of their community. From such a perspective, children's thought processes, views, behaviours and actions may be said to be products of their sociocultural milieu (Khimji & Maunder, 2012; O'Toole & de Abreu, 2005).

As was pointed out in the literature review section on theories of learning, the sociocultural perspective incorporates a family of theories that seek to provide an account of learning as participation in activities that occur within a social context. These activities lead to development and new learning as a result of interaction with others, with the environment and with tools and artefacts that enhance and affect the constructions that occur in the process. This family of theories is largely built on ideas put forward by both Dewey and Vygotsky and includes social constructivism, community of practice, distributed cognition, situated learning, cultural-historical activity theory, amongst others. From this perspective, learning occurs within or across multiple contexts and knowledge is created in communities that distribute learning resources so that they are made available to learners whose cognitive, affective and moral development is being formed in the process of social interaction. The dynamic interaction between people, their culture, their history and their upbringing impacts the way individuals use and understand the tools that facilitate learning and development such as language, communication and media (Engestrom et al., 1999).

Within a sociocultural and situated learning perspective, learning cannot be regarded solely as belonging to an individual and his/her internal processing of the stimuli that enter his/ her brain since learning is situated in the social activity in which it occurs at a specific time and in a particular place and is distributed among individuals rather than located within a single

person (Murphy, 2003). What a person learns, how this is acquired and the situation in which learning takes place are fundamentally part of the learning process and cannot be separated from it because learning largely occurs as a product of the context, culture and activities in which it is situated (Lave, 1988).

Working and researching from such a standpoint, I, as the researcher, must acknowledge that the study participants' constructions and views of the world are situated within their local context and therefore the meanings they assign to their experiences have to be interpreted and understood against a socio-cultural, historical and political backdrop. The background chapter at the beginning of this thesis dedicates space to an analysis of social, cultural, historical and political factors that have had an influence on my own learning trajectories, which ultimately led to the conception of this inquiry. On similar lines, this study aimed to explore issues of identity by examining the interplay between a teacher and her students and their mutual effect on one another's identity and constructions of their worlds with a specific focus on educational concepts such as professional identity, learner identity as well as perceptions of ability, learning and schooling.

4.5.2 Feminist Values as Researcher and Practitioner

In my choice of marrying narrative inquiry with elements from participatory research methods as research methodology as well as my sociocultural approach to epistemology and learning theory, I feel, as a woman, mother, teacher and researcher, a general belonging to the values and principles held by feminist thinking. It is essential to point out, however, that although this inquiry includes both my voice as a woman-researcher-practitioner as well as the narratives of four girls who were study participants, the focus of this study is not entirely on the social construction of gender. Gender is only one aspect out of a number of social phenomena that are tackled and that feature in the analysis and interpretation of the data collected as I attempted to understand my own experience and that of the study participants. In this section, I intend to explain the rationale behind a research approach that is feminist (as well as sociocultural) in order to defend my position of identifying myself as a feminist researcher even though gender may not be the main focus of the study and despite the fact that I included boys as well as girls as case studies.

For an inquiry to be labelled 'feminist', it is generally understood that it needs to recognise the organisation of the social world by gender, and that it is built on the standpoints and

experiences of women (Brayton, 1997). Harding (1987) emphasises the latter as one of the defining features of feminist research together with the idea of including the researcher as part of the research subject so that the inequality in power of the relationship between the researcher and the study participants is attended to. This is accomplished by validating the perspectives of the participants so that the hierarchical relationship that traditionally existed between researcher and participant is removed.

Methodologically, this inquiry begins from the standpoint of the researcher who identifies herself as a woman and whose gender has, to a large degree, influenced the course of her life, learning and professional trajectories as was exposed in the background chapter to this study (chapter one). Lather (1988) proposes that feminist researchers must identify and expose their social position and location in order to address any biases that might arise as a result of where they are coming from, considering that the choices made by the researcher regarding the research focus, purpose and methodology are shaped and inspired by the experiences, beliefs and values that are inherent in the sociocultural milieu to which the researcher belongs. Moreover, throughout the research study the views and experiences of the participants were sought and their voices and perspectives were at the centre of the researcher's pursuit to understand and validate the experiences of teacher and students as they make sense of the teaching and learning process through their everyday interactions and connections. Drawing on young children's views and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling to understand and uncover a teacher's professional identity was instrumental in changing the power relationship between researcher and participants. By presenting the children's narratives as a means to share and acknowledge their authentic voices, this research can be termed as 'feminist' in that it recognises the participants as experts and authorities of their own experiences.

Feminist thinking in epistemology seeks to listen to students' and teachers' voices in terms of what they think of and how they experience the phenomena of teaching and learning (Noddings, 1995). The children's own stories as well as teachers' experiences of the classroom in general and of the implementation of pedagogical strategies within a reality that, more often than not, is not as straightforward and idyllic as some outsiders tend to depict it have a great contribution to make to educational research and theory.

Listening to children's voices and valuing diversity amongst learners as a means to tackle issues of inclusion and exclusion is another way of embracing feminist lines of thinking. As a researcher and practitioner, I sought to provide equal opportunities (but not the same) for all learners to develop their gifts and talents and I used reflection and critical thinking to ensure that my pedagogy encouraged the cultivation of all possible areas of endeavour, including those not traditionally considered to be worthy educationally. I also sought to document the perceptions of 'tall poppies' (Gross, 1999) whose ideas, thoughts and feelings should provide further insights into those elements within a supportive and challenging learning environment that are conducive to the development of high potential and emerging abilities. It is my aspiration as a teacher and mother of young children that those 'small poppies' who grow taller or in different directions to their peers are not cut down to size but are given the opportunity through the development of 'smart contexts' (Barab & Plucker, 2002) to flourish so that they can "lift their heads to the sky" (Gross, 1999).

A major intent and driving force for my decision to embark on this research journey was my need to address the emancipatory element of educational research – by listening to my learners' voices when choosing pedagogical strategies and by interpreting and documenting what actually happens in the classroom and how learners respond to the learning environment, I aimed to empower those being researched, including myself as a representative of the teaching community.

In a nutshell, although a sociocultural perspective underlies this research inquiry, I feel I am also a feminist in my positionality as a woman and teacher-researcher trying to uncover my professional identity as a practitioner working with children. I am a feminist in my positionality, in my view of education's emancipatory power to liberate girls and women as well as members of our community who might otherwise remain stuck in oppression (Freire, 1970; 1994). I can also say that I feel a belonging to feminist thinking in my approach to celebrate diversity and to look at individual differences in children from a positive lens rather than focus on their deficits or areas of weakness. I am a feminist in refuting a model of education based on blames and what's wrong with children. I am a feminist in placing the responsibility in the hands of the educators to provide meaningful and rich learning opportunities for every child to be the best they can be irrespective of their background, their

cultural baggage and their life experiences. I am a feminist in the linking between the personal, professional and the political when I relate aspects of my personal experience that have influenced or been influenced by my gender as well as in my efforts to intertwine sociocultural and historical histories into the study in the first chapter of this study, the aim of which was to lay a foundation for this inquiry.

4.6 Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

When I delved into the literature on qualitative methodology in an effort to find those methods that would best suit my research needs, I was mesmerized by the idea that I could marry both my roles - as an educational researcher who seeks to examine, probe and learn more about my 'science' on the one hand and a reflective practitioner who is interested in the views, stories and relationships that enrich and give meaning to my profession and my reality as a primary school teacher. As outlined in previous sections, my research focus was on young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling and how their perceptions may help uncover a teacher's professional identity, pedagogy and practice as they interact, connect and learn together. It was felt that narration as method and form would be effective in exploring and analysing the experiences of the participants, in bringing out their voices as I try to understand and make sense of my practice by presenting an intertwined narrative told and constructed by a teacher and her pupils.

Narrative research as a method is said to be effective when a researcher is seeking to capture the detailed stories or life experiences of a single person or a small group of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Reismann, 2008). It is undertaken by qualitative researchers who are interested in collaborating with their participants or who wish to have a more subjective place in the research so that the researcher-participant relationship becomes central to the study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

"Collecting and analyzing stories is only part of narrative inquiry. It is in the living and telling of experience that we locate what represents our sense of our experience as narrative inquirers... on reflection, we understand that relationship is at the heart of thinking narratively. Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do." (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)

The use of narrative inquiry as a source for teacher reflection, learning and growth has increased in the past years as it provides the opportunity for teachers to learn, support and collaborate with colleagues while documenting their own learning within the educational context (Lemon, 2007, p.182). As a practitioner, I experience curiosity, respect and a

motivation to learn about other teachers' views and stories particularly when they depict the reality of classroom life. For me and for many others, as Ellis (1997 in Song and Taylor, 2005, p.160) clearly points out:

"A story's 'validity' can be judged by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible; the story's generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience."

Through the use of narrative inquiry, teachers learn to question what has often become part and parcel of the learning environment just like a piece of clutter that has no decorative or practical use becomes part of one's furniture. Central to my quest to examine my pedagogical approach was the concept of setting up a classroom that would challenge both me as the teacher and my learners in an effort to explore innovative ways of presenting the content and skills promoted and prescribed by the national and the school's curriculum while maintaining engagement and cultivating learners' gifts and talents. Therefore, narrative inquiry as research methodology fitted my educational quest as:

"To be able to tell your own story as a teacher alongside those stories of the students allows for an interlocking of understandings. Stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world while at the same time they shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality. We know and discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.7)

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, narrative inquiry enables research to gain insight from experiences that are meaningful to others, and therefore plays a vital role in being able to access and enter an interpretive world. Gade (2011) portrays the growth of her reflective voice as a teacher-researcher-educator in a paper where she adopts narrative as a unit of analysis with which to grasp teaching-learning practice. Her reflective journey leads her to argue in favour of empowering the praxis of teachers, which in turn is defined by Cohen et al. (2007, p.302) as "... action informed through reflection, and with emancipation as its goal" and the use of individual teacher voice in qualitative research. As outlined in the section on the research purpose, one of the aims of this research study was to acknowledge and validate a teacher's practical knowledge in an effort to give voice to teachers as practitioners who, through their experiences, relationships and practical knowledge, have a lot to contribute to the educational community in general.

Narrative stories may emerge as a result of the gathering of different sets of data by the researcher who shapes the story of individuals' lived and told experiences into a chronology. At times these stories are co-constructed between the researcher and the study participants

who collaborate through interaction and dialogue. The researcher uses different sources of qualitative data to tell someone's story, interpreting the data and constructing a narrative using words elicited by the participants and putting ideas, events and experiences in a sequence that is characteristic of storying because, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, there is a temporal change that is communicated when individuals talk about their experiences and about their lives. Such an inquiry may shed light on the thoughts, actions, behaviours and perceptions of individuals, on how they view themselves, how they see others and their worlds in such a way that through narrative stories, individuals' identities emerge (Creswell, 2013).

People are regarded as 'embodiments of lived stories' in narrative inquiries (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In accordance with a sociocultural perspective, studies that seek to explore and build narratives within an institutional context such as stories in schools, take into account the understanding that the lives and experiences of the study participants '... shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives'. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p.45) present an example of a narrative inquirer who, through her study, was attempting to understand the experiences and practical knowledge of an immigrant teacher but who, over the course of her research, discovered and acknowledged tension at the boundaries between her own personal narrative and the narrative inquiry per se. This is very similar to the tensions I infallibly experienced with my original goal to research giftedness in young children only to realise, during the research journey, that my initial views, attitudes and ways of thinking about inquiry and about educational phenomena such as ability and potential clashed with my evolved understanding of the actual kind of inquiry that I would eventually undertake. Referring to the example of their narrative inquirer, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p.46) conclude that:

"The most general lesson to be learned from Phillion's story is that narrative inquirers need to reconstruct their own narrative of inquiry histories and to be alert to possible tensions between those narrative histories and the narrative research they undertake."

The use of narrative inquiry in educational research has increased over the years, particularly in an effort to challenge reductionist and formalistic histories of inquiry. Qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, seeks to expose and understand everyday social situations as opposed to dictating absolute truths and knowledge about people, places and events. Billington (2000) presents a number of case studies as 'individualized stories of experiences'

to address issues such as power relations between professionals and their clients that are reproduced and generated by forms of government and institutions. His inclusion of stories of individual children to critically examine processes, relationships and boundaries within professional practices succeeds in bringing out the personal experiences of the children behind the labels that are given in psychologists' reports so that the everyday acts and events leading to the assigning of labels become crucial for a deeper and more critical understanding and examination of the familial, educational and institutional contexts that may have contributed to the pathologizing process of each child. Through the use of stories, Billington succeeds in promoting and encouraging certain ways of thinking, speaking and writing about children who are viewed as 'different'.

To sum up, this research study proposes to study my experiences as a teacher-researcher and those of my pupils using a variety of methods that should enable me to capture the participants' perspectives on matters concerning their educational experience and, subsequently, through an examination of their perceptions come to an understanding of their teacher's professional identity, pedagogy and practice. The methods used to collect the data also aimed to shed light on those salient elements in an inclusive learning setting that bring about learning to a point where children's potentials are unveiled, developed and nurtured through meaningful learning experiences. Such approach to the examination and analysis of experience follows from Clandinin and Connelly's (1989, 2000) approach to narrative and story based on Deweyian thought as a studying of experience itself. Stories are developed from seeing and describing the everyday actions of teachers, learners, leaders and others and therefore the narratives of researcher and participants become intertwined to a point where a shared narrative construction and reconstruction happens through the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989).

4.7 Methods

This section presents the data collection methods used throughout this research study. The epistemological and ontological roots of this study together with its qualitative and interpretative nature have undoubtedly impacted the choice of tools made to collect the data. Rather than seeking reliability and generalisation through triangulation as a researcher carrying out quantitative research would be expected to do, this study demanded that the data collection methods applied would enable me, as the researcher, to eventually present

an interpreted and intertwined narrative told by a small group of participants within a specific situation and context and retold by a teacher-researcher in an attempt to describe complex educational phenomena in an effective and authentic manner. Cohen et al. (2007) argue that the criteria of reliability in quantitative methodologies cannot be relevant to qualitative research and therefore are not to be applied. Instead, in qualitative research:

“...reliability includes fidelity to real life, context-and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents.” (Cohen et al., 2007; pg.149)

Choosing one or more tools for effectively generating and collecting data in a qualitative research study is not an easy and straightforward process and a researcher must reflect thoroughly on a number of issues to ultimately select those methods that would best help him/her answer the research questions within the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning the study. The fact that this research was built on social constructivist and feminist perspectives together with the belief that relationships are central to the teaching and learning process required the use of tools that can provide an authentic, rich and holistic picture of the interactions, connections and occurrences that take place within a classroom of young children so that the students’ and teacher’s voices are brought to the foreground in an effort to build narratives that teach and inform educators and professionals working with young children about the educational phenomena being investigated.

For the purpose of this research, the following data collection tools were used: the reflective diary, visual narrative and participatory methods with children which consisted of conversational interviews with six participants as well as a photo collage group activity towards the end of the study. Used alone, each of these tools would be able to tell a specific story about the experiences of the participants through different methods, an interpretation of what happens in a Junior 2 classroom within an independent school situated on the island of Malta. When each piece of data collected through the various tools is pieced together, a more holistic picture emerges, one that enables the researcher to create a reliable and authentic evidence base on which to construct, interpret and re-tell an intertwined narrative that ultimately aims to inform, instruct and inspire educators and professionals working with young children to reflect upon their practices by listening to, acknowledging and validating young learners’ voices.

4.7.1 Reflective Diary

The reflective journal was used during the first phase of the study to capture the lives of a group of twenty-two six year olds and their teacher as they interacted, connected, developed and learned over the course of a scholastic term. It was felt that a reflective journal, through its expressive and narrative nature, would be effective in facilitating a deep sensitive critical examination of my practice as well as in describing the everyday life of the participants within the context of an early years' classroom.

The use of a reflective diary was deemed important for the first phase of the study as a means to report the observations and reflections of the social events and interactions that took place within the classroom as setting for the study. Bold (2012; pg. 84) points out that whereas in generic research methods, a journal or a diary might be kept as an 'aide-memoire' to the process rather than as a means of gathering primary data, in narrative research a reflective diary might prove to be 'the most informative document, providing the backbone for all other materials gathered – primary and secondary data – from the field'. From the start, the intention was to record anecdotes and stories of those interactions and connections that would occur between me and the participants, between the participants themselves, as well as any relevant transactions that would be regarded as instrumental in bringing about changes and development in terms of teaching and learning. Apart from a retelling of what happened in the classroom, the stories told in the reflective diary also included examples of pedagogical approaches adopted, patterns that emerged related to talent development in different areas of endeavour, as well as stories about the teacher's and the students' use of tools and artefacts (including technology) as a means to communicate, demonstrate and extend the learning that occurred within this social setting. The reflections and descriptions in the diary eventually led to the choice of six participants for the second phase of the study i.e. the case-studies.

Over the course of the term during which the reflective diary was kept, a number of entries were made. Rather than keeping a daily record of everything that occurred in the classroom, I opted for a reflective diary that consisted largely of entries around powerful connections, meaningful learning experiences and lessons that were particularly appealing to the students in my class. One is to keep in mind the subjective element of such a diary since what might come across as interesting and engaging to me as a teacher-researcher might have produced

“Mr Elephant will smell like a washed house!”³

We had been doing some work about elephants lately – really and truly, it was a coincidence for a number of stories to include an elephant as their main character. We had used the story of The Blind Men and the Elephant as part of our Philosophy for Children ‘thinking stories’, we had also read the story of ‘Elmer’ as part of our focus on colours in nature (under a cross-curricular theme The Four Seasons) and this week we just read the story about Lizzie and her knitted elephant. On one side of our classroom a table displayed a variety of elephants of different shapes, colours, material and size which the children had brought in following yesterday’s reading of Lizzie’s knitted elephant. The table also includes the grey wool and knitting needles to remind us of Lizzie’s unravelled elephant. It also incorporates a range of books about elephants (including both fact and fiction).

It seemed to me natural to conclude this series of ‘elephant stories’ with a creative thinking group activity which linked the character of the omnipresent elephant to the topic of water (being explored as part of the theme of The Four Seasons). So when I entered the Junior 2B classroom for our Creative Thinking session, I first asked them about the work we had been doing about elephants over the past weeks and then said that today they needed to work in small groups, brainstorm ideas and come up with a solution to a problem I would be posing. Something like this always makes the children want to know more about the task being presented, and they eagerly asked me to tell them what it was about.

I first asked them to form groups of three or four and they instantly found a group to work with – obviously based on friendships more than anything else. Two children (Faye and Kathryn) formed a pair but when I asked them whether they wished to join one of the other groups, they said they preferred to work together as a pair so I let them be, emphasising the fact that what’s important is that they take pride in their work and do their best by putting both their brains to work together. I wrote the following question on the board: “How would you wash an elephant?” Some children giggled while a few others were still figuring out what I meant. I gave each group an A3 sized blank picture – and said that all they had to do was to try and answer this question by first discussing possible ways of washing an elephant and then drawing a picture or diagram and labelling it to illustrate their preferred solution to this problem. I said that they were being encouraged to use their imagination, to let their imagination run wild as anything was possible. I also reminded them to use their indoor voices when working in their group. This time I decided not to discuss any examples with the whole class as I was certain some children might stick to the examples being mentioned and be tempted to reproduce what had been said before rather than come up with original ideas.

The different groups sat around the classroom, some in a circle on the floor, some on their tummies on the mat, others on tables and others still on cushions. One thing is sure, each group sounded very excited about this task – and I could see children asking others in their group to whisper, I could also observe the natural leaders taking the pencil and paper in their hands. I went round each group, reminding them that for this to be a successful job, each and every child needs to be listened to and then all the ideas are to be put together so that the end result is a whole group effort and not the work of one child. At one point a teacher came into the class and looked at the class in awe – she walked up to me and whispered in Maltese “X’qed taghmlilhom lil dawn it-tfal? Kif thajjarhom jahdmu b’dal-mod?” which translates into something like “How do you manage to get them to work in this way?” Such feedback from a colleague is always welcomed as a bonus – I get plenty of job satisfaction just by looking at the children’s enthusiastic looks on their faces when they enjoy what we do but it is always reassuring to have someone you respect acknowledging your efforts as a teacher.

Table 4.1 Extract from my Reflective Diary

a totally different reaction in another teacher or researcher. However, I acknowledged from the beginning of this research endeavour the fact that this study is valid in that it tells the story of one particular teacher who has embarked on a research journey to investigate her own professional practice within a particular setting with a specific group of students. It has

³ Gabriel, his explanation for the use of mum’s detergent to wash the elephant (in class)

already been reiterated further above that narrative inquiry was selected as methodology for its potential to capture the lives of a small group of individuals, in this case those of a teacher-researcher and her pupils. The following table presents an example taken from the reflective diary. I chose to give a title to each entry as I felt that this would give each piece a life of its own, an identity as a story in its own right. It was also intended to facilitate the discussion about particular incidents or occurrences.

4.7.2 Visual Narrative

Clandinin and Connelly (2000; pg. 155) use the metaphor of a soup to explain the complexity of form of narrative research texts in that, like soups, narrative texts could be composed of different ingredients that describe, narrate and/ or build arguments around the area being investigated. A narrative inquiry takes shape depending on a number of factors such as the kind of data upon which stories are built or the time and place in which these stories unfold.

In addition to the recording of significant events, connections and interactions in my reflective diary, I also included photographs as visual narrative in the first phase of the study as a way to preserve the experience associated with the stories told in the reflective diary. I felt that the use of photographs taken during classroom interaction would provide an enriched picture of what was happening in the classroom since “images created with photographs thicken ways of seeing” (Bach, 2001, p.1 in Lemon, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000; p.156) describe the use of photographs and other artefacts that could be used as field texts as ‘an archaeology of memory and meaning’ that provide a rich source of memories. Such tools enable a researcher to explore different ways of narrating a story using visual documents to enrich the narration as well as to add layers of meaning to the stories being told.

Taking photographs was a practice adopted by most teachers at our school since we would later upload them on the classroom blog for parents and children to see. So the study participants were already used to their teachers carrying cameras and taking pictures on a regular basis. Parental consent for taking pictures was sought prior to the start of the study.

The use of photographs as an ‘aide-memoire’ for my study proved to be a very effective way for me to look back on a particular session, reflect critically and engage in a self-reflective exercise that led me to carry out a deep examination of the teaching and learning process as told by the experiences captured in the photographs. Visually documenting the relationships,

interactions and connections that took place within our classroom walls was powerful and instructional. Following the experience of using photographs to help me remember details of a particular session as well as to create a discussion with the participants about significant moments in their scholastic year, I tend to agree with Lemon (2007) who points out that:

“The camera can be seen as a tool that ignites inquiry into our own practice, and promoting self awareness, self monitoring, reflective and reflexive practice while producing questions and answers and perhaps more questions towards the type of teacher and learner we want to be.” (Lemon, 2007; pg. 183).

To sum up, the photographs were meant to aid my memory of events and particular moments during these events rather than as research data to be analysed and interpreted. Moreover, it was also a main feature of one particular participatory method used to elicit children’s perceptions of their learning and schooling experience – at the end of the scholastic year, the participants were shown tens of pictures taken throughout the year (most of which had already been uploaded on our classroom blog with the permission of all the parents) and discussed each memory to then create a collage of the best moments of the year. It was felt that the pictures explain clearly the meaning behind the phrase to ‘thicken ways of seeing’ as the facial expressions, actions, ways of relating, proximity of participants as they work and learn together are captured in a specific moment in time. For me, as I worked through the thesis, these photographs made visible aspects of the narratives that would otherwise be left untold and thus lost. However, I also felt that they should not be included in the thesis apart from through reference to them in the analysis and interpretation when data from the transcript of the discussion held as the photographs were being viewed by the children was included. This was decided as a way to protect the participants and their classmates’ privacy.

4.7.3 Participatory Methods with Children

Apart from the use of a reflective diary as well as photographs as memory aids, I also added elements from participatory research with children to my methodological repertoire. As explained earlier on, this piece of narrative research sought not only to tell my story but also to highlight the voices of a group of students whom I happened to be teaching during the scholastic year when the study was being conducted. This study was concerned with understanding children’s perceptions of schooling, ability and learning and, as a researcher, I was committed to hear ‘the voice of the child’ (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003). In addition to collecting data about the children and their learning through an adult’s eyes (the

researcher's), I also wanted to obtain the children's views by involving them directly in the research.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing interest in seeking children's viewpoints and experiences about matters that concern them (Levy, 2008; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; O'Kane, 2008). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) has also been highly influential in pushing for a new era of respecting children as persons in their own right rather than as incomplete adults. Changing views of children and childhood have had an impact on the ways in which professionals, including educators and researchers, work with children to the extent that children are viewed as active participants and agents within our societies (Billington 2006; Corsaro, 2011). To this effect, this study builds on recent participatory methods used by researchers researching children's perceptions on topics that directly concern them (Christensen & James, 2008; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003).

Once the decision was taken to seek children's perceptions about schooling, learning and ability, I reviewed current literature on researching with children, which led me to the conclusion that there are different possible ways of consulting effectively with young children through adopting methods that facilitate their participation and that are appropriate in terms of accessibility to their young age (Christensen & James, 2008; Dockett et al., 2009; Levy, 2008). It is suggested that the activities carried out to generate data from children are similar or closely connected with that which the children are familiar with in their home or school contexts. It is also recommended that the setting where the research is conducted is a naturalistic one and that the children are also familiar with the researchers carrying out the study (Khimji & Maunder, 2012).

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is clear about a child's right to be involved in decisions concerning matters that affect him/ her, not only as an individual but also to decisions that affect him/her collectively as belonging to the social group of children. O'Kane (2008) suggests that through the use of participatory techniques, researchers create spaces for children and young people to be listened to and heard, and consequently doing this kind of research with children is one important way to embrace the challenge posed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

“Participatory techniques provide one framework which is responsive, with open-ended research goals and methods which allow children to set their own agenda. Furthermore, these methods can be adapted to suit work across wide age-range of children and young people, and can be used in a wide range of settings.” (O’Kane, 2008; pg. 151)

Keeping the above recommendations in mind, I opted to conduct one-to-one informal conversations with six children who were chosen from the whole class to take part in the second phase of the study. These informal interviews consisted of a set of open-ended questions that guided each interview (Table 4.2). Each conversation was flexible enough to allow the participants to elaborate on points that grabbed their attention or to also include other points not necessarily referred to in the questions. As the researcher, I kept an open mind to let the study participants share their viewpoints about their schooling experiences. Moreover, the children were familiar with me and were eager to take part in the conversation. These informal interviews gave them the opportunity to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their thoughts and reflections on their learning experiences and also to be the centre of attention for a while.

1. Now that you’ve reached the end of this scholastic year, how do you feel about being a Junior 2 student?
2. If you had to give your Junior 2 experience a number from 1 to 10 what number would you give it? Why?
3. Is there anything that you would change or do differently if you were the teacher or if you were Ms Sue?
4. Do you enjoy learning new things? What do you like learning about? How do you learn best? Are there any activities that you think help you learn faster/ better than other activities?
5. Who is smart in your class? What makes you think they are smart? Who else says they are smart?
6. Do you think you are smart? What are you good at? Does anyone tells you so? How do you feel when someone says you are good at something or smart?
7. Are there any school activities that make you feel smart/ less smart?
8. Who do you like working with when you are in groups or with a partner? Why?
9. Can you think of an activity you did this year that you really enjoyed? Why?
10. Rate the following activities according to how much you enjoy them use of visuals to help child rate these activities (number cards and objects/ pictures).
 - Show and Tell
 - Story telling (teacher reading you a story)
 - Science experiments
 - Literacy booklets
 - Writing Journal
 - Mind maps
 - Working alone
 - Working with a partner
 - Group work
 - Using computers to learn
 - Story writing
 - Creative thinking
 - Songs to learn about something
 - Lap book
 - Working on projects such as Spots and Stripes
 - Christmas play – Emma the Red

Table 4.2 Conversational Interview Questions

Once the conversational interviews were complete, the group of six participants were involved in a photo collage group activity which I called 'The Best Moments of Junior 2'. The group was provided with tens of photographs taken throughout the scholastic year (some of which were included in the visual narrative data section) and asked to discuss together these photos, talking through their decisions to keep or discard photographs. Because of the nature of this activity, and also because I understood how interested all children in the class would be in such an activity, I decided to carry it out with the whole group (all 22 children) as a farewell ritual to our scholastic year. I recorded the session where the whole class discussed each photo and experience and transcribed it. The use of photographs facilitated the discussion and enlightened me to the kind of classroom activities that these very able children found most appealing, fun and engaging. Looking back at the research study, I feel that the photo collage activity was a very effective way of generating data from children. It managed to truly capture children's views and thoughts about classroom activities they found meaningful.

Researching with children and involving them actively in a study to listen to their voices requires a researcher to look at the ethical dimension of promoting children's engagement in research. I shall present some of the ethical considerations made as well as the ethical tensions experienced prior to and during the research process in a later section. This section has presented an overview of the methods of data collection used to generate data over the course of the study. The procedures adopted in the research study will be discussed in the next section.

4.8 Procedures

This section will present the procedures used to conduct the study as well as an exposition of the ways in which participants were selected and how data was collected during the two phases of the study. The research design and the data collected for this study aimed to enable me, as a teacher-researcher who was also a study participant, to eventually use the data to construct an intertwined narrative of a classroom teacher and her pupils. My methodological choices are therefore reflective of this main aim. I will attempt to explain the procedures taken in a chronological order, to be in line with the order in which narrative stories are told.

4.8.1 Setting and Participants

The research study was conducted with a group of 22 students aged 6 or 7 years, all of whom belonged to one out of two Junior 2 classes within the school where I worked. The setting for the study was a co-ed private independent school that caters for children between the ages of 2 years and 16 years of age. As a teacher and researcher, I was also a main participant in the study. All 22 students were asked to participate in the first phase of the study and consent by their parents was sought and obtained. During this period, I kept a reflective diary as the main tool for data collection. Photographs were also taken and included as visual aids. Eventually, six students from the group were selected to take part in the second and last part of the data collection phase which required them to participate in a conversational interview and also in a group photo collage activity.

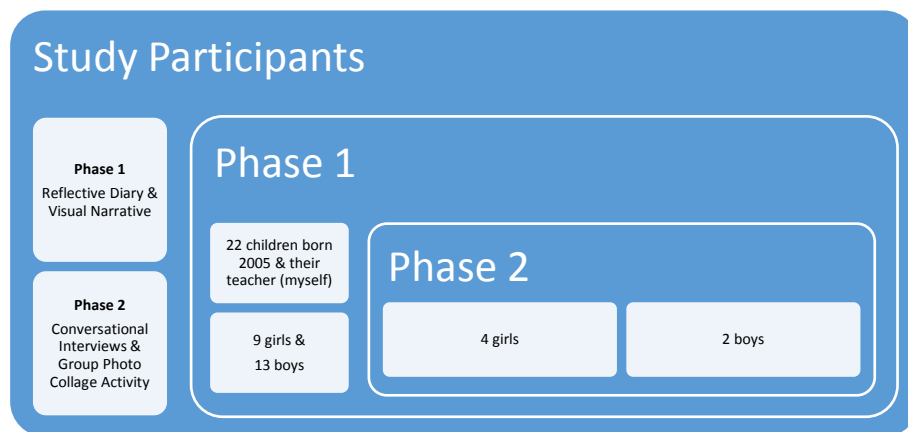


Table 4.3 Study Participants

The school and the students in this research study were identified using purposive sampling which is an approach used in qualitative research when making decisions as to whom to choose as participants for the study, the specific kind of sampling strategy adopted as well as the size of the sample to be included in the research (Creswell, 2013). Both the nature of the study and the methodology used to explore the research topic required careful reflection on whom to select – the researcher’s own workplace and students were convenient to study because of the reasons outlined below. Although from the start it was my intention to select a small group of participants around whom to build the narratives, I made a conscious decision to include the whole class in the study on the basis of a belief that effective provision should precede identification of high ability. As with all other classes in this school, the class

chosen for the study was a mixed-ability group. All 22 students were involved in the process of obtaining consent, from the parents and from the participants themselves.

Although this study was built on my desire to investigate and learn more about the experiences of those children in my class who were able to reach high levels of attainment or performance, I felt the need to give all my students a chance to be the best they can be through the creation of a stimulating learning environment that sought to unveil and develop their emerging abilities, gifts and talents. As outlined in the previous chapters, my belief in providing rich learning environments and experiences prior to making any attempts at identifying high potential or ability pushed me towards an inclusive approach whereby all of the 22 students would be provided with the opportunity to be involved in the research process and to then have a chance to participate in the case study part of the research.

When it came to selecting the six students for the case-studies, criterion sampling was used in that all students demonstrated an ability or potential to reach high levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour. The data collected for the six narratives came from six students who belonged to the classroom chosen for the study and who differed in many ways yet were similar in at least one aspect - I, as their teacher and the one who was also making decisions in terms of selecting participants for my study, regarded them as very able learners with high potential and, consequently, a need for challenging learning experiences. So the main criterion for the selection of children for the case studies was namely a high potential or aptitude in one or more areas.

As elaborated in the theoretical perspectives chapter (Chapter 3), my inclination to embrace sociocultural and situated learning perspectives on learning, ability and knowledge have influenced the process of identifying and selecting students for the second phase of the study. Resorting to traditional means of identification of high ability such as the use of standardised tests or formal assessments would have clashed with my view that learning is a dynamic process that is brought about through social interaction and participation with others as well as with tools and artefacts within a sociocultural and historical context. Talent within such a perspective is also regarded to be socially produced and socially validated (Barab and Plucker, 2002). The first phase of reflection and interaction with the whole group of students through the teaching and learning process over a number of months during one scholastic year would

result to be crucial for me to make decisions about who to include in the second phase. On the basis of these observations and reflections, I selected six students from the whole cohort of 22 students who, in my professional eyes, had responded well to the learning opportunities provided over the scholastic year, were doing exceptionally well in some or most subjects I taught them and who constantly required more challenging activities to keep them motivated, engaged and interested. As explained in previous chapters, it was my intention to explore ways of catering for children who developed at different or faster rates than their peers in one or more areas and therefore it was more important for me to design and develop stimulating learning opportunities as a way to respond to the diverse needs of my students rather than worrying about numbers, percentages and marks. Moreover, their young age called for a wider and more inclusive approach to 'identification' of high potential. Thus my intuition, professional expertise and practical experience were ultimately crucial in this process of selecting the six students who would participate in the conversational interviews and group activity of the second phase. In this manner, I took action informed through reflection, in a conscious attempt to empower my praxis as a representative of primary school teachers who believes strongly in the need to validate individual teacher voice and autonomy in decisions that concern their pedagogical choices and professional practice (Cohen et al., 2007; Gade 2011).

It is also imperative to point out that, at the time of this selection process, as an educator and researcher with a sense of belonging to feminist thinking and values, I felt a strong inclination and need to look into girls' experiences of learning, ability and schooling. Initially, I chose to focus on four girls from the group who had flourished as learners over the course of the scholastic year. Although I was very happy with my decision to delve more deeply into the experiences and perceptions of these four girls, I felt a nagging and persistent urge to also document the stories of some of the boys in my class. How could I exclude the rich experience and stories of my students simply based on their gender? Wouldn't it be contradictory to preach for the celebration of diversity and inclusive practices in schools whilst at the same time excluding a group of students based on the fact that they happened to be boys? It was finally decided that I would also include two boys in the second phase of the study. Both children had particularly intrigued me in the ways they had responded to and participated in the teaching and learning process. It was not possible to include more boys at this stage not

because there were no other students who would meet the criterion of high potential, but more so as a way to stick to the number of case studies that such a study would be able to contain.

4.8.1.1 School and classroom setting

The choice of the setting and the study participants was mainly determined by my role as an early years' classroom teacher at the time the study was devised and conducted. Being a full-time classroom teacher whilst undertaking post-graduate studies at doctoral level, I felt that it would only be fair for the children under my care to build a study around our teaching and learning experiences within our classroom in order to avoid, as much as possible, the need to be away from my classroom, considering that such absence might impinge on my students' educational experience of that particular year. I felt that it would not be easy nor advisable for me, as a teacher of young children, to be physically away from my classroom for long stretches of time. Moreover, for a long time, I had wished to use my studies as a means to continue reflecting and improving on my own practice and to design my research around my practice as I tend to agree with Carr (2006) who contends that a time has come when educational theory can no longer occupy a position outside practice. Therefore, I felt that it would be ideal to carry out my research study with the group of six and seven year old students I taught on a daily basis.

Although I was in contact with two cohorts of children within an independent school that practises a policy of team-teaching (where different teachers teach different subjects to two or more groups), I chose to focus my study on one out of the two groups. It was felt that a thorough examination of the multiple connections and interactions that occur in two classrooms, rather than one, would undoubtedly generate a large amount of data beyond the scope of this thesis. My role with the group that I selected to focus my study on was that of a classroom teacher who, apart from teaching them a number of subjects (in the same way I taught the second group of students) namely English, Science, Creative Thinking, General Knowledge as well as Drama and Music, was also responsible for the general well-being and care of the group including daily contact with their parents, welcoming them and settling them down in the morning as well as sending them home at the end of the school day, the setting of classroom rules, routines and procedures and so on and so forth. The second group I taught during that particular year had a different classroom teacher who was responsible

for them whilst I taught them the five subjects mentioned above. This teacher also taught them Maths, Religion and Arts & Craft, as she did with my group. A third teacher taught the two groups Maltese and another one was their Physical Education teacher.

The independent school where I work caters for children from the age of 2 up to the age of 16 under the headship of a group of school leaders and assistant directors who are in charge of different sectors within the school. It is a mixed gender school and usually the children who are enrolled at our school come from family backgrounds that are financially advantaged or at least stable in that their parents pay for their education. This does not mean that the school population is not diverse in terms of class, culture and identity. Moreover, the school practises a policy of inclusion and mixed-ability classrooms with no existent practices of selection according to ability or achievement at any stage of a child's schooling experience.

To a greater or lesser extent, this independent school is still autonomous, albeit not 'untouched' by government policies and practices of standardisation. The school functions as a learning community and is itself currently undergoing a 'reflective practice' exercise where dialogue about change and growth as a learning organisation has become part of our daily interactions. An important point to make is the fact that although our school leaders hold high expectations and aspirations for both teachers and learners, they adopt a kind of leadership that on the one hand requires commitment and excellence from teachers but, at the same time, promotes and nurtures individual talents, abilities, creativity and expertise. In this way, teachers and teaching staff do not feel they have to conform to a specific model of the ideal educator – teachers are empowered by being trusted and encouraged to take risks, experiment, collaborate and develop professionally. Consequently, it is my contention that such an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and empowerment provides a healthy ambience for the development and nurturing of students' emerging gifts and talents in a variety of areas of endeavour. Therefore, I feel that the choice of this independent school as a setting for my research study is suitable. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) suggest that enduring change can only happen in schools that function as learning organisations where teachers, administration and parents unite their collective energy (often under the guidance and support of transformational leaders) to engage in an ongoing analysis of their practice through reflective practice.

With regards to the classes that I taught, I used an integrated approach to link the subject matter through themes and projects that appeal to six and seven year olds and that enable them to connect the learning. As pointed out in the literature review, one important feature in any classroom is the creation of a stimulating, accessible and attractive learning environment. The children in my classroom sat around tables in groups of six. They participated in activities that required them to work individually, with a partner, in small groups or as a whole class. The children also used the classroom library carpeted area for whole class discussion as well as to relax with a good book during silent reading time or free time. The classroom also included five computers on one side of the room that were used throughout the sessions to integrate technology into the learning process. A main feature of this classroom was the use of a classroom blog as well as the use of a school-wide elearning platform used as another teaching and learning tool.

As a teacher of young learners with an experience of more than 15 years of teaching in primary schools, I have over the years developed a pedagogical repertoire that includes innovative methods and inclusive pedagogies aimed at helping children acquire basic skills on the one hand and reach their potential as capable learners on the other hand. The focus is undoubtedly on the learning process and individual differences are recognised and celebrated. My approach is a constructivist integrated approach where young learners are encouraged to construct knowledge through the interaction with others as well as with their environment. Children are also encouraged to learn by doing or constructing things including models, stories and projects amongst other things. Creative and critical thinking skills are encouraged through the use of projects that integrate subjects and revolve around themes. Prior knowledge, coaching, the use of scaffolding, reflection, flexibility and problem-solving are strategies adopted with the aim to help pupils become involved, engaged and motivated learners and that I include in my pedagogical repertoire on a regular basis.

Recommendations from the field of gifted education, constructivism and innovative pedagogies guide my professional practice as a teacher of young learners. Ultimately, my aim is to provide children with an integrated, participatory, inquiry-based approach that motivates young learners, engages them and brings out their natural desire to explore, learn and make sense of their reality.

4.8.1.2 Study participants

As pointed out in the table above, 22 children were involved in the first phase of the study. This group consisted of 13 boys and 9 girls, all born during the year 2005. Being a private independent school, the children came from different parts of the island. From the start, it was evident that the classroom was ecologically diverse in terms of potential, ability, home background, culture and identity, use of language, personality and past experiences. This required a flexible approach to teaching in order to be able to provide for this diversity. Some children were quick to respond positively to the learning community that was developing within our classroom walls, while it took some others a longer time to increase their participation in our activities. From the first weeks, I was also able to observe how children differed in the way they viewed themselves and others as learners. Some of them were confident in their ability to learn, whereas a few others believed they were not as good as the rest of the group. One of my missions with this group was to inspire them and help them unveil their potential as well as any hidden talents in order to understand that they were all different yet capable learners and that it was up to them to unlock their ability to learn and flourish.

Child	Gender	Age	Siblings	Language used at home	Aptitude & Personality
Giorgio	Male		0	Maltese	All rounder, very artistic, a perfectionist, interpersonal intelligence
Jeanine	Female		1	Maltese & English	Academically very able, diligent and a conformist
Jeremy	Male		3	English	All rounder, highly able linguistically, emotional intelligence, assertive and highly inquisitive
Kelly	Female		0	English	Linguistic and musical aptitude, avid reader and appreciator of literature, non-conformist, very creative and artistic.
Mireille	Female		1	Maltese & English	All rounder, advanced writing skills, diligent, creative, interpersonal intelligence
Nicole	Female		1	English	Academically very able, non-conformist, strong personality, mature for her age

Table 4.4 Phase 2 - Study Participants

The 6 children selected for the second phase of the study consisted of 4 girls and 2 boys. They were similar in their ability to make the best of the learning situations they encountered, in their enthusiasm towards learning and life in general as well as in their task commitment. They differed in their interests, talents, aptitudes, moods, personalities and home background. Another feature that over the year became strikingly evident was their parent/s' involvement in their education. All six children came from families who seemed to give a priority to their children's educational journey and who were very present in the lives of their children in general, but also, more specifically, in their schooling.

4.8.2 Procedure

With the start of the scholastic year 2011-2012 began my research journey with the group of 22 students who happened to be my students for that particular year. I dedicated the first six weeks or so to getting to know the students and their families. Following this initial phase, I gave out the school consent form to the school management team as well as documents linked to obtaining parental consent. These included a Parents' Information Sheet and Consent Forms (attached in the appendices section). Consent was gained from both the school and from all parents of the whole group of students.

Once this was secured, I began to reflect on a suitable way to introduce the children to what I was going to do as a teacher-researcher. By mid-November, I had already gained a good idea of who my learners were, the dynamics between the children in the group as well as what inspires them to learn and what grabs their attention and interest. I read research methodology literature on using participative methods with young children, on the ethical procedures to be followed when working with children in research, on whether it was possible and sensible to seek and obtain children's own consent or assent to become participants in my research. I opted for an informal information session with the group of students who would eventually become the study participants, i.e. the whole class. Our school director sat through the session so that she could later comment on whether the information given and the way it was done respected the children's young age and level of understanding. A detailed description of this session is included in my reflective journal (and this can be found in the Appendices section). I used the story of 'The Little Prince' to illustrate the objective behind my intention to listen to children's voices as part of my research study (an idea taken from

Christensen & James, 2000) because I felt that stories are one of the 'languages' in which children communicate and make sense of more abstract notions.

This was the beginning of the first phase of the study in which all 22 students belongs to the class I chose for the study participated. The reflective journal was kept from mid-November to the end of the second term. The intention behind it was not to keep a record of everything that happened throughout the scholastic year, but to use it as a research tool. This journal was to document anecdotes and stories that particularly touched me as a teacher of young children and that reflected typical days or activities in the life of a primary school teacher as well as interactions and connections that inspired me or shed light on certain aspects of the teaching and learning process. Throughout this period, photographs were also taken as a means to enrich the data collected through the reflective journal. Consent for the use of photographs taken regularly as part of everyday practice (it is common practice in this school to take photographs and upload them on the classroom blogs for parents to see) was sought and obtained from the parents of the study participants.

Following this phase, a decision needed to be made about the students who would be chosen to take part in the second phase of the study. As explained above, my inclination to explore ways of nurturing and fostering high ability in students who demonstrated an ability or potential to reach high levels of performance in different areas coupled with my earlier interest in giftedness in young learners inspired me to look into the perceptions of students who came across as potentially very able learners. I believe that those children who required challenge and stimulation to expand and grow as capable learners were being generally left to their own devices. I felt a great responsibility towards this group of students and I wanted to give them an opportunity to voice out their opinion, to have their say on matters that concerned their education. Looking through the notes and stories written in my reflective journal over the previous four to five months, I identified six learners who had motivated me to develop a more stimulating and enriching learning programme throughout this scholastic year. This is how I chose four girls and two boys as participants for the second phase of the study.

Each participant participated in a one-to-one conversational interview that was audio-recorded so that I could focus on the development of the conversation during the interview

and then go back to the recording to listen and take notes. Here again, consent was re-sought from the children's parents before this group participated in the second phase of the research. These interviews took place between the months of May and June, and at the end of the scholastic year, the photo collage group activity was carried out. The latter consisted of an activity carried out by the six study participants as a group. Tens of photographs depicting different classroom activities carried out throughout the scholastic year were provided and, as a class, the children discussed each photograph and later were encouraged to choose the ones that best illustrated the most special moments of their Junior 2 experience. Together the participants created a collage and, as they worked, they discussed, at times argued and commented on the reasons for selecting some photographs over some others. This activity was also audio-recorded. It is also important to note that this photo collage activity was presented as a farewell ritual to the whole class. For the purpose of the study, it was decided that the activity was to be documented as the intention was to add data to the research question focusing on the participants' perceptions of ability, schooling and learning.

4.9 The Role of the Researcher

This section aims to explore the role of the researcher including issues linked to subjectivity and power relationships between researcher and researched. The way researchers experience the research process is undoubtedly connected to their view of the world and, thus, to the ontological and epistemological beliefs underlying the study.

Researchers are generally expected to be objective in their attempts to explore phenomena or situations through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion et al., 2007). However, when a researcher opts for an interpretative, qualitative study such as has been done for this study, the approach takes a more subjective stance because the search for meaning overrides the need for generalisation and scientific rigour. In a qualitative study, a researcher looks for individual meaning-making and participants' subjective views and perceptions are sought. Within a sociocultural and constructivist perspective, the researcher is subjective in her search for meaning which, in turn, is believed to be socially constructed and therefore specific to the context, situation and participants' cultural baggage in which the research unfolds.

In this research, the boundaries between the researcher and the participants are not clearly defined since the researcher is also a main actor in the study. As explained earlier, this research was a self-reflective project conducted by myself. Throughout the research, I wore different hats simultaneously, namely that of a classroom teacher working with six year olds, a lifelong learner who has embarked on a quest to uncover one's professional identity by looking at young children's perceptions of schooling and learning, and also that of a researcher carrying out a research study in an attempt to construct an intertwined narrative that tells the story of a teacher and her pupils as they work, learn and develop together.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that researchers' personal, private and professional lives flow across the boundaries into the research site. This is definitely the case for a researcher carrying out a study around her own professional practice using narrative inquiry as methodology. The focus of the study is usually rooted in a personal experience, belief or value of the researcher – this aspect is elaborated in the positionality chapter (Chapter 2) of this thesis. The researcher also makes methodological choices based on one's ontological and epistemological beliefs. With regards to the choice of participants and setting, a researcher studying her own practice would have already developed relationships with participants. The list of relevant information and experiences that could become data is endless in a research site that is also the place of work of the researcher. In my case, I conducted a study in the school where I had been teaching for the past four years and therefore I was already acquainted with the setting, the teaching staff, the school management team as well as the students and their families.

It is also interesting to point out that the kind of relationship between the researcher and the participants can have an influence on the kind of data generated particularly when the researched are young children. It is important that children are familiar with the researcher in order to feel comfortable and safe when the data is collected. Issues of power may arise in terms of the researcher choosing which episodes, comments or reactions to include or exclude from the narrative or whose voice to document and whose voice to keep silent.

Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2008) discuss the issue of power relations between adults and children, pointing out their concern for researchers to find ways of altering their relationships with children to gain access to their worlds, to empower them as well as

acknowledge their emotions and fears during the research process. They mention different roles that might be adopted depending on the setting, participants and research focus and purpose – roles varying between non-authoritarian adults, friends, detached observers, mediators or entertainers. They also draw attention to the importance of being aware of ethical considerations, the variety of research roles and the plethora of research tools which might be used when attempting to elicit children's voices.

It is also good to reflect on vulnerability associated with practitioner research involving one's workplace. Bold (2012, pg. 65) draws attention to controversies or tensions that may arise because of data that might highlight certain inconsistencies, difficulties or sensitivities existent in the setting where the study is conducted. This is an issue that I reflected upon prior to choosing the research focus and is probably one of the reasons why I chose to focus on my own practice rather than to involve other teachers in the school.

In the next section, I will put forward the ethical considerations that were made prior to and during the course of the study. Issues linked to researcher's role and relationship with the study participants will be explored further in this section.

4.10 Ethical Issues

One cannot embark on a research journey where one's pedagogy and practice will be studied and scrutinized without taking into consideration a number of important ethical issues. This study was based in a primary school setting and the participants involved were mainly young learners. Therefore, a number of ethical considerations had to be highlighted in order to ensure that the study abided by expected ethical principles and practices. The ethical issues discussed below are those relevant to this particular research, mostly in terms of it being participatory research together with the engagement of children as main participants. Attention has been drawn to issues pertaining to consent, the representation of children who are selected as participants, concerns around how we speak, write and interpret data generated from children, the use of photography as visual data and issues around anonymity.

4.10.1 Obtaining Consent

Before embarking on this research journey, a number of considerations about issues pertaining to consent needed to be made. Researchers are required to obtain parental consent when researching with young children (Christensen & James, 2008; Dockett,

Einarsdottir & Perry; 2009). A written information sheet together with an accompanying consent form were given out to the parents and guardians of each of the 22 children taking part in this study in November 2012, before the start of the study. These can both be found in the appendices section. Keeping in mind that the study was conducted in a school setting, I also needed to obtain consent from the school itself. To this effect, an information sheet as well as a consent form were also handed to the school leadership team. All parents/guardians agreed to allow their child to take part in this study. The school leadership team also approved of the study.

One would conclude that I had the necessary approvals required to set the ball going. However, I felt that the most important stakeholders in this research journey that was about to begin had not been consulted yet. I asked myself whether it was indeed possible to obtain informed consent from the children themselves considering their young age. As I leafed through the relevant literature on researching with children, I was inspired by the idea that although at such a young age children may not be mature enough to give consent in the true sense of the word since their age prevents them from entering a legal contract, it was nonetheless possible and desirable to seek children's assent to take part in a study (Dockett et al., 2009). The researcher is asked to find ways of explaining and gaining children's agreement to take part in research using methods and activities that would appeal and help them understand what the researcher was asking them to do and what participation would entail. It is of utmost importance for a researcher to be constantly vigilant to children's responses at all times and to keep checking with them at different points during the research study whether they want to proceed with their participation in the research or whether they would prefer to opt out of the process (Cocks, 2007, p. 258-259). With regards to how children's assent is to be obtained, Fine and Sandstorm (1988 in Cohen et al., 2007, p. 54) comment that:

"Our feeling is that children should be told as much as possible, even if some of them cannot understand the full explanation. Their age should not diminish their rights, although their level of understanding must be taken into account in the explanations that are shared with them."

In this case, I chose to have an information session with the whole group prior to the start of the study. This session was witnessed by the school director who sat through the whole discussion and later confirmed that children's assent to take part in this research had been appropriately sought. In order to explain what participation in the study required from them

as potential participants as well as why and how this study would be conducted, I used the story of 'The Little Prince'. A detailed description is provided in the first entry in my reflective diary.

During this session, the children were given a child-friendly sheet on which to sign their name and write or draw something that they might have wanted to add. There was also a section on the leaflet that required them to tick whether they would prefer for their real name to be used in the write-up and dissemination of the study or whether they would prefer to have it changed with what I called a 'pretend name'. I was surprised to find out that the whole group opted for use of their real name, obviously interested in their participation being acknowledged. I made it clear more than once that they could decide to opt out of the study at any time during the year, and that such decision would have no consequences or repercussions. I was pleased to see that by the end of the session, all 22 students were very eager to become participants. One of the six case-study participants had originally said that he wouldn't like to take part but by the end of the information session, he changed his mind. This episode is presented in more detail in chapter 4.

4.10.2 Representation

The rationale behind the engagement of children as participants in research is rooted in the view that children are active agents in the construction of their own reality, lives and cultures (Corsaro, 1997; Dockett et al., 2009). However, one is to consider a number of issues related to how children are represented in research, how they are chosen, who is included or excluded on the basis of which considerations. Dockett et al. (2009) argue that researchers must keep in mind that diversity between children is to be acknowledged in order to avoid treating all children as belonging to a homogenous group and that one should also question the process of selecting the participants.

In selecting to conduct research with the group of students I was teaching during the year when the study was conducted, I attempted to give all students in my class a chance to become participants in the research, if they wanted to. However, the second phase of my study required me to select a smaller group of students on whom to focus. This group was chosen on the basis of a high potential or ability, including task commitment and responsiveness to the learning programme being offered. I was restricted by the number of participants that such a small-scale study could contain as well as by my notion of high

potential and high ability. Even though this left out a number of students from this phase of the study, it is also important to state that I felt the need to research high ability and high potential because in the past such an area has been left largely unexplored, particularly in our educational system. I wanted to give this group of students a voice, to be able to advocate for them through the construction of an intertwined narrative built on their perceptions and viewpoints as well as mine, as their teacher and researcher.

4.10.3 Speaking and Writing about Children

Billington (2006) suggests that professionals working with children, including researchers, need to ask a number of questions to make sure they are aware of the words they use and the kind of relationships they forge when working with children, questions that have guided me throughout my research journey. These questions are: *how do we speak of the child (to others)?; how do we speak with the child?; how do we write of the child?; how do we listen to the child?; how do we listen to ourselves?* These questions have implications on the way a piece of research with children is conducted.

In this research, I have attempted to listen attentively to what my students had to say, to observe and be attuned to their needs, abilities and personalities, to speak about them with respect when presenting parts of my research and to acknowledge their individuality and value their viewpoints throughout our educational journey together. I have also reflected critically on my practice on a daily basis to understand why children responded in a certain manner to my pedagogy and practice, to build healthy working relationships with them, as well as to improve my practice so that they can benefit from such amelioration. Ultimately, I strived to practise an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003) in my dealings with the study participants, showing them professional care and respect towards them as young learners with a potential and capability to learn.

4.10.4 Interpreting Children's Viewpoints

In addition to issues about children's assent, representation and questions on how we speak and write about children, there are also issues around how data generated from children is interpreted. Dockett et al. (2009) point out that neither data generation nor data interpretation can be regarded as neutral processes since they are embedded in the context in which research is conducted as well as in the interpretive framework adopted by researchers. As outlined earlier in the chapter, the constructivist approach to knowledge and

learning that underpins this research highly influences data interpretation in that it is understood that researcher and the children as participants both shape and are shaped by the interactions and experiences that unfold within the classroom context and the community/ communities they belong to. Data generated within this research study is largely a result of teacher/ child interaction and collaboration in the same way that learning is a result of social interaction.

Billington (2006) argues that professionals working with children must make sure that their interpretation of children's contributions concord with the children's own interpretations and constructions. This idea is also put forward by Dockett et al. (2009) who contend that the voice of the researcher should not be the only one considered when interpreting data, thus suggesting that children are to be engaged in the interpretation process and not only in the generation of data. Through my inclusion of the second phase of the study, where I added the conversational interviews and photo collage group activity, I wanted to listen to the individual voices rather than base my study solely on data generated by myself (in the reflective diary and the visual narrative through photography). However, one is to acknowledge the fact that the subjectivity of the researcher is inevitable when the whole repertoire of data is analysed and discussed. In this research study, the children's voices will not be heard in the analyses phase. This is a limitation of this study.

4.10.5 The Use of Visual Data

In addition to issues about children's assent, representation and questions on how we speak and write about children and how children's contributions in research are interpreted, there is also the issue of using photographs as visual data. One important point that I kept in mind throughout the research, is to avoid including data that might shed a negative light on a child or label them as someone or something they are not. When researching with children, one is to have a sensitivity to what should be included or not as data, to what is to be documented and what is to be discarded on the basis that no data should embarrass or eventually harm a particular child. This principle is valid for any kind of data, whether written or visual, including photographs. The photographs chosen from numerous ones taken throughout the scholastic year captured positive interactions and situations that occurred during our learning journey together. Moreover, I made a conscious choice to only use them as an aide-memoire as explained further above rather as data per se.

I also tend to agree with Nutbrown (2011) in her arguments against pixilating the images of young children engaged in different classroom activities because such 'distortion' of the images of children risks to reinforce the notion of 'othering' of young children in research as it "... masks what is real and changes it to something more distant, moves it from the original truth" (ibid., p.8). This also concurs with my participants' desire for their real name to be used throughout the study in the writing up and in the dissemination of the findings. As a general rule, I was more interested in presenting a close-enough representation of the participants' reality and perceptions of schooling, learning and ability – a concern that might be reconciled through careful and constant reflection and deliberation of my portrayal of the participants' actions, attitudes and interactions with others. I write 'a close-enough representation of children's perceptions' because I am deeply aware of the fact that no matter how hard we try to remain truthful to children's responses, nevertheless it is difficult, albeit impossible, not to be subjective in our interpretations of children's contributions.

4.10.6 Issues of Anonymity

Through the consent form given to the school in which the study was conducted, I committed to keep the setting anonymous, a commitment which I intended to abide by. However, it is important to acknowledge that it might be somewhat difficult for total anonymity to be maintained, primarily due to two factors: first, the small size of our country which makes it difficult to ascertain and guarantee that the school is not identifiable even though its name and location will be withheld, and secondly, the fact that I adopted a largely self-reflective approach in constructing my own narrative makes it quite clear that the research study is being carried out in the school where I work. However, our school prides itself to be a learning community and allows students undergoing post-graduate studies to conduct studies on our premises so the members of the school leadership team are also aware of this factor.

With regards to anonymity in terms of the study participants, I cannot be anonymous as a researcher researching into my own professional identity and practice. The students' first names will also be used in the writing up of the study, to validate and be loyal to what they have chosen during the information session where the study and research purpose were presented to the children. Nevertheless their second names will obviously be omitted.

4.11 Concluding Paragraph

Without any doubt, I encountered a number of dilemmas and challenges throughout the research inquiry. First of all, researching one's own practice proved to be an interesting yet rather exigent endeavour in that, at times, my role as a classroom teacher would require me to put the research aside temporarily in order to see to the needs of my students. It was not always possible to go home, following a long day at school, and sit at my computer to document and write down a story that would have unfolded during that particular day. Carrying out research at doctoral level whilst working as a full-time teacher of young children was tough and there were times when I felt discouraged. However, my wish to pursue and see this inquiry to an end enabled me to keep going, mostly out of respect for the promise that I made to the participants that I would eventually share the knowledge acquired through this study with other teachers and educators.

There were also dilemmas pertaining to the fact that I did not teach this group all the subjects and that therefore the selection of the case-study participants was limited to a high potential or ability in a particular areas or subjects. For instance, I did not teach them mathematics and so a high aptitude in this area would not be identified. As mentioned above, I felt a constant clash between my initial interest in giftedness in young children and my evolved perception and understanding of notions such as ability and learning – choosing the case-study participants based on my conception of high potential or ability without resorting to traditional means of identifying and testing for high ability could be contested. However, I firmly believed that at such a young age, using traditional measurement tools would defy the purpose of providing a rich and stimulating learning environment that encouraged and nurtured the development of students' gifts and talents.

By adopting a reflective practice approach, I strove to provide a safe and stimulating learning environment where children's voices, inclinations, aptitude and diverse interests were given their due importance throughout the whole process. Thus, while researching and documenting how my pedagogical choices, teacher-pupil relationship and commitment to the improvement and advancement of the pupils under my care (to an extent where gifts and talents are fostered and celebrated) impacted on their development as learners and active participants in the learning process, I also intended to involve the pupils in the decision-

making process by promoting a constructivist, project-based and child-centred approach to learning. One must agree with Billington and Pomerantz (2004 in Billington, 2006, p.3) that:

“Children and young people as yet possess little political power that is free from adult sanction and they clearly share much in common with all those marginalized groups in society who can be subject to abuses of power.”

Here is a clear connection between knowledge and power, in the sense that a curriculum is usually prescribed by professional adults and that there is a limit to how freely children can choose what to learn. However, a teacher can allow learners to choose their preferred mode of learning as well as to focus or delve deeper into particular areas of interest or to pursue a gift or a talent (which might or might not be academically oriented). In my role as reflective practitioner and narrative inquirer, I aimed to listen to children’s voices by carefully observing how they engaged in different activities, how they related with one another and how they differed in their behaviours and in the way they respond to different strategies or activities.

Finally, as a feminist and a believer in the centrality of human relationships in social contexts such as schools and classrooms, I sought to adopt an ethic of care whereby the relationship between the teacher-researcher and the children as learners was central to the research journey:

“Genuine education must engage the purposes and energies of those being educated. To secure such engagement, teachers must build relationships of care and trust, and within such relationships, students and teachers construct educational objectives cooperatively.” (Noddings, 1995, p.196)

Finally, I kept in mind Billington (2006, p. 160)’s sensible warning against a potential risk in “... invasively seeking a child’s stories” and his proposal that professional adults have a “... dilemma to address, or the balance to achieve, [which] is to acknowledge the importance of the private while not exploring it unnecessarily.”

As a concluding comment and a recapitulation of the above, this chapter set out to demonstrate how this research inquiry unfolded by explaining in detail the research process, the methods and procedures adopted, all of which were embedded within an interpretative, social constructivist paradigm. The search for meaning and understanding was focused on obtaining a close-enough picture of children’s viewpoints and constructions of matters linked to their schooling experience in order to give the protagonists of the learning process a voice, and to eventually utilise their viewpoints as mirrors of their teacher’s professional identity. Being a qualitative study, individual stories are told and emphasis is placed on the

construction of an intertwined narrative that exposes the lived experiences and identity of a teacher-researcher and her students as they make sense of their educational journey.

The following chapter will present the six narratives constructed out of the data generated and collected throughout the inquiry.

5 The Six Narratives: Case-Studies as Mirrors of My Pedagogy

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present the data in the form of narratives for each of the six participants who took part in this inquiry. As explained in the methodology chapter, each participant belonged to one of the classes I was teaching during the period when this study was conducted. I gathered a variety of data and used them to construct each story in an effort to bring to life each character, accentuating their individuality, their interactions with me, with other teaching staff and with their classmates, as well as their perceptions of schooling and learning. Each narrative is written in two voices: my voice as their teacher followed by their own voice. Every piece of data pertaining to each participant was interpreted and pieced together to create a coherent whole, resulting in an intertwined narrative between me as a participant teacher-researcher and the child who was deemed to have potential to reach high levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour.

The first part of every narrative describes each of the six study participants through my own eyes – this story is told in my own voice as their teacher and as a researcher researching her own practice. As I constructed and re-told the children’s stories in my words, I sought to capture each participant’s learner profile and perceptions of their learning experiences, building each interpreted narrative from the data collected during the period of the study (which included stories in the reflective diary, comments or posts on our classroom blog, photographs taken during particular activities or extracts from the transcripts of the conversational interviews held with each participant as well as the photo collage classroom activity) and piecing it together as I attempted to bring out a true picture of each participant in narrative style.

The second part of each participant’s narrative takes the form of a story told through the child’s voice. In this manner, I attempted to give a close-enough description of the participants by taking the original conversational interview held between myself and each participant at the end of the scholastic year and ‘refashioning’ it to provide a coherent and flowing ‘interpreted narrative’. It is important to acknowledge that, although I strived to be ethical and faithful in my representation of each participant, each story is my interpretation of who the participants are as learners and of how they perceive their classroom life and the experiences connected with their learning trajectories. As mentioned below in Mireille’s

narrative, as a researcher I was the one to choose which prompts to use during the conversational interview and therefore which aspects of the children's learning experience would be targeted and focused on. I was also the one to choose which episodes, photographs, comments and stories were to be included or discarded in the narratives.

Nevertheless, this comes as part of the 'subjectivity' involved when carrying out a qualitative research study as opposed to a quantitative one, but I confidently state that it is also one of its strengths where the 'personal' meets the 'professional' and the barriers between the two become blurred and almost insignificant as we attempt to understand and interpret human nature to improve our dealings with one another.

5.2 Kelly's Story

5.2.1 Through the teacher's eyes

It was the first day of a new scholastic year. I remember looking at the children and feeling that familiar sensation I am used to experience every time a new group enters my classroom. Looking at this group of students, all of whom wore the same uniform, came in similar body shapes and sizes and whose faces were still rather unfamiliar to me, I felt that sense of excitement, anticipation and a tinge of trepidation because I knew that it would only take me a matter of a few days and weeks to start becoming more acquainted with each and every child. What now seemed to me like a canvas with a number of blurred faces on it, would soon turn into a beautiful painting with distinct, well-defined faces representing each individual in my class.

This is how Kelly entered my classroom, quietly, as if she did not wish to disturb. Kelly was a girl with petite features, pale skin, a pair of eyes too big for her face, hair worn in two pig-tails, plenty of freckles and a fringe. She was one out of many other girls under my care for the coming scholastic year. Kelly was not particularly active during the first weeks and somehow preferred getting lost in her own world. I could not figure her out straightaway. Very often I wondered what was going on in her little mind, why she looked like she was somewhere far away from our classroom, what it was that kept her mind occupied and what took her attention away from what was going on in our classroom. Generally, Kelly did not seem to be interested in the stuff other girls in her class were interested in. At first, she seemed to prefer the company of boys, when she felt like company, that is! After a while,

she began to mix with girls who also tended to keep to themselves, or perhaps did not belong to the group of 'popular' girls in the class.

Her initial quiet demeanour and her preference for solitude and aloneness were soon dropped by the way side. With the passing of the weeks, I saw a metamorphosis in Kelly, particularly in her socialisation with others and in her ability to empathise with her classmates, with characters in stories and even with adults. She would still require some space, once in a while, but she became more ready to interact with others during our sessions.

As I observed her interacting with her peers, I noticed that she was quite easy-going as a character. Unlike other girls her age, she would choose to ignore other children's behaviours that she did not like. She came across as mature for her age since she did not waste time arguing about unimportant matters with her classmates. Later on in the year, I found out that Kelly was an only child, who lived with her mother at her grandparents' house. Her father was British and she had very little contact with him, although she did mention him every once in a while.

The more I observed and worked with Kelly, the more she reminded me of a favourite childhood movie character – Pippi Longstocking – somehow she had her mischievous traits, her sense of humour, her smart talking, her mature outlook, her independence, her no-nonsense attitude.

Kelly was very fluent in expressing her thoughts, ideas and vast knowledge using the English language. It was her mother tongue and she would rarely use Maltese to speak. She liked to justify her preference for the English language by saying that '... it's because my father is British, you know!' At home, this was the language used regularly with her mother and grandparents, and she felt comfortable communicating in her mother tongue. She had an ability to use advanced vocabulary to express herself. Kelly would invariably be able to give the meaning for most difficult words introduced during our sessions. The term 'walking dictionary' came to my mind every time I asked the children for the meaning of a new word.

As the year went by, I discovered that this linguistic aptitude was a result of a number of factors. Kelly was definitely a bright child with a quick and creative mind. She was also an avid reader who could read way beyond her age – her mother explained to me that Kelly had

been surrounded by books since the day she was born since all people residing in the same household loved literature. During a session in which children were being encouraged to choose a suitable book from our classroom library to take home, Kelly chose one that in my eyes was rather difficult particularly for a Junior 2 student in the first term of the scholastic year. However when I asked her what were her thoughts about the level of difficulty of this particular book, Kelly was quick to tell me that “No book is ever too hard for me”. Kelly would spend hours interacting and communicating with adults, particularly with her grandparents who were both well read. Through such interaction, Kelly had developed a rich bank of words that she’d use willingly in her everyday interactions as well as a keen interest and a passion for children’s literature.

Kelly also had an excellent memory which was translated in her facility with spelling words correctly, both for dictation and within the context of sentences and short stories or descriptions. She could also re-tell a story in detail. Kelly was always quick to recall facts or concepts, and was also able to apply the skills learnt and make connections across subject matter. Aware of her photographic memory, I chose her to be one of our narrators for the much-awaited Christmas play. She was also very keen on this role and acted out her role to perfection.

However she was not always ready to take an active part in our discussions or sessions. She was rather selective in deciding which activities were worthy of her focused attention and which ones were less interesting. As the weeks passed, she began to increase her moments of hard work but I cannot say that she was always consistent in her efforts. There were times when I needed to call her name a number of times to make sure she was following. As I got to know her more closely, I discovered that Kelly worked best either when a topic caught her attention, or when praised and involved. Consequently, I would make sure to include her at the start of our discussions or in the introduction to our sessions because by time I realised that once I managed to attract her attention and validate her contributions, she would then start performing at her full potential, willingly and without limits.

I definitely cannot compare her to the typical bright, diligent, conformist girl. She was far from what one would call a teacher-pet or a teacher-pleaser. Kelly had a mind of her own, a mind that questioned constantly and didn’t accept a straight forward answer. Once

interested, she would demand to elaborate on a topic, to answer open-ended questions creatively and enthusiastically. She was usually the first to ask questions and she would never say that she didn't have an answer – Kelly would rather fabricate a creative solution to a difficult question even if it did not make sense within a particular context. But she definitely did not like to leave questions unanswered. She possessed vast general knowledge, which she began to share more willingly with the passing of time. Like that time when the children were discussing how the whale (in the book 'The Snail and the Whale' by Julia Donaldson) might have become stranded on the beach. After listening to a number of suggestions made by some of her classmates, all of whom seemed to be using their vivid imagination but certainly not their scientific knowledge to explain such a phenomenon, she gave a thorough and precise exposition of how tides work and how this whale might have probably swam too close to the shore at the wrong time of the day, thus ending up on the sand. Here Kelly had used her personal experience of often visiting shores along the United Kingdom to her benefit and to the benefit of others who might never have experienced this phenomenon since in Malta it is almost inexistent.

Apart from a high linguistic aptitude, Kelly was also creative and artistic. She loved any activities that would require her to make use of her ability to draw or act. She was always very keen to demonstrate her understanding of a particular topic being tackled through her drawings, her stories and her role-play. Kelly was also highly interested in dancing and singing. She had a very good voice when she sang and her mother also confirmed that Kelly was good at piano.

I observed Kelly grow and develop over the year, and saw her flourish as a learner, despite her tendency to be disorganised, clumsy at times and not very neat in her handwriting or her presentation. Nevertheless, I saw enormous potential in this girl who, if left to her own devices or if forgotten by her teacher, might have become 'invisible' as a learner. Although I acknowledge the fact that she might still do fairly well academically because she was innately a bright student, however I cannot help thinking about what a lot of opportunities for deep and meaningful learning would have been lost. I witnessed a change in her output as she began to enjoy activities that required her to work with others. She would alternate between taking the role of a leader or following other peers whom she looked up to such as Nicole, Giorgio and Jeremy. The more she became accustomed to our routines, to our learning

journey, the more she increased her participation. I could not help but observe and rejoice in the fact that Kelly had truly moved from the periphery of our learning community to its core where true learning was happening constantly as the children were interacting with each other, with the technology around them and with other people and artifacts that facilitated the learning process.

5.2.2 Kelly's Narrative

I like school. It makes me happy. I feel happiness coming into myself when I learn new things. I like my teachers. They are all good and they teach me new things. They are so good that they help me to like the things that I find boring. And that makes me feel excited and proud. I knew my Junior 2 teachers would teach me well and in summer, before coming to Junior 2, I told my mummy this. I love learning and when I go home, I teach my mummy things she does not know. Sometimes I have to repeat to her, just like my teacher does when children do not listen, but it does not matter that I repeat. I can repeat for her, just like I did last year for Sports' Day – I think I had to repeat ten times because she didn't hear me! Then there are other times I don't need to tell her again because I know she knows them already.

I like many things about school. I love outings especially when we went for a visit to the old city of Mdina and Mosta, as a preparation for our Open Day topic. I enjoy our outings because it is lovely to go on a trip with my friends and with my teachers. One time, we went out for a walk down the road because we were working on a project called 'A Safe Community' and we were looking at road safety signs, pavements, buildings, people in the neighbourhood etc... Suddenly we hear a police car siren. We were so excited because the car stopped near us and called the name of a boy – Sam – and we couldn't believe our eyes! We thought that something had happened and then, when we realised the police were playing a trick on our friend, I thought it was very funny.

Another thing that I also enjoy doing at school is practising joined handwriting in class. It makes me feel like I'm growing up, writing like big people, joining our letters. I write neater when I join my letters. I do not like it when my teachers shout. They do not do this all the time, only when some children get on their nerves, like I do with my mummy!

If I were the teacher or the Head of school, I would change some things about our school. The first thing that I would do is to teach the children who disobey how to listen to their teachers

and to sit down quietly. I do not like it when the classroom is too noisy because they give our teachers a big headache. The only way they will learn this is if I keep repeating this from term 1 till term 2 until I am sure they will listen and obey. I feel calmer when children listen and obey the teachers, when they are doing their work without disturbing others. Another thing that I would change is to take pictures of all the charts and of our work and upload them on the computer. This way I can write about what we learn and the whole world will know what we do, even my aunties who live in America can see how intelligent we are! I would put a picture of Nicole's work on the computer especially her painting of the flowers in a vase. I really like the way it turned out. We nearly did a whole unit about plants and flowers. I got dirty painting my flowers when we were learning about them – when I paint I get really messy! I actually love getting messy, except for my hair. I do not like messing with my hair or else, perhaps, I need to tell mummy to cut it shorter so it won't get messy! Once the teacher recorded us reading stories and put our picture and our voices on a wikipage on the computer. Other children in New York could see our faces and hear us read to them. That was fun and I was very excited.

What I like most about school is that we learn new things and that we do different things. I remember in term one an art and craft activity that we did that was fun. We painted a self-portrait, we looked at each other's faces first and then the whole class went to the bathroom to look in the big wall mirrors. We stared at our faces, at the shape of our noses, at the distance between the top of our head and our eyebrows. We giggled and smiled as we looked in the mirror but it was fun. Our teacher put a picture of our portraits on our blog and we hung the portraits on a string in our classroom.

I enjoy our Science lessons so much. I like learning about the world and the animals. I also like it when the teacher reads us stories like that story of Shen and the magic paintbrush we did in term 1. After the story, we did a play and everyone was a different character in the story. That was the very first play we did. I love drama. I really enjoyed our play of Emma the Red for the Christmas concert. I was a narrator and a 'she-viking' and I felt so proud and happy. I wore a pink dress, a pink furry coat and a pink Viking hat. I think the Christmas concert was the best thing this year. That's what I really liked because I had fun practising with my friends but mostly I had fun showing it to my mum. Before the show, I told her the title of the play but nothing else because I wanted it to be a surprise. She was so excited on

the way home and she nearly cried in the car. When I saw her like that, I felt happy and excited, just like I feel when I go to the beach, so I jumped up and down on the backseat of mummy's car.

I like to do well at school. I am smart because when the teacher teaches us hard things, I study them and I read them and write them many times. Then I know them by heart. Sometimes I practise with mummy and that helps me to learn difficult words. When we repeat and repeat and repeat, I learn difficult things because they stay in my memory. I also find it easy to learn when we do arts and crafts. I am very fast to draw and paint. My teachers show me how to do my work and that helps me to learn too. Sometimes my friends teach me things.

I like that I am smart, that I am smart like other children. Even if someone tells me that I am not. I like it when Nicole tells me that I am smart. Sometimes my teachers tell me that I am smart and my mummy tells me 'brava' too. That makes me happy. Then I tell them that they are also smart and I mention the things they are good at as well. Not only I am smart, even they are. There are a lot of clever children in my class like Jeremy, Mireille, Jeanine, Nicole, Sarah and Kyra. There's Thomas and Giorgio too – I know they're clever because they know a lot about science. I remember Mireille's lapbook about space for Show and Tell. It was fascinating! Sometimes my teacher tells them they are clever. I am good at singing and dancing. I am also good at reading and playing, especially playing outside. I also know how to be kind. I am good at finding pronouns quickly like my teacher taught us. I am good when we have our assessments, even when I'm stuck! I think assessments are fun. If I get stuck with my assessments, I just calm down, I take it easy and I do whatever the instructions tell me to do.

Everyone is smart, not just the ones who are good at science, everyone is smart for me. I know that there is something smart inside every child and there are different things that they do well. Even if no one says it, I know that they have talent in them. I want to tell Jeremy that I think I want him to be a teacher because he is very good, he has lots of knowledge and he can share it with others. You know, when I was writing about outer space in my writing journal, I showed it to him and he helped me. That's something special about Jeremy – he knows a lot of things and he helps others. I like him to be my best friend ever. He loves mind maps. Even I do. I remember that time when we were all sharing what we already knew about deserts

and my teacher was writing everything down on a mind map. She took a picture of the mind map and put it on the blog to show our parents how much we already knew about deserts, even before she had taught us anything about the topic! It was fun learning from each other and knowing what my friends knew about deserts. Another boy I think is bright is Giorgio. He needs a lot of practice but I know he is also good. He can read very well and he is also good at playing with me. He is brilliant at inventing games and that also shows that he is smart.

I like working with Nicole best. She is my BFF and she always shows me that I have talent inside and she always shares too. We share things and I like being friends with her. We learn together because we get on well as friends. Then when we work in a small group, I enjoy working with Mireille, Nicole, Jeanine, Kyra and even Kathryn too. Like Nicole, they all think I'm talented, and they teach me things that I don't know. I show them respect and they show me respect in return. We help each other in class, we do. Like yesterday, I was reading to Isaac to help him and I asked him questions. I also like working with some boys. I would choose Jeremy, Giorgio and Thomas if we were working in a group. And Isaac, Gabriel and Liam too!

We learned so much in Junior 2. We did a lot of fun things. My best activities this year were story writing, using computers to learn and working with a partner. Next I liked our Show and Tell activities. When my teacher gave us a lot of photos to choose our best moments in Junior 2, I chose a photo that reminded me of our Show and Tell about the Four Seasons. It showed Jake H looking through a pretend TV he made out of cardboard. He was very good at telling us the weather forecast. I also liked our topics like that time when we learned about habitats, especially about the four layers of the rainforest. That was fun! Once we also went to do some work with the little ones in a Pre-Junior class. We worked on the story of the mixed-up chameleon and we were helping the little ones to learn and to build a mixed-up person. I remember I worked with Luigi's sister and it was like an adventure. Our Christmas play was also a very good thing we did this year and I liked it when we sang songs to learn like the song of the Water Cycle. We had experiments in class and we also kept a writing journal, which was fun. Sometimes I preferred to work alone. I loved being in Junior 2 and I am feeling sad that this is the end of the year. I like learning so many things with my teachers. I wish you would teach me again next year!

5.3 Giorgio's Story

5.3.1 Through the teacher's eyes

It did not take much time for me to become intrigued by Giorgio's manners, his way of approaching each learning experience, the intensity with which he abandoned himself in every activity that grabbed his attention and the variety of media that he used to demonstrate his learning. His most striking and distinguishing quality as a learner was the stark contrast between his tendency towards perfectionism, meticulous demeanour and presentation of his work (which is largely characteristic of students who are usually conformists and reproducers of what a teacher would have presented to them) on the one side, and the highly creative, artistic and original manner in which he worked particularly when it came to projects, presentations, group work, creative thinking activities and creative writing on the other side.

I remember thinking about the complex nature that singled him out from his peers – looking at Giorgio and observing him while on task, I would find myself wondering about those life experiences that might have contributed to his personality which, in my eyes, appeared to have the constitution of a sturdy material such as steel. Giorgio came across as a solid, mature and highly motivated learner with a determination that was highly precocious for a six year old boy coming from a working class family background. He was always focused, engaging in each task with a particular seriousness and commitment that was beyond his years. As his teacher, I was fascinated by his task commitment, his tendency to strive for excellence, and his facility with learning in general. It always seemed to me that learning came natural to him, but instead of taking it for granted or approaching it with a certain ease and confidence, Giorgio seemed to put his mind, body and soul in every opportunity for learning that was provided to him.

Giorgio came from a Maltese speaking family background, which might be expected to put him at a disadvantage when it comes to communicating in English, which at our school is the main language of instruction. However, this almost never posed any difficulties and he communicated effectively in the two languages i.e. both English and Maltese. In general, Giorgio used the two languages interchangeably, depending on the interlocutor. He could easily adapt to the situation, generally using English during our sessions and using Maltese with the Maltese teacher as well as with his closest friends. He usually spoke in English when communicating with me – probably because I was his teacher of English as well as of other

subjects that were taught in the English language. However, there were some rare occasions when he asked me permission to speak to me in Maltese, mostly to express a thought or a feeling. This was characteristic of his tendency towards perfectionism, not wanting to cross the line by using a language he rarely heard me use. He felt he needed to ask permission whereas his classmates never would (and frankly did not have to). His Maltese vocabulary was rich and varied, and included expressions reminiscent of the language used in a village community. As a matter of fact, Giorgio's family came from a very particular village famous for its traditions namely its bread and its exuberant village *festà*. Giorgio was named after the patron saint of his village and both him and his parents often mentioned their keen interest and active participation in the life and traditions of their village.

His advanced language skills were noticeable also in his writing skills. Giorgio was able to construct complex sentences in both languages, carefully choosing his words to convey his message in a richly written sentence. He would take pride in making sure his sentences included interesting adjectives and adverbs and that the structure was correct. His parents, particularly his mother, were very involved in their child's education and monitored his work daily, ensuring that Giorgio always presented excellent work. They were aware of his tendency for perfectionism and told me more than once that they tried not to put pressure on him with regards to presentation but that since a very young age he would keep rubbing off his letters and words until he felt satisfied that they were neat enough. This was evident from the beginning of the year and his handwriting resembled that of printed letters.

Perfectionism ... when I think about Giorgio's diligence and precision, I tend to experience mixed feelings. On the one hand, I admire the commitment and meticulousness a seven year old boy is able to demonstrate in his efforts to strive for excellence. It makes me wonder about the driving force behind such an attitude towards one's role as a young learner. It makes me wish to discover the ingredients that constitute such a disposition so that I could perhaps inculcate them into the minds of those students who tend to always be all over the place, rarely focused and rather inattentive to the details of their work. Working with Giorgio and observing him closely over a whole scholastic year drew my attention to the nature-nurture conundrum, particularly with this young learner.

Being an only child, who was truly the centre of his parents' attention in all senses, and their pride and joy (which was so evident in their eyes whenever we got a chance to talk about his progress, his achievements, his personality, his artistic talents), he had definitely acquired or accentuated this tendency for exactness through working closely with a mother who possibly was close to being a perfectionist herself. On the other hand, I could see clearly that there was also an element of innate inclination to do things in a particular order which was both structured and creative. This was what distinguished Giorgio as a highly creative thinker ... this propensity for inventive perfectionism. This trait was evident in his drawings, his sentences, his attempts at writing simple stories and his projects as well as in the way he organised his work, his belongings and his games. One might expect a perfectionist to be stifled by such a quality, and this would indeed make Giorgio take longer than others to complete a given task. At times it would also result in frustration because his work was not quite up to his standards, whereas in my eyes and in the eyes of his classmates it would be a thoroughly good piece of work. But all in all he was doing exceptionally well, producing beautiful pieces of work (both artistic and academic) and unconsciously conveying a message to others that it takes talent coupled with plenty of hard work to excel.

Giorgio alternated between seeking opportunities to work steadily in solitude and engaging wholeheartedly in activities that required him to collaborate with his classmates, usually with a small group of them. Because of his well-developed interpersonal intelligence, which could be translated here as a capacity to interact and work effectively with others through an advanced ability to understand the motivations, thoughts and desires of his classmates, he was usually chosen by many children as a great team player. Contrary to most students of the same age, he was usually willing to listen to others and negotiate during group work. He acknowledged other children's ideas but was also good at assisting his group to choose the best idea when working on a project or to assemble parts taken from different ideas to come up with a completely new proposal that would validate every team player's individual efforts. For instance, during a creative thinking session where students were asked to come up with a plan to wash an elephant, Giorgio's group (which consisted of three students) worked creatively and efficiently towards an end result that succeeded in grabbing not only my attention but also that of the whole class for its originality. Here is an excerpt taken from the

reflective journal that describes Giorgio's involvement, creativity and capacity to work well with others:

The last group consisted of Jeremy, Isaac and Giorgio – they took turns to explain different parts of their diagram. Jeremy started: "So these are four showers that are higher than the elephant. Giorgio came up with this idea. We'd use a sponge and some soap to hose his body." Isaac went on: "The elephant can use his trunk to rinse himself by throwing water from his trunk into a bucket, then back onto his back." Giorgio continued: "So we scrub him by getting bubbles from the sea. The pipe from the sea is connected to the showers." Jeremy concluded the explanation by putting up a 'narrator's voice' and saying: "Illustrated by Giorgio, ideas from Isaac, Giorgio and Jeremy, and authored by me!"

(taken from my Reflective Journal, entitled 'Mr Elephant will smell like a washed house!')

Following the group activity, I took up the children's own suggestion to extend the elephant activity further, asking them to work individually this time. They were encouraged to think about all the ideas shared by the different groups, choose the one that in their mind was the best idea and draw or present it in writing on an A5 sheet of paper. Giorgio, being a creative thinker, asked whether they were allowed to come up with a completely new idea. Once given the go-ahead for this, he was instantly immersed in the activity. He worked steadily, using drawing as a medium to convey his idea. Other children followed his lead and came up with a variety of new ideas especially concerning innovative ways to reach the back of the elephant. Giorgio's final drawing depicted a hot-air balloon that would take you on top of the elephant's back to make it easier to reach the higher parts of the elephant's body when scrubbing it. Through this activity, Giorgio's capability to work effectively with others, his highly developed creative thinking skills, his artistic talent as well as his confidence in his ability as a learner were highlighted. He felt secure enough to ask whether it would be possible to stray slightly from the instructions given by his teacher, and this 'bold' act enabled others to experiment with novel ideas that had not been previously mentioned.

Giorgio needed structure within our learning space and abhorred confusion and lack of direction, but then also asked for a certain degree of flexibility that allowed him to develop his creativity and innovativeness. Giorgio was undoubtedly a student other children looked up to, one who was popular both within and outside the classroom walls. He had high expectations for his own learning journey and made his teachers, including me, work to live up to his expectations. Giorgio was charismatic in many ways, a quality that accentuated his highly developed interpersonal intelligence. He was definitely a young learner who taught me a lot about creating challenge in a mixed-ability classroom, about being flexible and open to students' thoughts and ideas, about taking a child's lead and developing a curriculum that

accounts for children's gifts and talents and that is rich in experiences, one that validates children as capable and creative individuals. From the start of our learning journey, Giorgio occupied a prominent seat at the core of our learning community, and over time enticed others to join him on this exciting learning trajectory. He constantly moved between two worlds, one inhabited by his closest friends who consisted of a group of very active, boisterous boys with whom he felt a kinship and with whom he spent most of his break time and free time, and another one made of a group of likewise minded learners who were constantly seeking challenge and who strived to reach their full potential. Facilitating Giorgio's learning process was a meaningfully rich learning experience for his teachers, one that inspired us to be the best we could be in our roles as early childhood educators.

5.3.2 Giorgio's Narrative

My Junior 2 class went really well. I had many friends as well as some great teachers who could teach me so many new things. Most of all, I became a very good reader during Junior 2. We read a lot of books, all the time, during lessons, when we were working on a project, during our quiet time, to learn about a topic. So my reading improved greatly. I love books especially the Geronimo Stilton ones and adventurous stories like the Magic Tree House. My mum bought me a lot of books this year and I also started going to the public library where I live. I enjoyed being in Junior 2 and will surely miss my friends and my teachers during the holidays.

I liked doing most of the things we did in class. I would not change anything to my year at school. Except for one thing – I don't like the short breaks because there are short playing times so I'd make it longer. And another thing, I'd give children short breaks during the day for them to read their favourite books too. You know, I could also ask Ms Sue to paint the walls again, both inside and outside so that our school looks like new again. Let me see, I would probably ask her to paint the walls inside blue and then we'll add big red spots to make it colourful, bright and exciting. Perhaps the walls on the outside can be painted white with some brown designs too. And now that I'm thinking about it, I think that the school should build more classrooms so that then ... hmmm ... Can I say this in Maltese so that I explain myself better? Emm ... minflok jispicaw sa Senior 5 jispicaw iktar tard halli jgawdu l-iskola sakemm jikbru aktar!!! [Hmmm ... instead of ending their school journey here in Senior 5, they would be able to further their studies here till they're older so they can enjoy more years in

this school]. But otherwise, I like THIS school so very much. I always tell my parents how happy I am here and that I think they made a good choice for me when they choose this school even though it is far away from my home. The important thing is that I am happy here even if it means travelling a long distance to come here and then go back home. I would tell a boy who would be coming up to Junior 2 that it is indeed great fun and that I hope he will enjoy it too when he comes to this class.

We learned so many things in Junior 2. I like learning about Maths, Maltese and English. Because Maths is like playing games, English is fun like Maths and Maltese is my language. That's why I like them. Then I also like working on our projects about different topics – this year we did a lot of work about Mdina for our Open Day and we also worked on dinosaurs. One thing I really enjoy is going on an outing with my teachers and friends especially when we would have done work on the place we are visiting. Then it all make sense when you go and visit the place. Like when the teachers took us to Mdina – we had already talked a lot about it and then we had a treasure hunt with clues all around the old city. We were so excited and we managed to find all the places and objects that we had mentioned in class! I still remember about the Mdina gates and the big church and the bastions.

There were also other things that made me happy in Junior 2. I enjoyed joining my letters and practising my handwriting – I found that quite easy and whenever I did it, I felt happy and proud of myself. It made me feel smart and older. The teacher and my mum said I was very neat when joining my letters. I also enjoyed reading. We used to do all kinds of reading. Sometimes we listened to our teacher reading us a story while we relaxed on our cushions in the library corner. Sometimes we read with a partner, a sentence or a paragraph or a page each. Once we also recorded ourselves reading stories for children in New York to listen to it. Our teacher put that on a wikipage where children from different countries could see it and hear us read. We listened to them reading their favourite books too. There were times when we could read alone too. I like reading alone so no one can disturb me. It feels so good to read quietly especially when it's an adventure – it feels like you are there in the story with the characters and if you read alone you can really imagine you are part of the story.

There are some smart children and people in the school. Like my friends, Jake and Jeremy who is also an artist apart from being my friend. I am smart too, can I say that? Then there's Kelly,

Kyra and my teachers too. My teachers are very clever. Ms Anna is also smart – she is smart at sports. I mostly know that all these people are clever because they do smart things and smart activities, they work hard, they read a lot, they study hard, they write well and because they learned from good teachers like my teacher. I hear different people saying how smart someone else is. Like my friends, sometimes they say that Jeremy or I am smart. All the teachers say that too and even my parents tell me they are proud of me because I am smart and work very hard and keep my things tidy and do well at school.

I am good at joining words and sentences and I can even write longer sentences using lots of adjectives and interesting verbs to make my sentences long. Sometimes I get so many ideas in my brain that it would take a whole page to write them down. I like drawing pictures and painting them. I am very good at my art and I go for lessons too. When I am drawing a picture, I concentrate for a long time and I do not like to be disturbed. I am also good at helping my mum. I think it is smart when you are a good helper because you make others feel happy and then they are proud of you and you feel proud of yourself. I love doing hard things especially in Maths and English. There are many things that I cannot understand straightaway and lots of things that I can't realise or figure out what they are. So when that happens I just think with my head or at least I ask the teachers to help me out. I prefer when I have to think hard to figure something out because easy work does not make me feel smart. Easy work like not so hard sentences that we write sometimes or easy words that you can draw like cat and hat or just sticking things for art and craft – I prefer to create something than stick things.

I love working with other children during class work. If I had to choose a partner to do a project with, I would definitely go for Jeremy – he is smart and I am smart too and we could do something interesting and write a lot and then we share what we came up with with the whole class. If I had to work with more children, then I would choose Deyan, Jacob and Jake because they are all smart – I know that Deyan does not work a lot but I know that he is still smart so I would work with him anyway. I know everything about him and I know that when he feels up to it, he writes long sentences and long words. He also reads a lot. Jake and Nikolai are good at Mathematics so I would work with them when we have to work with numbers.

Most of all, I enjoy writing. Writing all the stuff – in the Writing Journal, for science because I love science – that is something that makes you smart because scientists are smart people.

Maybe when I grow up I could be a teacher. I like writing in my books and copybooks, I like learning about our topics and writing stories. I enjoyed our Christmas show – I was a Viking god in the play and I made sure I sounded like one when I said my lines. It was a brilliant show and we really had fun doing it. The lap books were fun and the dictionary work was also fun. I enjoyed working in a group especially when we were a group of children who worked hard. I liked our experiments for science – because I always enjoyed science lessons. So this is why Junior 2 was very good for me. This is why I love this school so much. I learn a lot of things, I am never bored and I learn with my friends.

5.4 Jeanine's Story

5.4.1 Through the teacher's eyes

I knew Jeanine long before she actually became my student. I had been her brother's teacher for two consecutive years and had regularly seen and interacted with her and her parents, almost on a daily basis since they would first pick her up from her class, then come to my class to pick her brother up. From a very young age, even when she was still four years old, Jeanine came across as a confident girl who could speak her own mind, was determined to excel at school and was very keen to learn and come to the older classes. She was always very polite and attentive and I could tell on her first day as my student that she had been looking forward to the start of this scholastic year. In her eyes, I could read the great expectations she had for this scholastic year as well as pride to finally be in her brother's teacher's class.

It was a great pleasure having Jeanine as one of the students in my class – she was definitely what one might classify as a 'model' student in terms of making a conscious and consistent effort to listen attentively, working through a task following the instructions given, behaving appropriately and participating actively in our classroom life. Jeanine, with her enthusiastic speech and well-developed linguistic ability, was always at the centre of the learning process, never in the periphery. At the same time, she was also able to understand that there were times when she had to take an observer's role and let others share their thoughts and knowledge. In a nutshell, Jeanine was rather mature for her age and could easily adjust to the rhythm and demands of a busy mixed-ability classroom scenario.

Jeanine was being brought up in a bilingual environment where Maltese and English were used interchangeably. This was evident in the ease with which she could express herself in

the two languages, both in her speech and in her writing. She had a high aptitude for the written word and revelled in the construction of creative stories. One of her favourite tasks during her free time was to get lost in her Writing Journal, writing imaginative, dreamy stories about princesses, girls and dragons. Her extensive use of rich vocabulary and interesting adjectives enhanced the quality of her sentences. She would proudly share her work with me and others once she was happy with it, reading her stories aloud with great expression and enthusiasm.

Her close-to-photographic memory coupled with her high level of understanding enabled Jeanine to master concepts quickly as well as remember and share knowledge and information willingly and confidently with others. It was remarkable to see her in action during our Show and tell presentations where each child would bring an object, a picture, a write-up or a chart about a particular topic being tackled during that week or month and talk about it in front of the whole class. Jeanine followed on her brother's footsteps in the form her presentation usually took. She invariably prepared a chart with around eight pictures but no words and would ask someone to hold it for her while she moved from one picture to the next, using each one as a memory aide as she explained every picture in great detail, giving extensive information about the topic. The most striking feature of her presentation was her lack of hesitation, her confident performance and the pleasure she evidently experienced as she related the material with great precision and expression. After her first in a series of presentation, Jeanine explained to me that her family would help her with its writing and memorisation part. She would repeat her presentation endlessly at home and in the car until they all made sure she could deliver it impeccably.

Jeanine was the younger of two siblings in a family who seemed to prize diligence, commitment and sheer hard work as much as it prized achievement and excellent performance. This was written all over Jeanine's demeanour – she worked with a purpose, never failing to set high standards for herself and to listen attentively because, in her world, doing her utmost meant there was no room for mistakes, let alone carelessness or distractions. Her brother, two years older than her, had also been a high achiever with a working stamina and maturity that was impressive for a six year old boy. So, really and truly, because Jeanine was keen to please her parents as well as her teachers, coupled with her tendency towards conformity, structure and routine, she was programmed to work towards

perfection. Anything less than that would place her on a different rank compared to her high-achieving and high-performing brother. Having said this, however, it is also essential to note that Jeanine did not seem to mind all this at all – a mind-set of achievement and hard work seemed to define her and place her at the centre of her family’s attention. She preferred our days to be structured and filled to the brim with planned activities rather than being left to her own devices to complete open-ended tasks. She thrived during tasks that required her to perform along a carefully laid out set of instructions or structure.

She excelled and worked relentlessly through such activities, usually with a level of concentration that was beyond what would normally be expected of a six year old child. One particular trait that was characteristic of this young diligent learner was the way she interacted with her peers during group work. She usually took a leadership role, particularly when working with classmates whom she knew required help to work through a given task. Jeanine directed the activity with confidence, guiding different group members through the activity, ensuring that no time is wasted and that they all work steadily towards the set target of the activity.

It is interesting to highlight the stark difference between Jeanine’s evidently habitual diligent and rigid demeanour and the streak of creativity that would emerge occasionally during particular activities. From a rather unyielding conformist who preferred to follow instructions to the letter and make sure that others did the same, she would sometimes transform into a more creative, more inventive kind of learner, relishing in producing colourful, artistic or imaginative creations whether it is a drawing, a project done in class or a story written on her Writing Journal or in her Creative Writing copybook. Working with her throughout the scholastic year, as well as knowing her family background and their views on education and achievement, I always got a sense that if left entirely to her own devices, without influences or pressures, Jeanine would more likely be more flexible in her manner of dealing with school life, and probably this would enable her to reveal some gifts and talents which I was only able to glimpse briefly on rare occasions.

It is worthwhile mentioning that in many ways being a hard-working, highly structured and focused learner like Jeanine has its advantages especially with regards to academic achievement. Jeanine performed exceptionally well in all subject areas and was definitely

able to grasp concepts quickly, recall information and use it in different contexts and apply the skills learned without adult assistance. Her learning trajectory was generally a smooth one and I admit that I welcomed and appreciated these traits. However, despite the benefits of her consistently hard-working and accommodating nature, I seemed to feel that as her teacher I should also provide Jeanine with more opportunities where she could feel safe to venture beyond routine and structure, encouraging her to tap into her natural artistic ability as well as creative mind, and develop these further. So, especially from the second term onwards, I made sure to praise her efforts to experiment more, her creativity and her originality which was mostly manifested in her drawings and her writings. I also made it a point to highlight these characteristics in my communications with her parents, particularly with her mother so that she would also learn to value, validate and promote Jeanine's creative efforts. I believed that once Jeanine felt that her family approved also of this aspect of her learning potential, she would blossom and develop more freely and be more adventurous in her learning journey. One positive way to encourage this kind of attitude was to organise Parent-Child Sessions at least once a term where one parent would come to school with their child and participate in a classroom activity. This enabled parents to experience first-hand the approach being adopted in class, the manner in which children were encouraged to explore, be inquisitive and be creative during our sessions. Following one such activity, Jeanine's mother expressed her gratitude and appreciation for having been given this opportunity in that day's post on our classroom blog:

Jeanine on April 23, 2012 at 6:04 pm said:

Dear Ms Rosienne

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be in class today. I really enjoyed every minute of it and Jeanine was so excited having her mummy in class! We are really looking forward for the next parent-child session.

Regards,

Jeanine's Mum

So Jeanine was definitely one of my 'challenges' in class in terms of making sure I provided appropriate and meaningful learning opportunities even though she could easily have become a student who wouldn't need much of my attention or efforts. I saw talent, hidden

gifts that were waiting for the right environment for them to be unveiled and fostered and I was beginning to understand that crucial role a teacher of a mixed-ability group could play in this respect.

5.4.2 Jeanine's Narrative

I love going to school. I feel happy on my way to school especially when I know we have our Show and Tell session. I prepare myself very well for this session and all the family helps me out to make sure my presentation is great. I love learning new stuff. When we do new things we have more fun. I am a fast learner so I like it when our teacher shows us something new. I do not always enjoy repeating things I already learned, only when I need to make sure I know something really well. Like with Show and Tell, I usually practise my presentation over and over again until I know it by heart. That is how Mum tells me to do it because even my brother used to learn his presentation by heart when he was in Junior 2. Not all my friends do it this way. Some only bring an object and they say something about it or bring a paper and they read it aloud in front of the others. But I think it is better to say it by heart because like that you show how smart you are and give your friends a lot of interesting information.

I enjoy our English lessons especially writing stories and working with nouns, verbs and especially pronouns. When we do stuff like pronouns, we get up and do some actions that help us remember which pronoun to use. We have fun doing the actions. I also enjoy copying sentences and changing the nouns with a pronoun. I always get these right when I write the sentences again. I also like our spelling lesson. The teacher usually writes a set of words on the board or gives us flashcards and we have to discover patterns in these words. Then we must use our brains to find out the rule for this pattern. Like when we learned about using the 'ck' at the end of a word. The teacher wanted us to tell her why some words end with a 'ck' whereas some only need a 'k'. It is fun when we do this because we become 'detectives'. I am usually very quick to find the answer, even some of my friends are, like Nicole, Deyan, Kyra and Jeremy. But sometimes the teacher asks us to wait so that she gives other children time to think. It is hard not to blurt out the answer when you know it, and I always hope that the teacher asks me to tell the others the rule. But sometimes, instead of telling everyone the answer, the teacher lets us whisper it to a partner before we all share the answer with the whole class. This makes me happy because I like working with a friend and we help each other out and learn together.

I really enjoyed being in Junior 2. I liked it so much. I knew it would be fun from before I came to this class. I remember how excited I felt when I was coming to Junior 2 because my brother told me we would do a lot of difficult things and I like it when things are not too easy. And that is how it was. When things were hard, I try to think first and then do it. There is nothing I would change in Junior 2. I like the way learning is done so I do not want to change anything to it even if they let me change something.

One of my favourite subjects this year is Science. I like to work with science stuff. Like when we learnt about switches and short circuits. It is good when we do experiments to learn. I like working with my friends and making discoveries. I like doing things and it helps me understand and learn. I also feel that I learn best when we have to prepare something about a topic like when the teacher asks us to go home and do some research. For example, once we had a project about chameleons and I still remember all the things I learned about chameleons. I learned a lot when I was doing the project at home but my friends also taught me many things about chameleons. That time, I enjoyed listening to their presentation and that is how I learned. At home, my mummy and my daddy help me with my projects and I like it a lot that we do it together. They make sure I know it very well before I go to class with my Show and Tell. Mummy and Daddy help me do it and then I get used to saying it myself, alone. That is how I get to know a lot of stuff about a topic.

I am good at drawing pictures. I love drawing and am careful to choose beautiful colours to decorate my pictures. I still remember how impressed my teacher and friends were when I drew the picture of the Gruffalo. They also like Giorgio's picture. He is a very good artist.

Many children are smart in my class. Mireille and Jeremy are very clever. When we are in class, Mireille always knows what she has to do and the teachers do not need to repeat things for her. Jeremy is very good in many things, like Maths and Maltese. When the Maths teacher asks us questions, he knows the answers really well. I know they are smart and sometimes the teachers also say they are clever but Mireille is better than Jeremy in Maltese. Sometimes teachers tell me I am smart too and I like it because when they say it I know I am a clever girl. But only the teachers tell me that I am smart not my friends. Mummy tells me that if I want to be smart I have to do things slowly and carefully and I have to think a lot, to use my brains.

It is good to talk about these things. I have fun talking about being smart at school. I know I am good at English and grammar, when I have to circle pronouns, nouns, verbs and adjectives in the sentences. Once the teacher gave us a lot of flashcards with words and we worked in groups to sort them out into nouns, verbs and adjectives. I think it was one of the best games ever, and I was very good at sorting them properly. I help some children in my group because they were finding it difficult. I like it when the teacher asks me to help someone who is having difficulty with a task. I feel like a teacher when I help someone else with their work. I usually finish my work quickly so sometimes I do help others. Other times, I write in my Writing Journal or practise joined handwriting on our workbook. There are also times when I read a book in the library corner or help my teacher around the classroom.

I also like describing things, saying them and then writing them. I am good at writing stories, like the one we did of the fairy tales. It felt just like you're an author when I was writing the story. When we do a lot of things around the same topic, I feel smart because I get to learn many new things. Like this year, for our Open Day, our class was working on our old city Mdina. We talked about it but we also did a lot of other things. The teachers took us on a trip to Mdina. Last year we could not go to Australia so we only learned about it in class. It's better when you get to visit a place you are learning about. Like when we went to Mdina, I learned about the gates of Mdina and I enjoyed it.

I think I am not as good at Mathematics. I do not always feel very smart in this subject because when the teacher gives me my homework or school work, I make some mistakes. If you get mistakes, you are not that clever. You must get everything right to show the teacher and your mummy and daddy and your friends that you are smart. But my teacher says that sometimes mistakes can help us to be smart because you learn from your mistakes and then you would know the thing that you didn't know before so you won't repeat the same correction next time.

I love working with other children. I enjoy working with Mireille, Emma and Nicole. I also work with Kyra because she loves me and she is really good to me. She's a good friend although before she used to fight with me sometimes. Nicole is smart and she knows about lots of stuff so it's good that we work together. Emma is a good friend of mine and she also loves to share when I have something missing. It is good that you work with children who are

smart but it is more important that they are helpful and friendly. I think that Nicole is the cleverest girl in the class, smarter than Mireille so if I have to work with a partner I'd choose her. It is amazing how she always knows about things we have not learned before. When we start something new, she knows about it already. I choose her as my partner so she can help me with stuff and I get to learn about it like her. I think she would choose me as well because we're friends. I do not mind working with boys either, what I mind is that they are clever so if I don't know something and they do, then they could help me and tell me about it. I usually enjoy working with others and sometimes we have so much fun that we don't want the bell to ring for the end of the lesson. Sometimes it is hard to work in a group because you want everyone to choose your idea but they want to do something else. The teacher tells us to discuss and choose the 'best' one or put ideas together and come up with something new that includes something from each idea. One activity that I really enjoyed doing with my friends was when we had to brainstorm ideas and come up with a way to wash an elephant. I remember I was the one from my group to read out the list to the rest of the class. I like writing lists. It helps me understand stuff when things are presented in order.

I loved doing many things in Junior 2 but most of all I thoroughly enjoyed learning new stuff like when we learned about dinosaurs and chameleons. Well, the best activity was our Christmas play ... Emma the Red about Vikings. I was so happy to be given the main part. Even though my song did not play on the day of the show ... I panicked at first but then the teacher helped me to go to the next part and everyone clapped and was happy with our show. Apart from the Christmas play, I also loved writing stories, doing work on our literacy booklets, doing a lot of science experiments, using the computers and working on projects or creating lap books. I prefer working with others in a group or with a partner. Junior 2 was loads of fun!

5.5 Mireille's Story

5.5.1 Through the teacher's eyes

On the surface, Mireille was one of the girls in my class who was always on top of everything, working steadily through the tasks and activities provided, striving to give her utmost as a student and to please the teachers, never failing to follow rules or instructions. But as the year rolled by, Mireille uncovered a further richness of character and began to also feel safe enough to bring out her true colours, adding layers of potential, talent and personality to

those that she may initially have felt were the only side of her that was allowed to come out. Her soft but rather husky voice distinguished her and at times also created some unease as she struggled to project her voice well. Her warm, gentle eyes mirrored a sweet-natured personality with a propensity towards being a peace-maker, resolving conflicts between groups of friends, particularly when it comes to issues that crop up in the lives of six-year old girls.

Mireille, a tall girl with a rather large frame, was the younger of two sisters. As with Jeanine, I knew Mireille and her family before she actually entered my class. I had taught her older sister for two consecutive years and therefore Mireille was already acquainted with some of the procedures of our class. One interesting feature of the school where this study took place was the fact that the leadership team, run itself by family members (since, as an independent school, it had belonged to the same family for decades), practised an open-door policy. Parents were encouraged to walk their children to their classrooms and, without any doubt, this led to plenty of daily interactions between the class teachers and our students' families. I remember clearly how, as a four year old girl, Mireille used to enjoy coming into her sister's class, a couple of years prior to her becoming my student. She would not hesitate to take in and observe the colourful charts on the wall, leafing through books in the library area, sitting on the carpet area while I discussed an issue with their mother. I also recall moments when Mireille, as a quiet but nevertheless alert girl, would come up to me to ask permission to use this or that classroom tool or to read this or that book. At times there would be a small group of young siblings roaming around my classroom or sitting at different areas of the room, playing with materials or games in different learning areas, or simply listening to an older sibling read them a storybook from our library as us adults chatted or discussed a particular issue or clarified a specific concept that would have been presented in class during that week. These end of day interactions with children's families were instrumental in opening our classroom door literally and metaphorically for the wider community where our learning space was thus extended outward as adults and children were welcome to enter and move freely around the classroom and the school corridors on a daily basis.

As I attempt to render a true-enough representation of this six year old girl, I am aware that my description and her story told through my voice may not do justice to the richness and authenticity of who she is as a girl, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a learner and a budding-

author amongst many other facets. Her voice, presented in her own narrative below, does provide a deeper insight into who she is, how she perceives the world around her in relation to her schooling, her peers, her teachers and her life in general. However, here again, I am wary of making claims about the authenticity of her voice primarily because, as an adult and as a researcher, I was the one to decide which prompts and questions to ask during the conversational interview I had with Mireille (as well as with the rest of the case study participants). But, as in any narrative, the words uttered by study participants, their actions, their behaviour, the daily connections and interactions made during the research study are open to interpretation, and more specifically in narrative, to a re-storying where the researcher and writer pieces information and data into a story that is constructed and retold to provide a consistent and sensible portrait of the participant.

Being what one would call an all-rounder, Mireille excelled in a number of areas and was able to demonstrate her knowledge and learning using a variety of media. Her spoken language ability in both Maltese and English was advanced for her age, but she seemed to be more comfortable with expressing herself in writing or through her drawings. She would get entirely lost in her stories as she used her imagination and creativity to first plan and write her accounts, then illustrate them with colourful and beautiful art work. Her Writing Journal was definitely a favourite for her, particularly when she would finish a task earlier than others and simply work on a story alone while others completed their classroom tasks. At times she asked to be allowed to take her Writing Journal home to read her story to her parents and sister. Her sense of pride and accomplishment was evident in the conscious efforts she made to be the best she could be and to work with purpose as she persevered in producing work that was interesting and accurate on the one hand as well as aesthetically eye-catching on the other hand. The only area in which she seemed to take a step back was Physical Education, probably and mainly due to her rather large frame compared to her classmates. However, this was not a major issue for her because, as she herself pointed out often in class, everyone is special and good at different things and activities and there were plenty of things and activities in which she knew she performed extremely well.

From our daily interactions, it was evident that on the one hand Mireille benefited greatly from her schooling experience and was being challenged and encouraged to flourish as a learner, whilst on the other hand it was also clear that her presence within this group of

learners enhanced the experience of other children in her class. Her contributions to our discussions were always interesting and rich in terms of knowledge and understanding, her diligence and her task commitment during group work or written tasks were more often than not also of a high level of performance, which ultimately provided a model for her classmates and thus raised the bar in terms of the level of work produced within a group or a class. Observing Mireille flourish and blossom as a learner very often motivated me to pursue in my efforts to provide a challenging but stress-free learning environment where interaction and active participation were encouraged and where learning was regarded to be optimal in situations where learners worked together, shared knowledge, asked questions and sought answers from and with each other, all along using technology as well as other resources and artifacts available in the classroom and beyond.

Our classroom blog was an important feature in our learning journey, particularly with regards to inviting children's families to be part of what was happening within our classroom walls. For Mireille and her family, the classroom blog proved to be an effective and essential link between the school and their home, giving them plenty of opportunities to revisit links used in class, share ideas, comment on activities carried out during the school day and make suggestions, thus participating actively in our learning experience. Both Mireille and her mother, in particular, frequently left comments on the posts in our blog, as well as shared links that were connected with a particular topic or lesson presented on our blog.

The positive feedback received from children's families, including Mireille's, was a true testimony of how our classroom blog was creating a healthy sense of belonging within the children's families that benefited and promoted the idea of our classroom turning into a 'community of learners' in the true sense of the word. Mireille would often enquire whether a particular video clip, website or photographs taken during an activity would be uploaded on our blog, very often even urging me (politely) to do this at my earliest convenience as if she could not wait to proudly show off what she had learnt or accomplished in class – indicating that for this student, the learning experience did not cease to exist with the school bell. Her insistence on uploading whatever was done in class on our classroom blog was also evidence of a generally heightened sense of interest and motivation, a collective effort to intensify and share knowledge, skills and attitudes developed during the school day, and which ultimately improved and enhanced the teaching and learning process.

As pointed out at the start of this narrative, apart from doing well in most subject areas, Mireille was also a good team player and used her good judgment and interpersonal skills to encourage others to work well in a group. Her classmates respected her and usually, when working within a team, Mireille would be able to stir her group in the right direction and manage to solve conflicts without the need for adult intervention. However, she also experienced moments of frustration and anger when she worked with groups that included children who somehow would not agree to pull the same rope but rather wanted to stubbornly do what they wanted to do without consulting others or without keeping the task objective in mind. These were moments when Mireille would feel dejected and at times give up after realising that she would not manage to convince the others to see why her point of view would help them accomplish the task given and reach their goal. These were also moments when she would vent her frustration and anger with an adult like myself or our Learning Support Assistant. However, I took such moments as opportunities to encourage Mireille to put herself in other people's shoes and realize that she might also be doing what her stubborn classmate was doing to her and that such difficult experience was an opportunity for her to learn to be more flexible and to accept that other children's contributions may be different but yet as valuable and interesting as her own. In the end, her determination to get a task accomplished always made her cooperate with others, at times not entirely happily, but nevertheless willing to see their task through to the end.

In a nutshell, Mireille, with her quiet demeanour but consistently active participation in class activities, was always at the centre of the teaching and learning process. She worked unswervingly hard throughout the scholastic year and was able to flourish as an effective and increasingly independent learner who relished in working both alone and with others. Notwithstanding her confidence in her ability to perform and reach high levels in her academic work, she never failed to work steadily and to be committed to give her utmost, even in trivial tasks such as practising her joined handwriting or decorating her work. As her teacher I could not but feel privileged to have her in my class and to feel compelled to persevere in creating meaningful learning experience that would help this talented and hard-working girl to blossom and grow in whichever direction her learning journey took her.

5.5.2 Mireille's Narrative

I felt very happy to be in Junior 2 with all my teachers and my friends. I liked my Junior 2 class because we did a lot of English work and English is my favourite subject. And Religion, I like talking about Jesus and we do that a lot during Religion. Being a Junior 2 student was a good experience. We did so many different things, fun things but we also learned plenty of new stuff. Open Day was one of the best days. Every class in the school did a lot of work on a town or village in Malta and our class chose to learn about Mdina which is the old city of our island. Our parents and other adults and children came to our class and we had a gigantic timeline which we used to ask questions to them in a quiz. It was so much fun asking people questions, especially our parents. Sometimes we had to tell them the answer because it was too tricky like when we asked them for dates or names of the Grand Master or information about important buildings and event. But then there were so many other things that I liked in Junior 2. I would not change anything at all because it was perfect for me!

One thing I truly enjoyed doing was learning how to join my letters. That made me feel proud of myself because I could join letters just like grown-ups do, just like my sister does. And my teachers say I write neatly when I join the letters. I've always wanted to write in joint and now I've learned how to do it. I need more practice of course but I can join many letters. Joining my letters makes me feel older. Books help me learn, they make me smart because when we read books, we learn about something we don't know about, we see the pictures and we figure things out. In our library corner we have a poster that says 'Books are some of our best friends' and I know this is true because they help us learn and tell us many beautiful stories. I read a lot of books, at home my sister and I have plenty of interesting ones. This year I became faster and better at reading chapter books like the Magic Tree House or books about fairies. I have a whole shelf with books at home and even at school I enjoy reading in the library corner when I'm done from my work or when I want some quiet time.

My teachers know a lot of things and they help us learn. They know a lot about Maltese, English and Maths. Ms Rosienne is also learning new stuff for her university and that is why she talked to us about her studies. Because to be an excellent teacher, you can never stop learning. And that is what she is doing. It is fun talking to her about what we like doing at school. She says that she wants us to share with her what we think and feel about school and about our work so that she can learn from this and tell other teachers and other schools about

it. This way, we will all be helping many children to have fun at school and to be smart and to learn.

I know some of my classmates are very clever like Nicole, Jeremy and Jeanine. When you ask them a question, they always know the correct answer. The teachers tell them they are smart even Ms Maureen, our Learning Support Assistant says that. I think I have a good brain too because I am good at Maltese, English and Maths. I am also smart in Creative Thinking and writing stories on my Writing Journal and also in Religion. But no one tells me that I'm smart, I just feel it because I work hard and I do my work correctly and the teachers tell us that it is not just important to have a brain, because we all do, but to make it work and to do our best. One of our classroom rules is to be the best we can be. I like that and it reminds me to work hard. I think I am very good at writing stuff. I love drawing things but I usually prefer to write a story to show my teachers what I know. Like when our teacher told us to work in groups and come up with a creative way of washing an elephant, I worked with Jeanine, Kyra and Emma and we decided to write a paragraph about how the elephant could be washed while the other groups preferred to draw a picture and label it. Or when we had to describe a lamb, my mum was impressed and asked the teacher whether I had really written the sentences alone! I like to use interesting words to describe something and I used lots of adjectives to make my sentences interesting.

I like working with my classmates. Kyra and Jeanine know a lot of stuff so it's good to work with them but I also enjoy working with other friends like Nicole, Kathryn, Emma and Kelly. Sometimes I work with Jeremy too. Then there's Faye. She realises stuff when we are doing something like she gets good ideas. I usually work well with others but sometimes I get upset if the other children in the group do not listen to my idea or ignore it. It hurts my feelings. But usually we talk about things and then we agree about what to do and everyone is happy then. Then there are times when it feels hard to work with others especially if they do not concentrate on what we have to do. Like when we had to sort flashcards into nouns, verbs and adjectives. I do not know what happened to me exactly but I panicked because the other two children did not know what to do and I felt lost. They were putting nouns with the adjectives, and mixing the verbs with the nouns. I felt confused during that activity. It is much better to work with children like Nicole, Kyra and Jeanine. Like that everyone knows what to do and works hard and we get the correct answers.

Many things that we did this year were fun. Show and Tell was fun. I like showing my work to the other children and I like telling them about my work. When I grow up I want to be a teacher so Show and Tell is a bit like that. I love stories, reading stories and listening to our teachers telling us stories. We did a lot of projects and sometimes we made our own lap books about these projects. I really enjoy craft especially sticking and gluing stuff and cutting and pasting. I use lots of colours to decorate my work and I always feel proud when I am careful in my work. My teachers are always impressed with my colouring. At times I hurt my finger when I colour because I like to make sure there is no empty space that is not coloured and I love my pictures when they have bright colours. I love English especially working with the dictionary. When I look up words to check what they mean or to learn how they are spelt, it feels like I am a big girl looking for stuff in a dictionary. This makes me feel smart. When I am ready from my work, I like to write in my Writing Journal. The teacher writes three titles every week on the side of the whiteboard and I choose one and write about it. Sometimes I even manage to write about the three titles because I really enjoy writing and it comes easy to me. One time, we watched a video clip about Julia Donaldson, the famous author and you know what? She brought her own Writing Journal with her and showed everyone that even she writes her ideas down and includes many drafts before she feels happy with her story.

I enjoy our experiments during science especially when we are working in a group and discovering things about science like when we were learning about floating and sinking or about the water cycle. The song was so clever, it told us all about the different types of clouds, and how the water cycle works. One time an archaeologist came to our class and she brought old stuff with her to explain to us about her work. She is the aunty of Emma who is in my class. She works in a museum and I want to go and visit her one day because she said there is a special room for kids to learn more about digging for stuff and finding things out about the old times.

I prefer to work with my classmates or with a partner. I do not like working on my own that much. We learn more when we work together because you put two or three or four brains together so you learn more things from each other. Like my friend knows one thing, and I know something else and my other friend knows another thing so we put these ideas together and we all learn so much more than when we work alone. It is good that we get to work with different children, sometimes I learn stuff from them and sometimes I teach them something

they did not know or remind them what we have to do. One thing that was super nice this year was our Christmas play. The girls were she-vikings or goddesses and it was so much fun. I had a special costume with gold trimmings and peach design. I felt very pretty in this dress. Junior 2 was indeed a lot of fun and I was very happy in this class. I liked everything that we did at school!

5.6 Jeremy's Story

5.6.1 Through the teacher's eyes

One of the pupils who undoubtedly left an important mark on my professional practice was Jeremy, who, with his inquisitive mind, enthusiastic attitude and need for more challenging learning opportunities inspired me to be always on the lookout for creative ways to approach a topic or present a concept. Jeremy, the third son out of four siblings, came from a family of passionate readers and book-lovers who were also always keen to seek new knowledge and to delve deep into anything that interested them. As a relatively large family for today's standards, the children in this household were brought up with an awareness of the fact that their actions and attitudes effected the rest of their family. This upbringing seemed to have an impact on Jeremy's ability to empathise with others, to think and act in terms of his place within the group or classroom and to develop good interpersonal skills that made him popular with his peers.

From the very first day of the scholastic year, Jeremy headed straight into the core of our learning community and, without batting an eye, took a prominent role in our learning adventure. Jeremy immersed himself fully and completely into each activity that happened within our classroom walls, approaching each event or task as an opportunity for him to share his vast general knowledge with his peers and to also extend and build on this knowledge. He was definitely confident about his abilities and talked openly about his efforts to improve his skills and knowledge in different areas. It felt as if this was his mission in life – to grow and develop into an independent and skilled learner and to share and increase his vast knowledge, whilst learning from and with other children in his class. Every morning, he would enter our classroom and enthusiastically share something he has figured out or discovered, and many times he was also very willing to suggest routes the class could take to explore a particular topic or area we would currently be working on.

Jeremy liked to mention his family's experience in Scotland when his father used to work for a while as a doctor there. He seemed to have fond memories of his earlier years there and regularly referred to episodes or anecdotes from their life in Scotland as well as their long journey back to Malta. Because of their stay in Scotland, English was Jeremy's first language and he was notably advanced in both spoken and written language development. Jeremy possessed a wide and varied vocabulary and he seemed to find pleasure in playing with words, using new vocabulary in different contexts. He had a natural way of expressing his thoughts and ideas and his speech gave the impression of effortless richness too. I must say that the ease with which he shared complex thoughts, feelings and ideas never failed to amaze me, considering his tender age. Jeremy was nevertheless aware of his limitations in expressing himself in the Maltese language and he regularly emphasised the fact that he wanted to work hard this year to learn Maltese well and to be able to use it with his friends. I had no doubts about his ability to reach this goal and I was confident that with the right coaching and the right environment, Jeremy would quickly be able to transfer his advanced English language skills to Maltese.

One important point to mention is Jeremy's confidence to speak his mind. His facility and ease with words certainly played a role in this but I felt that his flair for commenting, arguing, criticising and voicing his ideas and thoughts evidently came from a deep-seated feeling of self-assurance and a belief that his voice mattered and that it was fine to agree or disagree with others, as long as one did this respectfully. Very often, Jeremy would engage in discussions on issues around fairness, justice, respect and trust and would do this with conviction and passion. He always gave me the impression of him growing up to be an influential, inspiring but unconventional politician or activist. It was indeed a pleasure to observe such a young boy confidently arguing in favour or against an issue, trying to resolve conflicts by analysing the situation and coming up with various solutions and options. During such moments of passionate conversations, I could sense an intertwining of both his interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences – a meeting between his ability to relate with others, to interact effectively, to empathise or critically question someone's actions or thoughts on the one hand and a propensity for looking inward and being in touch with his emotions and his thoughts to then be able to express them and share them with others.

One interesting event upon which I, as a teacher-researcher, have dedicated some reflection to was the day when my research study was introduced to the children in my class. Jeremy instantly understood what I was talking about, himself having experienced a similar situation when he participated in his own mother's research study, who in turn had just completed her studies at Masters' level. During the children's information session, Jeremy as usual was very active and happy to comment, pass a judgment or explain a concept to his classmates as an 'expert' who had already experienced a similar event. However, towards the end of the session, at the point when I asked the children to sign their names if they wished to be part of this study in an effort to involve them in this decision (issues on children's ability to assent or give consent are tackled in Chapter 3 of this thesis), I experienced the shock of my life when Jeremy decided not to be part of this. Fortunately, he changed his mind by the end of the session, but nevertheless his first reaction could not be left unnoticed or undocumented. The following excerpt taken from my Reflective Journal is self-explanatory:

"Now, I'd like to dedicate a paragraph to my feelings about Jeremy's adamant refusal to take part. As soon as he said it, I felt honestly shocked because he is, in my eyes, a very particular child with a brilliant and creative mind who keeps me always on my toes and who is always on my mind when I'm planning my sessions. As a researcher, I would have loved to document his responses, his learning journey, his story. But he, out of all children, had straight away refused to be part of this – I wondered why, and thought that perhaps he'd had enough already of his mother studying – so this 'study' reminded him of the time his mum spent on the computer or perhaps he hadn't enjoyed his role in her study for the assignment. My reaction was to say that it was fine and that should he change his mind, he just had to tell me – anytime during the year. I also looked at our Junior School Director, who was observing the scene – and I realised that she had had my same reaction from the look she gave me. So here again, for the umpteenth time, Jeremy had decided to keep me on my toes. The fact that I would have to leave him out of my documentation and reflections made me feel somewhat disappointed but then realised that he'd still be in my class and although I wouldn't be including him as a participant, he'd still be undoubtedly influencing my choice of pedagogy, my plan of action and my practice as he's been doing before.

Then, out of the blues, as we concluded the session and the children started to move freely around the room to get ready for the next activity, he came up to me and said: "Ms Rosienne, I changed my mind. I do want to take part." I was switching off my computer (I had switched it on to audio record the session so that I could go back to it later) – and I stopped, looked at Jeremy and said "Are you sure about this Jeremy? You know it's ok not to take part in this, do you?" And he said "Yes, I do but I still wish to do it." And I asked the reason behind him changing his mind. To which he replied "I was thinking that when you tell other teachers about what we like and what we enjoy doing in class, I want them to know that I am very interested in space and I want them to know the things I like doing at school." He was referring to a comment I've made during the explanation when I had said that I wish to share my findings with other teachers and administrators in this school and outside this school to make classrooms a better place for learning for them and for other children. Jeremy had realised that, although in this classroom, I knew what he liked doing and therefore he didn't need me to write about it, but things might be different in other classrooms with other teachers so better be on the safe side. I gave him his information sheet back and he changed the 'no' into a 'yes'. And I felt relieved!"

(taken from my Reflective Journal, entitled 'I changed my mind ... I do want to take part!', dated 30th November 2011)

Apart from his advanced language skills as well as his ability to interact effectively with peers and adults, Jeremy also harboured an interest for science and general knowledge. His excellent memory facilitated his sharing of this knowledge with others and he was held in high esteem amongst his peers. As a matter of fact, some of them referred to him as a 'scientist', a label which I learned throughout the year that in six year olds' minds meant that, for them, Jeremy (or whoever warranted such a title) was extremely smart, knowledgeable and thus was to be admired. Whenever a scientific or a general knowledge topic was introduced or explored, Jeremy would not only participate actively in the discussion, and work steadily and with motivation throughout the tasks assigned to him or his group, but he would then go home, research more on the topic and come back with either an object, a book, a website link or whatever he feels would help to extend our exploration of that topic. Other children would choose him to work with them for group activities, evidently aware of his work ethics and vast knowledge.

Jeremy was always a first choice for many peers when asked to choose classmates to work with. The reasons behind his popularity can be said to be multi-fold. Apart from his high ability and aptitude to reach high levels of performance in many areas, he was also rather fair and just when working with others, and he also had the instinct to encourage others to use their talents to enhance the quality of their collective work and products. His artistic talent was also not to be ignored and his peers usually chose him to help them in their drawings or creative projects. Contrary to most of his peers who at six years of age were still self-centred and would highlight or focus only on their own input in a particular project, Jeremy would always point out his own contribution but also those of others, emphasising each individual's role in the final product.

Having such a talented and motivated learner in my class was definitely a privilege in many ways and a chance for me to strive to make a difference in his learning trajectory by creating as many meaningful and relevant occasions that would quench his thirst for more knowledge and for challenge. The downfall for this was that there were sessions or days when I did not manage to meet his needs (and those of other children who required a more challenging curriculum) and thus felt that I may have failed him and others like him. At times I felt that the pressures of teaching in a mixed-ability class and the demands of working in a very busy school environment that increasingly organised activities that would take away our classroom

learning time had an adverse impact on the quality of the activities that were presented during particular days.

To make up for these moments of overwhelmingly busy school days, I tried to use these out-of-classroom time events as learning opportunities, presenting them as a challenge as well as assigning different responsibilities to different children, thus enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and ownership of what was going on around our school. Within the classroom walls, I also sought to create areas or activities that did not require my attention or input so that children who, like Jeremy, were early finishers, would be able to choose from various activities or projects that interest them or that were in one way or another connected with our theme. A number of tools such as our computers, our reference books like dictionaries or the children's own index books, our library area and the resources placed at an accessible level were always at their disposal. The children were instructed to make use of certain resources and tools but also learned that it was their responsibility to put everything in its place for others to find next time. This helped reduce the pressures I occasionally felt to constantly be on my toes and provide challenge and interesting work to children like Jeremy.

Needless to say, when weighing the pluses and minuses of teaching a mixed-ability group, it is a teacher's attitude and willingness to turn every difficulty into an opportunity for deep and meaningful learning that will ultimately result in the success or failure of one's practice. It is a teacher's ability to constantly come up with creative and varied ways of facilitating children's learning, of being aware and planning for different aptitudes, talents, learning styles and interests. It is a teacher's inclination to celebrate rather than fear diversity and to be resourceful and practical in supporting children who struggle in the classroom whilst providing for the needs of those who are able to reach high levels of performance. It is also a teacher's propensity to create the right environment where children understand that everybody's contribution is valuable and that talent and ability are linked to particular situations and that learning will not only happen but also be multiplied if interaction and participation in different groups is encouraged. Over the scholastic year, I made the following reflection: if placed with a group of likewise talented and highly able learners, Jeremy might most likely move at a faster pace or reach even higher levels of performance in certain areas of endeavour. But I also felt that he would miss out on priceless opportunities for him to develop his interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as he negotiated his way to include and be

included in different groups within the classroom, groups that were created on the basis of friendship, ability, interests, talents and other numerous configurations. As I conclude this narrative, I cannot but feel in awe of the plenitude of lessons on education and life in general an educator learns in her interactions with individual young learners – like many of his classmates as well as previous and future pupils, Jeremy had enabled me to continue growing professionally as well as personally.

5.6.2 Jeremy's Narrative

You know, I must say I feel very happy about the year that's just ending but at the same time I know I am going to miss being in Junior 2 so much. I am very fond of this experience because I enjoyed it very much. So to make up for this, I found a way to still enjoy it when I'm at home during the holidays. Let me explain to you. So, when I play games with my brothers and with my sister I do the following – I will pretend that I am a seven year old student in a Junior 2 class. Yes, that's what I'm going to do, that's what! I will keep pretending I am still a student in Junior 2, that's what I'll do.

Junior 2 was great fun. I liked doing all the crafts but not only that. I liked everything we did. I mostly am happy and proud that I improved so much my Maltese. If I had to give it a number out of ten, I would definitely give it a ten because I enjoyed it so much. However I would change one thing – I would have more art lessons, not only once a day but two art lessons a day. I learn a lot when I'm drawing or creating so I think Ms Sue should let us have more art in our school day.

I learned so many new things. I learned about nouns, pronouns, adverbs, root verbs and adjectives for English. I thoroughly enjoyed doing Mathematics and Art, yes I cannot forget about Art and Craft! I enjoyed our topics like Our Island Home because I love learning about places, especially about our country, Malta. Learning about Space and Dinosaurs was also fun. In fact, that last topic about Dinosaurs gave me a hobby. It made me discover how much I love dinosaurs and now I want to find time to play with an orange dinosaur I have at home.

Well, this year there were some very smart children in my class. Giorgio must be one of the cleverest children in my class. I think he is very smart and he's also a good friend of mine. Giorgio is special and I like working with him. He is a great artist and he works hard in class. Then there's Deyan. Some time ago he was sitting on my table and I noticed that he worked

really well, that he produced smart work. Jeanine is good at nouns, verbs and anything that has to do with grammar. She can spot them out very easily and she enjoys doing that. Mireille is very much like Jeanine. She works hard and is smart. There's one more who is also a very good student – Nicole. I find her very smart especially about things around space. She love science and knows a lot of stuff about different science topics.

My friends sometimes say that I am a smart boy. Once at my party Giorgio said to me 'You are the smartest person in this class'. Another time Deyan was sitting at my table and he said 'You are a really smart guy!' All my teachers tell me that I am good at their subjects, even the Maltese teachers says that. In fact I've improved a lot in the language. I am much better to speak Maltese than I was before Junior 2. Only the PE teacher does not tell me that I am good at PE – maybe she is right because I am not a very fast athlete. I wish I were faster and better especially at football. I must say I feel very proud of myself when someone likes my work or tells me that I did well or that I am smart. It is nice for others to see how hard you've been working. It gives you a nice warm feeling inside. I also like to tell others that I like their work or that I think they are smart. This makes my friends feel happy and proud of themselves too.

I do quite well in most subjects. I find English grammar quite easy and my mathematics teacher will surely confirm that I am also very good with numbers. Science is also an area that I love as well as Creative Thinking. I enjoy working on our projects and learning about space, about our island home. I have quite a lot of knowledge about places since I travel a lot with my family. I go abroad about twice yearly and during the Carnival holidays I usually go to Gozo. This year we're going to Scotland beside Gozo. I love it when we talk about things we already know and when we share our knowledge with others during class discussions. Like that time when our teacher drew a mind map on a chart with the word 'Deserts' in the middle. We were working on the theme of 'Habitats' during that term and she wanted to know what we already knew before deciding what to teach us. The mind map grew and grew and by the end of the session, we were all surprised by how much we already knew about Deserts! We call this 'brainstorming' like there's a storm in our brain with all the ideas that we share but mind maps help us to organise our thinking using words, pictures and different colours. Using mind maps makes me feel smart and learning about different topics too. I remember that when we had our Show and Tell for the topic 'Habitats' I brought to school an exotic fruit that does not usually grow in Malta and I talked to my friends about it, then let them taste it. Well,

now I will try to grow one in my garden as I kept two seeds and I will plant them and see if it can grow in Malta.

I enjoy working with other children. Jeanine would make a great partner – she is very smart and she gets along with me. I like that about her. I would also work with Mireille, Giorgio and Deyan because they are smart too. We all get along and the good thing about that is that if you get along you'll probably learn more from each other because you don't waste time arguing or bossing each other around. If I had to choose I would definitely prefer to work with a group of children or with a partner but not alone. Working alone is not much fun and anyway when you work with someone else you can help one another and learn stuff from each other.

Looking back, I must say I enjoyed doing loads of stuff during this year especially the crafts – that is my hobby so I like that a lot. Some of the best things we did were the projects like Spots and Stripes where we did some research about spots and stripes in the animal kingdom and all around us, then I thoroughly enjoyed our Christmas play called Emma the Red which was brilliant. Because I am a fast learner and I usually get my work done rather quickly, at times I write stories on my Writing Journal when I finish the class work – that is something I am good at and that I really enjoy doing – I would get bored waiting for the others to finish their work. I read loads of books and have plenty of favourite authors – I like it when the teachers use books to start a topic or to teach us something. One day, I remember very clearly, the teacher told us a sad story about Lizzie who was a girl whose woollen elephant got unravelled. It was a sad story at first and I felt like crying but then her Granny saved the day because she could knit Lizzie's elephant back to life! I still remember how curious I was when the teacher showed us her knitting needles and some grey wool before telling us the story and how we all figured out what the word 'unravelled' meant when she asked Jacob to pull the string so we understand. It is good when we listen to stories in class because stories can be loads of fun and they also teach us a lot of interesting things.

Sometimes I bring my own books and the teacher uses them in class and I feel happy when I see that my friends like the same authors as me. I also enjoyed working on our literacy booklets during English and I had fun experimenting with my friends during Science. Music and songs are fun and we usually use them to learn about different things like English or Science. The teachers then puts the link to these songs on our classroom blog and we can then

watch them at home with our families. We made some colourful lap books when we worked on our projects. As you can see, we did lots of things in Junior 2 and we learned so many new stuff. Being a Junior 2 student was a lovely experience and as I said already I will surely miss it a lot.

5.7 Nicole's Story

5.7.1 Through the teacher's eyes

It took me quite a while to figure Nicole out ... she entered my class with the presence and stamina of a little warrior who was determined, confident and highly focused. Her deep, booming voice coupled with her zero tolerance for babyish behaviour from her peers made her presence felt. She developed a number of new friendships but also struggled with maintaining some of her previous ones, particularly with girls of similarly strong personality. She was different from other pupils in my class in terms of attitude towards school and life in general. At times it seemed that she was too mature, way beyond her years and her behaviour and interaction with others reflected a tendency to take things too seriously, unable to make a light moment out of a tricky or funny situation. This created some difficulties in her relationships but over the year, she also learned to empathise more with others and be flexible and open to different views, particularly when dealing with strong-minded, stubborn girls her age. Usually, at this age, my pupils would warm up to me fairly quickly and it is considered normal and acceptable for girls to be affectionate with their teachers, hugging and seeking close contact with us. However, Nicole preferred to keep a distance and only way into the first term did she start to relax more in my presence and to trust me with her thoughts and emotions.

Nicole had a sharp and alert mind. She not only answered questions during our discussions and explanations but also asked her own questions to clarify a matter or to delve deeper into a particular concept. She revelled in trying to solve puzzles or little 'mysteries', and she prided herself in being considered to be a budding scientist who was always investigating, experimenting and finding out about the world around her. She possessed a vast knowledge of scientific notions and she was an active participant during our science sessions. She usually enjoyed experiments especially when encouraged to predict and observe before explaining a phenomenon. During one particular session which focused on seeds and plants, for instance, Nicole commented on the fact that one is not required to 'become' a scientist if he or she

already was one. Here she was reacting to a comment that I passed as I introduced a task that was meant to be carried out in small groups. I had asked them to 'think like scientists', encouraging them to come up with possible ways of finding out the right conditions for sunflower seeds to grow into beautiful flowers. These type of open-ended activities provided Nicole and other children with an inclination for exploration and investigation with an opportunity to take ownership of the activity and rather than follow a predetermined set of instructions, take different routes to reach the same objective. Her confidence in her 'expertise' as a budding scientist made her want to take a central place during our science sessions, usually referring to knowledge that episodes where she had discussed or read something in one of her fact books together with either one of her parents.

Nicole's apparently hard shell began to mellow by time. Her initial cold, defensive and rather stern demeanour was replaced by a bubblier, friendlier attitude which enabled her to be more fully integrated within our classroom and to extend her circle of friends. As the year went by, I noticed that she would make a conscious effort to care for children who required help and assistance. She would also willingly and purposefully comfort those who were upset for one reason or another. It took a while for me to realise that Nicole was used to taking care of others, specifically her younger sister who required special attention due to a physical disability. She often mentioned her younger sister and spoke about her fondly, just like a big sister is expected to. The only time she mentioned her physical condition was when the whole class had been invited to watch a show at a nearby school that was attended by children with severe disabilities and as we prepared them for this performance, Nicole pointed out that her sister at times attended that school. That same day, Nicole's group of friends seemed to make a special effort to show their care and their affection towards her – as only children do, they had some questions for her which she answered very openly and happily, but most of all, this episode and revelation gained Nicole more respect and understanding amongst her classmates.

Apart from her vast scientific and general knowledge coupled with her excellent memory and ability to work steadily through a given task, Nicole was also a brilliant speller, a confident public speaker of great eloquence and a creative thinker. She was also developing outstanding writing skills which were evident during our creative writing sessions. Being a true bilingual, Nicole's language skills in both English and Maltese were developing at a fast

rate and over the year, Nicole demonstrated an aptitude for both spoken and written language ability. Just like with science, Nicole preferred to find things out for herself. For instance, every week a new sound or letter pattern would usually be introduced during our English Spelling session. Working with this group, I realised that challenge had to be introduced even in what could be considered and dealt with as a straightforward session to gain and maintain the children's interest and motivation – rather than give them the list of words and discussing the new sound, I would encourage students to discover or uncover the mystery sound, looking for similarities and differences in letter patterns between words (presented either as individual words or within a context), figuring out the rule behind a particular sound and sharing it with others. At times they were encouraged to use the set of words and build a short story, including all of these words. Other times, I would ask the children to look words up in a dictionary and discover their meanings or use their reference books to come up with as many words that had that same letter pattern as they could.

Nicole's strong character and confidence were accentuated during our Drama sessions. Drama was integrated into most of the subject areas I taught this group since they seemed to have a particular liking for this type of activity and also because it seemed to help them master concepts and demonstrate their understanding of what had been covered in class. With the passing of the time, I learned to appreciate the value of linking and including Drama in my teaching repertoire as I observed that using role-play, puppet shows and varied theatrical activities created opportunities for children to discover and use their team work skills, leadership ability, creative thinking, movement, dance, and their sense of the aesthetic amongst many other skills and attitudes. The impact on the children's level of motivation was very positive and this encouraged me to keep using Drama in the teaching and learning process. Nicole usually took a main role in our plays, and was a first choice for a prominent role by her classmates. She was confident, eloquent, fluent and sharp and was able to fully immerse herself in her characters. Nicole also enjoyed directing apart from acting and also used her creative abilities to improvise when it came to costume design or development of a character act. The enthusiasm and smiles experienced during these sessions were not to be discarded or ignored, and Nicole was definitely one of those students who thoroughly enjoyed such occasions.

Being an all-rounder, Nicole seemed to be developing well in all subject areas that I taught her. Her emerging abilities were most evident during activities and sessions where she worked with others, aiming to reach a goal but at the same time being encouraged and allowed to explore, experiment and try different ways of working towards that target or objective. Very often, she expressed her preference for 'hard work' and her dislike for 'easy tasks'. She wanted to learn new things and she particularly appreciated methods used during our Creative Thinking sessions where children were encouraged to think critically, to work through a project in small groups, moving from one stage of the TASC wheel to another (a framework used to help children focus on different steps they are to take to work effectively on a project) together as a group but independently from the class teacher. Nicole loved it when she was given choices rather than told exactly what to do or how to proceed through a given task. For her, worksheets and simple written exercises were a waste of time as there was no challenge in such activities and she would rather work hard to accomplish a task than fill in the blanks or something of the sort. She could be organised and was able to use mind-mapping to brainstorm and organise her thoughts, but she was also creative in both her thinking and presentation and a lateral thinker.

The questions Nicole sometimes asked blew me away and her approach and attitude to our learning experience made me wish to be able to show other teachers, parents and educators that this is why I loved teaching the early years, this is why I did not feel that I was wasting my talents by working with young children (as people at times said to me), this is why I felt that an early years teacher had a very important role to play in children's lives. Young learners come to our classrooms with an open mind, with potential and abilities that are still emerging, with plenty of expectations for their own learning and development. As teachers and educators, we may simply follow the curriculum guidelines, making sure that each concept for each subject area we teach is delivered. But we can also make a conscious effort to do all of this whilst creating the right environment where children not only acquire the skills and attitudes required for them to progress from one scholastic year to the next, but help them uncover their true potential, discover a passion for learning and new knowledge, and to work alone or with others to enthusiastically find out about the world. These are the kind of thoughts and reflections that Nicole and young learners like her inspired and triggered in my mind as an educator in a mixed-ability classroom. These are the experiences and encounters

that taught me to be more open and flexible in my approach to teaching young children. These are the little ‘success stories’ that fuelled my ambition and need to reach each and every individual that entered my classroom walls. This is the reason behind my insistence and responsibility to continually provide learning opportunities that leave a positive impact on their experience of schooling and their identities. In my eyes, Nicole was one of my little ‘success stories’ and by the end of the year I felt that I had managed to partly or more fully inspire her to be the best she could be and to be happy and proud about who she was growing to be.

5.7.2 Nicole’s Narrative

I cannot believe we are at the end of Junior 2. I feel excited about growing up. I feel happy that I am growing up and that I am going to Junior 3. I liked being in Junior 2 – it was fun especially the outings. You learn a lot when you are inside the classroom and the teachers are teaching you. But you don’t only learn like that – you don’t learn only from the teachers. You can learn by going on outings like we did when we went to the Bird Park. There we learned so much about the birds and other animals that we saw there. And it was also lots of fun. I always feel excited when the teachers say we have an outing. I usually cannot wait till the day of the outing and I keep asking my mum or my teacher how many more days until we go!

I enjoyed doing many things in Junior 2 and I was almost never bored or unhappy. We learned a lot of fun things, interesting topics in class and we worked on projects, talked about exciting stuff and learned so much. I do not even remember one thing that I did not like in Junior 2. It is hard to try and remember a bad thing – because most of the things were fun and because I have a lot of nice memories, I forget about the bad ones. It seems that I can only remember the good times – like that time we went to watch the movie about the girl at St James Cavalier in Valletta. In Junior 2 we did many things and we were getting ready to move up to Junior 3 so we learned plenty of new stuff. I thoroughly enjoyed learning new things about science which is my favourite subject. I like it when we do hard work because hard things will be new to us and I prefer to learn new things that I had never learned before than repeating things I already know. That makes me feel excited to know something new and smart too. I remember what a lot of fun I had when we learned about the weather and we used a puppet to learn about it. I also like learning new things about dinosaurs – I even managed to build a mind map on the computer about them. We use mind maps a lot in class – when we start a topic

for example so that we show the teacher what we already know about it. Then sometimes we construct a mind map to show all that we have learned about the topic. I like using mind maps. I also learn when we create books like lap books about an interesting topic. When we were learning about Habitats, we made one called Spots and Stripes and our lap books looks so colourful and with lots of patterns when the teacher put them up on the big wall outside our classroom. Looking at our work every time we walk to class with our parents in the morning makes me feel proud especially when I see the look of surprise on Mummy's face as she finds mine on the wall! I like making her proud of me, I really do!

All the children in my class are very smart. All of them are good at something. Some are very good at everything too but everyone is clever because everyone can learn new things. I really feel that most of my friends are very smart, because each one of us is good at different things. Jeremy, I know he's really smart because I listen to him when he starts talking about something interesting – I enjoy listening to what he has to say, I learn a lot from him too. I've known him since Junior 1 so I know a lot about him. Then there's my friend Mireille who's good at many things but mostly at Maltese because she can speak it and write it very well and because she goes to Maltese Catechism so she has friends who speak Maltese. Kelly is smart too – once she made this Show and Tell about nature and she was like a teacher for us and we learned many things about nature because she could explain very well. I can read my big fat book, the chapter books, and I think that this makes me smart too. When you read the big books you learn more, you learn about the world. I like reading fact books, sometimes I read them to my sister when she comes in my bed. Making things can make you smarter – like once I was trying to make a kite with my nannu [grandpa] but it couldn't work at first, it kept coming down so my nannu got more bamboo until we managed to get the kite up. That day I learned things about flying and about bamboo and kite paper. We needed to make sure the kite was light enough so it flies.

I am good at a lot of things like science. Science is fun and sometimes I make pictures of what I like so once I made a portrait of a scientist and I enjoyed that a lot. I gave this portrait to my mummy and she got a fright – it was really funny! He was a scary scientist and he was making an experiment. I still remember how much I laughed when I gave it to her. It's nice to make mummy smile because she has a nice smile and when she smiles I know that she is happy. Once I made a portrait of a chef and she was crying tears of joy and telling me 'It's beautiful!!!'

The scientist was a boy and the chef was a girl. But scientists could be girls too and chefs could be boys as well.

I like it when someone tells me that I am clever or that they are proud of me – like that I know people are noticing that I am learning a lot of new things and that is important for me because I know I work hard to do well. I enjoy Maths because I like working with numbers and when I learn new words in Maltese, I feel smart because there are lots of Maltese words I still do not know. Creative thinking is a really interesting lesson because during this lesson you think and do something creative. It is a bit like building something with your Meccano, you learn step by step, you follow instructions and you can build a car or an elephant. Once we listened to a story about an elephant and some blind men and that was good because it made us think and talk about the story. Then I went home and showed it to mummy because the teacher put the video of the story on our classroom blog. That is fun, when I can go home and show mummy the new things we do at school because there is everything on the blog – sometimes I play games that the teachers put on our blog, sometimes I read the stories on the computer or watch a video there or listen to songs that we use to learn like that song about the water cycle. That was so funny because there was a man who was so scared during the thunderstorm he hid in a bin in the street!!! We really laughed in class and we kept asking the teacher to listen to it over and over again.

I work well on my own but I also enjoy working with other children like Jeremy, Thomas, Jeanine and Giorgio. I like working with them because they can draw well, they can do different things so we learn together and from each other when we work in a group. When I work with one partner, I really like working with Emma. I really like her, she is a good friend and we do very nice things together and can decorate our pictures really creatively. Sometimes Emma likes to draw stick figures but then other times she draws normal figures.

I think that the best thing this year was that film we watched during the Children's Arts Festival in Valletta. There was something about that film with the girl and the thief that I really liked. It was a really nice movie and it was the first time I went to watch a film with my school friends. It is difficult for me to choose the best things that we did because I really loved doing different ones like show and tell, writing stories, the Christmas show, our lap books and project, my Writing Journal ... everything. Maybe I only liked writing in my literacy booklet a bit less than

the other things because I prefer creative things and hard things and the literacy booklet is easy for me. But I really enjoy doing different and new things in Junior 2. Now I feel ready to move up to Junior 3 because I learned everything I had to learn in Junior 2. I feel proud of myself. It is a good feeling and it makes me happy.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an intertwined narrative constructed from the data collected during the research study which was in turn refashioned to offer two distinct but interconnected stories - one through the eyes of the participant teacher-researcher and a subsequent one told through the voices of each of the six children that took part in the study. This resulted in a series of interpreted narratives that sought to capture each participant's learner identity and perceptions of schooling, learning and ability. The analysis and interpretation of these narratives together with the process and approaches that were adopted to make sense of the intertwined narratives will be put forward and discussed in great detail in Chapter Six.

6 Analysis and Interpretation: An Uncovering of a Teacher's Pedagogy and Practice

6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to first provide a clear picture of the process involved in making meaning and interpreting the narratives depicted in the previous chapter, reflecting on participants' voices as they shared their constructions of ability, identity and various aspects of their schooling and life experiences. Subsequently, it also analyses the emerging themes in depth and in breadth as a teacher's pedagogy and practice is uncovered and presented. Following the discussion of the themes, each of the three research questions posed at the start of this narrative inquiry will also be addressed.

Due to the qualitative and interpretative nature of this study, it was felt that the data collected was to be presented in the form of narratives, as seen in chapter five. Two voices were used to make sense of the various data gathered during the study, highlighting the interplay between a teacher and her pupils as they made sense of the teaching and learning process, the former striving to understand and meet the needs of each individual capable learner under her care, whilst the latter were constructing and sharing ideas, thoughts and feelings about notions that affect their schooling experience.

As previously explained, the first narrative is an interpretation of each child's profile and schooling experience presented through the teacher-researcher's eyes. This was in turn built and pieced together using elements from the various data in order to construct and present an interpreted narrative for each participant. With regards to each child's narrative, this was largely refashioned out of the transcripts of the conversational interviews held with each individual participant although some anecdotes taken from other data sources were also include to explain a thought or an idea further.

This chapter attempts to bring further meaning and analysis to the questions asked at the beginning of the study by returning to the original data and extrapolating the emerging themes in an effort to understand children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling as identities are formulated and a teacher's pedagogy and practice are uncovered. In this manner, the narratives presented in the previous chapter as well as the emerging themes

discussed in great depth below are merged together to bring some light as well as a deeper understanding of the area being explored.

6.2 Making Meaning of Data

The primary goal of this research study is to uncover an early years' teacher's pedagogy and practice with a particular focus on her role in creating learning environments that are conducive to both learning as well as the development of emerging abilities and talents in young able children. Most importantly, her pupils' own constructions of ability, learning and schooling comprise an essential element in the process of turning field texts into research texts in the form of 'interpreted narratives' as well as in the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riesmann, 1993).

To use the metaphor of a mirror, it is as if I, as the teacher-researcher in this study, am looking into a mirror where I see a replaying of the daily interactions and connections that take place in my early years classroom with a group of six to seven years old learners, and through such activity, my own professional identity, practice and pedagogical choices are being reflected back to me as I ponder deeply about issues that challenge my professional mind, educational concerns that are also close to my heart as a teacher of young children who is highly aware of my role in motivating pupils, bringing out their potential and emerging abilities as positive learner identities are developed.

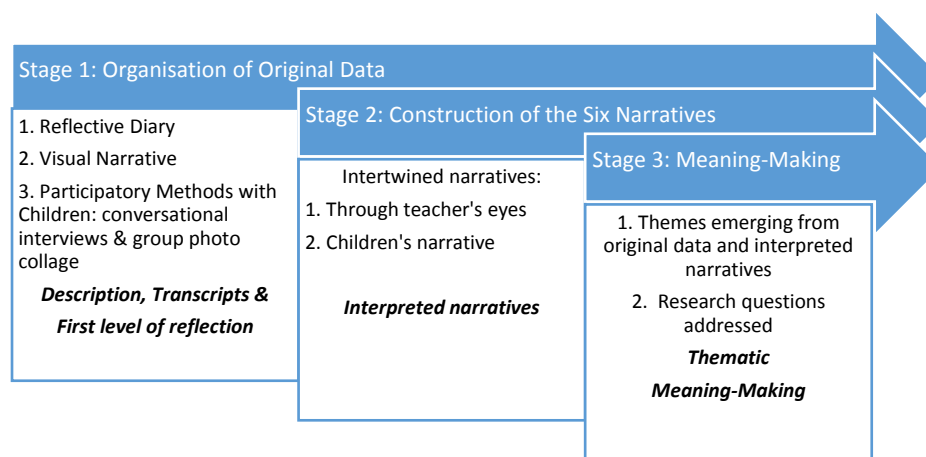
In this study, experience is represented through the telling of stories in the form of narratives. Although I have tried to be ethical (Richardson, 2005) and faithful in my representations (Riesman, 1993), it is important to point out that inevitably, because the narratives are my interpretations of what the participants were saying and doing, they are 'interpreted narratives'. As a teacher-researcher, I tell my own story alongside the stories of the pupils in my class, and in so doing I provide an interwoven picture of the inner reality of an early years classroom to the outside world, inviting others to have a glimpse of our interactions and everyday classroom occurrences. This leads to an 'interlocking of understandings' (Lieblich et al., 1998).

As pointed out by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), for narrative inquirers, the process of turning raw data into field texts and then into research texts is never a straightforward, linear one. It is a process that is characterised by negotiation, layered in complex ways as the

researchers go back and forth within and across different sets of data to bring meaning to the stories being told and to ultimately understand and make sense of the area being explored. In many ways, this is how this study was carried out, in the sense that there was often plenty of negotiation going on as the inquiry began to unfold, its research focus refined, participants selected, data gathered, meaning-making process initiated, interpreted narratives constructed and further meaning sought through a deeper analysis and interpretation as themes emerged and research questions were addressed. The figure below gives a visual representation of this complex task.

As can be seen in Figure 6.1, during the first stage, the original data was gathered and organised in the following way: the **reflective diary** comprised of a collection of stories telling the everyday life of the participants within an early years' classroom with margin notes at the side, the **visual narrative** consisted of a series of photographs that added colour to the individual stories told in the reflective diary and served as a memory aide for me as I looked back at significant events and occurrences over the year, the **conversational interviews** held with each of the six participants which in turn were audio-recorded and later transcribed and, lastly, the **group photo collage activity** that was also audio-recorded and transcribed.

Figure 6.1 Process of Meaning-making



In the second stage, the different sets of original data were read several times (i.e. stories in the reflective diary, descriptions of the visual narrative and transcriptions of the conversational interviews and the group activity) and the audio recordings were also listened to over and over again. As I read through the raw data and listened to the audio-recordings

of my conversations with the participants, it began to occur to me that what was important was not only the content of what was being said, but also how the participants' views, knowledge and understanding of matters that concern their schooling experience were being expressed, as well as the relationships behind these interactions – the more I went over the data, the more it became evident and pressing for me to be able to bring out the two voices - the voice of the teacher who had her own knowledge, values, attitudes and opinions to share but also the children's very own voices. At this point in time, there were a number of decisions to be made.

At this stage, I could have started a systematic thematic analysis and identified codes and themes. But this did not feel justifiable since I hoped to first turn the raw data into a research text that gives a sense of wholeness and connection and that remains also faithful and authentic to the participants' voices before engaging in an exercise of analysing and dissecting the texts into themes and codes. This is when, after contemplating various possibilities, I decided to construct and present an intertwined narrative that aimed to present the stories of the six participants told in two distinct voices – first through my eyes and voice as their class teacher and participant-researcher, and subsequently through their own voices. It was felt that this exercise of amalgamating different sets of data pertaining to each individual and turning these field texts into research texts was necessary as I attempted to create a close-enough picture of each individual child in the form of 'interpreted narratives'.

Following the writing of the narratives, for the final stage of the meaning-making process, I went back to the original data as well as to the interpreted narratives and began another cycle of reading and re-reading both the field texts and the research texts, looking out for statements or epiphanies that would shed light on the area being explored, paying particular attention to any patterns, themes, recurrences and consistencies within and across data and texts as well as to idiosyncrasies and peculiarities that would render particular insights and enhance the process of making meaning. As teacher's voice and children's voices merged and diverged, themes began to emerge, which led to the grouping of these themes and further interpretation and analysis took place. Finally, in order to bring to a close what originally started this research inquiry, the research questions identified at the beginning of the study were addressed.

As pointed out by Riessman (1993; 2008) and Creswell (2013), there are different options when choosing between methods for interpreting texts in a narrative inquiry. What is essential in narrative analysis is that the data gathered is analysed in terms of the story or stories they have to tell, thus taking the story itself as the 'object of investigation' (Riessman, 1993). Different approaches within the sphere of narrative inquiry choose to focus on different aspects of the stories being told. For Clandinin and Connelly (2000), relationship is at the centre of a narrative inquiry. They put forward a three-dimensional space approach, conceptualised within a Deweyan view of experience, that seeks to analyse the data for three particular elements in the story: personal and social interaction, continuity within and across the stories being told in terms of past, present and future, as well as situational circumstances that place the researcher and the participants in a specific location. Creswell (2013) presents an approach whereby stories and experiences are placed in a chronology before particular insights or epiphanies are identified and the larger meaning of the story is interpreted and later presented, where focus is finally placed on processes, theories and unique/general features of the life being represented. Hiles and Cermak (2008) point out that narrative has a primary role in the construction and establishment of our own identities. Through what they call narrative-oriented inquiry (NOI), researchers are empowered as they discover the possibility to renegotiate these identities and to challenge oppression, discrimination and injustice. As the process of analysis is initiated, the original data or text in NOI is broken down into segments so that a number of interpretative perspectives can then be applied to ultimately reveal not only *what* is being told but also *how* it is told. Parker (2005) writes about carrying out radical action research upon their lives when narrative inquirers understand and acknowledge the limits of narrative and treat narrative research as a way out of 'fixed identities as prisons of the self' (p. 72). He contends that in narrative analysis 'individuals may tell their stories to others in a way that both represents themselves and reflects on the representations' by giving importance to five key ideas that are dialectically connected – agency, temporality, event, context and format. By doing so, narrative inquirers purposely locate stories within the wider structures of culture, discourse and power:

"The order of telling, the puzzling about powerlessness in the face of external forces, the social relations that determine what counts as important for life and the style in which a story is told, are bound together so that it seems as if the individual storyteller is the centre, as observer and actor. Narrative research traces how these dialectically interrelated aspects of subjectivity are put together, and how they may be connected with the stories of others." (Parker, 2005, p. 74)

In Clandinin et al. (2006) a number of inquiries that highlight the interwoven lives of children and their teachers are presented. Within these studies, the three-dimensional space approach to analysis mentioned above is adopted. Amongst the insights that result from these inquiries, the group of researchers point out to the fact that as 'stories to live by' are constructed and field texts turned into research texts, one may experience conflicting plotlines that compete between children's own stories and those their teachers tell of them. Teachers and researchers are encouraged to become more attentive '... to how our stories of children shaped who they were and were becoming.' (p.60)

In her study on mothers' choices, beliefs and dilemmas about work and childcare, Page (2010) adopts a life historical approach through the use of deep-level interviews to explore mothers' views about issues that mattered closely to them. After transcribing, refashioning and editing each interview, Page presented a number of interpreted narratives, one for each of the six participants in her study, told from her voice as a researcher but each narrative also concludes with a description of the participant in her own words. Further interpretive meaning was brought to the original data through a thematic-analysis approach to meaning-making.

Through the narratives of first-person accounts presented in her book, Riessman (1993) places the focus of narrative analysis on the different forms of 'telling' about experience that narrators adopt, thus on *how* a story is constructed and told rather than simply examining a story for its content, for *what* it is about. In so doing, the investigation considers how participants seek to 'impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives' (p. 2), drawing upon various linguistic and cultural resources, as they 'claim identities and construct lives'. This approach to narrative analysis in personal accounts of experience is also assumed by Bruner (2004; p. 696) who contends that 'form' rather than 'content' is what matters in narratives and that language creates and builds what it tells.

These similar perspectives to the study of human experience highlight notions of human agency, imagination, subjectivity and the construction of identities that result out of the very act of narrating about one's life experiences by exposing the structure or form of each narrative. At the heart of Riessman's and Bruner's works is a contention that in many ways, 'we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives (Bruner, 2004) – our ways of working and telling a story define who we are or who we become. This also

resonates with what seems to have occurred as this research study unfolded, moving from an initial attempt to identify and examine ways of working effectively and respectfully with young 'gifted' children in an effort to discover and promote their emerging gifts and abilities to a deeper understanding of how a teacher's portrait is painted as her identity, pedagogy and practice are unveiled through young able learners' constructions of their own experiences of ability, learning and schooling.

The notions of human agency and subjectivity mentioned above are reflected in the researcher's choice of data to include and the methods to use, in the way the original data i.e. the field texts were transformed into research texts in the form of 'interpreted narratives', as well as in the very process of analysing and interpreting the original data and the interpreted narratives. Imagination was also instrumental in assisting the researcher to sift through the variety of approaches used for narrative analysis in order to create a methodologically and epistemologically adequate and feasible approach to analysis and interpretation for this narrative inquiry. Needless to say, as stories were told and retold, teacher and learner identities were being constructed and reconstructed as the lives of the teacher-researcher and a group of young able learners were intertwined.

6.3 Thematic Meaning-Making

This section presents the main themes identified during the third phase of the analysis and interpretation of this narrative inquiry. As mentioned in section 6.2, the data was presented by merging the original data to construct the six interpreted narratives. Subsequently, there was a final stage of analysis which focused on the emergence and grouping of themes and sub-themes and an eventual addressing of the research questions. This was carried out by going back and forth between the original data collected during the course of the study as well as the interpreted narratives. Following Reismann's approach to narrative analysis (1993, pg.15), this process involved an expansion but also a reduction whereby I, as the researcher, first selected features from the whole experience and collated them into a coherent research text by adding interpretative elements that would bring continuity and unity to the stories being told, then reducing the text to codes and themes that would enable further analysis and interpretation of the area of inquiry.

Figure 6.2 *Marked-up Thematic Analysis – Conversational Interview with one child*

- Perceptions of learning
- Perceptions of schooling
- Perceptions of ability
- Pedagogy and practice

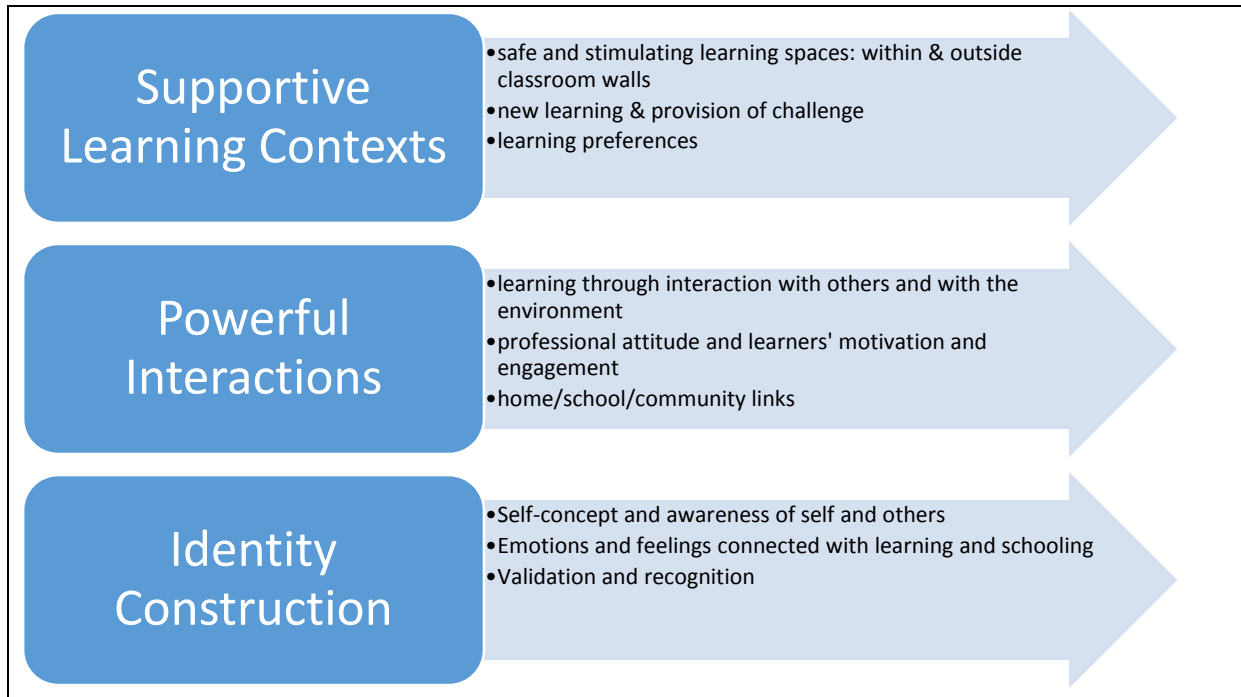
<p>R: And why nine – that’s a really good mark. So why 9?</p> <p>J: Because we had a lot of fun.</p> <p>R: So you think you’d do it again if you had to.</p> <p>J: I’m gonna keep on remembering that I was full excitement coming to Junior 2.</p> <p>R: Really? And why were you full of excitement? What were you expecting? What things did you want to do in Junior 2?</p> <p>J: Difficult things.</p> <p>R: So you like difficult things? Okay. Do you think that <u>me</u> and the other teachers manage to challenge you? To give you difficult things? To teach you new things. Were there a lot of these?</p> <p>J: Yes.</p> <p>R: Did you ever worry that it was too hard or did you always manage to <u>...</u></p> <p>J: When things are too hard I try to think and to do it...</p> <p>R: Very good ... okay ... <u>brava</u> ... so you still manage because you know that you can do it if you think ... <u>brava</u> ... okay. Another one ... ready for the next one?</p> <p>J: Yes.</p>	<div style="margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>Rosienne Farrugia Connecting emotion with learning</p> </div> <div style="margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>Rosienne Farrugia Anticipation for a new year that will be exciting and interesting; expectations of learning new stuff. Learning through presentation of new tasks that are just out of reach of current abilities – pleasure associated with challenge and difficult work.</p> </div> <div style="margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>Rosienne Farrugia Anticipation of challenging learning opportunities – positive feelings connected to this.</p> </div> <div> <p>Rosienne Farrugia A child’s need for challenge as motivating factor. Linking cognition with learning new stuff. Self-perception as a capable learner who can use own cognitive abilities to tackle challenging and difficult concepts.</p> </div>
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As original data and narratives were read over and over again, keeping in mind the research questions and angle from which this inquiry was being explored, in an effort to try and search for meanings and patterns within each individual participant’s story and across the narratives, a number of codes and sub-themes began to emerge. Each piece of data was colour-coded and highlighted according to whether it shed light on children’s perceptions of learning, ability and schooling or whether it indicated or revealed aspects of the teacher’s pedagogy and practice. Throughout the thematic analysis, there were also numerous instances where the notion of identity construction became evident – this seemed to occur across the data and ran through the various sub-themes. Figure 6.2 provides a sample of a marked-up thematic analysis of a section of a child’s conversational interview.

After highlighting the data according to the key above, I began another process of combining and sorting different sub-themes into meaningful groups that became the three main themes – *stimulating learning contexts, powerful interactions and identity construction*. The data was reviewed for each theme to ensure that coherence and continuity were embedded in the thematic analysis. Figure 6.3 illustrates the main themes together with their respective

subordinate themes to give a clearer overview of the discoveries and findings that emerged from this inquiry.

Figure 6.3 *Main themes and their sub-themes of this inquiry*



In the next section I shall engage in an interpretative analysis of the data that was collected during this inquiry, through a critical discussion of the main themes that emerged from a thorough examination and multiple reading and re-reading of both the original data gathered as well as the interpreted narratives presented in Chapter 5. Through this discussion, the researcher will seek to understand how young able children make sense of their learning and schooling experiences, their views on matters that influence their personal, social and educational journeys, whilst also bringing into the analysis what these perceptions disclose about their teacher's professional attitude, pedagogical choices and practices. The teacher's voice will also be included in the discussion as an analysis of data pertaining to the teacher as researcher and participant of her own study will add further richness to the interpretation and debate. Ultimately, it is my intention to place a lens on various important aspects of the educational journey that impact the learning experiences of this group of young able learners as well as the significance of their teacher's input and overall practice. The interplay between the two as they interact, work and learn together will bring further meaning and understanding to the study.

6.3.1 Supportive Learning Contexts

The research data gathered strongly indicates that despite their age, young able children are already aware of what makes their current learning experience a meaningful one, one that enhances and promotes their overall development. This is in line with the view that children are active participants and active agents in our societies and thus should be given a voice particularly on matters that have a direct impact on their lives. Promoted by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), the need to engage children and seek to listen to the experiences and perceptions of their everyday lives was encouraged and highlighted by researchers and educators who worked with children and believed in their capacity not only to learn but also to discuss issues and topics that touch their lives (Christensen & James, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003). As teacher and learners in this inquiry interacted during their everyday classroom life, they made reference to features of the learning environment that support the learning process. The data points to a kind of environment that is supportive of and conducive to learning and development which includes:

- ✓ the physical spaces in which children learn, both inside and outside classroom walls
- ✓ the kind of activities and opportunities for learning provided
- ✓ the quality and variety of such learning opportunities in terms of novelty and challenge.

6.3.1.1 *Safe and stimulating learning spaces: within & outside classroom walls*

The six participants and myself as the teacher-researcher in this narrative inquiry frequently mentioned features within their learning environment that, on the one hand gave learners a feeling of the familiar, a sense of security and safety, and on the other hand stimulated and inspired them to engage in the process of learning. These included different areas and features in the physical learning spaces, both inside and outside their classroom such as displays on the wall, the carpeted area where they regularly met for whole class discussion or story-telling or brainstorming, and the library corner. Apart from the physical space per se, reference was also made to other important articles that made learning possible – such as the resources used, objects and artefacts that grabbed the children’s attention and facilitated their understanding, as well as multimedia resources. All of this coupled with the people who

joined their learning trajectory over the scholastic year succeeded in creating an environment that was both safe and interesting, and that was ultimately conducive to learning.

One can argue that in this inquiry, the learning spaces within which learning occurred played an essential role in providing an appropriate and meaningful learning experience for all learners in the study, and more specifically for the six participants who required challenge and stimulation for their needs as learners to be met. Both Piaget and Vygotsky seemed to agree on the idea that learning occurs as children act upon and interact with their environment and with others. This knowledge and perspective is reflected in this research inquiry where I, as teacher-researcher, place an emphasis on maximising the use of different areas, resources and materials within and outside the classroom environment for the benefit of the learners. This professional attitude functioned as a means to embed challenge within our daily interactions and learning situations, in a conscious effort to meet learners' diverse needs, including those of very able learners who can reach high levels of attainment and performance (this will be further explored in the next sub-section). Apart from using a variety of resources to facilitate learning and understanding as concepts were presented and skills were acquired, the classroom environment also included areas where learners, particularly those who were early finishers, would go to when they were done from a particular task – popular activities were the writing journal, experimenting with language through the use of dictionaries and reference books as children delved further into topics related to our themes, hands on tasks, joined handwriting practice (which seemed to be a favourite by the most of the six participants as can be seen in the interpreted narratives), use of computers and our library corner where children, especially those who loved books, would resort to for some peace and calm. This helped minimise boredom, frustration and reduced unnecessary demands on me as the teacher so that my attention could be paid to other more imminent tasks such as supporting children who required additional help. Moreover, having learning corners, areas or challenging tasks for the early finishers encouraged independence and discovery learning. The excerpt below taken from my narrative of Jeremy, one of the very able learners in my class, provides evidence of the ways in which the learning spaces were organised to meet these learners' needs.

Jeremy's Interpreted Narrative – through my (teacher's) eyes

Having such a talented and motivated learner in my class was definitely a privilege in many ways and a chance for me to strive to make a difference in his learning trajectory by creating as many meaningful and relevant occasions that would

quench his thirst for more knowledge and for challenge. The downfall for this was that there were sessions or days when I did not manage to meet his needs (and those of other children who required a more challenging curriculum) and thus felt that I may have failed him and others like him. At times I felt that the pressures of teaching in a mixed-ability class and the demands of working in a very busy school environment that increasingly organised activities that would take away our classroom learning time had an adverse impact on the quality of the activities that were presented during particular days. To make up for these moments of overwhelmingly busy school days, I tried to use these out-of-classroom time events as learning opportunities, presenting them as a challenge as well as assigning different responsibilities to different children, thus enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and ownership of what was going on around our school. Within the classroom walls, I also sought to create areas or activities that did not require my attention or input so that children who, like Jeremy, were early finishers, would be able to choose from various activities or projects that interest them or that were in one way or another connected with our theme. A number of tools such as our computers, our reference books like dictionaries or the children's own index books, our library area and the resources placed at an accessible level were always at their disposal. The children were instructed to make use of certain resources and tools but also learned that it was their responsibility to put everything in its place for others to find next time. This helped reduce the pressures I occasionally felt to constantly be on my toes and provide challenge and interesting work to children like Jeremy.

Noddings' (2003) idea of practising an ethic of care within educational settings where teachers aim to make a difference in children's lives comes to mind since learners are cared for through the adaptation and creation of contexts that are stimulating and enabling as learning spaces developed by teachers who plan carefully and think about how their actions and practices impact individuals' lives and educational trajectories. These observations also link well with the notion of creating 'smart contexts' as an opportunity for learners to excel and develop their emerging abilities and talents suggested by a number of educational writers included in the literature review. According to Barab and Plucker (2002), educators have a responsibility to develop contexts for learning that increase learners' ability to interact and engage in potentially 'talented transactions' – thus by carefully planning, designing and making available a variety of suitable and stimulating materials and resources that entice and maintain students' interests, teachers develop effective learning spaces whereby learning and talent development are more likely to occur via the interaction between and amongst the individuals, the physical environment and socio-cultural relations. When teachers and schools design and develop 'smart' learning spaces, they increase the chances for potentially able learners to flourish and discover their talents through their interactions and connections with the environment. In this inquiry, data seems to point to an increased awareness by both the teacher-researcher and the participants of the ways in which meaningful student-environment interactions bring about learning and at times even talent development. As recommended in section 4.4.6, this points to the need for adequate teacher training, both initial and in-service, that aims to create awareness of the diverse needs of learners in classrooms and that equips teachers with the knowledge, competences, attitudes and skills needed to create stimulating environments and adopt inclusive practices. As teachers

develop their pedagogical repertoire over the years, they are ideally provided with and/or encouraged to seek and attend professional development sessions and programmes to be able to create such learning environments that are supportive and nurturing of the achievement and learning of young able learners (Adey, 2004; Borders et al., 2014; Borko, 2004; Robinson & Dailey, 2014).

In accordance with Sousa (1998), as a teacher of young learners in a diverse classroom setting, I sought to ensure that our classroom was a safe yet challenging and motivating learning environment. In this way, it was possible to cater for the needs of the highly able as well as for students with different abilities, learning dispositions, and learning styles, thus adopting an inclusive approach to learning through interactions with a rich learning environment that was aimed to be largely free from stress whilst at the same time provide interesting and challenging opportunities for learning. According to Dyson et al. (2002), inclusive schools and classrooms do not merely focus on providing for one particular group based on their atypical needs, but more importantly to create settings that encourage participation in the learning process by all learners. Clough and Nutbrown (2004; 2006) similarly propose an approach to inclusion in early years settings that fosters maximal participation and minimal exclusion, through practices that facilitate children's holistic development where schooling and learning are regard as social encounters in which learners' own previous experiences and current knowledge and skills are taken into consideration and built upon as efforts are made to create safe and enabling environments and make learning as appealing and relevant to children's lives. This is reflected in the data, as can be observed in the excerpts provided and discussed in this section.

In the extract below taken from one of the stories in my reflective journal, one can analyse various features in the context in which the activity was taking place that encouraged students' participation and engagement, thus making it effective as a learning experience. Starting a new week with an explanation and discussion of what was to come, what the children were to expect during the coming days undoubtedly gave children a sense of security and reduced stress that might have been otherwise experienced by learners had the environment not been structured nor safe.

So both safety and structure seem to form an integral part of this learning space. Through children's reactions to what was being explained, I obtained good feedback about their likes and dislikes for what I had planned in terms of learning activities for the current sub-theme. Moreover, this attention to children's responses and comments implies a kind of reflective practice whereby a teacher feels the need for feedback by those upon whom her pedagogical choices and decisions have most impact i.e. the learners. Additionally, reference is also made to resources that facilitated learning and understanding – the timetable of a day at the farm as a visual aid on the laptop, the audio clip of the song, the online book with pictures and text, the farm animal photo album as well as the carpeted area where this part of the activity took place. The use of different media and resources to explore a topic and learn new vocabulary and knowledge ensured that a high level of interest and engagement is maintained. Furthermore, although there is challenge embedded in the activity as children's higher-order thinking skills are promoted through the questioning techniques, discussion, sharing of related personal experiences and explanation of meanings of new vocabulary, a healthy atmosphere within the learning context is maintained as children's sense of humour is tapped upon through funny events, comments or language use within the story.

Reflective Journal: A visit to the farm

A new week, a new sub-topic, a number of projects in the pipeline, a lot of enthusiasm - similar to every Monday morning. As I told the children about things we would be covering throughout the week, my energy level and motivation to plan interesting and meaningful activities for the children got a real boost with the children's cheers and rejoicing – their way of showing their approval for the sessions I had planned for them. This was a good start to the week – a week with a focus on animal descriptions, first of farm animals and later on in the week, desert life. The children had a lot of questions, but I needed to start today's creative writing session and therefore I said that we will be having time to explore these topics later on. I asked them to look at the laptop screen (how I'd love to have an interactive whiteboard/ projector available in class for whole class activities!!!) and they all huddled up on the mat and looked ... after a few attempts, they realised that I was showing them a timetable about a day at the farm. We talked about their experiences on a farm (they had all been to a farm with their Junior 1 teacher and some had been to other farms in Malta or abroad). Some children had a lot to say about this, children like Jeremy who had been to a farm in England, or like Jake and Nikolai who seem to have a relative who owns a farm, Kurt and Kelly who'd been to a farm too. Next, I told them that we were going to listen to a song about some farm animals. It was Julia Donaldson's A Squash and a Squeeze song (the musical version of the storybook). Then we moved on to discuss the pictures and text on the online book – new vocabulary was explained by me or the children (mostly by children like Kelly, Jeremy, Nicole and Jeanine who are really good with words and their meanings). The children liked funny parts in the story such as 'mucking out the cow's shed' ... 'smelliest job I've ever done' etc... and it was nice to hear their hearty laughs. Then we talked about the different animals that live on the farm, both the ones mentioned in the online book and other ones. This is obviously a familiar topic for the children and they could even mention sheepdogs, donkeys, roosters and lots more. The discussion moved onto baby animals – I was surprised that most children didn't know words such as calf and lamb or had mixed ideas of whose babies they were. So we went over the vocabulary for baby animals and then I asked the children which animal they would love to write about today. We looked at a number of farm animal photos and when I showed them the one with a cute lamb, they all went "Ohhh!!!" and "Wow!!!" and so it was decided that we'd focus on describing a lamb ...

The research data also pointed to the idea that as an early years' teacher who wanted to maximise learning potential through student participation, I could not isolate myself and my

classroom from the school, the children's families and the wider community nor limit the learning to only that which occurred within our classroom walls. Although the links between the school, the home and the community will be delved upon further in section 6.3.2.3, it is relevant to include data that demonstrates the importance of extending learning outside the four walls of our classroom. The data presented below stresses the importance of expanding one's view of what kind of learning opportunities could be made available to young children by taking the learning from inside the classroom setting to other areas or classrooms within the school as well as by visiting places in the community or outside of it, and in this way increasing the potential for more meaningful learning to occur.

Reflective Journal: "A chameleon may change colour to show another chameleon how it is feeling and sometimes also to find a girlfriend!"

Following last week's introduction about desert plants and animals with a focus on reptiles, today was the day for our twinning project with a Pre-Junior class (a class of 26 four year olds). The Pre-Junior teacher and I have been thinking of pairing up our classes for a different kind of activity for quite some time and a couple of weeks ago we just said we should try it out. We thought that we'd base our project on a story that can link both her current theme (Around the World) and our theme (Habitats) – so we went for one of our students' favourite author Eric Carle and his story called The Mixed-Up Chameleon. We'd link it to our themes by talking about possible habitats (mostly warm or hot places) around the world. We thought this story would also appeal to both year groups for its focus on not just the chameleon but also a number of zoo animals as well as colours too. We met, planned out the activities and also worked on a wiki page in which we included video clips, games and pages where we could eventually share photos or include any links the children might wish to include: <http://themixedupchameleon.wikispaces.com/>

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I like many things about school. I love outings especially when we went for a visit to the old city of Mdina and Mosta, as a preparation for our Open Day topic. I enjoy our outings because it is lovely to go on a trip with my friends and with my teachers. One time, we went out for a walk down the road because we were working on a project called 'A Safe Community' and we were looking at road safety signs, pavements, buildings, people in the neighbourhood etc... Suddenly we hear a police car siren. We were so excited because the car stopped near us and called the name of a boy – Sam – and we couldn't believe our eyes! We thought that something had happened and then, when we realised the police were playing a trick on our friend, I thought it was very funny.

6.3.1.2 New learning and provision of challenge

As I read through the data collected over the course of the study and composed the interpreted narratives, my attention was often grabbed by the variety of pedagogical strategies and principles that seemed to underpin my practice as a teacher of young learners with diverse needs and abilities. The entries in the reflective journal are a reflection of the complexities and dynamics within particular learning experiences and the processes of interaction that were at play as learners engaged in activities that brought about learning and that also fostered, in my opinion, the emergence of abilities, gifts and talents.

In the extract below, one can witness various elements that make this particular activity and other similar ones appealing in terms of attracting the attention of young capable learners and maintaining it. As an activity, it builds upon previous learning experiences and links with various other sessions, thus providing children with opportunities to make connections with past knowledge and learning. It promotes a kind of learning that is socially constructed and inquiry-based and thus constructivist in nature. By encouraging the children to work in groups at this creative thinking task, this activity gives learners an opportunity to use language and solve a 'problem' by communicating and interacting with others as they use higher-order thinking skills to find a solution, an approach that ties in with Vygotsky's (1978) views on learning and development. New learning and challenge are both inherent in this activity – although structure is provided by the teacher who planned and created the activity in the first place and gave the children some parameters within which to work, this learning experience allows for flexibility, adaptation and ownership of the direction in which the activity could take. Creativity, imagination and the ability to share ideas with other members of the group and then together choose the best idea to present it to the teacher and to their peers formed an integral part of this task. Also, as children worked with others in a group, they would be able to tap on each other's strengths and use them for the benefit of the whole group as they made decisions about who would lead the group, how their chosen idea/solution would be presented to the rest of the class and who would do what amongst other things. This particular activity adopts Wallace's (2008) TASC wheel framework as a guideline for children to follow as they brainstorm ideas, think creatively, make choices, reflect, evaluate and share their findings with others (see section 3.4.5 in the literature review for more information). All this is in accordance with findings that emerged from a study carried out with a group of young gifted learners in a multi-ability classroom to examine their experiences of schooling during their first year of primary school by Buckner (2009) – the study suggests that inclusive classroom settings should be designed in ways that foster creativity, personalised learning, independence and choice of activities. Parental involvement, social relationships and student-directed learning were also themes that emerged and that were seen to need attention when planning and designing a rich learning environment for gifted learners in the early years.

Reflective Journal: 'Mr Elephant will smell like a washed house!'

We had been doing some work about elephants lately – really and truly, it was a coincidence for a number of stories to include an elephant as their main character. We had used the story of The Blind Men and the Elephant as part of our Philosophy for Children 'thinking stories', we had also read the story of 'Elmer' as part of our focus on colours in nature (under a cross-curricular theme The Four Seasons) and this week we just read the story about Lizzie and her knitted elephant. On one side of our classroom a table displayed a variety of elephants of different shapes, colours, material and size which the children had brought in following yesterday's reading of Lizzie's knitted elephant. The table also includes the grey wool and knitting needles to remind us of Lizzie's unravelled elephant. It also incorporates a range of books about elephants (including both fact and fiction).

It seemed to me natural to conclude this series of 'elephant stories' with a creative thinking group activity which linked the character of the omnipresent elephant to the topic of water (being explored as part of the theme of The Four Seasons). So when I entered the Junior 2B classroom for our Creative Thinking session, I first asked them about the work we had been doing about elephants over the past weeks and then said that today they needed to work in small groups, brainstorm ideas and come up with a solution to a problem I would be posing. Something like this always makes the children want to know more about the task being presented, and they eagerly asked me to tell them what it was about ...

I wrote the following question on the board: "How would you wash an elephant?" Some children giggled while a few others were still figuring out what I meant. I gave each group an A3 sized blank picture – and said that all they had to do was to try and answer this question by first discussing possible ways of washing an elephant and then drawing a picture or diagram and labelling it to illustrate their preferred solution to this problem. I said that they were being encouraged to use their imagination, to let their imagination run wild as anything was possible. I also reminded them to use their indoor voices when working in their group. This time I decided not to discuss any examples with the whole class as I was certain some children might stick to the examples being mentioned and be tempted to reproduce what had been said before rather than come up with original ideas.

As I reflect on these kind of learning opportunities, Paulo Freire's (1970, 1994) ideology comes to mind, particularly his view on education as empowering learners to exercise their freedom as teachers facilitate learning by guiding their students to a mode of learning that is problem-posing, critical, dialogical and participatory – an alternative vision of education on values of inclusion, empowerment and love.

During the conversational interviews, it became apparent that there was a link between the need for new learning and variety in the provision of learning experiences on the one hand and young able learners' motivation and participation on the other. The six participants all value learning new things and acquiring new skills and knowledge. The extracts from Giorgio's interpreted narrative and Nicole's conversational interview provide evidence of their expressed need for new learning and challenging work to keep them interested and enthused to strive for excellence. Giorgio seems to suggest that apart from finding hard tasks challenging and stimulating, they also reinforce his self-concept as a capable learner who is able to find his way around difficult work either by using his cognitive abilities or asking for assistance from a more knowledgeable adult, in this case, his teacher. Giorgio's need for challenging work relates closely to Holt's (1982 in Winstanley, 2010) thoughts about the feelings of pleasure, satisfaction and relief that are borne out of challenging activities aimed at awakening curiosity in young children.

Giorgio's Interpreted Narrative – through his eyes

I love doing hard things especially in Maths and English. There are many things that I cannot understand straightaway and lots of things that I can't realise or figure out what they are. So when that happens I just think with my head or at least I ask the teachers to help me out. I prefer when I have to think hard to figure something out because easy work does not make me feel smart. Easy work like not so hard sentences that we write sometimes or easy words that you can draw like cat and hat or just sticking things for art and craft – I prefer to create something than stick things.

In the extract on the next page, Nicole also refers to her preference for new learning and difficult work and she makes a direct connection between the two, explaining that she enjoys 'hard things' because they teach her something new and it is always enjoyable to learn new stuff. Moreover, when asked to provide examples of new/ challenging learning that she particularly liked, Nicole's response also indicated that in addition to challenging work, being provided with varied learning activities was also important.

In my view, one of the strengths and successes in my dealings with the multitude of factors that required to be considered as I sought to create supportive and motivating environments, cover curriculum content whilst at the same time maintaining student engagement and involvement, was the fact that I adopted a largely constructivist methodology where all new concepts, knowledge and skills were presented and built upon learners' previous knowledge and experiences. Moreover, this approach encouraged inquiry-based learning through social interaction and active participation. This is in line with sociocultural approaches to learning and knowledge triggered by and developed on Dewey's and Vygotsky's theoretical views that give an account of learning and development as the outcome of participation in socially-mediated and socially constructed activities. Inherent in such an approach is also a wider and more dynamic view of ability, cognition and intelligence, one that is closer to Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences as opposed to the quantification of a child's ability in terms of a single IQ score through the use of standardised tests.

Nicole's Conversational Interview

R: Okay ... very good. Now another one: if you had to give your Junior 2 experience a number from one to ten, what number would you give it? One is too little and ten is super good. How was your experience – you can say 2,3,4,5 ... 6,7,8,9,10 – how many points would you give it?

N: [pause] Ten!

R: Wow! Why ten?

N: You learn a lot of fun things, you do things in class, you learn ...

R: Okay, so it was good for you.

N: Ehhe ... I want it to be ten because we the children learn a lot of things so then we can manage to go up to Junior 3 ... so we learn a lot.

R: Is there anything that you would change if you were one of the teachers or if you were the Head of School?

N: No.

R: No?

N: I like the school how it is. I like it like this.

R: Do you enjoy learning new things. What do you enjoy learning about?

N: Yes. New things about science ... I enjoy learning mostly about things like hard things because hard things will be new and I will start learning hard things and it will be nice to learn new things.

R: Okay, do you remember learning any new things that you really enjoyed?

N: Yes, I enjoyed learning about the weather when we used a puppet to learn about that, I liked learning about dinosaurs, I made a mind map on the computer about them.

R: How do you learn best Nicole?

N: I think mostly sometimes like when I made a book to learn.

Vygotsky's (1978) idea of learning and development encourages educators and teachers to present opportunities for new learning through tasks that are just out of reach of their current abilities – in this manner, as opposed to Piaget's role of maturation in children's cognitive development, Vygotsky proposed that learning precedes development as one's state of development is changed and enhanced through new tasks that are slightly above a child's current level of performance and ability. The pedagogical choices and approaches adopted in this research inquiry put these theoretical ideas into practice – I strongly feel that these approaches to learning reaped benefits for all children, including and most especially those who were coming across as having potential in various areas of endeavour.

In an article on creating regular classrooms that are responsive to potential giftedness, Hertzog (2005) proposed that through their conscious efforts to capture students' engagement and curiosity through inquiry-based activities, teachers increase their expectations for all learners and in this manner may succeed to close achievement gaps between groups of students. In reality, having been highly aware of the significant role of early years practitioners in providing the right environment for emerging abilities and talents to be developed and sometimes discovered, has led me to adopt this constructivist approach to learning where activities encouraged social interaction, active participation and inquiry-based learning. The results were evident as our classroom transformed itself into a community of learners characterised by motivation, engagement, curiosity and keen interest to learn despite the diversity of needs, learning dispositions and interests amongst the students. In this manner, as a teacher of young learners who were still discovering and gaining confidence in their capacity for learning, I was implementing a kind of inclusive practice suggested by Nutbrown and Clough (2006) that proposes that all learners in early years settings should be provided with the opportunity to be the best they could be through inclusive processes embedded in the curriculum, pedagogy and the services. One is not suggesting that the classroom in which the research was conducted was an ideal one – there

were instances where as a teacher-researcher I felt that pressures and challenges of dealing with the demands of an ecologically diverse classroom. However, in many ways, efforts were constantly made to celebrate diversity and thus adopt a ‘complimentary’ as opposed to a ‘compensatory’ pedagogical approach in terms of appropriate inclusive provision (Watkins et al., 2014; Smith, 2003). This is in line with recommendations made by the external audit carried out regarding the current situation of Special Needs and inclusive Education in Malta whereby it was suggested that teachers maximise learning opportunities for all learners in a climate of more flexible curricula, assessment frameworks and pedagogical approaches that stimulate children’s minds and encourage engagement and active participation (Watkins et al., 2014).

Reflective Journal: Excerpt from ‘Granny saves the day’

What had made this session such a successful one for this group of learners, particularly for those who usually require more challenging work? In my view, the introduction (the use of real wool and needles), the fact that the story tackled an issue they could all relate to (the loss of a favourite toy), the variety of activities that all led to the writing of the letter and the fact that both challenge and support were inherent in the activities as modifications for the lesson to cater for the wide variety of aptitudes and emerging abilities.

Just like Giorgio did in the excerpt provided above, Jeanine and Jeremy also describe how new and challenging work in class succeeds in bringing out their sense of accomplishment and pride in their own capabilities to learn – the phrase ‘makes me feel smart’ suggests that young able children value the notion of being smart and see it as desirable. This also has implications for the choices that teachers make when planning learning activities for their classes and for raising their expectations for all learners by adopting innovative strategies that give their pupils opportunities for their minds to be stimulated and stretched, and ultimately develop positive learner identities (Sutherland, 2008).

Jeanine’s Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I also like describing things, saying them and then writing them. I am good at writing stories, like the one we did of the fairy tales. It felt just like you’re an author when I was writing the story. When we do a lot of things around the same topic, I feel smart because I get to learn many new things. Like this year, for our Open Day, our class was working on our old city Mdina. We talked about it but we also did a lot of other things. The teachers took us on a trip to Mdina. Last year we could not go to Australia so we only learned about it in class. It’s better when you get to visit a place you are learning about. Like when we went to Mdina, I learned about the gates of Mdina and I enjoyed it.

Photo Collage Activity – Best Moments of Junior 2 (all participants)

R: Now, what are these boys doing on the floor?

Girl: I think they are doing a picture ...

R: Working alone or in a group?

Children: In a group ...

R: Do you like working in a group?

Children: Yes!!!

R: So this picture you would choose if you enjoy working in a group... Now, what are these three boys doing?

Girl: Thinking!

Children: Working!

T: What else are they doing? Kyra? Faye?

Faye: They're thinking how to do stuff like doing stuff like that ...

Jeremy: They're thinking how to ... how to ...

R: What was it about Jeremy?

Jeremy: How to wash an elephant!

R: Do you remember that activity of the elephant?

Jeremy: I still remember and I love it!!! (very emphatically) I just love it!!!

R: Why did you love that activity? Tell me Jeremy.

Jeremy: Because it makes me feel smart.

R: Okay. And do you remember, and this point in time (pointing to the picture), you, Isaac and Giorgio – what were you talking about? What were you trying to figure out?

Jeremy: How to wash an elephant ...

R: How to wash an elephant ... you were asked to come up with a brilliant idea of how to was an elephant ... let's move on – who's this?

Children: Jake Huber ...

6.3.1.3 Learning preferences

One of my objectives for examining young able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling as a researcher within my own primary classroom was to investigate whether the hunches and ideas I had developed about their learning preferences were close to the learners' own actual experiences and feelings. Also, it was important for me to understand whether as a teacher of young children and researcher into inclusive practices and pedagogies that foster talent development and the emergence of abilities and gifts in regular primary classrooms, the theories that informed my pedagogical choices matched children's interests and views.

In the previous section, we saw that generally the young able learners in my research inquiry acknowledged new learning and challenging work as necessary to keep them engaged, motivated and to help them feel accomplished and 'smart'. In this section, I will look specifically at what kind of activities and methodologies used in class are felt to bring about new learning and to provide challenge by listening to both the teacher's and the learners' voices. In agreement with what the literature on both gifted education and general education proposes, the pedagogies used within this mixed-ability classroom are wide and varied and include strategies such as challenging curricula both in content and pedagogy, meaningful learning that is linked to real-life situations, active involvement and social interaction, transferring of knowledge, relating new information to prior knowledge, outcome-driven instruction, flexibility for individual differences and use of integration such as theme-based

and inquiry-based approaches (Hockett, 2009; Vosniadou, 2011). Such a wide-ranging repertoire was purposely used in my class as a means to cater for the needs of all learners, by creating inclusive and enabling learning spaces that encourage children to discover their capacity for learning (Nutbrown and Clough, 2006), construct positive learner identities (Sutherland, 2008) and discover, develop and nurture their emerging abilities, gifts and talents before any attempts by teachers, families or the management team are made to identify and label children as 'gifted' or 'highly able'. This belief in providing effective and meaningful learning experiences prior to any efforts at identification of gifts and talents has been gaining ground in various countries around Europe and the world as opposed to previously more common practices of using traditional methods such as testing for high IQ scores to identify and many times isolate children who are deemed to be at the higher end of the ability spectrum (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Gross, 1999; Sutherland, 2008; Wallace et al., 2010).

My experience with this group of very able learners is that they are highly motivated by learning experiences that are integrated through a thematic approach where subjects and activities are linked to a particular topic. Examples of topics covered throughout this particular scholastic year were The Four Seasons, Habitats and Our Island Home, each of which was then subdivided into sub-themes that explored each topic in more details. These themes served as a starting point from where our discussions and sessions began, linking new learning to previous knowledge. Children's responses to an introduction to a new theme was always positive and enthusiastic. A new topic, concept or piece of information was never presented before children's understanding and knowledge was checked – the following extract from the photo collage class discussion explains this clearly. In this example, the sub-topic of 'Desert Life' was being introduced as part of the main theme of Habitats.

Photo Collage Class Discussion – Best moments of Junior 2

R: okay ... this is similar to that but not exactly that ... what is this? Can you see what this is?

Children: A mind map ... the desert ... mind map!

R: Yes, a mind map ... when do we usually use mind maps? What do we usually use them for? Isaac?

Isaac: Well, we do them for our topics like the desert ...

R: yes ... and this was ... do you remember what I told you? Had we already started learning about deserts when we did this?

Boy: No.

R: Exactly, no! We did this mind map before we started learning about deserts because I wished to see what you already knew about deserts and you surprised me because by the end of the lesson we had filled up a whole big paper with your knowledge! You already knew so much about the desert and I told you – 'you see, if I hadn't asked you, I wouldn't know that you knew so much already' and then I might have tried to teach you things you already knew about and learn the same things – and that would be boring, wouldn't it?

Sarah: Miss, I know something ... [27:24]

R: We did another one, yes, about dinosaurs. Sarah ...

Sarah: If somebody knows something about what we're doing and somebody else doesn't know and the other person knows, then you can learn from them.

R: You see, Sarah is telling us something very important – that we don't only learn from the teacher or from books, but that we can learn from our friends. We can teach each other new things, right?

Sarah: And if you don't listen, they will not know.

Social interaction, learning by thinking and talking with peers and with others and active participation were an integral part of our daily interactions and connections. In many ways, our classroom life reflected Vygostky's (1978, 1986) contention that children increase their levels of conceptual understanding when they interact with others through the use of language – as they talk with others and discuss topics, concepts, information and new knowledge, they internalise new information and skills, thus the link between thought and language that leads to meaningful learning. The research data seems to point to a general consensus between the six participants that they preferred to work with others in a group or with a partner than alone. Hands-on learning or work that required them to be actively involved in the activity was also highly valued by most participants. As mentioned above, tasks that required them to be inquisitive and to solve problems or create something were more welcomed than closed-ended ones. Our weekly Show and Tell was thoroughly enjoyed by all participants who over the year gained increasing confidence to present their work in front of their teacher and peers. Out-of-class activities were also mentioned during the conversational interviews – including our Christmas concert, our outings and visits to other places, and a walk around the community. Also visits by other people to our classroom were thoroughly enjoyed such as our parent-child sessions – these were a definite favourite. The following narrative extracts explain the above in children's own voices.

Nicole's Interpreted Narrative: through her eyes

I cannot believe we are at the end of Junior 2. I feel excited about growing up. I feel happy that I am growing up and that I am going to Junior 3. I liked being in Junior 2 – it was fun especially the outings. You learn a lot when you are inside the classroom and the teachers are teaching you. But you don't only learn like that – you don't learn only from the teachers. You can learn by going on outings like we did when we went to the Bird Park. There we learned so much about the birds and other animals that we saw there. And it was also lots of fun. I always feel excited when the teachers say we have an outing. I usually cannot wait till the day of the outing and I keep asking my mum or my teacher how many more days until we go!

Jeanine's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I loved doing many things in Junior 2 but most of all I thoroughly enjoyed learning new stuff like when we learned about dinosaurs and chameleons. Well, the best activity was our Christmas play ... Emma the Red about Vikings. I was so happy to be given the main part. Even though my song did not play on the day of the show ... I panicked at first but then the teacher helped me to go to the next part and everyone clapped and was happy with our show. Apart from the Christmas play, I also

loved writing stories, doing work on our literacy booklets, doing a lot of science experiments, using the computers and working on projects or creating lap books. I prefer working with others in a group or with a partner. Junior 2 was loads of fun!

Jeremy's Interpreted Narrative – through his eyes

Looking back, I must say I enjoyed doing loads of stuff during this year especially the crafts – that is my hobby so I like that a lot. Some of the best things we did were the projects like Spots and Stripes where we did some research about spots and stripes in the animal kingdom and all around us, then I thoroughly enjoyed our Christmas play called Emma the Red which was brilliant. Because I am a fast learner and I usually get my work done rather quickly, at times I write stories on my Writing Journal when I finish the class work – that is something I am good at and that I really enjoy doing – I would get bored waiting for the others to finish their work. I read loads of books and have plenty of favourite authors – I like it when the teachers use books to start a topic or to teach us something ... It is good when we listen to stories in class because stories can be loads of fun and they also teach us a lot of interesting things.

Sometimes I bring my own books and the teacher uses them in class and I feel happy when I see that my friends like the same authors as me. I also enjoyed working on our literacy booklets during English and I had fun experimenting with my friends during Science. Music and songs are fun and we usually use them to learn about different things like English or Science. The teachers then puts the link to these songs on our classroom blog and we can then watch them at home with our families. We made some colourful lap books when we worked on our projects. As you can see, we did lots of things in Junior 2 and we learned so many new stuff. Being a Junior 2 student was a lovely experience and as I said already I will surely miss it a lot.

Needless to say, not all activities and sessions held over the scholastic year were a success. There were instances where I questioned my own practice, mostly because the children's response was not always what I would have expected or anticipated. As a reflective practitioner, I was constantly monitoring and evaluating my own practice, and took each 'failure' or difficulty as an opportunity for professional growth. Factors that influenced whether a particular session or activity was successful or less so were not always linked to the choice of pedagogy or the content. At times there were other factors such as time, interruptions, timetable issues and lack of resources that affected the unfolding of a session. However, there were also instances where differences in children's response and participation could be observed and such experiences led to introspection and revising of practices and pedagogical choices. The following excerpts exemplify this.

Reflective Journal: Sorting flashcards – learning about nouns, verbs and adjectives

All in all, the objectives for this session were reached but this activity prompted a number of questions about the choices I make and the kind of activities I present. This kind of activity is in many ways a closed-ended activity and thus should be less challenging than the usual open-ended and innovative ones. Perhaps the lack of challenge or the absence of a context for the individual flashcards provided that needed to be sorted into groups made the activity either more challenging or cumbersome for some learners. Many other factors could have prevented this particular last group from working independently on what seemed to be a straight-forward sorting task. At the same time, one cannot disregard the fact that there were other groups who like structure and order who relished in carrying out this kind of activity. Perhaps, one may conclude that providing this kind of activity as part of a rotation exercise where there is a balance between closed and open-ended activities would be one solution. Another one would be to provide a number of choices for activities so that children can choose between them rather than having to do one particular activity when they are evidently not engaged by it. This is certainly a normal part of an early years' teacher's everyday classroom life – reflecting back, evaluating and revising own pedagogical choices, values and attitudes towards work.

Mireille's Interpreted Narrative: through her eyes

I like working with my classmates. Kyra and Jeanine know a lot of stuff so it's good to work with them but I also enjoy working with other friends like Nicole, Kathryn, Emma and Kelly. Sometimes I work with Jeremy too. Then there's Faye. She realises stuff when we are doing something like she gets good ideas. I usually work well with others but sometimes I get upset if the other children in the group do not listen to my idea or ignore it. It hurts my feelings. But usually we talk about things and then we agree about what to do and everyone is happy then. Then there are times when it feels hard to work with others especially if they do not concentrate on what we have to do. Like when we had to sort flashcards into nouns, verbs and adjectives. I do not know what happened to me exactly but I panicked because the other two children did not know what to do and I felt lost. They were putting nouns with the adjectives, and mixing the verbs with the nouns. I felt confused during that activity. It is much better to work with children like Nicole, Kyra and Jeanine. Like that everyone knows what to do and works hard and we get the correct answers.

All in all, participants' voices seem to indicate that the pedagogical choices that I made were mostly valued and welcomed by the children. Their need for stimulation, new learning and challenge was met through the wide range of activities and methods used to present learning. The children's responses and preference for active learning and participation as well as for new learning and challenge indicates that as a teacher of young children, some of whom had potential to reach higher levels of performance and achievement, I have taken up recommendations presented by literature on gifted education and inclusive practices to provide adequate educational opportunities that enabled young able learners to develop and nurture their high ability and capacity to learn. In doing so, I was making conscious efforts to abide by the principle of 'education for diversity' specifically endorsed by the Maltese National Curriculum Framework (2012). In many ways, as outlined in the section 3.4.4.3 of the Literature Review chapter, the pedagogical choices that were made throughout the study were only possible due to a NCF (2012) that at least in theory provides a backdrop and a right direction for the consideration of the diverse needs of different children within one classroom. It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study amongst early years teachers in Malta to explore how our curriculum framework is interpreted and translated into effective and inclusive classroom practices that foster talent development and creates positive learner identities for young able children so that they experience meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities.

6.3.2 Powerful Interactions

The participants in my study all place emphasis on interaction as a vehicle for learning. Throughout the various data gathered, there is constant mention of how learning takes place with and through others. Both teacher and learners in this inquiry talk about the power and centrality of relationships that are formed and sustained throughout the scholastic year as

well as the value of personal and social interaction with other learners, with adults as well as with their environment. In this section, I will draw on the voices of the participants to highlight the ways in which interaction seems to play an important role in bringing about learning and nurturing the development of children's emerging abilities as they become confident and capable learners. Different kinds of interaction referred to during the study will be analysed and connections will be sought in relation to existing literature about the area of inquiry. The notion of 'powerful interactions' as one of the main themes that emerged during the thematic analysis exercise consists of the following subordinate themes, all of which will be discussed further below:

- ✓ learning through interaction with others and with the environment
- ✓ teacher's professional attitude and learners' engagement and motivation
- ✓ home/school/community links

6.3.2.1 Learning through interaction with others and with the environment

Sociocultural and cultural-historical activity perspectives on learning, knowledge and cognition put forward the notions of situated learning and distributed cognition whereby learning becomes socially-mediated and participatory and knowledge is constructed through the use of psychological and technical tools and artefacts within the learning contexts (refer to section 3.2.3 in the literature review for more details). Through this research inquiry, it became evident that learning through social interaction and active participation in activities that strike a good balance between structure and open-ended tasks which provide a safe yet at the same time stimulating learning environment was desirable and prized by the participants. It provided a means through which all learners, irrespective of gender, ability, dispositions, preferences and interests could explore their capabilities and gain confidence in their emerging abilities and learning dispositions.

In the extract taken from the entry in the reflective journal entitled 'A visit to the farm', I talk about the complexities and the interactions that occur as we embarked on a creative writing project. In this session, built around the sub-topic of Farm Animals (as part of the larger theme of *Habitats*), interaction with the whole class was encouraged at the initial phase of the activity prior to the brainstorming of ideas for the writing project (this is only an excerpt from the whole entry). Visual aids and online resources had started the discussion on farm animals so the children were encouraged to interact not only with their peers and their

teacher, but also with the objects and resources used to stimulate their curiosity and aid comprehension. During brainstorm for vocabulary to include in their descriptions, the children shared their thoughts and ideas. These were in turn documented on the whiteboard as a mind-map for everyone to refer to during the actual writing task. They took turns, listened to others, at times quietly, other times impatiently, and explored different ways and new vocabulary to use to describe farm animals and make their sentences more interesting and descriptive. Brainstorming helped children learn with and from each other and the mind-mapping helped organise all their ideas and thinking. For the writing task, the children were given a choice to either work on their own, using ideas shared during the session, or work with a partner – most usually preferred to work with others but there were always those few who would rather find a quiet spot in our classroom and work independently using the resources and materials available to produce a good piece of writing.

Reflective Journal: A visit to the farm

I had already introduced adjectives as describing words in a previous session and so I asked them what words would we like to use to make our description more real and interesting. Many children suggested loads of words which we wrote down in boxes on the board – words such as fluffy, white, soft, playful, small, little, cute ... – this sharing of ideas is an activity the children just love. The whole class consists of a group of children who are always so willing to contribute their ideas. Some of them do find it hard to listen to others and can get upset when not asked but I keep showing them they always get a chance to share some of their ideas in the end. To compensate for the impossibility to listen to all twenty-two children's ideas for every question or prompt, I do tend to resort to pair and group work because these are effective ways of giving individual children an opportunity to share ideas with others and be heard by others. And the children do love this. They love the variety of activities, they love the turn taking in pairs and small groups and in spite of their young age, they do manage to work well in different kinds of grouping. Children who tend to thoroughly enjoy pair work and small group work tend to take their work to a higher level when sharing and interacting with others. It also depends on who they are working with and this is an issue that is constantly on my mind. Children like Deyan, Jeanine, Jeremy, Nicole, Mireille and Giorgio tend to enjoy working together probably because they match each other's high level of concentration span, attention and ability. Other children who tend to follow others are much more inclined to work harder when placed with a good leader or a child with good working habits. However, I do try to vary the kind of groupings I use so that I give each child an opportunity to work with both similar and different children in terms of personality, friendships, attention level, ability, task commitment etc... Following the discussion, each child was given their creative writing copybook and was encouraged to write about the little lamb. Reference could be made to the word bank on the board and they were also encouraged to make use of both their dictionary and their Index Book (for tricky spellings). They were also encouraged to choose between working with a partner or alone ...

The twinning project described in the journal entry below (again this is only an excerpt from the whole story) also demonstrates how learning can be socially-mediated and participatory just like sociocultural and cultural-historical activity perspectives propose (Daniels, 2001; Engestrom et al., 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007). Collaborative projects where older learners work with younger ones on a joint task can be effective in fostering children's potential to develop their thinking and their language through cooperation as well as their social and emotional skills too as they negotiate ways to work well together and achieve goals set by their teachers

at the start of the activity. The project below succeeded in providing opportunities for meaningful and authentic learning to take place through elements inherent in the whole activity that have been recommended and proven to be effective in stimulating children's minds and developing their emergent abilities in general education classrooms by various educational writers, namely constructivist approach to learning, inquiry-based learning, project-oriented curriculum, connection of new ideas with prior knowledge, modelling, scaffolding, explorations, flexibility and adaptation to the learning situation. (Camilleri, 1998; Eyre, 1997; Hertzog, 2005; Porter, 2005; Wallace, 2002; Winstanley, 2010).

Activities like this twinning project thrive on social interaction and active participation as well as exploration of a topic through personal (each child individually) and social (as a group) interaction with artefacts and materials or resources that enhance the learning activity and bring about deep understanding and acquisition of skills and knowledge. By collaborating with others, older or younger learners, with their teachers, and with the resources used, they construct knowledge and increase their ability to learn as they practise various cognitive, language and social skills. This is connected to the idea that creating opportunities for collaborative and group activities is an effective strategy that teachers could adopt to support the attainment, achievement and participation of learners of high potential and ability, and that teachers have a crucial role in the quality and character of such group interactions (Bailey et al., 2008). This also ties in well with the notion that task-related interaction between learners and others is beneficial and conducive to deeper learner and understanding (Patrick et al., 2005; Webb, 1983). Moreover, the idea that learners engage in 'talented transactions' that facilitate the development and nurturing of emerging abilities and talents when they make use, explore and interact with tools and artefacts in the learning environment has also been gaining attention in educational literature (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010).

Reflective Journal: "A chameleon may change colour to show another chameleon how it is feeling and sometimes also to find a girlfriend!"

What a very exciting morning! We knocked on the Pre-Junior Class' door at half past 8 sharp, armed with cushions, pencil boxes as well as a big curious smile and a beating heart. The Junior 2 children were all so eager to find out why they were there and what was going to happen! After the usual introductions, a few Pre-Junior and junior 2 kids were asked to come to the front and try and guess what was hiding inside my tummy. Some said lizard, others said crab and finally the children guessed that it was a chameleon. That is when we brainstormed ideas about what the children already knew about this wonderful reptile. Both Junior 2s and Pre-Juniors had a lot to share with other children. The little ones mentioned mostly the fact that chameleons change colour, (some said chameleons cannot go on something red because that would kill them). One Pre-Junior child (who happens to have a brother in Junior 2) told us that chameleons are cold-blooded and when I asked what does that mean, she specified that they are cold-blooded and we are warm-blooded. As expected the Junior 2s knew more

details – that a chameleon is a reptile, has scaly skin, that it lives in warm places such as the desert and the jungle and that it needs the sun to keep it warm. They were able to reproduce many reptile features discussed during last week’s session. They also mentioned the long sticky tongue and that it eats flies. As always many children wanted to share their thoughts, ideas and current knowledge with the rest but not all got the chance – this is always a downside of working with large groups of children. But then we moved on to the next activity which proved to be fascinating for all. One of the children in the Pre-Junior class, brought in two pet reptiles in a heated aquarium along – so we had these two visitors for everyone to see. The child, with his teacher’s help, explained things about the green water dragon and the bearded dragon. The look on the children’s faces was an expression of awe and bewilderment - both reptiles barely moved and every time one of them moved a limb or opened an eyelid, the children would utter in surprise! It was a wonderful experience indeed!

As teachers post pictures and information about such sessions on their classroom blogs, the interaction extends into the children’s homes and other classes and teachers who follow their blogs. As a matter of fact, in this case, families who knew about this project prior to its implementation through the classroom blogs demonstrated their interest and engagement in the project not only by commenting on the blogs, sending us links to online sites that connected with our project, but also by sending some interesting stuff including two exotic real-life reptiles kept as pets by one particular family. Eventually, the learning was further extended by a visit to a Bird Park where we saw some of the animals we spoke about during the project. This is how communities of learners are built and how individuals as part of these communities are influenced by, and in turn themselves transform knowledge, identities and culture.

As I re-read and interpreted children’s perceptions of their experiences as learners in my classroom, I am reminded of the important roles that we as adults and educators play in the lives of the young learners we come in touch with. Being aware of what the literature has to say about the notion of creating inclusive settings that support student-environment and task-related interactions where children are provided with various opportunities to develop their skills and acquire knowledge as they discover their gifts and talents is essential for teachers of mixed-ability classrooms - nurturing and developing children’s emerging abilities and aptitudes in the early years and the primary classroom fosters a culture of high expectations, respectful practices and beliefs in children’s capacity to learn and excel. Mireille’s narrative points to her liking for various kinds of interaction that bring about learning as well as enjoyment: in this extract, she refers to hands-on activities carried out with other peers such as scientific experiments, interaction with songs and stories that teach about concepts being covered and facilitate their understanding, as well as interaction with

outsiders and visitors who extend children's learning and help them make connections with the real world.

Mireille's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I enjoy our experiments during science especially when we are working in a group and discovering things about science like when we were learning about floating and sinking or about the water cycle. The song was so clever, it told us all about the different types of clouds, and how the water cycle works. One time an archaeologist came to our class and she brought old stuff with her to explain to us about her work. She is the aunty of Emma who is in my class. She works in a museum and I want to go and visit her one day because she said there is a special room for kids to learn more about digging for stuff and finding things out about the old times.

In my narrative of Jeremy's experiences as a very able learner in my class, I reflect upon missed opportunities that might have been the case should Jeremy have been placed in a group or class that consisted solely of similarly highly able learners. My experiences as a teacher of learners with diverse needs in mixed-ability classrooms has time and time again confirmed my values and beliefs in the creation of 'smart contexts' for all learners that give each child an opportunity to be the best they can be through inquiry-based instruction, supportive and enabling environments as varied innovative ideas and strategies that stimulate their minds and facilitate potential engagement in what activity theorists such as Barab and Plucker (2002) and Daniels et al. (2010) call 'talented transactions'. As suggested in Jeremy's narrative below, working within a diverse group of learners has many benefits for young able learners, not least emotional and social benefits apart from cognitive and linguistic ones.

Jeremy's Interpreted Narrative – through my (teacher's) eyes

Needless to say, when weighing the pluses and minuses of teaching a mixed-ability group, it is a teacher's attitude and willingness to turn every difficulty into an opportunity for deep and meaningful learning that will ultimately result in the success or failure of one's practice ... It is also a teacher's propensity to create the right environment where children understand that everybody's contribution is valuable and that talent and ability are linked to particular situations and that learning will not only happen but also be multiplied if interaction and participation in different groups is encouraged. Over the scholastic year, I made the following reflection: if placed with a group of likewise talented and highly able learners, Jeremy might most likely move at a faster pace or reach even higher levels of performance in certain areas of endeavour. But I also felt that he would miss out on priceless opportunities for him to develop his interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as he negotiated his way to include and be included in different groups within the classroom, groups that were created on the basis of friendship, ability, interests, talents and other numerous configurations. As I conclude this narrative, I cannot but feel in awe of the plenitude of lessons on education and life in general an educator learns in her interactions with individual young learners – like many of his classmates as well as previous and future pupils, Jeremy had enabled me to continue growing professionally as well as personally.

6.3.2.2 Teacher's professional attitude and learners' motivation and engagement

The research data, particularly the reflective journal as well as my own version of the participants' narratives (each of the six interpreted narratives through my eyes), provide a clear picture of my professional attitude towards my role as a teacher of young children with

diverse learning needs, different abilities, interests, experiences and backgrounds. Children's perceptions and views of learning, ability and schooling are also invaluable in bringing this out as their perceptions and continuous process of identity formation are also linked to the experiences provided by their teacher in their classroom.

One striking feature that runs through the data is my strong belief in working respectfully and positively with young children, seeing them as individuals and starting from a standpoint where all learners are deemed to be capable of learning, and that it is up to the adults and teachers in their school life to provide opportunities for them to flourish and develop their skills and emerging abilities. Starting from such a position of respect for their individuality and trust in their capacity for learning seems to give young children, including and perhaps most especially very able ones (who are said to possess highly attuned nervous systems in their brains that may contribute to advanced learning as well as increased emotional sensitivity and intensity) (Piechowski, 2003; Porter, 2005), a desire for learning, involvement and active participation as well as motivation to strive for excellence. In many ways, through the analysis and interpretation of the research data gathered and the narratives composed as a result of this research inquiry, I became further convinced of the importance of having quality teacher-child interactions that lead to powerful and healthy connections between the two for the ultimate benefit of their learning journeys and the development of positive learner identities.

In the sections above, it has already been discussed how the young able children in this inquiry are motivated and become engaged through effective provision, new learning and the incorporation of challenge in the kind of learning activities provided and in the running of the classroom. The excerpts below also demonstrate how my observations and reflections as a reflective practitioner and researcher helped me get to know the children's ways of working, their capacities and learning dispositions, their strengths and any areas that required my intervention. This knowledge assisted me in ensuring that my pedagogy and practice was inclusive of their learning needs in a way as to make their learning experience within my classroom an educationally and personally worthwhile one. Moreover, being aware of the diversity between the children in my class, differences that were obvious even amongst the six participants who were all regarded to be able learners through my professional eyes, gave

me reason for ensuring that flexibility, personalised learning and choice were integrated into my pedagogy and practice.

Mireille's Interpreted Narrative – through my (teacher's) eyes

In a nutshell, Mireille, with her quiet demeanour but consistently active participation in class activities, was always at the centre of the teaching and learning process. She worked unswervingly hard throughout the scholastic year and was able to flourish as an effective and increasingly independent learner who relished in working both alone and with others. Notwithstanding her confidence in her ability to perform and reach high levels in her academic work, she never failed to work steadily and to be committed to give her utmost, even in trivial tasks such as practising her joined handwriting or decorating her work. As her teacher I could not but feel privileged to have her in my class and to feel compelled to persevere in creating meaningful learning experience that would help this talented and hard-working girl to blossom and grow in whichever direction her learning journey took her.

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative – through my (teacher's) eyes

I observed Kelly grow and develop over the year, and saw her flourish as a learner, despite her tendency to be disorganised, clumsy at times and not very neat in her handwriting or her presentation. Nevertheless, I saw enormous potential in this girl who, if left to her own devices or if forgotten by her teacher, might have become 'invisible' as a learner. Although I acknowledge the fact that she might still do fairly well academically because she was innately a bright student, however I cannot help thinking about what a lot of opportunities for deep and meaningful learning would have been lost. I witnessed a change in her output as she began to enjoy activities that required her to work with others. She would alternate between taking the role of a leader or following other peers whom she looked up to such as Nicole, Giorgio and Jeremy. The more she became accustomed to our routines, to our learning journey, the more she increased her participation. I could not help but observe and rejoice in the fact that Kelly had truly moved from the periphery of our learning community to its core where true learning was happening constantly as the children were interacting with each other, with the technology around them and with other people and artefacts that facilitated the learning process.

Yun Dai and Coleman (2005) argued that educational efforts to plan and provide for learners who are believed to be potentially gifted are always based on a particular conception of the nature of giftedness. In section 3.3 of the literature review I discuss in detail various conceptions of high ability and giftedness in young children and come to a conclusion that when it comes to young children in early years classrooms, it is more appropriate to talk in terms of potential and emerging abilities that will flourish and lead to talented transactions and high ability if provided with appropriate and meaningful learning opportunities. This implies a great responsibility in the hands of the early years practitioner and the important role of teachers in facilitating the emergence of abilities, gifts and talents. The inclusive practices described and documented in this research inquiry reflect this conception of emerging abilities and potential in the early years.

All in all, as already discussed in the previous sections, engagement and motivation were made possible in this classroom because of a variety of factors including the use of the

thematic approach where learning is integrated and subjects are interconnected through a common theme, the wide variety of open-ended activities that encouraged social interaction and active participation, the connections and interactions with others and with a rich learning environment, an awareness and celebration of differences amongst learners through effective provision as well as the creation of good links between our classroom, other classrooms within our school and outside through the use of technology and also with families and community members who had something to share with us connected to a particular topic or concept.

The use of brainstorming with the whole class, modelling of interesting descriptions, use of various resources to facilitate understanding, scaffolding, support and collaboration with peers made the writing session below effective in improving children's outcomes whilst keeping them engaged and motivated. Encouraging the children to edit their own work before sharing it with a peer and/or with their families also gave the learners a sense of ownership and pride in their work. Challenge and independent work were also embedded in the activity as children were encouraged to be creative in their writing, to use dictionaries, index books, mind map and word banks that had previously been created as a whole-class effort to enhance their writing skills.

Reflective Journal: 'A Visit to the farm'

The children spent around 20 minutes of writing. You could hear a pin drop and most looked interested in what they were doing. I sat with a group of children who usually require help to build sentences, but as always there were children who required my assistance in the meantime. Some wanted reassurance that they were doing the right thing, others needed me to write down a tricky spelling on their Index Book, others were done in no time and I had to ask them to go back, re-read their writing and try and add a few more words to give their sentences more colour. In these situations, it would be ideal to have an assistant who would help me out in the class. There is the Learning Support Assistant, but because the two children she's helping have a short attention span, I do not ask for her help as her hands would already be full ... I was positively impressed by the complexity of some of the children's sentences. They wrote very good sentences with creative ideas. They mentioned different aspects of a lamb, including details about appearance, character, lamb's family, produce and so on. Many of the children made effective use of the words we had previously brainstormed together. I expressed my pleasure at reading their sentences and would have liked them to read out their sentences aloud but there were only 5 minutes left till the end of the lesson and therefore I asked the ones who were ready and had checked and edited their work to read their descriptions to one of the early finishers. The children just love sharing their work, having an audience and getting feedback about it. The bell rang, as usual too early for our tastes (you can always hear an utterance of disapproval from children who were enjoying the activity) but this is something that we cannot do much about as I needed to be in the next door classroom for my lesson. I encouraged everyone to take it home and to read it to someone (a parent or a sibling) and then choose another farm animal and write a description for homework.

At this point, it is important to mention the relevance of providing adequate teacher training, both initial and in-service, and continuous professional development opportunities so that teachers are able to expand their pedagogical repertoire, create the right conditions at the school and classroom level and develop positive professional attitudes for the benefit of all

learners including the very able ones. As outlined in the literature review in section 3.4.6, there are clear links between teacher education, continuous professional development and inclusive practices (Adey, 2004; Borders et al., 2014; Borko, 2004; Robinson & Dailey, 2014; Sutherland & Stack, 2014). Moreover, as pointed out by the external auditors on Special Education and Inclusive Education in Malta (Watkins et al., 2014) there also needs to be a climate and an adequate framework for national quality assurance and accountability mechanisms at a school and classroom level. Attempts at appropriate provision for the very able should not be regarded as isolated occurrences based on one teacher's particular professional interest or expertise but should consist of collective efforts at a college, school and grade level.

6.3.2.3 Home/school/community links

Learning within a sociocultural perspective is not confined simply to the four walls of a classroom. It occurs and is increased and encouraged through connections and interactions with others, both within and outside the classroom. The research inquiry included references to learning experiences being extended and expanded to children's families as well as to other classrooms and schools outside our learning community. The planning and implementation of twinning projects with younger or older learners, the use of classroom blogs, wikipage and online platforms, parent-child sessions in the classroom, visitors who come to class to talk about their particular occupations or a topic of interest, as well as visits and outings to places of interests all formed part of the learning experiences provided to this group of young learners.

In the extract taken from Kelly's interpreted narratives, she talks about her mother's reaction to her participation in our Christmas play where she was the narrator of the play and also had a small part as a 'she-viking'. Many children mention the play to be one of their favourite and best moments in their scholastic year – and talk about positive feelings connected to taking part in it as well as their pleasure and enjoyment in having their families and the whole school come to see them in action.

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I enjoy our Science lessons so much. I like learning about the world and the animals. I also like it when the teacher reads us stories like that story of Shen and the magic paintbrush we did in term 1. After the story, we did a play and everyone was a different character in the story. That was the very first play we did. I love drama. I really enjoyed our play of Emma the Red for the Christmas concert. I was a narrator and a 'she-viking' and I felt so proud and happy. I wore a pink dress, a pink furry coat and a pink Viking hat. I think the Christmas concert was the best thing this year. That's what I really liked because I had fun practising with my friends but mostly I had fun showing it to my mum. Before the show, I told her the title of the play but nothing else because I wanted it to be a surprise. She was so excited on the way home and she nearly cried in the car. When I saw her like that, I felt happy and excited, just like I feel when I go to the beach, so I jumped up and down on the backseat of mummy's car.

Through such a wide variety of activities that also include links with their families and with the community, children are provided with learning that is open, flexible, socially-mediated and participatory as proposed by sociocultural perspectives described in the literature review. The importance of supportive links with the community as well as with children's families is evident as children's perceptions include references to their relationships with their family members, to parental expectations and involvement, as well as to activities where learning was extended to people other than their teachers and peers. Parental involvement and interest is also evident in the excerpts below.

Reflective Journal: 'A visit to a farm'

The following day, as parents were picking up their kids from school, Mireille and Kyra's mums asked me whether the sentences their children had written during school work (about the little lamb) were sentences we wrote together or whether they had really written them by themselves. They were very happy to hear that their children had indeed come up with the sentences themselves following the whole class discussion and expressed their approval for similar activities that seem to motivate their kids to write.

Reflective Journal: 'Is this a real gruffalo or someone dressed up in a costume?'

This evening, as I was writing a post on the classroom blog, I received three emails from three different parents all of whom pointed out how happy their sons had been with today's creative writing activity because the gruffalo was a favourite character and book. We put up their writing on display outside our classroom walls and I can tell you that many children and parents have stopped by to have a look at our Gruffalo descriptions – we received some positive feedback from little kids who particularly liked the 3D wart on the gruffalo's head and also from the upper primary English teacher who came into class specifically to praise the children for their wonderful work on the gruffalo. Parents also commented on the interview with Julia Donaldson uploaded on the blog – Jeremy's mum said that her children thoroughly enjoyed it (she has four kids) and that the little one (a four year old) also noticed and commented on the fact that Julia first wrote her story on her journal (which she showed during the interview) and then 'she gave it to us in a book'. Sarah's mother told me that they had practically learnt the interview and the song by heart and that both her kids (Sarah and her younger sister who is five) were hooked on the Gruffalo and Julia Donaldson now. So, in a way, this confirmed my thought that, although I knew that the majority of the kids had read the Gruffalo before, they still found the character interesting enough to describe it. Using familiar and favourite stories and characters in stories is an effective way to teach grammatical and other concepts indirectly.

6.3.3 Identity Construction

In addition to talking about their own perceptions and experience of learning, ability and schooling, the young learners in the study concurrently refer to how they view themselves as learners in relation to others, what makes them and others effective in their learning, and how other people at school or outside school recognise and validate their efforts and hard work. There seems to be a thread that runs through the whole inquiry whereby participants negotiate ideas and thoughts about who they are and who they are becoming, about self-concept and perceptions of others, about confidence and capabilities as they work and learn together. Ultimately, there is evidence that identities are being constructed, altered and renegotiated throughout the process of interaction and learning and that each individual participant actively shapes and impinges on own and others' identity construction. In this

section, I shall discuss the notion of identity construction through the following sub-themes that were developed during the interpretative analysis:

- ✓ self-concept and awareness of self and others
- ✓ emotions and feelings connected with learning and schooling
- ✓ validation and recognition

6.3.3.1 Self-concept and awareness of self and others

As participants in this inquiry sought to make sense of their experiences as active members of a learning community that was vibrant, stable yet dynamic, and open to innovative and new ideas and approaches to the nurturing of young children's emerging abilities, reflections on self-concept, identity constructions and the interplay between a teacher's professional identity and her pupils' identity formation emerged. The research data began to yield interesting information about how young able children viewed themselves in terms of learning and ability in relation to self and others and how these perceptions matched or diverged from the ways in which I as their teacher constructed my own descriptions of the six participants. As I attempted to bring the research data into a coherent and unified research text in the form of 'interpreted narratives' presented in Chapter 5, and sought to seek further meaning and understanding through the thematic analysis, I was constantly reminded of Billington's (2006) advice to compare and contrast my own constructions of the children I was working and researching with to those that the children were themselves negotiating and forming as they participated, worked, learned and developed through the whole schooling experience.

Both the reflective journal and the interpreted narratives include numerous instances where I comment or reflect on my views and perceptions of the six participants in terms of who they are as children and learners, who they are becoming and turning into, and the roles I need to take to meet their individual needs and to help them learn, develop and improve overall outcomes. As explained in the Chapter 4 on Methodology, the six participants were selected on the basis of my own perception and experience of them as very able learners with high potential to excel in one or more areas of endeavour, learners who consequently required the provision of challenging learning experiences. Research data from the reflective journal, the conversational interviews and the interpreted narratives includes evidence of my

perception and view of these children as capable learners. For instance, the excerpts below clearly shows that seen through my eyes, as both teacher and researcher, each participant

Reflective Journal – ‘I changed my mind ... I do want to take part!’

Now, I’d like to dedicate a paragraph to my feelings about Jeremy’s adamant refusal to take part. As soon as he said it, I felt honestly shocked because he is, in my eyes, a very particular child with a brilliant and creative mind who keeps me always on my toes and who is always on my mind when I’m planning my sessions. As a researcher, I would have loved to document his responses, his learning journey, his story. But he, out of all children, had straight away refused to be part of this – I wondered why, and thought that perhaps he’d had enough already of his mother studying – so this ‘study’ reminded him of the time his mum spent on the computer or perhaps he hadn’t enjoyed his role in her study for the assignment. My reaction was to say that it was fine and that should he change his mind, he just had to tell me – anytime during the year. I also looked at my colleague, who was observing the scene – and I realised that she had had my same reaction from the look she gave me. So here again, for the umpteenth time, Jeremy had decided to keep me on my toes. The fact that I would have to leave him out of my documentation and reflections made me feel somewhat disappointed but then realised that he’d still be in my class and although I wouldn’t be including him as a participant, he’d still be undoubtedly influencing my choice of pedagogy, my plan of action and my practice as he’s been doing before. Then, out of the blues, as we concluded the session and the children started to move freely around the room to get ready for the next activity, he came up to me and said: “Ms Rosienne, I changed my mind. I do want to take part.”

Giorgio’s Interpreted Narrative: Through my (teacher’s) eyes

Being an only child, who was truly the centre of his parents’ attention in all senses, and their pride and joy (which was so evident in their eyes whenever we got a chance to talk about his progress, his achievements, his personality, his artistic talents), he had definitely acquired or accentuated this tendency for exactness through working closely with a mother who possibly was close to being a perfectionist herself. On the other hand, I could see clearly that there was also an element of innate inclination to do things in a particular order which was both structured and creative. This was what distinguished Giorgio as a highly creative thinker ... this propensity for inventive perfectionism. This trait was evident in his drawings, his sentences, his attempts at writing simple stories and his projects as well as in the way he organised his work, his belongings and his games. One might expect a perfectionist to be stifled by such a quality, and this would indeed make Giorgio take longer than others to complete a given task. At times it would also result in frustration because his work was not quite up to his standards, whereas in my eyes and in the eyes of his classmates it would be a thoroughly good piece of work. But all in all he was doing exceptionally well, producing beautiful pieces of work (both artistic and academic) and unconsciously conveying a message to others that it takes talent coupled with plenty of hard work to excel.

mentioned possesses positive learning dispositions that effect my planning, pedagogy and practice, and ultimately my professional identity as a practitioner who seeks to meet individual needs and whose outlook acknowledges the need for challenging learning opportunities to cater for children who can reach higher levels of performance.

Through the reading and re-reading of the data, it became evident that as an early years educator I sought to work respectfully and positively with young children particularly through my interaction with them and my view of them as capable learners – this undoubtedly was influential on the construction and reconstruction of my own professional identity. For instance, in the journal entry that describes the children’s information session where I informed them about this research inquiry and their participation in it before I started to collect the data, there are comments that demonstrate a specific view of children and childhood from my part as a practitioner working with young children, one that concords with

Nutbrown's (1996) approach of 'respectful educators – capable learners' and also one that indicates a firm belief in the validity of seeking children's views to help us improve our dealings with them and our practices in general. This is also in agreement with Corsaro's (2001) view of children as active participants and active agents in our societies.

Reflective Journal: Children's Information Session

I placed the children's cushions in the shape of a circle around the mat in the library area of our classroom. I started the session by showing them the information sheet and consent form I had previously sent to their parents and asked whether they knew what they were and why I had given the sheets to their parents. Jeremy instantly said "I know" followed by another two kids – Mireille said "It's for your university"... Then Jeremy said "It's for your assignment for university". How do you know? "It's because my mummy did something like this ... she had an assignment about me." Do you know what it was about? "Yes, it was about me and about the things I like"... I explained that apart from being a teacher, I was currently a student at the University of Sheffield in England and that this year was a very special one for me as I need to conduct a study (a bit like my homework). I tried to explain that although I learn many things by discussing with my 'university teachers' or by reading books about school and about learning, I feel that I can find out how to be good at my job and how to make learning a great experience for them (the children I teach) by observing and writing about how the children in my class learn, about what activities help them to learn and to be good at what they do and the kind of lessons and activities that help children to be the best they can be. Most of all, I wish to listen to what children have to say about learning, about school and about being good at doing different things ...

In this example taken from an excerpt about children's information session, the children in my class were asked to sit in a circle in our carpeted area where we liked to meet and conduct our whole group discussions as this gave us a sense of being a community. I talked to my class about the reasons behind my research inquiry, what it entailed and why I needed their participation, all along keeping in mind that the children had a right to know what was going to happen and most importantly, for them to understand that I valued and acknowledged their views so much that I wished to document them in my study so that they could help me understand more the strength in my pedagogy and practices as well as those areas that needed to be improved. Such an approach has also been advocated by Christensen & James (2008) and by Nutbrown & Hannon (2003), whose work promotes the idea of seeking children's perceptions and constructions about their own experiences of issues and topics that directly influence aspects of their lives.

The data seems to indicate that as a teacher of young learners, I view myself as one who seeks to build strong teacher/ pupil relationships based on mutual respect and trust. This comes across clearly through the efforts that I seemed to make in practising an approach that regards children in my class as active agents – ones who made an impact on the learning process whilst their identity, learning and development were also being shaped by the learning process itself and by the contexts and relationships in which they happened. This is in

accordance with more recent perspectives on learning and development, namely cultural-historical activity theorists such as Daniels (2001) who departs from the idea that human beings actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them. Thus, in seeking to understand able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling, I seem to be promoting their participation and active involvement in the creation of those factors which might have a direct effect on their learning and education.

Research data from the conversational interviews and the reflective journal included children's own views of themselves as learners – their comments show a certain degree of self-awareness and generally also revealed that positive learner identities were being confirmed, negotiated, developed and sometimes reconstructed as children participated in our daily interactions and learning activities. The extracts presented below clearly demonstrate that young able children already hold strong views about their own abilities and about what makes them and others 'smart'. This concurs with findings from a study conducted with children from Euro-American and Chinese cultures, aimed at eliciting kindergarten children's perceptions of achievement and perceptions of their achieving peers carried out by Jin Li and Qi Wang (2004). Results confirmed differences between children's views based on their culture and identity and also indicated that despite their young age, kindergarten children already possessed rich conceptions and attitudes towards ability and achievement due to an internalisation of the beliefs and values within their respective cultures.

Reflective Journal – 'No book is ever too hard for me'

During the time spent copying the set of new words on their 'Sound Book' (a copybook which contains all sounds/ words learned during the year) – I called children to my desk so we could choose their library book together. I usually like to do this exercise in partnership with the child ... When I called Kelly, she pointed to a book called 'Mermaidia' which had a beautifully illustrated cover and when I opened it and saw that it was mostly text with small print, I asked her whether she would really like to borrow it or whether she thought it was a bit too hard for now. Her reply was: "No book is ever too hard for me!" And what a reply – a reply full of meaning, a reply that tells a lot about this particular six year old's perception of herself as a competent and confident reader. I had previously observed how fluent she was in her reading, way above what you would expect of a Junior 2 child in the first term – she was an avid reader and took every opportunity to read during the school day. Her mother during parents' day had confirmed that the girl who lived with her mother, her auntie and her grandparents was surrounded by books from a young age and everybody in the home read regularly.

Jeremy's Conversational Interview

R: So, who says that you are smart, apart from you knowing it. Do you ever hear somebody saying it?

J: Yes, Giorgio ...

R: What does Giorgio say?

J: Because once I heard him say 'you are the smartest person in this class' at my party. And then there's Deyan ... once he was sitting at my table and he said 'You are a really smart guy!'

R: Do you like that when they say it?

J: Yes.
 R: And what about your teachers? Do they ever tell you that you are smart?
 J: Yes.
 R: Who?
 J: Our LSA, you, the Maths teacher especially and the Maltese teacher.
 R: So they all do!
 J: Yes, apart from the Physical Education teacher.
 R: Do you think you are smart?
 J: Yes.
 R: What are you good at?
 J: I'm good at the verbs and those ... I'm also good in grammar.
 R: What else apart from grammar?
 J: Well, maths ...
 R: What else ... think about the subjects ...
 J: Science ...
 R: Think about the topics that you really know about ...
 J: Yes space ... and our island home – I know quite a lot about that cos I travel a lot ... I go somewhere twice a year, I go abroad twice a year ... I go to Gozo in the Carnival holidays, and this year I did that ... and then I go to Scotland in July ... I think I went over the Scotland thing.
 R: You think? What did you tell me ... the last thing?
 J: And this year we're going to Scotland beside Gozo ... [11:10]
 R: Okay ... how do you feel when someone says that you're good at something, and that you're smart?
 J: I feel proud of myself.
 R: Do you like it or you'd prefer they don't say it?
 J: I really like it, a real lot ...
 R: Why do you like it?
 J: Because I see that I've been working hard.

Nicole's Interpreted Narrative – Through her eyes

All the children in my class are very smart. All of them are good at something. Some are very good at everything too but everyone is clever because everyone can learn new things. I really feel that most of my friends are very smart, because each one of us is good at different things. Jeremy, I know he's really smart because I listen to him when he starts talking about something interesting – I enjoy listening to what he has to say, I learn a lot from him too. I've known him since Junior 1 so I know a lot about him. Then there's my friend Mireille who's good at many things but mostly at Maltese because she can speak it and write it very well and because she goes to Maltese Cathecism so she has friends who speak Maltese. Kelly is smart too – once she made this Show and Tell about nature and she was like a teacher for us and we learned many things about nature because she could explain very well. I can read my big fat book, the chapter books, and I think that this makes me smart too. When you read the big books you learn more, you learn about the world. I like reading fact books, sometimes I read them to my sister when she comes in my bed. Making things can make you smarter – like once I was trying to make a kite with my nannu [grandpa] but it couldn't work at first, it kept coming down so my nannu got more bamboo until we managed to get the kite up. That day I learned things about flying and about bamboo and kite paper. We needed to make sure the kite was light enough so it flies.

I am good at a lot of things like science. Science is fun and sometimes I make pictures of what I like so once I made a portrait of a scientist and I enjoyed that a lot. I gave this portrait to my mummy and she got a fright – it was really funny! He was a scary scientist and he was making an experiment. I still remember how much I laughed when I gave it to her. It's nice to make mummy smile because she has a nice smile and when she smiles I know that she is happy.

6.3.3.2 Emotions and Feelings connected with learning and schooling

A recurring theme across the research data was that of emotions and feelings felt, observed and expressed by the teacher and the learners. In the review of literature, I discussed the role of emotion in learning, particularly findings from brain research and the neurosciences that have been putting forward the idea that a child's emotional state has a direct influence on his ability to learn due to the connection between learning and thinking with feelings and

emotional well-being (Damasio, 2004). According to Billington (2006), professionals including educators, must ensure that this knowledge about the important role of emotion in facilitating children's openness to learning and development should be acknowledged and kept clearly in mind when dealing and working with children. This is also mentioned by Sousa (1998) who advocates for the creation of safe and supportive learning environments where strong levels of stress are minimised and opportunities for true learning provided. Furthermore, there is also mention of the connection between emotions and the formation of identities since identity construction is a process that happens within, through and is dependent upon contexts and relationships as well as stories and emotions (Rodgers and Scott, 2008). Throughout the study, participants (both teacher and learners) make reference to how particular aspects of their schooling experience make them feel, and in turn this provides evidence about how their feelings and emotions effect their perceptions of learning, ability and schooling as well as their self-concept and motivation to learn.

When talking about emotions linked to their experiences as Junior 2 learners, the six participants mostly focus on positive feelings such as enjoyment, excitement, joy as well as feeling proud and accomplished. However, they also occasionally refer to aspects of their schooling experiences that bring about boredom, frustration or make them feel upset. The 'having fun' factor is mentioned by all children as they discuss and evaluate their scholastic year during our conversational interviews. When asked to assign their Junior 2 experience a number from one to ten (ten being the highest and most favourable mark), all of them gave it a 'nine' or a 'ten, supporting their choice with arguments about why they feel that being in Junior 2 had been a fun and interesting experience.

Mireille's conversational interview

R: So if you had to give your Junior 2 experience a number from one to ten, ten being super and one meaning that it wasn't such a good experience, then there's 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 ...what number if you had to give it points would you choose?

M: Ten.

R: Ten? Why?

M: Because I really had fun learning all the subjects.

R: Is there anything that you'd do differently if you were me or Ms Sue, would you change anything?

M: I wouldn't change anything.

R: You wouldn't? You're sure.

M: (nods)

Some children also talked about optimistic feelings of anticipation they felt prior to entering Junior 2 – which indicates that young children have expectations and hopes for what they

consider would be a new positive scholastic year. It also shows that children talk with others (siblings and friends) about school and being in a particular class or with a particular teacher and gain knowledge and information by observing and listening to adults who may discuss their children's schooling experiences with others – these help form ideas and thoughts about what a particular scholastic year might be about. The following two excerpts, one taken directly from my conversational interview with Jeanine and the other one from Kelly's interpreted narrative present clear examples of children's expressed needs for new learning, experiences that are fun, new friendships associated with the start of a new scholastic year.

Jeanine's conversational interview

R: And why nine – that's a really good mark. So why 9?

J: Because we had a lot of fun.

R: So you think you'd do it again if you had to.

J: I'm gonna keep on remembering that I was full excitement coming to Junior 2.

R: Really? And why were you full of excitement? What were you expecting? What things did you want to do in Junior 2?

J: Difficult things.

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative

I like school. It makes me happy. I feel happiness coming into myself when I learn new things. I like my teachers. They are all good and they teach me new things. They are so good that they help me to like the things that I find boring. And that makes me feel excited and proud. I knew my Junior 2 teachers would teach me well and in summer, before coming to Junior 2, I told my mummy this. I love learning and when I go home, I teach my mummy things she does not know. Sometimes I have to repeat to her, just like my teacher does when children do not listen, but it does not matter that I repeat. I can repeat for her, just like I did last year for Sports' Day – I think I had to repeat ten times because she didn't hear me! Then there are other times I don't need to tell her again because I know she knows them already.

During their interactions, the six participants talked about activities and tasks they did in class that made them feel happy. Giorgio, for instance, who is an all-rounder and has potential to excel in a number of areas of endeavour that range from the academic to the artistic to the social and the emotional mentions various activities that bring him joy. Mireille, who possesses excellent language skills and is creative and artistic too, also refers to different aspects of her schooling experience that make her happy.

Giorgio's Interpreted Narrative

There were also other things that made me happy in Junior 2. I enjoyed joining my letters and practising my handwriting – I found that quite easy and whenever I did it, I felt happy and proud of myself. It made me feel smart and older. The teacher and my mum said I was very neat when joining my letters. I also enjoyed reading. We used to do all kinds of reading. Sometimes we listened to our teacher reading us a story while we relaxed on our cushions in the library corner. Sometimes we read with a partner, a sentence or a paragraph or a page each. Once we also recorded ourselves reading stories for children in New York to listen to it. Our teacher put that on a wikipage where children from different countries could see it and hear us read. We listened to them reading their favourite books too. There were times when we could read alone too. I like reading alone so no one can disturb me. It feels so good to read quietly especially when it's an adventure – it feels like you are there in the story with the characters and if you read alone you can really imagine you are part of the story.

Mireille's Interpreted Narrative

I felt very happy to be in Junior 2 with all my teachers and my friends. I liked my Junior 2 class because we did a lot of English work and English is my favourite subject. And Religion, I like talking about Jesus and we do that a lot during Religion ... Open Day was one of the best days. Every class in the school did a lot of work on a town or village in Malta and our class chose to learn about Mdina which is the old city of our island. Our parents and other adults and children came to our class and we had a gigantic timeline which we used to ask questions to them in a quiz. It was so much fun asking people questions, especially our parents ... But then there were so many other things that I liked in Junior 2. I would not change anything at all because it was perfect for me! One thing I truly enjoyed doing was learning how to join my letters. That made me feel proud of myself because I could join letters just like grown-ups do, just like my sister does. And my teachers say I write neatly when I join the letters. I've always wanted to write in joint and now I've learned how to do it. I need more practice of course but I can join many letters. Joining my letters makes me feel older.

It is worth noting that as such there were not many instances in the data that revealed negative emotions and feelings connected with learning and schooling. The six participants seemed to generally be happy with the way things happened during the scholastic year and mostly focused on what they liked as opposed to what they disliked or would want to change. One can also point to the fact that, particularly during the conversational interviews, the children might have been concerned about their loyalty towards me as their teacher, and emphasised positive aspects of their school experiences as opposed to negative ones, even though I specifically explained that it was fine with me that they talk about both and that their input would assist me and other teachers to know what children enjoyed and what they disliked with regards to school and learning. Apart from Kelly who understandably expressed a particular dislike for when a teacher shouts, the other participants talk about negative feelings only in terms of a dislike for particular activities that they do not particularly enjoy. There seems to be a consensus amongst the participants that repetition and 'easy' work are not desirable and should be replaced by new learning and challenging or 'hard' work. The participants also seem to prefer group work or pair work, thus expressing a dislike for work that is done alone. Giorgio, in particular, expressed his concern about a number of issues and suggested that these need to be targeted by the school management team and teachers as areas to be improved as can be seen from the following excerpt.

Giorgio's Interpreted Narrative

I liked doing most of the things we did in class. I would not change anything to my year at school. Except for one thing – I don't like the short breaks because there are short playing times so I'd make it longer. And another thing, I'd give children short breaks during the day for them to read their favourite books too. You know, I could also ask Ms Sue to paint the walls again, both inside and outside so that our school looks like new again. Let me see, I would probably ask her to paint the walls inside blue and then we'll add big red spots to make it colourful, bright and exciting. Perhaps the walls on the outside can be painted white with some brown designs too. And now that I'm thinking about it, I think that the school should build more classrooms so that then ... hmmm ... Can I say this in Maltese so that I explain myself better? Emm ... minflok jispicaw sa Senior 5 jispicaw iktar tard halli jgawdu l-iskola sakemm jikbru aktar!!! [Hmmm ... instead of ending their school journey here in Senior 5, they would be able to further their studies here till they're older so they can enjoy more years in this school]. But otherwise, I like THIS school so very much.

Keeping in mind that as their teacher and researcher, I perceived the six participants to be either highly able or potentially able to excel academically and/or in other areas of endeavour, one may conclude that the participants were all considered to be successful learners, or at least had the potential to succeed rather than fail as students if provided with the right supportive learning environment. Generally speaking, they seemed to all regard school, Junior 2 specifically, to be fun and a good scholastic experience through their expression of positive feelings when they talked about it on various occasions. They were all happy and enthusiastic about their learning experiences, about being in Junior 2 and rated their experience as a very good one. Their performance, motivation and engagement were definitely highly commendable too. It is therefore fair enough to suggest that these learners clearly show that there is a strong link between emotion and one's ability to learn as suggested by Damasio (2004).

Another aspect that is worth discussing is the connection between emotions and the construction of identities. When children are presented with activities that engage them and enable them to be active participants in the learning process, they feel excited, happy and proud. When this happens on multiple occasions, through the provision of varied activities that are meaningful and relevant to children's interests and lives, children develop positive learner identities because they enjoy the process of learning, they become confident as they work alone or with others and develop skills or acquire new knowledge. This becomes a positive cycle of reinforcing their learner identities as capable learners. In many ways, this concurs with Sutherland's (2008) idea that during the early years, when learners are in the process of developing their learner identities, they are influenced by the learning context in which they learn. More specifically, she contends that young able learners who experience positive learning environments are more likely to develop positive learning dispositions, which eventually brings about the construction of positive learner identities. This ties well with the idea that creating safe and stimulating learning contexts where learners have fun, feel happy and safe whilst increasing their knowledge and understanding of the world around them is not only sensible and desirable but also effective in ensuring that learners are equipped with a positive self-concept that ultimately enables them to learn and develop in healthy, successful ways.

Nicole's Interpreted Narrative – Through the teacher's eyes ...

The questions Nicole sometimes asked blew me away and her approach and attitude to our learning experience made me wish to be able to show other teachers, parents and educators that this is why I loved teaching the early years, this is why I did not feel that I was wasting my talents by working with young children (as people at times said to me), this is why I felt that an early years teacher had a very important role to play in children's lives. Young learners come to our classrooms with an open mind, with potential and abilities that are still emerging, with plenty of expectations for their own learning and development. As teachers and educators, we may simply follow the curriculum guidelines, making sure that each concept for each subject area we teach is delivered. But we can also make a conscious effort to do all of this whilst creating the right environment where children not only acquire the skills and attitudes required for them to progress from one scholastic year to the next, but help them uncover their true potential, discover a passion for learning and new knowledge, and to work alone or with others to enthusiastically find out about the world. These are the kind of thoughts and reflections that Nicole and young learners like her inspired and triggered in my mind as an educator in a mixed-ability classroom. These are the experiences and encounters that taught me to be more open and flexible in my approach to teaching young children. These are the little 'success stories' that fuelled my ambition and need to reach each and every individual that entered my classroom walls. This is the reason behind my insistence and responsibility to continually provide learning opportunities that leave a positive impact on their experience of schooling and their identities. In my eyes, Nicole was one of my little 'success stories' and by the end of the year I felt that I had managed to partly or more fully inspire her to be the best she could be and to be happy and proud about who she was growing to be.

In a similar way, a reflective and dedicated teacher who constantly strives to develop and improve her practice for the benefit of her learners gains her satisfaction from observing her pupils' response and reactions to activities that have been carefully planned to promote learning and talent development. Such a teacher feels a sense of pride and accomplishment when learners become engaged in a task and when observations of her pupils' engagement clearly indicate a high level of motivation, task commitment and enjoyment. As Rodgers and Scott (2008; pg. 733) suggest, emotions play a role in the construction of teacher identities as, together with teacher's stories, they constitute the internal meaning-making aspects of identity formation. In this inquiry, as the teacher-researcher, who was examining my own pedagogy and practice through children's perceptions and participation, I paid particular attention to how the children felt as they engaged in everyday classroom life or in specific learning activities, and also to the emotions and feelings that I felt as I sought to create a safe and supportive learning environment where children with diverse abilities, including the more able ones, benefited from their time and work in class. I was never satisfied with simply covering content material for the sake of syllabi and curriculum demands. I was always constantly aware of how to present the material in the best possible way to make it interesting, relevant and challenging without adding unnecessary stress to the task. The following excerpts from stories written in the reflective journal include references to emotions felt and expressed by both teacher and learners during particular activities. They demonstrate how meaningful learning occurs when children become engaged in a particular

task or event and how a teacher experiences positive feelings as she reflects on children's response, participation and learning.

Reflective Journal – 'Granny saves the day!'

The children first listened to an illustrated audio version of the story on my laptop, answering questions and predicting the story all along. The children seemed to relate to what happened to Lizzie and her elephant, and I noticed how they managed to empathise with the distraught girl whose favourite toy got unravelled. I was also pleased by the fact that many children put themselves in Lizzie's shoes and answered open ended questions that aimed to encourage a deeper understanding of the story rather than just what had happened. As a teacher of mixed-ability classrooms, I feel that the use of open-ended questions is a very effective means of encouraging children to think creatively and allows for a more challenging approach to a story, thus catering for children who can reach higher levels of thinking. The word 'unravelled' was definitely a new word for all children – but watching my tiny knitted scarf being 'unravelled' in front of their eyes (I asked Jacob to do this for us – to pull the yarn until there was only a long string of wool left in his hands) was a vivid demonstration of what the word actually meant and therefore of what a big disaster it must have been for Lizzie to find out that her much loved knitted Elephant (who had been her companion throughout all her life) had got unravelled when it got caught on a thorn! And what a relief when they discovered that (in Jeremy's own words) 'Granny saved the day!' by spending the night knitting the Elephant back for Lizzie. When I asked them why Lizzie ran to granny's room early in the morning saying 'The Tusk Fairy's been!', they all seemed to know instinctively that an Elephant didn't get a visit from a 'tooth fairy' but only from a 'tusk fairy' (as if saying 'Why would you think otherwise Miss?') – this understanding of the use of a term such as a 'tusk fairy' indicated how engaged and interested the children had been in the story and how fully they had grasped what had happened despite the use of some new vocabulary and a storyline that was somewhat different from the usual stories we had read so far.

Reflective Journal – 'Best Day Ever'

I was woken up by the tedious sound of the alarm clock – as soon as I opened my eyes, I realised that the late mornings in bed are over as today is the first day of our second term. I've made it a point to try and get as much rest as I could these holidays, knowing that the coming months would be very busy for me. How will I cope with my added role of researcher together with that of an early years teacher? At the same time, I feel so enthusiastic about what is awaiting me in the coming term.

I was welcomed by a class full of children beaming with energy (apart from a few who had left home as early as 6 o'clock) who all had something to say about their holidays, exciting outings, Christmas presents and so on. I made it a point to go round the class and acknowledge each child with a smile, a hug or a nice comment. In addition to all the inevitable excitement of coming back to class after such a long holiday, we were also surprised to find that our old wooden, broken benches had been replaced by six fairly big colourful tables and twenty-two chairs. This definitely lifted my spirits a notch upwards as I had been asking for new tables and chairs for the past three years – not only to make our classroom environment more attractive for the kids but also for practical reasons.

Routines and procedures were also important to provide these young learners with a stable and secure learning environment. Both myself and the six participants referred to the importance of having routines and procedures that not only provide safety and a sense of security, thus forming secure attachments between the members of our learning community, but it also allowed for independent work and reduced demands on the teacher. Routines and procedures included having a visual timetable that was reviewed every morning to give the children a sense of knowing what to expect, having specific 'library days' but also being flexible enough to allow those fluent and avid readers to change their books more often, using particular methods when tackling different subjects such as the use of the TASC wheel when working on a project in Creative Thinking sessions or using materials such as dictionaries,

index books and word banks when working on a writing task. The data is populated with such references to classroom routines and procedures but, due to word limitations, I am only including the following excerpt to exemplify this. Through the use of routines and procedures, coupled with a flexible and open attitude towards teaching and learning, I feel I was able to create a safe and supportive learning environment that encouraged children's active participation and acknowledged and validated their emotional well-being as a necessary requisite for openness to learning.

Reflective Journal – 'Best Day Ever'

*After going over the timetable for the day, I informed the children that during our 3 sessions together, we would be combining the English and Science sessions in order to introduce the theme for the coming term and also to work on our English spelling. I showed the children the book *The Snail and the Whale* by Julia Donaldson and asked whether anyone had read or seen this book before ...*

During the telling of the story, the children first looked at the pictures and try to predict what would happen. I could see how the children would actively participate in the discussion, particularly when open-ended questions were asked such as 'How can a tiny snail travel around the world?' Or 'Why and how did the whale get beached on the sand?' And 'In what way could the school children help to save the whale?' Some children were particularly creative in their answers. For example, answering the first question, Giorgio said the snail could find a large shell and tie it with ropes to two seahorses to travel around the world. Jeremy said the snail could ask the whale to give him a lift 'because that is what the story is called – so it must be the whale who would give the snail a lift!' He is very quick to make connections, and is usually able to 'think aloud', expressing and reasoning things out in front of everyone. In reality, many children wanted to have a go, some repeating what others had said before, others building on what their friends had said while the rest came up with original ideas. In such discussions, it is easy to disappoint some children by moving on to the next question or task before they would have exhausted the question but, as a teacher, I do feel I need to manage the time well, particularly due to the fact that I am usually with a group for 40 minutes or 80 minutes (in a double session).

There were also instances when as a teacher working with young learners of diverse abilities and needs, I expressed negative emotions and feelings mostly connected with the limitations that prevented me from always fulfilling my role to the best of my abilities. Feelings of frustration, exhaustion and helplessness were sometimes expressed as can be seen in the example below.

Reflective Journal – 'Mr Elephant will smell like a washed house!'

Soon it was time for each group to share with the whole class. Some children didn't wish to stop but I said they could explain what hadn't been finished – unfortunately the bell keeps us teachers always on the alert, knowing that soon we have to move to another class. Although team teaching has its benefits, I still feel that at this tender age, children would benefit more from having a classroom teacher that teaches them all subjects by integrating them through the use of an overarching theme. This is an issue that I have often pointed out and discussed with our school leader, asking her to consider changing the system of team teaching for the early years of primary i.e. Junior 1 to Junior 3 – however, so far, this seems to be an impossible change in her eyes as, according to her, having contact with a number of teachers will ensure that there are no considerable differences between what each class acquires and experiences. There are undoubtedly other issues that she is not voicing out to me but at this point I feel that my task is to ensure that the time spent with each class I teach is full of opportunities for meaningful learning to take place. Rather than complain about things that I cannot change as they require intervention and decision-making from the administration, I prefer to focus my energies on improving my practice despite limitations and constraints that stifle my practice. However, I do feel that if educators and teachers are to provide their classes with more inquiry-based and opportunities for meaningful learning to take place, school leaders and administrators must ensure the provision of a supportive environment that backs the teaching staff up – a task which our leader is definitely working on but has her own constraints and stumbling blocks.

Reflecting on the reasons behind these emotions, I am reminded of Billington's notion of theoretical fluency (2006), whereby he suggests that confident practitioners who work with children must be always in touch with changing theories and knowledge that affect our practices and use such knowledge when reflecting and improving our practices. When, as a teacher who is knowledgeable and informed about best practices and inclusive pedagogies for the emergence of abilities and talents, I experienced situations where I could not apply this knowledge into practice due to a variety of circumstances, I felt my confidence falter and also experienced feelings of guilt and incompetence. There were also times when the feelings of frustration were linked to the fact that I was aware of the idea that even though I might succeed in creating what Barab and Plucker (2002) call 'smart contexts' to provide all learners with opportunities to develop and nurture their emerging abilities and talents through the careful creation of a learning environment that is safe, supportive and stimulating, this will not have many long-term benefits if such an approach to talent development does not become a whole-school project. The following episode that describes Jeremy's decision to give his assent to participate in this research study after having initially refused to do so shows that this participant was also aware of this issue.

Reflective Journal: Children's information session - 'I changed my mind ... I do want to take part'

Then, out of the blues, as we concluded the session and the children started to move freely around the room to get ready for the next activity, he came up to me and said: "Ms Rosienne, I changed my mind. I do want to take part." I was switching off my computer (I had switched it on to audio record the session so that I could go back to it later) – and I stopped, looked at Jeremy and said "Are you sure about this Jeremy? You know it's ok not to take part in this, do you?" And he said "Yes, I do but I still wish to do it." And I asked the reason behind him changing his mind. To which he replied "I was thinking that when you tell other teachers about what we like and what we enjoy doing in class, I want them to know that I am very interested in space and I want them to know the things I like doing at school." He was referring to a comment I've made during the explanation when I had said that I wish to share my findings with other teachers and administrators in this school and outside this school to make classrooms a better place for learning for them and for other children. Jeremy had realised that, although in this classroom, I knew what he liked doing and therefore he didn't need me to write about it, but things might be different in other classrooms with other teachers so better be on the safe side. I gave him his information sheet back and he changed the 'no' into a 'yes'. And I felt relieved!

6.3.3.3 Validation and recognition of own abilities and performance

Children's identities and their views and constructions of the people and the world around them are not formed or reconstructed in isolation but created in collaboration and negotiation with others within social contexts that confirm, alter or introduce new ideas and thoughts through everyday connections and experiences. Freeman and Mathison (2008) suggest that in order to understand children's experiences and perceptions, one needs to analyse and interpret their words and actions as they interact with others within particular social contexts. Having worked and taught the six participants for one scholastic year whilst

carrying out this narrative inquiry, I have gathered stories and ideas about who they are as learners, their own perceptions of themselves, of others, of their knowledge about learning, schooling and ability. However, as I analysed and interpreted the data collected, I was at times amazed by what I was discovering, particularly about the fact that the young able children in my class had already formed firm and strong thoughts and ideas about their own capacity for learning, about what made themselves and others smart, about activities that helped them learn and/or have fun whilst doing so, about who in their class was a very able learner. When asked about the reasons behind their assessment of one's ability, all participants mentioned validation and recognition by teachers, family members and other peers. However, they also own their views and perceptions using phrases like 'I know they are smart ...', implying that even though others confirm their own views, in many ways they already had this knowledge themselves.

One striking feature in children's narratives is the fact that when asked about the children they believe to be smart, they mention some of the six participants that I myself had chosen for the second phase of the study, a choice that I had made based on my view of these children as having high potential to excel and reach high levels of achievement and performance. This triggers a number of questions as their teacher and researcher of children's perceptions and views of learning, ability and schooling. Amongst other things, including the validity of seeking children's perceptions and legitimacy of children's knowledge claims as valid in their own right (Freeman and Mathison, 2008), one also wonders about the subtle messages that are passed as a teacher and her learners' lives are intertwined through their daily interactions in class. Questions of identity-making that results from exchanges and interactions between teachers and learners have already been researched and documented, particularly using narrative approaches to research (Clandinin et al., 2006; Huber et al., 2012).

In the examples provided below, Jeanine talks assertively about peers who she considers to be smart and provides evidence for their presumed high ability. She also suggests that although some teachers have validated her own views about her achieving peers, she firmly believes in this with or without such recognition from adults. However, Jeanine does not deny that praise and encouragement from her teachers and parents are most welcome when it comes to her own capabilities as a learner. As can be observed in their interpreted narratives, the rest of the participants also discuss confidently their views about peers who

they deem to be smart, about their own abilities and special talents and about their views on learning and ability in general.

Jeanine's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

Many children are smart in my class. Mireille and Jeremy are very clever. When we are in class, Mireille always knows what she has to do and the teachers do not need to repeat things for her. Jeremy is very good in many things, like Maths and Maltese. When the Maths teacher asks us questions, he knows the answers really well. I know they are smart and sometimes the teachers also say they are clever but Mireille is better than Jeremy in Maltese. Sometimes teachers tell me I am smart too and I like it because when they say it I know I am a clever girl. But only the teachers tell me that I am smart not my friends. Mummy tells me that if I want to be smart I have to do things slowly and carefully and I have to think a lot, to use my brains.

As outlined in section 6.3.1.2, the participants in this study seem to view the idea of being 'smart' as desirable and positive. Thus being recognised as 'smart' and 'able' is something that elicits positive feelings and emotions and that they appreciate and value. Both Kelly and Nicole also talk about the idea that everyone has special gifts and talents, not only the ones who perform well at school, indicating a more inclusive view of ability whereas the other participants seem to attribute being 'smart' to performance and achievement in different areas, not necessarily only academic however.

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes

I like that I am smart, that I am smart like other children. Even if someone tells me that I am not. I like it when Nicole tells me that I am smart. Sometimes my teachers tell me that I am smart and my mummy tells me 'brava' too. That makes me happy. Then I tell them that they are also smart and I mention the things they are good at as well. Not only I am smart, even they are. There are a lot of clever children in my class like Jeremy, Mireille, Jeanine, Nicole, Sarah and Kyra. There's Thomas and Giorgio too – I know they're clever because they know a lot about science. I remember Mireille's lapbook about space for Show and Tell. It was fascinating! Sometimes my teacher tells them they are clever. I am good at singing and dancing. I am also good at reading and playing, especially playing outside. I also know how to be kind. I am good at finding pronouns quickly like my teacher taught us. I am good when we have our assessments, even when I'm stuck! I think assessments are fun. If I get stuck with my assessments, I just calm down, I take it easy and I do whatever the instructions tell me to do. Everyone is smart, not just the ones who are good at science, everyone is smart for me. I know that there is something smart inside every child and there are different things that they do well. Even if no one says it, I know that they have talent in them. I want to tell Jeremy that I think I want him to be a teacher because he is very good, he has lots of knowledge and he can share it with others. You know, when I was writing about outer space in my writing journal, I showed it to him and he helped me. That's something special about Jeremy – he knows a lot of things and he helps others. I like him to be my best friend ever.

In the excerpt entitled 'No book is ever too hard for me', it can be observed how providing opportunities for children to explain a concept or discover a particular rule prior to the teacher's own explanation gives them a chance to feel proud and accomplished as they seek to find answers using their own cognitive abilities and prior experiences of similar tasks. In this case, one girl manages to identify the pattern and come up with an explanation of the rule for a specific letter pattern and, as a result, she is congratulated and made to feel 'smart' by herself and through her peers' response to her correct attempt. Thus, recognition and validation of children's capacity for learning can also be achieved through the provision of

challenging work that puts the learners at the centre of the learning process, giving them opportunities to own the learning and relish in figuring out their own emerging abilities.

Reflective Journal: 'No book is ever too hard for me'

As usual, this morning we started the day off by having our weekly 'spelling game' – a softer, child-friendly name for 'dictation'. This was followed by a short session on the new sound of the week during which the children were encouraged to find a common denominator in a group of words – ck' and to come up with the rule for when to use a ck at the end of one-syllable words and when to use just a 'k'. The children love this kind of activity – they like the challenge of coming up with the rule, of discovering why and when they must use certain letters, of being given a 'detective's task'. Invariably, there is a group of brilliant spellers who always have the answer to this inquiry but I have learned to give children (others) time to think – I have noticed lately that children like Thomas, Kathryn and Emma who might say something just for the sake of saying it if asked straight away, might be able to give a correct answer (or nearly right) and justify it when they are given a few more seconds/ minutes to reflect on it. Today, Faye was able to come up with an explanation – she figured out that all the 'ck' words on the board had one vowel before (and when I asked whether it was short or long, she said a 'short vowel') but that pink, junk and bark don't so the 'ck' always needs a short vowel before. Then she also added that the 'ck' rule was just like the flossy words rule. The clap that she received from her classmates as a sign of approval put a beaming smile on her face indicating how important it is for teachers to focus their practice on the learners and the learning process, providing the pupils with opportunities for discovery, ownership of the learning process and recognition of their capacity for learning. All this would have been lost had I decided to just explain the rule myself.

Another aspect connected to this sub-theme is displaying children's work around the classroom and in the corridors for others to look at as well as putting up pictures and photos of both the process and the product of our classroom activities on these displays as well as on our classroom blog so that children get validation and appreciation of their efforts through such sharing of their work and of the learning process.

Lastly, as a teacher, it is always positive to receive feedback about own practice from others, including the protagonists themselves i.e. the learners in one's classroom, as well as their families, colleagues, management team and other people who may follow what is happening inside your classroom. This can only happen when one's professional attitude is an open one that welcomes other people into our community of learners, shares own work and the teaching and learning process using technology and online platforms and invites others to join in the learning experiences of our classroom. Examples of such practice have been presented throughout the analysis. This section is concluded with an example of feedback received from a colleague that validates and acknowledges a teacher's efforts to create a meaningful and effective learning environment for the benefit of all learners.

Reflective Journal: 'Mr Elephant will smell like a washed house!'

The different groups sat around the classroom, some in a circle on the floor, some on their tummies on the mat, others on tables and others still on cushions. One thing is sure, each group sounded very excited about this task – and I could see children asking others in their group to whisper, I could also observe the natural leaders taking the pencil and paper in their hands. I went round each group, reminding them that for this to be a successful job, each and every child needs to be listened to and then all the ideas are to be put together so that the end result is a whole group effort and not the work of one child. At one point a teacher came into the class and looked at the class in awe – she walked up to me and whispered in Maltese

“X’qed taghmlihom lil dawn it-tfal? Kif thajjarhom jahdmu b’dal-mod?” which translates into something like “How do you manage to get them to work in this way?” Such feedback from a colleague is always welcomed as a bonus – I get plenty of job satisfaction just by looking at the children’s enthusiastic looks on their faces when they enjoy what we do but it is always reassuring to have someone you respect acknowledging your efforts as a teacher.

6.4 Addressing the Research Questions

This research inquiry stemmed from a teacher’s need to understand issues related to her catering for the learning needs of six year old children in her mixed-ability classroom who were potentially able to reach high levels of performance and attainment in one or more areas of endeavour. Through this narrative inquiry, I as the teacher-researcher in this study, gave a group of young able learners a voice through an exploration of their perceptions on learning, ability and schooling. Moreover, the data collected was aimed to also reveal a teacher’s pedagogy and practice in meeting the needs of these young able learners and also understand how teacher and learners impinged on each other’s identity formation and reconstruction.

In section 6.3, three main themes that emerged from the research data were presented and discussed. The data yielded invaluable information about aspects of the teaching and learning process that seemed to impact the learning trajectories of the six young able learners who became the main participants of the inquiry – these became the main themes, namely the importance of **supportive learning contexts** for meeting the needs of highly able learners, the impact of **powerful interactions** with others and with the environment as well as the notion of **identity construction** that was observed to form an integral part of the daily interactions and occurrences as learning dispositions were acknowledged, inclusive practices were adopted to promote the development of these learning dispositions, and as a result, positive learner identities were enhanced, developed or confirmed.

Following the presentation and discussion of the themes, in this section I will address the research questions which guide this thesis. For each research questions, arguments will be developed in an effort to tackle each part of the question.

6.4.1 What are young able children’s perceptions of learning, ability and schooling?

It is felt that this research inquiry produced rich data about how young able children view their learning experiences, the process of learning per se, their conceptions of ability and

talent, as well as their understanding of schooling in general. This validates the idea of involving children in research to include their views and constructions as learners, active participants and active agents in matters that concern them and their lives, in this case learning, schooling and perceptions of being 'smart' and how this could be nurtured in class (Christensen & James, 2008; Corsaro, 2011). The data demonstrates that young learners, even at the age of six years, have already developed well-established ideas about learning and ability, but it is also interesting to note that children's comments and responses also suggest that their conceptions are not entirely fixed and unchanging and that their views are influenced and altered as they interact with people who they look up to such as teachers and family members. As they connect with others and are exposed to new or different ways of looking and experiencing learning and schooling, their perceptions and their identities as learners are changed as they shape and, in turn, are formed by the circumstances, encounters and experiences of the environments in which they learn and grow. This accords with the notion put forward by Corsaro (2011) about children as active agents and also links with the view presented by Daniels (2001) on the dynamic involvement of learners as active agents in their own development as ability and cognition become a process that does not happen in the mind of a single child but in the joint mediated activity of learners who work, learn, share and develop ideas together.

All of the six participants share positive feelings and emotions connected to learning and to schooling. They talk openly about what they like about school, and refer to different feelings they experience in connection to their being part of this community. They mostly express feelings of happiness, excitement and pride as they relate how being at school makes them feel. As they share their enjoyment and liking for the particular experience of being in Junior 2, they seem to portray a feeling and sense of belonging to their Junior 2 classroom specifically, and to their school community in general as they talk with confidence and positive enthusiasm. Undoubtedly such positive feelings and a sense of emotional well-being plays an important role in facilitating these children's learning journeys and overall development (Damasio, 2004) – the link between children's emotional state and their ability to learn has already been discussed in more detail in section 6.3.3.2.

Some of the participants talk about their feelings as they entered this particular classroom at the start of the academic year and also express their emotions as they move towards its end.

Prior to starting Junior 2, some participants had already formed a good idea of what it would be like to be in Junior 2 and had developed expectations about its unfolding. Two of the young able learners had older siblings who had already been in my class in previous years and mentioned how they had been looking forward to being in my class so as to experience new and challenging work. They seemed to connect moving up to Junior 2 with 'growing up' and also with trickier and more stimulating learning experiences. The participants also refer to how they feel as they move closer to the end of this scholastic year – they mention how they know they are going to miss being in Junior 2 and one particular child also explains how he has come up with a plan to replicate what we do in our classroom at home with his siblings and family so that he would not miss it as much. Some participants also discuss their feeling ready and well-prepared to move up to Junior 3.

When it comes to other feelings that are less positive than the above, these are mostly centred on tasks, activities or aspects in the learning environment that they do not like or would love to change if they could. One participant child made reference to her dislike for when a teacher raises her voice and suggests that teachers should use repetition to harp into 'noisy' children's minds how to be quiet, listen and obey. Another young able learner commented on his preference for longer breaks, more quiet time for them to read during the day and differently coloured walls around the school. He also suggested that the school should have an additional post-secondary section so its students can attend this school for a longer period of time after they finish secondary school. Some children mentioned a difficulty to work joyfully at a task when other learners fidget or do not concentrate, especially when they are working in a group. This seems to indicate a preference to work with children who have similar learning styles or work habits.

With regards to their conceptions of learning, all the participants seem to equate learning to acquiring new knowledge or skills rather than repeating what they are already able to do. They also talk about the processes involved in learning as well as the products of learning. There seems to be a general consensus amongst the six young able learners about the need for new and challenging work in order for them to feel that they are actually learning. Overall, they seem to talk about their learning experiences in positive, encouraging terms as they discuss the numerous activities and experiences that they particularly enjoyed. By doing so, the participants seem to point to the fact that as capable learners with a potential to excel in

different areas, they value variety in their learning experiences as well as the provision of challenge - these inspire them to work hard and motivate them to apply themselves and diligently work through the tasks presented. It is also interesting to point out that the young able learners in this study were quite confident and fluent in talking about the processes and experiences that bring about or enhance learning, indicating an awareness of their metacognitive skills. The richness of the data pertaining to participants' conceptions of learning and the learning process is in agreement with findings from two studies conducted with young children to investigate their understanding of the process of learning – these studies demonstrated good links between young children's developing concepts of learning and their metacognitive awareness (Sobel et al., 2007).

Learning is at times directly connected with having 'great teachers' or teachers who 'teach me well'. Some children also link learning to favourite subjects, particular tasks, acquiring new knowledge or the practising of skills. They talk about learning that occurs within the classroom walls and show awareness of a wide variety of activities and experiences that bring about learning and development such as working with other children, class discussions or brainstorming, exploration of particular topics through the thematic approach, and exposure to books. Some participants refer to progress made in areas they were previously not so good at – one particular learner speaks about him becoming 'a very good reader' because books were used all the time in Junior 2, another one mentions his feelings of joy and pride at making considerable progress in his Maltese language skills, which he regarded to be his 'weakest' area. Thus, the participants seem to be pointing to an increase in their confidence and self-efficacy in particular areas through the help of their teachers and through participation and interaction with others during specific tasks. This links well with findings from a study carried out with young children aged six to eight year olds to examine their perceived self-efficacy and confidence in specific learning situations (Maatta & Jarvels, 2013). This study encourages teachers of young children to promote their self-efficacy by scaffolding children's learning through the creation of interactive learning contexts where task-related interaction increases children's confidence and efficacy.

There is however also mention of learning that involves others outside their peers and teachers. Some participants specifically refer to the fact that learning does not only occur inside the classroom with their teachers but it can also happen when they go on visits to

places of interests during school outings or when they use online platforms to connect with other learners within or outside our school community or our country. This is also linked to the notion of sharing the learning that takes place within their classroom with others, including inviting parents and families to join in the learning during parent-child activities or working with another class of older or younger children. Such events seem to be particularly cherished by the young able learners. Moreover, the participants all seem to favour having an audience to share their learning, new knowledge and skills with. They mention the importance of forging good links between the school, their families and the community through the use of our classroom blog, online platforms such as wikipages, publishing or audio-visual recording of their work, and displays around the classroom and in the school corridors. Thus, participants' perceptions of learning seem to point to the idea that learning increases and is multiplied through interaction with others (teachers, peers, families, visitors) as well as with tools and artefacts which are part of inclusive classrooms that can be defined as 'smart contexts' – this is in accordance with the ideas presented by socio-cultural and activity theorists discussed earlier in the literature review, mainly in section 3.4 (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010).

They talk about favourite activities – as mentioned earlier on, new learning and challenge are highly valued by all participants in the inquiry as opposed to 'more of the same' or repetitive work. What they seem to agree upon is the structure in terms of routine, procedures and practices followed as new topics, new concepts and new learning are presented. Thus, for instance, all the participants mention their liking for the exploration of themes and topics as the integrated approach to learning through common themes is adopted. They also particularly love sharing what they have learned and discovered about particular topics through Show and Tell, which became a regular activity and initiated interesting links between the home and the school. All participants seem to favour inquiry-based learning, hands-on learning and tasks that required them to be actively involved, working with others, open-ended tasks, creating products to demonstrate their learning such as lap-books or displays, as well as the use of different media and resources to learn something new including the use of songs, stories, role-play and project work. Thus, there seems to be a preference for innovative and participatory strategies advocated and adopted by a more constructivist approach to learning as opposed to traditional methods.

When it comes to young able children's perceptions of ability, it is evident that they already have a clear understanding of what they deem to be considered 'smart' or less so. With regards to their own abilities and special talents, the six participants all talk with confidence and certainty about what they are good at and which kinds of activities or learning make them feel 'smart' since these help them advance and progress. Being able to learn new stuff and to work through challenging tasks gives the participants a sense of accomplishment as well as pride and self-assurance in their capacity for learning. Through the participants' eyes, having a propensity for doing very well at school is also linked to various skills such as one's reading ability and advanced language skills, one's aptitude to discuss and present valid arguments during a class debate, possession of vast general knowledge and information about topics being explored, the capacity to create and make things using artistic talents, being good at science, mathematics, languages and drawing, together with one's ability to share his ideas and information with others or teach them new things when working in a group. There are instances where participants associate the notion of being 'smart' to being a good friend or being helpful, thus referring to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. No participant seems to link being 'smart' to being good at sports and physical education except for one child who stated that his Physical Education teacher is very smart because she is good at sports. However, reference to all other 'intelligences' (Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences) is made by all or some of the participants. In many ways, this seems to point to the idea that in this study, children's developing views of ability and talent are not necessarily connected to academic achievement but to a wide range of skills, competencies and attitudes – which may be indicative of an inclusive learning context that has an impact on how they view ability, achievement and performance in class.

All of the six participants seem to consider themselves to be capable learners or 'smart'. This shows that my professional view of them as young able learners with a capacity to reach high levels of performance corresponds with their own view of themselves – this in turn has implications for identity formation and the ways in which teachers and learners impact each other's experiences and identities as they make sense of their learning experiences and discover who they are or are becoming as learners. This shall be discussed further in the last research question addressed in this section.

With regards to their views of other children, the six participants invariably mention one or more peers who had been identified by myself as being young able learners i.e. 'smart' in one area or another. It is interesting to point out that none of the learners in my class knew who formed part of the participants in the second phase of the inquiry as during the children's information session, I had not specified that a particular group would be later on chosen to participate in a further part of the research. Therefore, one can say that the children's own 'identification' of peers they deemed to be similarly able to perform and do well at school had not been influenced by my choice of participants for the second part of the inquiry where the six children were chosen on the basis of their high potential or ability to learn, perform and reach high levels of understanding and achievement in different areas. This is not to say, however, that my attitude, comments, behaviour and interaction with these children had not in any way imparted subtle messages about ability, talent and emerging abilities. Once again, this idea will be further explored in the last research question as it has to do with the intertwining of a teacher's and her learners' lives as well as with questions of identity formation.

Some differences were observed in the children's notion of ability, in that only one participant seemed to indicate from her comments and perceptions of learning and ability that being 'smart' is a fixed trait inherent in a child's demeanour and constitution and therefore one is either bright or not bright. The rest of the participants seemed to view 'ability' as being a dynamic and ever-changing quality, a quality which can be developed and improved with one's efforts, experiences and help from more knowledgeable others. This reminds me of Dweck's notion of *self-theories* (2000) which highlights a main difference between learners who view their attributes and abilities as fixed and unchanging, and those who believe they are able to incrementally learn, change and develop. Additionally, in their work on experiential learning, Kolb & Kolb (2009) observed that when learners have a fixed negative view of their capacity for learning, they are hindered from being open to learn and develop their potential. Keeping these theories in mind, it is safe to argue that the participants' positive self-concepts and perception of ability as dynamic and incremental may continue to nurture and be instrumental in their own flourishing and development as young able learners.

Another point that is observed through the interpretation of the data is the fact that the participants seem to understand that even though they themselves are aware that they are

smart and good in terms of learning potential and abilities, and also that others have that same capacity for learning, this belief and knowledge is sometimes confirmed by others who believe the same thing. To this effect, they mention that recognition of their ability and efforts to do well are welcomed by them because they show them that their efforts are being acknowledged and that others appreciate their special abilities and talents.

The participants had also very clear ideas about activities or events that helped them to improve their skills, knowledge and performance, thus making them feel 'smarter' – some of these activities included story writing, working with others, Show and Tell, working on projects, creating, inventing and solving problems, developing their reading skills through exposure to books, role-play and drama, joined handwriting practice, and generally, new learning and challenging work.

Finally, when commenting on classmates they usually enjoyed working with on projects or particular tasks, each participant mentioned names of children from amongst the six of them, justifying their choice on the basis of them having good knowledge, skills and also a commitment to get a job done. When choosing a partner, they invariably based their choice on ability and task commitment by the other child. However, when it came to choose more classmates for group work, other factors such as gender, established friendships or a calm, respectful and friendly attitude towards others also formed part of the equation.

As can be observed, young able children have very valid contributions regarding issues that pertain to their learning and schooling experience, their conceptions of ability and the factors that make their learning trajectories meaningful and effective in bringing out their potential, emerging abilities and talents. Listening to what they have to say and giving them a voice has various implications for the advancement and improvement of inclusive practices in regular classrooms that are conducive to learning and talent development. These implications will be dealt with in the concluding chapter of this study.

6.4.2 What do young able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling reveal about a teacher's pedagogy and practice?

The scope of this research inquiry was to research and document the stories of a group of young able learners as a means through which their teacher's pedagogy and practice was to be mirrored back and revealed, particularly in terms of those pedagogical choices and

practices used in a regular primary classroom that succeed in meeting the diverse needs of very able learners. This aim was reached through an examination of their perceptions as six year old learners who are able to reach high levels of performance and attainment, and eventually, through an interpretative analysis of those salient features in this Junior 2 learning environment that facilitate the development and nurturing of children's emerging abilities and talents, seen through the eyes of the protagonists themselves i.e. the six able learners as well and those of their teacher who was, in her own turn, researching and examining her own practice.

The research data yielded important information about the pedagogical choices and inclusive practices that became an integral part of the daily occurrences and interactions between myself, as the classroom teacher of this group of Junior 2 learners, and the learners themselves. Looking at the children's perspectives of their learning and schooling experiences within this particular classroom and academic year, it is possible to deduct a number of elements that seemed to govern and guide the daily practice and running of this mixed-ability classroom setting.

The fact that the six participants were able to share their views of learning, ability and schooling with such detail and confidence may suggest that they were consciously or unconsciously aware of their teacher's views and attitudes in terms of how she viewed children and childhood, and her inclination to respect and validate her learners' views and opinions. This may also be an indication that open talk and discussion of notions linked to the processes involved in learning and the qualities that facilitate a child's progress, performance and achievement formed part of their interactions. As a matter of fact, the data provides evidence of the use of metacognitive strategies that encourage the participants to think about their thinking, to understand the processes involved in their learning, and to be aware of their input and contribution in bringing about learning and progress.

From the data collected over the course of the study, one can deduct that the children in this inquiry are generally happy and motivated as learners, which is evident through their expression of positive feelings and emotions connected with their schooling experience. Children's emotional well-being within a classroom is a good reflection of children's ability to learn and the efforts a teacher makes to create a safe, stimulating and supportive learning

environment (Damasio, 2004; Sousa, 1998). It is also indicative of a teacher's willingness to work with an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003), consciously aware of the ways in which her actions, her attitudes, the pedagogical choices she makes and the manner in which she interacts and relates to her learners impact children's lives, learner identities and educational experiences.

The data also suggests that as the teacher, the learners and their families became accustomed to one another as well as to the practices and procedures of their classroom, healthy working relationships between all parties were formed and the classroom developed into a community of learners that encouraged parental involvement, active participation and inclusive practices that succeeded in catering for the diverse learning needs of all learners, including those of very able learners. Children's acknowledgement of links that were developed between their school, their families and the community also demonstrates a disposition on the part of the teacher and the school to open the classroom doors to families and to members of the community as a means to enhance the children's learning experiences.

The participants' expressed need for new learning and challenging work together with their descriptions of activities, tasks and daily routines that enhance their learning may on the one hand point to suitable learning experiences that kindle able children's curiosity and quench their thirst for new learning. On the other hand, this need may also be suggestive of pedagogy and content that is not always appropriate for the learning needs of young able children who require stimulation and challenge to be inherent in the planning and implementation of learning activities. This concurs with the teacher's own lamentations and frustration at not always managing to juggle the various roles she needs to adopt as a classroom teacher working with children of diverse abilities and dispositions. It also validates her inclination towards continuous reflection, self-evaluation and revision of her pedagogical choices and practices as a way to overcome the difficulties and, at times, impossibilities of reaching the needs of all learners all the time.

It is however important to acknowledge that overall the six participants seem to have experienced a motivating and engaging learning experience through the provision of varied learning experiences, a safe, rich and stimulating learning environment as well as challenge that was inherent in most activities and embedded in the way teaching and learning was

presented and lived. In many ways, children's perceptions about how learning took place within this classroom setting and the various activities that succeeded in making them progress, enjoy the learning journey and also feel 'smart' and develop positive learner identities show that the teacher was largely effective in her efforts to meet the learning, cognitive and socio-emotional needs of the young able learners in her class.

Each of the six participants, in his/her narrative, delve into aspects of their schooling experience that have nurtured their individual emerging abilities, special talents, dispositions and interests. As can be observed from the narratives, despite their propensity to excel and perform highly in one or more areas – a quality which binds them in terms of capacity for learning, they all differ in their talents, their personalities, their needs, their preferences, their backgrounds and their views. The fact that each of them expresses keen motivation and interest in developing their skills and knowledge, and improving their outcomes, as well as their expressed satisfaction in classroom activities, tasks and events that have encouraged them to be the best they can be also shows that the teacher's professional attitude is one that values individuality and celebrates diversity through practices that allow for flexibility, variety, choice, support and challenge through scaffolding of learning, as well as independent work. It may also demonstrate qualities that are essential for an early years educator to thrive in the complexities and dynamics of a mixed-ability classroom – intuition, good communication skills, resourcefulness, creativity, open-mindedness, non-judgmental attitude, fluency in theoretical perspectives and reflective practice skills. Moreover, by having high expectations for the education of those children who are able to excel and reach high levels of performance in both academic and non-academic learning, there seems to be a general improvement of outcomes which is not solely confined to those at the higher end of the ability spectrum.

All in all, young able children's views and descriptions of learning, their learning preferences and activities that help them discover and develop their potential and emerging abilities provide a clear picture of the pedagogies and practices adopted in this classroom setting – a constructivist approach to learning that acknowledges children as active participants and active agents in the learning process, learning that happens and is increased and multiplied through interactions and therefore thrives on healthy working relationships, and the use of inclusive processes that are available for all learners in class to ensure equity and access for

all. Children's perceptions also provide an account of a learning experience that is dynamic, ever-changing yet stable, safe and structured.

6.4.3 In what ways, if any, does a teacher and a group of young able learners aged six years in a mixed-ability classroom impact each other's experiences, performance and identities?

As the teacher and researcher of this inquiry, I feel that in exploring and interpreting the perceptions of a group of learners in my class, more specifically those whom I considered to be potentially very able learners, I have learned invaluable lessons about who I am as a teacher of young children and how I have used the theoretical knowledge obtained over years of research and professional development as well as my practical experience acquired over more than a decade of working with young children to constantly improve my practice, adapting and modifying it according to the learning needs of the students in my classrooms.

In the background chapter to this thesis, I wrote about those personal and professional experiences in my life since my years as a child up to nowadays that may have influenced my professional growth, the issues that seem to attract my attention as a professional and the experiences that have turned me into a reflective practitioner who is consciously aware of the impact of her actions and professional attitude on the learners I come in contact with through my practice. In the same way that my own encounters, circumstances and experiences with others (including teachers, significant others, people I looked up to, learners and their families) influenced both the course of my learning trajectories as a lifelong learner as well as the routes that I took or avoided as a professional, this narrative inquiry also brings out the intertwining of the lives between myself, as the teacher-researcher, and this group of young able learners and their impact on one another.

The richness of the research data, the interpreted narratives and the themes that emerged through the interpretative analysis all point to a strong connection between a teacher's practice and professional outlook on the one hand and young able children's responses, attitudes, motivation and engagement on the other. Moreover, it is significant to note that the teacher's professional identity and the children's learner identities evidently impinge on each other, through a process of construction and reconstruction.

Through my vast experience as a teacher in mixed-ability classrooms, I became very aware of the possibilities and difficulties of meeting the needs of all learners within a setting where

content needed to be covered and a number of children required the teacher's support. Prior to working with the participants in this study, I had already developed a huge repertoire of techniques, strategies and approaches that I would use to try and reach each individual learner in my class. Therefore, my past experiences, training and particular interest in the needs of what the literature called 'gifted learners' had already directed the course of my inquiry and my views on ability and learning. So I entered the research setting already armed with plenty of enthusiasm coupled with my professional practical and theoretical knowledge that I would eventually find useful when making pedagogical choices to meet the needs of my learners. The experiences and interactions I had with young able learners in the past had already formed some of the ideas that eventually continued to be developed and explored during this inquiry.

In many ways, my professional identity was being revealed through the stories I was telling and retelling as the teacher of this Junior 2 classroom, as well as through my learners' perceptions – this has already been pointed out in the discussion of the second research question. Through the narratives, one can find a coming together of different data that identify how children view themselves as learners in relation to themselves and others.

Starting with my professional identity, I must say that after years of experience and training, I entered the classroom setting confidently and with a lot of high expectation and anticipation at the beginning of this academic year, particularly because it would be one in which I would be collecting the data for my narrative inquiry. I had already developed an identity as a fairly competent and effective classroom practitioner who was able to meet the needs of different learners in a diverse classroom setting throughout the previous years. I was a well-established experienced teacher of young children who was always on the lookout for new strategies and new ideas. Over the course of the year during which this inquiry was conducted, my identity was in many ways confirmed and reconfirmed through children's positive response to my pedagogical choices together with their families' feedback and active involvement in our learning journey which provided further validation and recognition of my success in providing a meaningful learning experience to the learners who enter my classroom.

What had changed from the previous years, was my dual role as teacher and researcher. I was now compelled to wear different hats simultaneously and the juggling of different roles

had an impact on my personal and professional identity. The impact was mostly positive in the sense that despite the added pressure and work load that a research inquiry inevitably brought with it, it also began to define me as a highly motivated and committed reflective practitioner in the eyes of the children, their families and the people who knew me. Moreover, the fact that the children I taught were going to be involved in the study, their reactions during the Children Information session held at the start of the year together with their expectations for a fruitful and enjoyable year also pushed me to apply myself almost totally to this dual role. This dual role, in turn, also impacted the children's own learner identities when they realised that I wanted to learn from them about my work with them. In some respects, as I let them know of my wish to give them a voice in matters that influenced their learning trajectories within my class, we were switching roles where I became the learner and they became my 'teachers' as they helped me reflect on my performance and professional success or failure.

There is also one particular fact that has been influential on the reconstruction of my identity as a woman and a professional. In the past, practically ever since I remember, I always had the tendency to conform, to accept 'what is' without questioning too much, to feel inadequate particularly when it comes to criticism or refusal of certain ideas, thoughts and theories presented by authorities in the field, to be a peacemaker and not rock the boat even within a work setting. As I worked with young children and became increasingly aware of how little or nothing was being done in classrooms and schools to meet the learning needs as well as the social and emotional needs of young able learners, I began to feel the urge to voice my frustration and refusal of traditional ways of looking at very able learners. As I became familiar with each group of individuals who entered my classroom, this need to advocate for their needs and give them a voice became more pronounced and pressing. As I built working relationships with young able learners who entered my class, and became aware of their strengths, peculiarities, dispositions and needs I began to change the way I looked at ability, cognition, giftedness and talent. These children compelled me to read up the literature available on learning, giftedness, high ability and practices used to cater for the need of the children at the higher end of the ability spectrum. As I read, reflected and developed the basis for this study, keeping in mind what I knew about the learners in my class, I could not accept to use traditional methods to identify, label and provide for the bright children in my

class. I kept mulling and reflecting, discussing with other professionals (colleagues, my school leader, my professors and tutors within the university) issues connected with working and researching with young children until I found some good grounds on which to build my inquiry. Most of all, not only did I begin to identify myself with practitioners and teachers who questioned established practices and pedagogies (something which in the past I would not dare do, at least not openly) but I was also turning into a practitioner who was not afraid to change and revise her own practice through reflection, research and by attending to her learners' voices. Furthermore, the realisation that teacher training in our country, both initial and ongoing, was not preparing us teachers for the challenging task of creating inclusive classrooms that promoted learning and development of all learners (European Agency for Special Needs and Education, 2014), particularly the very able ones, was also instrumental in pushing me to research and explore this field as I kept in mind the idea that professional learning is the basis for a teacher's professional growth and development, and one that increases the possibilities of higher levels of learning and performance for both the educators and their learners (Hirsh & Hord, 2008).

With regards to the learners who participated in the study, there is evidence throughout the data that these children were aware of their learning dispositions and, as a result, they were developing and/ or reaffirming positive learner identities that were increased by their experiences of success in various skills and activities and mostly, it seems, by their ability to take up challenging work. It is not easy to deduct whether their consciousness of their learning dispositions and of their tendency to achieve high levels of performance was developed in previous years or whether it was an awareness that emerged over the course of this year through my own dealings and interactions with them. What is more certain is the fact that their sense of self as capable learners was developed and/or reinforced through the wide variety of opportunities provided throughout the inquiry to explore and nurture their emerging abilities and talents. Moreover, the participants themselves refer to the benefits of feedback from their teachers, their parents, and their peers on their self-confidence and learner identities.

The data also confirms that through my efforts to create safe and stimulating learning environments where all learners are provided with opportunities to discover and develop their emerging abilities and learning dispositions, I was also addressing the children's

emotional well-being, which in turn benefited and positively impinged on their capacity to learn, thus reaffirming their positive self-concept as 'smart' learners. Furthermore, by adopting an inclusive approach where individual learners' needs were accounted for through the conscious embedding of support and challenge in the planning, content, and pedagogy used, I was trying to show the children under my care that I respected them as learners with their individuality and that I was constantly working hard to find effective ways of reaching each one of them, thus showing them that they mattered as did their learning journeys.

As participants spoke about their skills and emerging abilities, they indicated a sense of self-assurance and confidence in what they were already capable of doing, which probably was a result of past experiences of success and achievement in the particular skill or area mentioned coupled with positive feedback by others. The practice that I embraced to encourage learners to share their learning with others through photographs that were uploaded on our classroom blog, the creation of products and materials that demonstrated their learning, and displays of their work around the classroom and the school corridors also had an impact on children's sense of self-worth as their families and other school children (older or younger ones) or visitors who came to the school commented on the quality and presentation of their work.

Moreover, as they speak about other children's abilities and talents, the participants are to a certain extent comparing and contrasting others in relation to themselves. Through such descriptions, the participants share their view of what makes one 'smart' or good at a particular skill or area of endeavour. By talking about who they usually enjoy working with on a particular task or project, the participants also seem to be hinting at the idea that learner identities are not fixed and unchanging, but can be reconstructed as learning occurs through interaction with others who can help them to learn better, faster or acquire new concepts and skills too. This shows a belief that learning dispositions can be improved, and consequently, learner identities altered.

All the above demonstrates that teachers and learners who work, learn and develop together within a learning community are constantly shaping each other's experiences and identities and, in turn, are being shaped by the interactions, connections, attitudes, experiences and dynamics that occur within these learning environments and through their learning trajectories.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have carried out an interpretative analysis of the data collected during this research inquiry following the presentation of the data as 'interpreted narratives' in the previous chapter. I began by explaining the process involved in the analysis and interpretation of the research data, followed by a thematic analysis of the emerging themes that stemmed from the inquiry and an addressing of each of the three research questions that were asked at the beginning of the inquiry and that thus guided the study. There is only one final stage left to give closure to this thesis, that of writing a final concluding chapter where findings are summarised, implications for future research and for educational practice in general are discussed and limitations of the study are put forward. All this will be presented in Chapter 7, which will be the final one for this thesis.

7 Concluding Thoughts: Findings, Limitations and Implications of the Study

7.1 Introduction

As a conclusion to this thesis, this final chapter provides an overview of the main findings that emerged from this research inquiry in section 7.2, presents a number of limitations of the study in section 7.3 and, in section 7.4, suggests various implications for both educational practice and future research. Section 7.5 concludes with some reflections and final thoughts about what I regard to be this inquiry's contributions to new knowledge in the field of education.

7.2 Summarizing the main findings of the inquiry

This thesis has, through a narrative inquiry approach to the study of human experience and the use of participatory methods in its involvement of young children aged six to seven years, brought forth a number of interesting points that shed light on the experiences of young able learners in mixed-ability classrooms in terms of learning and ability, and how these reflections uncover a teacher's professional identity and pedagogy as teacher and learners interact and work together. Furthermore, these findings lead to a deeper understanding of the kind of inclusive pedagogies and practices that seem to succeed in stimulating the curious minds of young able learners, motivating and engaging them, and ultimately facilitating their learning and development.

Through the presentation of data in the form of 'interpreted narratives', this inquiry highlights the possibilities that exist in looking at particular phenomena from different perspectives to create an intertwined narrative between a teacher and her learners. Although the study does not aim for its findings to be generalised, it certainly produces a richness and a depth in terms of the participants' views as well as the interactions and occurrences that have an impact on a teacher and her learners' identities, perceptions and understanding of the world they inhabit.

As the data, both in original form and as narratives, underwent an interpretative analysis prior to addressing the research questions, it was observed that it generated important information about aspects of the experiences of young able learners that positively influence their learning journeys and, more specifically, enable them to nurture their emerging abilities, thrive and enjoy the process of learning. The following three main themes which shed light

on the conditions that may foster the emergence and nurturing of abilities and talents in an inclusive early years classroom were identified:

- the importance of **supportive learning contexts** that are ‘smart’ in terms of design, flexibility, and quality and variety of opportunities for meaningful learning provided;
- the impact of **powerful interactions** with others (peers and adults) as well as with the environment, including materials and artefacts that aid understanding and bring about learning with and through others;
- the intertwining of the lives of teachers and learners through **identity-making processes** that automatically happen as they build healthy working relationships and interact and work together, processes which seem to leave a mark on each other’s self-concept, experiences and performances.

The first research question yielded rich data about the views and constructions of young able learners who have the potential and ability to reach high levels of performance in different areas. Well-established ideas and thoughts about their experiences of learning and the processes involved, together with their conceptions of ability and what helps them and others to be ‘smart’ were evident in the confident manner in which they expressed their views. Here is a brief overview of the main points that summarize young able children’s perceptions of learning, ability and schooling:

- they depict a general sense of emotional well-being and belonging to their community of learners, both within the Junior 2 classroom and the whole school;
- there is evidence that young children have expectations and feelings of anticipation for a new scholastic year, mainly related to their wish for a good and stimulating learning experience;
- young able children are highly aware of their learning preferences as well as aspects in their schooling experience that they particularly dislike;
- they equate learning with acquiring new knowledge or skills rather than practising or repeating what they are already able to do;
- they express a persistent need for new, varied and challenging work that stimulates their minds and gives them a sense of accomplishment and pride when they succeed in reaching a particular goal or completing a difficult task;

- learning and ability are mostly seen as dynamic and ever-changing rather than fixed and static – young able children see themselves as capable of incrementally developing and improving their skills and abilities through their efforts to respond to the provision of challenge by effective teachers within a rich learning environment;
- young able learners value learning that is participatory and that encourages the involvement of others outside the classroom who enhance the learning experience through social interaction and sharing of skills, knowledge and attitudes;
- the use of technology is seen as a vehicle for sharing their learning experiences with their families and the community and as a means to connect with the world outside their classroom;
- the participants tend to favour inquiry-based learning, hands-on tasks that encourage active participation and social interaction, open-ended tasks and the demonstration and display of their learning through the creation of products that allow for creativity and flexibility;
- in general, the young able learners have a positive self-concept which they talk freely about with confidence and self-assurance and are also aware of which areas or skills they are mostly good at and which ones require them to work harder at;
- they seem to be developing a wider conception of ability and intelligence in that they value being ‘smart’ in different areas of endeavour and skills, including both academic and non-academic ones;
- the participants are also aware of activities and practices that encourage them to be the best they can be as opposed to those that do not bring about new learning – these are linked to their learning preferences;
- when choosing classmates to work with on specific tasks, they seem to value peers who have similar work habits and who are able to help them accomplish a task – however, there are also instances where gender and friendships were also the basis on which work partners were selected;

The second research question focused on what the participants’ views on learning, ability and schooling had to uncover about a teacher’s professional practice and pedagogy. This was deemed to be important in determining whether as a reflective practitioner and teacher-researcher, my insights and hunches developed over years of working with young learners

matched some or most of the children's own constructions of what they felt were the kind of activities and practices adopted in class addressed their needs as young able learners with potential for high achievement and performance. The participants' perspectives mentioned above seem to provide relevant information about a number of elements that are embedded in the daily practice and running of this particular mixed-ability classroom setting that in many ways seem to make a difference in the learning experiences of this group of very able learners:

- an open disposition on the part of the teacher to discuss, respect and validate learners' views on different notions including those linked with children's learning process, performance and achievement;
- the encouragement and development of metacognitive skills as an integral part of their learning experiences;
- a conscious effort by the teacher to create a safe, stimulating and supportive learning environment where children's emotional well-being is given importance and their need for new learning and challenge is addressed;
- the development of a community of learners through the forming of healthy working relationships between the teacher and her learners, between the learners themselves as well as with others outside the classroom who may participate in their learning trajectories – these may include their families, other staff members and students in the school, as well as children and people outside the school;
- the provision of new learning and challenge as a means to create suitable and varied learning experiences that kindle young able learners' curiosity and quench their thirst for new learning – challenge to be inherent in the planning, organisation and implementation of inclusive practices;
- the use of continuous reflection, self-evaluation and revision of a teacher's pedagogical choices and practices as a way to ensure that the diverse needs of all learners are met, including those who can reach high levels of performance;
- the development and nurturing of positive learner identities through an atmosphere of high expectations and a celebration of diversity that ultimately helps improve outcomes for all learners, including (but not solely) those with high potential and emerging abilities;

- the adoption of a constructivist approach to learning that acknowledges children as active participants and active agents in the learning process;
- the promise of equity and access through provision of challenge and appropriate inclusive learning opportunities rather than through early identification of high ability;

By addressing the third and final research question, it was possible to examine and reflect on the different ways in which a teacher and a group of very able learners impinge on each other's identities through their experiences, encounters, interactions and work together. The interpretation of the data collected over the course of this inquiry points to the following:

- a strong connection between a teacher's practice and professional outlook and young able learners' responses, attitudes, motivation and engagement;
- the teacher's professional identity and her students' learner identities impinge on one another through a process of construction and reconstruction;
- the influence of children's positive response to a teacher's pedagogical choices as well as their families' feedback and active involvement serve as validation and confirmation of a teacher's effectiveness and ability to address the needs of young able learners;
- the positive impact of a teacher's decision to involve a group of learners in her research inquiry by seeking their views on her students' learner identities who understand that their voices and opinions are important and valid;
- the reconstruction of a teacher's identity as a woman and as a professional through her urge to refute traditional ways of looking at very able learners and her efforts to reconceptualise notions of learning and ability – thus becoming an advocate and expert in inclusive practices that address the needs of these learners;
- the development and/or reaffirmation of children's positive self-concept as capable learners through the provision of activities and opportunities that facilitate the emergence of their abilities and talents as well as through a particular attention to their general well-being;
- the benefits of feedback from others, including teachers, parents, and peers, on young able learners' confidence and self-concept as learners;

- the use of an ethic of care and respect in the way a teacher deals with individual learners, as their individuality, interests, competencies and personalities are acknowledged and considered through a teacher's conscious efforts to embed support and challenge in the planning, content and pedagogy used;

7.3 Limitations of the study

By adopting an interpretative, qualitative approach to the examination of the area of inquiry and seeking the views of a small group of participants who belonged to one particular classroom in one specific school in Malta, I was more interested in a search for meaning and depth rather than the need for the findings of this inquiry to be generalised and scientifically rigorous. As a narrative inquirer with a sociocultural and constructivist approach to knowledge, I was also constantly aware of the subjectivity in seeking and constructing meaning. Thus it can be said that interpretation and analysis of the research data is specific to the context in which this research was carried out, to the particular situation, the number and kind of participants who took part in the study as well as my the dual role as teacher-participant in the inquiry and researcher.

Another limitation of the study could be said to pertain to the fact that as their teacher, I was only exposed to the children's performance during five specific subject areas since team-teaching is practised in the school where I taught whilst the inquiry was taking place (this point has been explained in more detail in the Methodology chapter). This left a gap in my observation of learners in subject areas that I did not teach mainly Mathematics, Maltese and Religion. It may thus have had an impact on my choice of participants for the second phase of this inquiry when I chose six participants on the basis of their emerging abilities and capacity to reach high levels of performance in different areas. However, in the conversational interviews, reference to their views on matters related to subject areas or activities at school other than those I was in charge of were also included occasionally.

The focus in the interpretative analysis was on the perceptions of the six young able learners – thus as I reflect on how their perceptions mirror my pedagogy and practice, I base my discussion and interpretation on how children who seem to be experiencing success at school report and look at their learning and schooling experiences, thus largely leaving out the perceptions of the rest of the group. It would be interesting to replicate the inquiry but this

time focusing on a different group of learners to compare and contrast the findings and discoveries presented in this research study.

It is also important to point out at this stage that notwithstanding the research design and thus a lack of generalisability of the findings, this study succeeded in reaching its main goal, that of documenting and narrating the perceptions of young able learners as a way to uncover their teacher's pedagogy and practice as she attempts to address their diverse needs. It can be argued that this inquiry, apart from presenting intertwined narratives between a teacher and a group of very able learners, also sheds light on how teachers and young able learners may impact each other's identities, experiences, attitudes, performance and achievement.

7.4 Implications of this study

In this section, I will attempt to look at the discoveries made through this inquiry and comment on the implications of the findings of this research on current educational practice as well as on future research in related fields. Although, as already pointed out, it is not my intention for the findings to be generalised, one may infer a number of lessons and recommendations that would benefit teachers of young learners who work in a mixed-ability setting – settings where abilities and talents are still developing or emerging and where the diverse needs of different kinds of learners tend to overwhelm teachers with demands and pressures that leave them with little room for the provision of challenge or the catering of the needs of very able learners.

I thus attempt to open up this inquiry to a wider audience, possibly in fields related to and affecting children's lives and to explore the possibility and obligation to share the wisdom acquired through this qualitative study with a wider community by looking at implications of seeking to reflect upon a teacher's own pedagogy and practice by learning from the protagonists themselves i.e. a group of young able children. I will first present some general implications and contributions for educational practice and research. Subsequently, I will put forward a number of implications for different educational stakeholders, namely policy makers, teacher educators, SMTs and teachers as well as researchers.

7.4.1 General Implications for Educational Practice and Future Research

First of all, this inquiry undoubtedly reaffirms the validity and contribution to knowledge and educational practice of involving young able children when seeking to understand and

examine notions related to their learning and schooling experiences. In terms of the connection between the fields of **gifted education** and **general education**, this research inquiry points out the need for the recognition of the notion of giftedness, high ability and emerging abilities and talents in our classrooms, and thus for more focused attention to effective provision through inclusive practices that support the learning, development and attainment of all learners, including very able ones. This also implies the necessity for **teacher education** in Malta to target this field as part of its inclusive education framework and to provide adequate training and professional learning opportunities to improve school effectiveness and teacher efficacy in including this group of learners. The field of **inclusion** also benefits from the findings of this narrative study as evidence points to the need for a clearer vision of inclusion and subsequent adoption and endorsement by Maltese policy and legislation for inclusive education for all as a rights-based approach. Moreover, this study recommends the recognition and adequate provision of the educational needs of gifted children as learners with special educational needs.

With regards to **educational research** on the exploration of inclusive practices that are supportive of the needs of young able learners, this inquiry seems to fill a gap as the literature available is largely carried out from the perspective of adults and fails to include young able children's own perceptions of ability and learning as they try to make sense of what enables them to perform, learn and achieve at school. Moreover, using these perceptions as a mirror to reveal elements of a teacher's pedagogy and practice that appeal to their need for stimulating and appropriate learning activities is also a novel perspective in educational research on the nurturing of young children's emerging abilities and talents. It also contributes to practice-based research that sheds light on teachers' practical wisdom built on their theoretical knowledge and understanding of issues educators face in their everyday dealings with the learners in their classrooms, thus highlighting the tensions and links between theory and practice.

7.4.2 Implications for Policy Makers

This research study places a lens on the importance for Maltese policy and legislation to be built on international agreements such as the UNCRC (1989) so that all Maltese learners are guaranteed their right to a quality education and to supportive measures that enable them to maximise their learning, their participation and their achievement. For this to occur, it is

imperative that a right-based approach to inclusive education is espoused by Maltese legislation and that all stakeholders are aware and accountable of both their individual and collective responsibilities in meeting the diverse needs of all learners, including the young able ones. The discrepancy between policy and actual practice in schools needs to be addressed through more participatory approaches to policy development, implementation and evaluation by all stakeholders including school leaders, teachers, educators and parents.

Also, this research has implications for the use of a wider conception of ability and learning, particularly in the early years, where the focus should be on creating 'smart' environments and inclusive practices that help develop and nurture children's emergent abilities rather than identifying and labelling children as 'gifted' at an early age without providing the right environment for their gifts and talents to flourish and be discovered. This needs to be reflected in the policy framework for a broader approach to providing adequately for the diverse needs of all learners. In this manner, issues of equity, social justice and access to a 'curriculum of opportunity' for all learners are also targeted and given due attention. This applies to educational systems locally and internationally.

Although, as seen previously in the literature review, mention of 'the gifted and talented' can be observed in some Maltese policy-related documents such as the *Learning Outcomes Framework (2015)* and *Inclusive and Special Education Review (2004)*, more awareness and focus on the creation of learning environments and supportive practices for young able learners is required. Therefore, this needs to be also implicit in policy documents and legislation to ensure that curricular implementation and quality assurance mechanisms take the needs of more able learners into consideration when reviewing effectiveness of inclusive practices as well as attainment and achievement of this group of learners.

7.4.3 Implications for Teacher Educators

The need for more focused and contextualised teacher training that prepares teachers and early years practitioners for the challenging task of catering for the needs of all learners in diverse classrooms is highlighted. There is a general lack of specific training on giftedness, high ability and effective provision for children who are able to excel in one or more areas of endeavour in our country and thus teacher education institutions and organisations are encouraged to design and devise opportunities for training and professional development in different aspect of the fields of gifted education and inclusive education.

Implicit in the call for more links between policy and practice in schools and classrooms is the requirement for professional learning and professional development opportunities, both initial and ongoing, to be linked with policy and legislation in order to ensure that there is consistency, collaboration and concordance between all educational stakeholders during the implementation and review processes. This will reduce the risks of fragmented and isolated attempts at implementing aspects of existent or new policies in our schools and classrooms and also promote a more holistic and wide-ranging approach to effective implementation and practices.

Moreover, teacher educators themselves need to be conversant in gifted education but also aware of the links between this field, general education and inclusive education in order to be able to bring about changes in attitude, belief, awareness and competences of the teachers and educators they eventually train. It is also advisable that teacher education in Maltese higher education institutions, organisations and associations that currently provide different educational stakeholders with professional learning opportunities is in line with recommendations presented by the Council of Europe (1994) where the special educational needs of gifted learners were officially recognised. It is also important that professional training concords with current educational trends in other countries and continents. Thus, links with organisations that provide support for recognising and meeting the needs of able learners need to be forged between our educational institutions and specialist expert individuals and organisations or institutions abroad. Teacher educators as well as teachers themselves need to be encouraged to attend workshops, courses and conferences locally and internationally where knowledge and experience of working with young able children is shared and explored.

7.4.4 Implications for Teachers and Early Years Practitioners

With regards to the Maltese context, this inquiry encourages practitioners to understand the important role they have in creating opportunities for learners' capabilities and talents to emerge and be fostered particularly in an educational system that is yet without specific teacher training in the field of inclusive practices for the needs of the very able learners. The effectiveness of a constructivist, inquiry-based and participatory approach to learning in a mixed-ability classroom for the development and nurturing of the diverse needs and abilities of young able children as demonstrated and evidenced through the participants' own voices

and positive learner identities urges teachers within similar learning contexts (in Malta and other countries with similar approaches to the early years) to adopt the ideas presented in this inquiry in terms of pedagogy and practice as an inclusive measure for addressing the needs of this particular group of learners.

This research study also highlights the crucial role that teachers play in the lives of young able learners particularly in the development and fostering of children's positive learner identities as a prerequisite for positive learning dispositions. The narratives in this study provide an indication of strong connections between a teacher's own pedagogical choices, professional attitude and professional identity and her learners' responses, motivation, engagement and performance.

Moreover, it is also essential for teachers to engage in continuous professional development to build their professional capacity to support young able children's learning, development and achievement. Apart from attending in-service training provided by their schools and colleges, it is also recommended that teachers take charge of their own learning by seeking opportunities for training and professional learning that is relevant to their needs. In this manner, teachers are able to make more informed choices in terms of pedagogy, assessment and practice whilst using continuous reflection and self-evaluation to constantly revise and improve their own practice for the benefit of all learners, including highly able children.

7.4.5 Implications for Research

The idea of presenting data in the form of intertwined narratives where a teacher's perspective and a learner's voice are simultaneously exposed allows for an interesting take on how daily occurrences, interactions and experiences can be viewed from similar or different standpoints by different participants. The intertwined narratives also bring out the individuality of each participant and therefore succeed in providing readers with an authentic and close-enough picture of who the participants are, what attracts their attention, how they experience particular events and experiences and generally, how they shape and are in turn influenced by what happens within the environment in which learning takes place. The use of narrative inquiry as a method also makes research more accessible to the wider audience through the use of stories and narration for the presentation of the data.

This study, particularly the presentation of data in narrative form, thus contributes to the literature on the intertwined lives of a teacher and her learners. It also provides specific material for the exploration of able children's own perceptions in the field of high ability and giftedness in young children. Moreover, it encourages educators and researchers to look into the possibilities of using young children's voices to understand how teachers' pedagogical choices and practices impact learners' identities to the benefit or detriment of the emergence of abilities and talents. This inquiry also sheds light on the need for inquiries to be conducted inside the classroom in order to give a voice to those directly involved in the teaching and learning process.

As already pointed out, this inquiry does not in any way attempt to claim generalisation of the interpretations and meanings that emerged from the study since the focus was consistently on individual meaning pertinent to the specific context in which this study was carried out. It is however hoped that educators, teachers and researchers working and researching with children can discover different lessons regarding the relevance of learning about one's professional practice by truly listening to children's voices and acknowledging their validity and authenticity when reflecting upon and researching topics that have a direct or an indirect influence on the lives of these same children or those of others.

7.5 Concluding Comments

This inquiry was originally set in motion by my dissatisfaction with certain practices currently existent in our schools, particularly concerning talent development and the provision of challenge for students who show or may have the potential to reach high levels of performance in certain areas of endeavour, both academic and non-academic ones. It was also an expressed need to share my practical wisdom acquired over years of teaching and researching about the crucial influence that teachers' professional attitude and pedagogical choices may have on the recognition, unveiling and development of individual children's emerging abilities and talents and on their learner identities. Looking back I realise that somehow, consciously or not, I felt that researching this topic that I had at heart at doctoral level would in more ways than one confirm the relevance and validity of giving teachers and learners a voice. The depth of the findings and richness of the data generated from this inquiry definitely validate this need that I had originally felt about placing the participants at

the centre of an inquiry and using their voices to bring forth the message for more inclusive practices that address the diverse needs of the more able learners in the early years.

As I write the concluding comments to put an end to my research journey, I cannot but relive some of those rewarding as well as more challenging moments that have accompanied me throughout these past five years during which I began and complete my doctoral studies. The year when I conducted this research inquiry happened to be my very last year of working as a classroom teacher – my professional journey has subsequently taken me first into a leadership role in the same school where the study was conducted and later to a higher education institution where I am now in a position to train and influence, hopefully in various positive and healthy ways, trainee practitioners who aim to themselves become early years practitioners.

The lessons learned from this narrative inquiry will hopefully encourage more practitioners to validate children's capacity for learning by providing rich and meaningful learning opportunities through the use of inclusive practices, to continuously reflect on their pedagogical choices and practices using children's own perceptions as sources of information, and to ultimately understand and work with children in ways that confidently help learners to become aware of their learning dispositions through motivation, engagement, interaction and active participation so that positive learner identities are developed and reaffirmed. Finally, on the basis of the interpretation and findings of this inquiry, I would argue that teachers of young learners must be consciously aware of how their professional attitude, pedagogies adopted and kind of relationships they build with their students may impact, positively or adversely, young able learners' capacity for learning, recognition of their individual talents and emerging abilities, positive self-concepts as capable learners as well as the richness and extent of their learning experiences in general.

Appendix 1

University of Sheffield Ethical Review

COVER SHEET

I confirm that in my judgment, due to the project's nature, the use of a method to inform prospective participants about the project (eg 'Information Sheet'/'Covering Letter'/'Pre-Written Script'):	
Is relevant	Is <u>not</u> relevant
✓ (if relevant then this should be enclosed)	

I confirm that in my judgment, due to the project's nature, the use of a 'Consent Form':	
Is relevant	Is <u>not</u> relevant
✓ (if relevant then this should be enclosed)	

Is this a 'generic "en bloc" application (ie does it cover more than one project that is sufficiently similar)	
Yes	No

I am a member of staff

I am a PhD/EdD student

I am a Master's student

I am an Undergraduate student

I am a PGCE student

The submission of this ethics application has been agreed by my supervisor

Supervisor's signature/name and date of agreement



I have enclosed a signed copy of Part B

PART A

A1. Title of Research Project

'So that tall poppies can lift their heads to the sky': an investigation into the multiple factors within an inclusive learning context that facilitate the unveiling and nurturing of emerging abilities, gifts and talents in six-year-old capable learners.

A2. Applicant (normally the Principal Investigator, in the case of staff-led research projects, or the student in the case of supervised research projects):

Title: Mrs First Name/Initials: Rosienne Last Name: Farrugia
Post: Primary School Teacher Department:
Email: rosiennef@gmail.com Telephone: 00356.27200062

A.2.1. Is this a student project?

If yes, please provide the Supervisor's contact details:

Prof. Tom Billington School of Education, University of Sheffield Room 8.03

A2.2. Other key investigators/co-applicants (within/outside University), where applicable:

Please list all (add more rows if necessary)

Title	Full Name	Post	Responsibility in project	Organisation	Department

A3. Proposed Project Duration:

Start date: October 2011

End date: October 2013

A4. Mark "X" in one or more of the following boxes if your research:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Involves children or young people aged under 18 years
<input type="checkbox"/>	Involves only identifiable personal data with no direct contact with participants
<input type="checkbox"/>	Involves only anonymised or aggregate data
<input type="checkbox"/>	Involves prisoners or others in custodial care (eg young offenders)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Involves adults with mental incapacity or mental illness
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Has the primary aim of being educational (eg student research, a project necessary for a postgraduate degree or diploma, MA, PhD or EdD)

A5. Briefly summarise the project's aims, objectives and methodology?

The proposed study aims to examine the issue of providing meaningful and challenging learning experiences to all learners within one primary classroom in an effort to stimulate, discover and nurture the development of emerging abilities and talents in six to seven year old children.

This aim will be achieved through the use of narrative inquiry in order to capture both my own story as a teacher-researcher as well as my pupils' perspectives about learning, ability and schooling. By adopting a qualitative approach to researching and documenting my own journey and that of a group of young learners over up to twelve months, I intend to carry out a narrative inquiry of our learning journey, constructing along the way an intertwined narrative that explores and reports about those elements within an inclusive learning setting that might encourage the unveiling and nurturing of emerging abilities and talents in young capable learners.

Three research questions have been developed and their answers will be sought as follows: through the literature review; through the use of a research diary and visual narrative as I document and reflect upon the daily interactions and connections that occur within the classroom setting that ultimately leads to talented transactions; and through the use of participatory research techniques with children that aim to give young learners a voice to talk about their experiences and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling whilst being interviewed by me as their teacher-researcher. The following research questions have been developed:

1. What are the elements of an inclusive learning environment that foster young children's emerging abilities and talents?
2. What are the opportunities and challenges experienced by a primary school teacher when creating an inclusive classroom environment that encourages six year olds to develop and flourish as young capable learners?
3. What are young capable children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling and how do they respond to a range of inclusive pedagogies aimed to revealing, developing and nurturing their emerging abilities, gifts and talents?

A6. What is the potential for physical and/or psychological harm / distress to participants?

This research study will be carried out from October 2011 to October 2013 by me who will be adopting two roles at the same time – that of a classroom teacher as well as that of a participant-researcher. Therefore, although care will be taken to ensure that children who do not wish to take part in the study will not be involved directly in the study, one cannot deny the fact that they will still form part of the classroom in which the study is being conducted. On the other hand, the study will not take the form of an experiment, and therefore the daily interactions and activities that will happen during the course of the research study will be similar to those that occur each year in my classroom – the only difference would be that this year these classroom interactions and activities will be recorded and documented in a research diary. It is therefore important that anonymity is offered at the beginning of the study so that the children together with their parents can choose whether they wish for their real name to be changed for a pseudonym.

Another issue is that of selecting up to six participants to take part in the case-study research in the second phase of the study whereby I will choose a group of young learners from the class to be interviewed through the use of participatory research techniques with children. My concern is that those children who will not be selected might feel that they were not 'good' enough or 'as good as' those who will be chosen. To minimise this possibility, it is felt that all children in the classroom should be exposed to the use of similar techniques in our everyday interactions in the classroom so that they do not feel 'unworthy' of further participation in the study.

- A7. Does your research raise any issues of personal safety for you or other researchers involved in the project and, if yes, explain how these issues will be managed?**
 No, as this study will take place on the premises where I have been working for the past three years i.e. a primary school.
- A8. How will the potential participants in the project be (i) identified, (ii) approached and (iii) recruited?**
 The choice of participants is mainly determined by my current role of teacher-researcher. Being a full-time primary school teacher whilst carrying out this research study, I felt it to be more convenient to conduct the study at my workplace due to a difficulty to be physically away from my classes for long stretches of time.
 Although I teach two cohorts of children within a school that practise a policy of team-teaching, I choose to focus my study on one out of the two groups – the one for whom I am the ‘class teacher’. It is felt that a thorough examination of the multiple connections and interactions that occur in two classrooms would undoubtedly generate a large amount of data beyond the scope of this thesis.
 Thus, apart from myself as the main participant-researcher, a group of up to twenty-four children aged 6 to 7, all of whom belong to the same classroom, will initially be asked to participate in this study as pupils in my classroom. Following the first scholastic term, during which time I shall be focused on getting to know my pupils and keeping a reflective diary throughout, I will proceed to select four to six participant from the group of children in my class and I will ask them to take part in the next phase of the study – which will take the form of case-study research where the children will become participants rather than subjects and during which phase, they will be asked to share their experiences and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling.
- A9. Will informed consent be obtained from the participants?**
- | | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | ✓ |
| No | |

If informed consent is not to be obtained please explain why. Further guidance is at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/researchethicspolicy-notes/consent>
 Only under exceptional circumstances are studies without informed consent permitted. Students should consult their tutors.

- A.9.1 How do you plan to obtain informed consent? (i.e. the proposed process?):**
 I plan to obtain informed consent from the school, the parents and the children as follows:
- the school management team, namely our junior school director, will be asked to give permission to conduct this study on the school premises with the students in my class through a covering letter.
 - Parental permission for their children to be involved in the study will be sought through the use of a parents’ information sheet and consent form – permission from parents will also be sought regarding the taking of photographs and the use of their comments as well as their children’s comments on our classroom blog.
 - I will also find ways of explaining and seeking children’s permission and cooperation to participate in this research study so that they are told as much as possible to be able to give their consent to participate. I will use stories such as Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s ‘The Little Prince’ to introduce the idea that adults sometimes need children to explain things to them to better understand their world. This will mainly occur during a witnessed meeting with the children in which they will be told about this research study, their participation in it and their option of accepting or refusing to participate.
 - In the second phase of the study, once the four to six students to take part in the case-studies are selected, I will again seek consent from their parents and the children to interview them through the use of participatory research techniques.

- A.10 How will you ensure appropriate protection and well-being of participants?**
 Anonymity will be kept throughout the process in the recording down of data. Photographs of children 'in action' during class activities will be largely taken as a whole group – it is 'normal practice' for class teachers to take pictures of students engaged in different activities during the school day and then post them on our classroom blogs so consent will be sought to use these pictures for both classroom blogs and research study where needed. However, where photographs of individual children will be used for the purposes of this study, parental and child permission will periodically be sought to double check whether it would be fine for the photographs to be used particularly for dissemination purposes. Due to the fact that the study will occur over a whole scholastic year, it is important for me as the teacher-researcher to keep checking that the children are at no time uncomfortable or unhappy with the research process or with their participation in the study. An information sheet with pictures and clear explanations about different aspects of the study will be eventually be developed for the case-study participants to ensure that the children are provided with a verbal and a visual explanation of what the study is about. It will also be equally important to tell both the parents and the children that they do not have to participate and that if they decide to take part, they have a right to stop whenever they wished. As the main researcher and teacher of the participants, I will be sensitive to the needs and comfort of the children and always consider the children's well-being above data collection.
- A.11 What measures will be put in place to ensure confidentiality of personal data, where appropriate?**
 Pseudonyms will be offered to replace the names of participants in my classroom as well as changes in the information given about the details of the school where the study will be taking place if it is deemed necessary. However, if participants express the wish for their real names to be used, I will negotiate proper permission from the school and their parents in this regard.
- A.12 Will financial / in kind payments (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? (Indicate how much and on what basis this has been decided.)**

Yes

No

✓

A.13 Will the research involve the production of recorded or photographic media such as audio and/or video recordings or photographs?

Yes

No

A.13.1 This question is only applicable if you are planning to produce recorded or visual media:
How will you ensure that there is a clear agreement with participants as to how these recorded media or photographs may be stored, used and (if appropriate) destroyed?
Parents' permission will be sought to use photographs taken during class activities for the purposes of the study – only the ones deemed necessary to give a richer and fuller description of what took place during a classroom activity will be kept till the end of the research study. Their children will be invited to use a camera to take their own pictures which subsequently will be used in the making of a group photo album that the children themselves will choose and create to illustrate their perceptions of what makes learning interesting and worthwhile. I will also seek parents' consent for the use of specific photographs for dissemination purposes.

PART B - THE SIGNED DECLARATION

I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the University of Sheffield's policies and procedures, which include the University's 'Financial Regulations', 'Good research Practice Standards' and the 'Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants, Data and Tissue' (Ethics Policy) and, where externally funded, with the terms and conditions of the research funder.

In signing this research ethics application I am confirming that:

1. The above-named project will abide by the University's Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants, Data and Tissue: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/tris/other/gov-ethics/researchethics/index.html>
2. The above-named project will abide by the University's 'Good Research Practice Standards': <http://www.shef.ac.uk/tris/other/gov-ethics/researchethics/general-principles/homepage.html>
3. The research ethics application form for the above-named project is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
4. There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of researchers conducting this project.
5. Subject to the research being approved, I undertake to adhere to the project protocol without unagreed deviation and to comply with any conditions set out in the letter from the University ethics reviewers notifying me of this.
6. I undertake to inform the ethics reviewers of significant changes to the protocol (by contacting my supervisor or the Ethics Administrator as appropriate)
7. I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data, including the need to register when necessary with the appropriate Data Protection Officer (within the University the Data Protection Officer is based in CCS).
8. I understand that the project, including research records and data, may be subject to inspection for audit purposes, if required in future.
9. I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this form will be held by those involved in the ethics review procedure (eg the Ethics Administrator and/or ethics reviewers/supervisors) and that this will be managed according to Data Protection Act principles.
10. If this is an application for a 'generic'/'en block' project all the individual projects that fit under the generic project are compatible with this application.
11. I will inform the Chair of Ethics Review Panel if prospective participants make a complaint about the above-named project.

Signature of student (student application): *Rafelue Camogie*

Signature of staff (staff application): *John*

Date: 21 November 2011

Email the completed application form to the course/programme secretary
For staff projects contact the Ethics Secretary, Colleen Woodward
Email: c.woodward@sheffield.ac.uk for details of how to submit

Appendix 2

Information Sheets & Consent Forms

Information Sheet

Title of the proposed study:

An enquiry into young able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling as an uncovering of a teacher's pedagogy and practice

Project's Aims and Objectives:

The proposed study aims to examine the issue of providing meaningful and challenging learning experiences to all learners within one primary classroom in an effort to stimulate, discover and nurture the development of emerging abilities and talents in six to seven year old children.

This aim will be achieved through the use of narrative inquiry in order to capture both my own story as a teacher-researcher as well as my pupils' perspectives about learning, ability and schooling. By adopting a qualitative approach to researching and documenting my own journey and that of a group of young learners over up to twelve months, I intend to carry out a narrative inquiry of our learning journey, constructing along the way an intertwined narrative that explores and reports about those elements within an inclusive learning setting that might encourage the unveiling and nurturing of emerging abilities and talents in young capable learners.

In order for me to be able to conduct my study, I am seeking the school administration's permission to carry out the proposed study within one of the classrooms I teach in the same school. I will thus be adopting the roles of both a classroom teacher and a researcher concurrently.

Three Research Questions:

The three research questions chosen for this study are:

1. What are young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling?
2. What do young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling reveal about a teacher's own pedagogy and practice?
3. In what ways, if any, does a teacher and a group of young able learners aged six years in a mixed-ability classroom impact each other's experiences, performance and identities?

Who will participate in the study?

Apart from myself as the main participant-researcher, a group of twenty-two children aged 6 to 7, all of whom belong to the same classroom, will initially be asked to participate in this study as pupils in my classroom. Following the first/ second scholastic term, during which time I shall be focused on getting to know my pupils and keeping a reflective diary throughout, I will proceed to select four to six participant from the group of children in my class and I will ask them to take part in the next phase of the study – which will take the form of case-study research where the children will become participants rather than subjects and during which phase, they will be asked to share their experiences and perceptions of learning, ability and schooling.

How will consent be obtained?

I plan to obtain informed consent from the school, the parents and the children as follows:

- the school management team, namely you as our junior school director, will be asked to give permission to conduct this study on the school premises with the students in my class through this information sheet and consent letter.
- Parental permission for their children to be involved in the study will be sought through the use of a parents' information sheet and consent form (attached with this email) – permission from parents will also be sought regarding the taking of photographs and the use of their comments as well as their children's comments on our classroom blog.
- I will also find ways of explaining and seeking children's permission and cooperation to participate in this research study so that they are told as much as possible to be able to give their consent to participate. I will use stories such as Antoine de Saint-Exupery's 'The Little Prince' to introduce the idea that adults sometimes need children to explain things to them to better understand their world. This will mainly occur during a witnessed meeting with the children in which they will be told about this research study, their participation in it and their option of accepting or refusing to participate.
- In the second phase of the study, once the four to six students to take part in the case-studies are selected, I will again seek consent from their parents and the children to interview them through the use of participatory research techniques

What if I have more questions about the study?

I can be contacted through email as follows: rosiennef@gmail.com or on the phone – home: 27200062 or mobile number: 79591953. Moreover, I am also conducted this study under the supervision of Prof Tom Billington, University of Sheffield, Room 8.03.

School's Consent:

I agree that Ms Rosienne Farrugia can carry out the proposed study within the Junior 2 classroom (6 to 7 year olds) she is currently teaching and that the students from St Catherine's High School can take part in the research on the multiple factors within an inclusive learning environment that facilitate the unveiling and nurturing of emerging abilities, gifts and talents in six-to-seven year old capable learners.

I confirm that the necessary parental consent will be sought.

Name of Junior School Director

Signature of Junior School Director

Date: _____

Contact Number: _____

Email: _____

My Educational Philosophy:

- All children who come to my class are capable learners who require the right kind of classroom environment to be the best they can be.
- All children have gifts and talents (which vary both in kind and in potential) that need to be discovered and nurtured.
- Children learn by interacting with others as well as with the resources available in their environment.
- An inclusive classroom enables all children to discover and gain confidence in their own capacity for learning.

- Schools and families need to work hand-in-hand at all times to ensure that children have a positive schooling experience.



Dreaming bigger dreams for our children, our families, our school ...

Anonymity and Children's Consent:

A pseudonym will be offered instead of your child's real name in any reports or publications following the study.

Once you give your consent for your child to be a participant, s/he will also be asked for his/her permission to take part in this study. Every effort will be made to ensure that the children who accept to participate in the study understand, as much as possible, why this study is being conducted and why their participation is required.



"I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the picture frightened them."



But they answered: "Frighten? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?"

My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant."

*The Little Prince
By Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

Parents' Information Sheet

"So that Tall Poppies Can Lift their Heads to the Sky": an Investigation into the Multiple Factors that Facilitate the Unveiling and Nurturing of Emerging Abilities, and Talents in Six- Year-Old Capable Learners.



**Ms Rosiemme Farrugia
BEdoc (Hons.) MEd.**

A research study in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education.

An Invitation to Take Part in a Research Study

I would like to ask you, as parents of to give your permission for your child to take part in this research study over the coming scholastic year. It is important that you read this leaflet and understand what the study is about before you give your consent.



Also, it is important that you know that your child does not have to take part in this study and that, should you give your permission, your child can withdraw from this study whenever s/he wishes.

Please take time to read this information sheet carefully and to ask questions should you need further clarifications. Feel free to speak to me or email me with any queries you might have. I can be reached at the following email address:

rosie.nesf@qmail.com

Why is the study being conducted?

I am currently a third year student at the University of Sheffield, studying towards a PhD degree in Education. This study aims to explore the multiple factors in an inclusive classroom that might influence the development of high ability and talent in young learners.

I will be documenting and narrating the stories and anecdotes of our daily interactions in a research diary and I will also include some photographs taken during class activities. Also, a group of six children will eventually be interviewed (towards the end of the second term).

Promoting Educational Practice that Strives for Excellence:



Children develop at different rates, have different interests, needs and learning styles. As a teacher-

researcher, I will seek to provide a rich and varied learning experience for all children in my classroom in an effort to encourage them to develop their gifts and talents and to transform their potential into high achievement.

What will participation in the study involve?

The study will take place over the coming scholastic year, starting in November 2010 through to June 2012. During this time, I shall be keeping a record of what happens in my classroom, what the opportunities and challenges experienced by me as the teacher might be and how the children respond to the activities being carried out. It is important for me to re-assure you that this study is NOT an experimental one—I will be presenting the 'normal' curriculum as in my previous year—the only difference is that this time it will be recorded in a research diary and eventually presented as a study.

I will be on the look-out for any classroom activities that encourage and nurture the development of high ability and talent in particular children. All children will be given the opportunity to experience a rich and challenging curriculum so that all of them have the chance to discover a particular ability or talent.

A group of up to six children will eventually be selected to take part in the second phase of the study—but parental consent will be sought once again in due time.

Parental Consent Form

Title of Project: 'So that tall poppies can lift their heads to the sky': an investigation into the multiple factors within an inclusive learning context that facilitate the unveiling and nurturing of emerging abilities, gifts and talents in six-year old capable learners.

Name of Researcher: Ms Rosienne Farrugia

Please tick initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 13 September 2011 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

The researcher can be contacted on her email: rosiennef@gmail.com

3. I give my consent for my child to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant Date Signature

(or legal representative)

Rosienne Farrugia

Name of researcher Date Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

As a teacher I believe that:

- All children can learn and be the best they can be.
- There are things you are very good at and there might be things you will do well with some help.
- At times, you learn alone, by doing things with others or by making use of interesting stuff.
- A teacher can learn about how children learn and what they think about school and about learning by talking to them, by listening, to what they have to say and by observing them while they are learning, playing and doing things alone or with others.

How will I write about you?

I will at times need to write about something you did or said in class. Would you prefer that I use?:

- your real name
- a 'pretend' name



Your Space to Write, Draw or Share Your Thoughts:

Children's Information Sheet



So that Tall Poppies Can Lift their Heads to the Sky: an Investigation into the Multiple Factors that Facilitate the Unveiling and Nurturing of Emerging Abilities, and Talents in Six- Year-Old Capable Learners.



**Ms Rosiemme Farrugia
B.Educ (Hons.) M.Ed.**

A research study in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education.

An Invitation for You!

Dear _____,

I would like to ask you to take part in my study. Do you think it would be fine for me to sometimes write about what you say, write or do in class during our lessons?



I wish to learn about the important things that help Junior 2 pupils to learn and to feel good at what they do.

I would like to also help other teachers understand what makes a Junior 2 child happy to be in a classroom and what activities, lessons or things help him/her to be a great learner!

Would you like to take part in this study?

Yes

No

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: 30th November 2011

Thank you

Ms Rosienne :)

Appendix 3

Sample of Data:

Conversational Interview Transcript & Reflective Journal

Conversational Interview with Kelly M - Transcript

R: So, is it fine for you to be here, me and you alone?

K: (nods)

R: Whatever I ask you, feel free to tell me whatever comes to your mind. Don't worry, for example, that Ms Rosienne might not like this. No, I wish to know what you really feel. It's okay, whatever you say will stay between me and you, I'll write it down here. I won't say 'Kelly' said that, but I'll just say 'a girl in my class'. So it could be any other girl who said it. So feel free, okay?

K: Or else tell them that the whole class did it ...

R: Okay, so I could tell them that some children told me this, another child said that, something like that right?

K: Like, you chose four children, so if there's four children and they wrote down.

R: Okay, shall we start now? So, I am going to even (you see this is a recorder) record our conversation. So what you are saying will stay here so that later I can go home and hear your voice again and I'll be able to smile a bit hearing your voice. Okay? So the first question is this: Now that we've reached the end of the year (we're almost done with Junior 2) – right?

K: We can have our graduation and we don't even know what we're going to do yet!

R: But I know what we're going to do ... ehmm, how do you feel about being in Junior 2, how was your experience?

K: It was fun for me and exciting ... in the beginning of the year, I thought I was going to be doing new things and that I'm going to feel happy when I learn and that I'm going to know new friends and have fun playing.

R: How good! Let me write them down, if you don't mind.

K: And then in Summer I told my mummy, I know that these teachers are going to, are going to teach us some new things.

R: So you were excited about that. Do you like learning new things?

K: Yes ... and do you know what? What my mummy doesn't know, I teach her, things of English, Maths ...

R: And you teach her? How good!

K: Yes.

R: Are you a good teacher?

K: (nods)

R: Very good.

K: But now that she knows them, I won't tell her again.

R: Cos you are a good teacher – you told her once and she knows it. So what was it that you really liked in Junior 2 apart from learning new things. Anything else that you really enjoyed in Junior 2?

K: Yes, I really liked it when we went on an outing.

R: Which one, is there one that you really enjoyed?

K: Yes, the one of Mdina and Mosta.

R: Okay, what else, anything else that you liked?

K: Of the outings?

R: Not just the outings – of Junior 2.

K: I like it that you teach us how to write in joint.

R: Okay ... and was there anything that you didn't like so much? Can you think of something that you didn't like so much?

K: That I didn't like so much? When you were shouting.

R: Oh!!! When I was shouting ... and do I do it many times?

K: Yes.

R: Yes? Oh dear! ... Shall we go to the next one. If you had to give your Junior 2 experience a mark from one to ten, ten is the best if it was brilliant or one is really bad – like, I really didn't like being in Junior 2, and then there's 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10. Can you give Junior 2 a mark, how you felt as a Junior 2 student?

K: Nine.

R: Wow! Why nine, tell me.

K: Because even with the other teachers, I enjoyed it, even the things I didn't like. I said this is boring, then when I did it, I felt like I had happiness coming to myself, and I enjoyed with Ms Silvana a lot and with you and with Ms Anna and with Ms Josepha. Next year I hope you will teach us again.

R: How sweet of you! That's a really good mark – 9! I am writing down so that I remember because I might forget some important things that you told me and I don't want to forget them, okay?

K: It's okay, I can repeat ... like I repeat for my parents when they don't hear me. I think last year I had to repeat 10 times to her on sports' day.

R: So even though at times I shout, you still seem to have enjoyed Junior 2. Do I shout all the time?

K: No, not all the time. Only when some people get to your nerves. Like I do with my mummy.

R: Mela, another one. Ready for the next one? (6:05) Is there anything that you would change or do in a different way if you were Ms Sue or a teacher? Is there anything about Junior 2 (in the teaching, in the things that you learn, in the classroom, in the school) that you would want to change if you had the chance?

K: I would, I would teach them[the children] how to obey and to listen to their teachers really carefully and to sit down quietly and not give their teachers a big headache.

R: (laughs) And do you have any idea of how you could do that?

K: I would keep on repeating from term 1 till term 2.

R: Okay. So does it bother you when children disobey in class?

K: It does a little bit but then when they stop, it calms me down.

R: So you don't like a noisy class?

K: No, I like them quiet, and doing their work like now and listening to their teachers.

R: Is there anything else that you would change?

K: I will change that the charts, I would pick up a big cartoncene, make a photo on them and put them on the computer and write about them to the whole world.

R: So would you want us to put those pictures on the computer?

K: Yes.

R: And why do you feel that it's important that you put them on the computer and send it to the whole world?

K: So like they to America where my aunties live, and like so they know how intelligent they are!

R: So you think that your friends are intelligent, you and your friends? We'll talk more about that.

K: Yes.

R: Is there a particular child that you would want me to put on the computer?

K: Nicole's work is nice, and I really like it her painting like that ... I really liked it. And her painting the flowers in a vase. I really liked the way it turned out.

R: I think we did it all together right?

K: But I liked the way you stuck them together. When I paint I get really messy.

R: You remember?

K: We nearly did a whole unit about it. I even got dirty painting those flowers.

R: Why did that happen?

K: Because I am really messy.

R: But do you like getting messy?

K: Yes I love getting messy ... but except for my hair. I don't like messing with my hair. Or else tell my mummy to cut it and I won't get messy any more ...

R: Okay, shall we try the next question?

K: Okay ... (10:08)

R: Are you tired?

K: No.

R: So we go to the next question?

K: Yes, the next question.

R: Okay, do you enjoy learning new things?

K: Yes.

R: What do you like learning about?

K: I like learning about you remember in term 1 when we did that thing – the art and craft and activity and I remember ... what was it when we also did a play with the magic pen?

R: That was the very first play we did ... of Shen and the magic paintbrush.

K: And then I liked the Christmas concert, that's what I liked.

R: So you like drama! Anything else you like learning about? Science, English ...

K: I like the Science a lot and I like learning a lot with you and I'm sad this is the end of the year.

R: That's sweet ... so do you know how you learn best? What are the things that help you to learn faster?

K: To learn faster? I know, I study them (12:35) and then I learn them by heart and then I'll be ready in 1 minute, or a second, or an hour like last time ...

R: Last time when?

K: Last time I think it was last time, I think I was telling my mummy I will stay an hour doing my homework but I didn't then.

R: And in class, what are the things that we do that make you feel you are learning really fast?

K: When the teachers show us things ...

R: When the teachers show you? And do you think that you learn quickly when you work with somebody else, with a partner or with a group?

K: Yes, if I work with Nicole or Kyra, they would teach me.

R: Okay ... very good. So what else? Are there any activities that we do that help you to learn faster than other things?

K: Yes, the art and craft when you give us something to take to finish at home, I do it fast and then plus and minus for maths, I can do them fast even like five and the counting in tens or fives, it's very easy for me. When we repeat and repeat and repeat, I know them, I have them in my memory.

R: Very good ... you're giving me a lot of interesting information.

K: That's about this year ... I'm going to write it down in my diary, about my year.

R: You can, you can... now next question ... Who do you think is smart in your class?

K: Jeremy is smart and Mireille I think is smart, Jeanine is smart as well, Nicole and Sarah and Kyra are smart as well.

R: Any other boys?

K: Thomas and Giorgio are as well.

R: So what makes you think they're smart?

K: Because they know a lot of science.

R: So if you know a lot of science, it means you are smart?

K: And even if they're not smart, I know that there is something smart inside them and they do lots of things good. But I know they are smart and even if they're not, they are smart for me. (16:20)

R: Who else says that these children are smart, the ones you mentioned? Only you know it or you hear somebody else at school say it?

K: I know they are, even if no one says it, I know that they have talent in them, I know they have talent.

R: And does any teacher tell them that they are smart?

K: You tell them. And I want to tell Jeremy that I think I want him to be a teacher because he is very good, he has lots of knowledge.

R: And when he shares it, does he share it well?

K: Yes, and you know the one of outer space I did on my writing journal?

K: I told him to see it and he helped him. And that's something special about Jeremy. And I like him to be my best friend ever ... And about Giorgio, Giorgio he needs a lot of practice but I know he is good.

R: If you think about Giorgio, what makes you think he is smart?

K: He know a lot, more than reading.

R: What else is he good at?

K: He is good at playing with me ... he always says yes when I ask him to play with me. And he is good at inventing games when he plays with me. And that shows that he is smart as well.

R: So shall we move to the next one? Are you tired?

K: No.

R: Now, do you think that YOU are smart?

K: Yes.

R: What makes you think that?

K: Because when you told me about something hard, I said I better start reading so the difficult words, I tell my mummy and I know them.

R: Is it important for you that someone like me tells you that you're smart?

K: Yes, and I like it when Nicole tells me that I am smart.

R: Do you?

K: And you know what ... I like that I am smart that I am smart like the other children. Even if someone tells me that I am not.

R: But does anyone tell you you're not smart?

K: No.

R: So your teacher tells you that you're smart, Nicole tells you as well, is there anybody else who says that you're smart?

K: Sometimes my mummy says that I am, she tells me *brava*.

R: Other teachers?

K: Yes, other teachers like you or Ms Silvana or Ms Maureen.

R: Okay. How do you feel when they tell you that you are good at something or that you're smart?

K: I feel happy and I tell them you are smart and I tell them what they're good at as well. Not only I and I tell them 'even you'.

R: And what are you good at?

K: I'm good at singing and dancing.

R: What else are you good at? I know a few things you're good at. (21::18)

K: I'm good at reading as well, and playing.

R: Anything else?

K: I know how to be kind.

R: I know that's true, even the way you speak tells me that you are.

K: And I kept a secret that I know a lot.

R: What do you mean?

K: Because I didn't want to tell mummy that I don't know English so then I told her that I know a lot about English, like I remember when you taught us how to find it quickly like I you he she it we you they (doing actions for pronouns).

R: Okay ...are there any things that we do in class that make you feel really smart?

K: Yes, like when we go outside to play and when we have our assessments, even when I'm stuck I think the assessments are fun.

R: So what do you do when you are stuck?

K: When I'm stuck, I just calm down, I take it easy and I do whatever tells me on the line.

R: Another one – who do you like working with when you're in a group?

K: If you tell us to choose a partner, I would like Nicole to work with me.

R: Why Nicole?

K: Because Nicole is my BFF and she always shows me that I have talent inside and she always shares together. If I ask her for something, she gives me and then I give her something of mine. And I like being friends with her. (24:00)

R: And in a group?

K: In a group of 7?

R: In a group of 4 or 5.

K: I would like Mireille, Nicole, Jeanine, Kyra and who else? And maybe I'd choose ... Kathryn.

R: And why would you like to work with this group?

K: Because like Nicole, they all show me talent, and they teach me things that I don't know. I show them respect and they show me respect. Like I taught Isaac yesterday, I was reading to him and I asked him questions.

R: Is there any boy you would like to work with? Or only girls?

K: I would choose Jeremy, Giorgio and Thomas. And Isaac and Gabriel and Liam.

R: Now another one. Can you think of an activity that you did this year and that you really enjoyed? The one that you'd give a trophy for being the best activity ever.

K: I would choose the Christmas concert of this year. That's what I really liked

R: So why?

K: The Christmas concert – I had fun! I had fun practising it and showing it to my mum. And I told her the title but I didn't tell her about it.

R: And was she happy when she came to see you?

K: Yes she was so excited in the car she was nearly going to cry in the car.

R: Really? And that made you happy?

K: Yes and excited. When I go to the beach I am so excited that I jump up and down in the car.

R: Okay, now there's this exercise that I would like you to do – there is a list of activities that we do in class, and I want you to write numbers next to each activity so that you show me which activities you really like, or like best or less. Start with the things that you really really like ... you can give number one to even two or three things, but then continue with two, three, four and five. Let me read them to you – there's Show and Tell, storytelling when I read stories to you, science experiments, literacy booklets, mind maps ...

K: I think Jeremy likes that ...

R: Okay ... working with a partner or groups, creative thinking like the story of the blind men and the elephant, the songs that help us to learn about things like the one about the water cycle and the one about the planets, lap books (do you remember about spots and stripes) ...

K: And Mireille's lap book about space ...

R: yes and the Christmas concert of Emma the Red. Put numbers next to the ones you really like.

K: So number one for the one I really, really like. Okay.

R: So what's the next thing that you really like after Show and Tell? So that you give it the number two.

{end of conversational interview}

Reflective Journal Entry

“A chameleon may change colour to show another chameleon how it is feeling and sometimes also to find a girlfriend!”

Following last week’s introduction about desert plants and animals with a focus on reptiles, today was the day for our twinning project with a Pre-Junior class (a class of 26 four year olds). The Pre-Junior teacher and I have been thinking of pairing up our classes for a different kind of activity for quite some time and a couple of weeks ago we just said we should try it out. We thought that we’d base our project on a story that can link both her current theme (Around the World) and our theme (Habitats) – so we went for one of our students’ favourite author Eric Carle and his story called *The Mixed-Up Chameleon*. We’d link it to our themes by talking about possible habitats (mostly warm or hot places) around the world. We thought this story would also appeal to both year groups for its focus on not just the chameleon but also a number of zoo animals as well as colours too. We met, planned out the activities and also worked on a wiki page in which we included video clips, games and pages where we could eventually share photos or include any links the children might wish to include: <http://themixedupchameleon.wikispaces.com/>

This weekend was spent planning and preparing the materials and resources needed for this session to be successful and to run smoothly by both me and Ms Gaby. As I worked on this project, I couldn’t help but think how important it is to have colleagues who are enthusiastic and passionate about our role as teachers of young children, who come up with creative ideas and are not afraid to take risks, who are either a step forward or who are enthusiastic followers. Ms Gaby is certainly a very dedicated, energetic, artistic and hard working teacher who loves sharing her ideas and resources and who cares about providing meaningful and fun learning opportunities for her students. She is also our ICT co-ordinator and therefore she is always ready to try out new things and use technological tools to make the learning experience more accessible to the students. The moment I mentioned a twinning project (and I had been telling her that I would love to work with an older group like I had originally done a couple of years ago when her son was in my Junior 2 class) she instantly suggested that I do it with her class – and we started working on this idea straight away without hesitation. Obviously, the fact that our school leader is a flexible person who trusts fully in our judgments as teachers and who doesn’t ever say no to our ‘crazy’ ideas such as this one, helped make this project possible.

What a very exciting morning! We knocked on Ms Gaby’s door at half past 8 sharp, armed with cushions, pencil boxes as well as a big curious smile and a beating heart. The Junior 2 children were all so eager to find out why they were there and what was going to happen! After the usual introductions, a few Pre-Junior and junior 2 kids were asked to come to the front and try and guess what was hiding inside my tummy. Some said lizard, others said crab and finally the children guessed that it was a chameleon. That is when we brainstormed ideas about what the children already knew about this wonderful reptile. Both Junior 2s and Pre-Juniors had a lot to share with other children. The little ones mentioned mostly the fact that chameleons change colour, (some said chameleons cannot go on something red because that would kill them). One Pre-Junior child (who happens to have a brother in Junior 2) told us that chameleons are cold-blooded and when I asked what does that mean, she specified that they are cold-blooded and we are warm-blooded. As expected the Junior 2s knew more details – that a chameleon is a reptile, has scaly skin, that it lives

in warm places such as the desert and the jungle and that it needs the sun to keep it warm. They were able to reproduce many reptile features discussed during last week's session. They also mentioned the long sticky tongue and that it eats flies. As always many children wanted to share their thoughts, ideas and current knowledge with the rest but not all got the chance – this is always a downside of working with large groups of children. But then we moved on to the next activity which proved to be fascinating for all. Giuseppe, one of the children in the Pre-Junior class, brought in two pet reptiles in a heated aquarium along – so we had these two visitors for everyone to see. Giuseppe, with Ms Gaby's help, explained things about the green water dragon and the bearded dragon. The look on the children's faces was an expression of awe and bewilderment - both reptiles barely moved and every time one of them moved a limb or opened an eyelid, the children would utter in surprise! It was a wonderful experience indeed!

After this first-hand encounter, it was time for the telling of the story – I showed the children the book cover, asking them whether anyone had read this before – Jeremy and Thomas said they have the book at home – then I asked who they thought had written this book. First answer was Julia Donaldson – a very popular author with our Junior 2s but then I asked them to look carefully at the illustrations on the book cover and Nicole said it's Eric Carle. Jeremy also replied that yes it's the same author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and Sarah mentioned that he also wrote the book about the slow sloth. As I told the story, asked questions to check the children's understanding and knowledge about the characters and chameleon facts being implied in the story as well as their predictions about what will happen next, I could tell that the children were mesmerized by the whole story. It does include most elements a good children's book usually has – the simple and repetitive storyline that makes it familiar and accessible to young children, the element of fun that appeals to young children's sense of humour, the use of animal characters and the beautiful and colourful illustrations. The children participated actively during the story-telling session and particularly enjoyed repeating the animals in the order which the chameleon was changing into. So I would ask them "Let's see – which animals did the chameleon meet so far and wanted to turn into? First the chameleon said ..." to which the children would reply "I wish I could be as big and strong as a polar bear, then he wanted to be as handsome as a flamingo, then as smart as a fox, and next we wished he could swim like a fish ..." The pictures on the side of the book helped the children memorise the order of the animals the chameleon met (like you would find in an address book or an index book) – I do find that this element of going over what's happened so far before moving on to the next page encourages the children to fully understand what's going on in the story and to feel part of it too. Also, the children were learning important facts about the chameleon or confirming their previous ideas and knowledge about this interesting creature and building onto it through the telling of the story such as when it mentioned that when the chameleon felt cold and hungry, it turned a dull grey colour or that it sat still with only its eyes moving all around. The look of surprise and awe on the children's face became more pronounced as the chameleon became more mixed-up. And what a final sign of satisfaction and relief the children uttered together as they finally saw the chameleon say his last wish (which by that time they all realised was the most sensible one) " ... to be MYSELF"! They all laughed at the last line of the story that said the chameleon finally managed to catch the fly with his sticky tongue.

When I finished reading, a couple of children said "Read it again! Read it again!" – and that is when we switched on the projector and showed them the animated version of the story – a video we had previously included on *The Mixed-Up Chameleon* wiki page. This was indeed an extra bonus for the kids who sat motionless watching the story unfold on the screen, becoming alive through the

animations. Ms Gaby and I had discussed and reflected on whether to tell the children the story through this video only – but we had realised that it was important for the children to get their first encounter with the story through the actual printed book so that we could give them the gift of appreciating children’s literature in its original format first. I feel that this has been a wise decision as the children participated actively during the reading of the story and then watched quietly, fascinated by the “coming alive” of the characters they had just met in the book version. Some children even anticipated parts of the story by mentioning the animal that would appear next, some of them using the exact words told in the story.

It was now time to get into groups and work on a hands-on activity together. Again, we had sorted the children into groups of four (two Pre-Junior kids with two Junior 2 children) and after explaining what they were going to do next (create their own mixed-up boy or girl in groups), the children found some space around the classroom and went straight to work. It was great watching the children put their minds together and work through this activity, asking for help when lost or unsure. It was also particularly interesting looking at the Junior 2 kids guiding the younger learner through the activity, helping them with the cutting out of the body parts, explaining things to them and doing their best to take good care of the little ones. It was also evident that some children are naturally inclined to work with younger learners and guide them through an activity while others tend to focus more on their own work. However, all in all, it was a positive experience for everyone. At one point, the Pre-Junior kids were instructed to continue working on their mixed-up boy or girl while the Junior 2Bs were asked to work on the writing part of the project in which they were asked to write about their mixed-up picture. For this part, the children were encouraged to refer to the charts prepared on purpose for this activity (charts with colour and animal flashcards) as well as the use of their index books for tricky spellings. As always, it was soon time to leave the classroom and go to our class – but we left the Pre-Junior class feeling very happy, satisfied and looking forward to our next visit to their class. We actually plan to have a concluding session in the Junior 2 class this time but we will wait for the outing to the Bird Park first.

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