**Boys and Early Literacy Learning
in
Three Maltese State Schools**

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Abstract

Internationally, there is a gender-related performance gap in literacy attainment, and in the Maltese islands, recently published international literacy test results caused rising concern about the academic achievement of boys. Within the global context of concern about 'boys' underachievement', this thesis reports a study which investigated the lived literacy experiences of young boys in three co-educational Maltese state schools. The purpose of this enquiry was not to solve the widely discussed phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' but rather to create new understandings about boys and early literacy learning in the first years of compulsory schooling in Maltese state schools. Consequently, this study is framed within the exploration of the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning', and 'school readiness' in its local context.

The theoretical foundations of this research were underpinned by several theoretical perspectives including posthumanist, emancipatory, socio-cultural, experiential education and childhood theories, attuned to my epistemological stance of pragmatism in mixed methods phenomenological research. Young boys' voices, several stakeholders' perspectives and the lived experience of three groups of five- to six-year-old boys during schooled reading and writing practices were investigated through an online questionnaire, classroom observations, individual interviews, and focus groups.

Findings suggest that the three main concepts explored were inclined to biased and constricted worldviews that resulted in the majority of the young boys experiencing undesirable reading and writing practices. Merged findings funneled down to questioning whether a 'paradigm paralysis' effect - the inability or rejection to embrace new ways of thinking - is restraining stakeholders and policymakers from taking action, rethinking and repositioning existing conceptualisations concerning 'underachieving boys', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness'. Subsequently, this research study implies the risk of a 'paradigm paralysis' in the fields of gender, literacy, and early years education in the local context, and offers new conceptualisations towards an educational response.

This study posits that policymakers, educators and all stakeholders involved in education should ensure that all children have access to quality early literacy learning through a more socially just education system: a solid foundation for all successful literate citizens.

I dedicate this work to Mum and Dad who flew up high to a better place during my PhD journey.

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Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
CCP	Child-Centred Pedagogy
CVC	Consonant-Vowel-Consonant
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DCM	Department for Curriculum Management
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DLL	Dual Language Learner
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EFA	Education for All
EXE	Experiential Education
ILA	International Literacy Association
IRA	International Reading Association
LOF	Learning Outcomes Framework
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MFCS	Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity
NAEP	National Assessment of Education Progress
NAEP	National Assessment of Education Progress
NAEYS	National Association of the Education of the Young Children
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
OECD	Organisation Economic Co-operation and Development
ORF	Official Recontextualising Field
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRF	Pedagogic Recontextualising Field
PT	Possibility Thinking
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
TA	Thematic Analysis
TACTYC	Training Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nation Children's Fund
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis tells the story of an academic journey that commenced from a particular social position, together with my initial thoughts, perspectives and assumptions as I tried to make sense of my experiences at that particular point in time. These had implications on my research interests, which gradually developed into the chosen research area as they were eventually crystallized, shaped and narrowly focused by my literature review, research questions, paradigms, methodologies and methods.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I explain the synergy connecting this chain of elements that justify the choice of topic, my position on the phenomenon under enquiry, and the reason for undertaking the study. Chapter 2 sets out a review of the literature, and my position on three components that constitute the framework and context of my study: boys' underachievement; early literacy learning; and school readiness. These key concepts derived from my experiences and positionality at the time the study was conducted, and were investigated and explained in my literature review chapter through the lens of several theoretical perspectives. My assumptions about these concepts and the theories I came across influenced the rest of the components of my study. In Chapter 3, I will describe in further detail the mixed methods phenomenological research approach used in my study, the context and participants. My role as a researcher in the study and ethical discussions will also be clarified in this section. Chapter 4 will present the analysis procedure, findings and discussion of the interpretation of the results. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I provide a summary of the key findings, limitations and significance of my work, and implications as well as recommendations for further study.

1.2 Background to the Thesis

Two key social targets in education are achieving equity in education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2007, 2014a, 2014b) and eliminating gender disparities in literacy attainment to ensure the development of a literate society (Education for All [EFA], 2006). Nonetheless, rising political concerns and debates based on evidence related to (some) underachieving boys and (many) successful girls in literacy standards

persist within several educational institutions and academic research worldwide (Cobb-Clark & Moschion, 2017; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Mifsud, Milton, Brooks & Hutchison, 2000a, 2000b; National Literacy Trust, 2012; Niklas & Schneider, 2012; OECD, 2002, 2003, 2010, 2014c). Conversely, research findings and statistics also show that: some groups of boys are high achievers and tend to hold higher self-esteem to learning (AAUW, 1992; Francis, 2006); some groups of girls are underachieving (George, 2012; Renold & Allen, 2006; Skelton, Francis & Read, 2010). Therefore, several scholars highlight the need to explore the phenomenon of 'underachievement' by including both boys and girls rather than, for example, focus solely on boys (Cobbett, 2014; Cobbett & Younger, 2012; Kamwendo, 2010; Smith, 2003). During the 1990s the focus was more on boys' 'underachievement' (Arnot, Gray, James & Rudduck, 1998; Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998) and more recent investigations concerning 'underachievment' also extended to students from low socio-economic background, and ethnic minority students (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Gore & Smith, 2001). Young and Brozo (2001) argued that even though not all boys are underachieving, there remains a challenge to reach out to those boys who are not performing well. In the context of this thesis, the challenge is to gain further insights into the schooled lived experiences of young boys from different backgrounds in Maltese state schools rather than to position them where they must compete with girls.

In the Maltese islands, national and international statistics repeatedly show that boys are most likely to lag behind girls in literacy achievement (Borg, Falzon & Sammut, 1995; Mifsud et al., 2000a, 2000b; Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2013b, 2013c, 2015b, 2016). It can be argued that despite the global educational efforts to reach every child's full potential through quality education as from the earliest years (United Nations, 2015), there seems to be a hidden problem with some boys and literacy, and this is what made me want to investigate the phenomenon further. Notwithstanding considerable global research on boys and literacy and popular hegemonic discourses on 'boys' underachievement', this phenomenon has not been explored from the lived literacy experiences of young boys and several stakeholders within the early primary classrooms of Maltese schools. Studies of the literacy practices of boys, particularly young boys in schools, are limited (Brozo, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm,

2002). Undeniably, given a lack of consensus on the validity and reliability of existing evidence, methods of testing and popular rhetoric pertaining to this longstanding gender gap in literacy performance, the area preserves a level of interest among researchers (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999; Connolly, 2004; Francis, 2006; Gorard, Rees & Salisbury, 1999).

OECD (2015) concluded that gender differences in educational achievement are not due to disparities in talent but if all human beings are given equal opportunities they will "have equal chances at achieving at highest levels" (p. 13). The OECD (2007) document *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education* reported that the international gender-related performance gap in literacy skills is a "dismal picture", considering the fact that in Finland no girls were found to be poor readers (0.3%) and only 1.8% of boys are non-readers (p. 26). It further argued that this exceptional outcome has to do with Finland's education system, and this demonstrates that schools must also be an influential factor in the gender gap in literacy attainment.

Pedagogical approaches can make some transformation in producing a more socially just education system (Gale, 2011; Lingard & Mills, 2007). Through an attempt to convey an egalitarian message in education, this thesis rather looks at the literacy gender gap evidence as a vital educational challenge that needs to be unravelled from schooled learning experiences (Griffiths, 2012). An equitable approach to literacy learning, underpinned by a 'socially just' education system, is key to every child's school experience, right from the start (Francis & Mills, 2012). Schools are perceived as institutions that activate wider social change, and crucial to the development of active and socially critical citizens (Beane & Apple, 2007). Literacy education plays a significant role in the development of young children and in the future success of literate individuals that enables them to function well in a society (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Green, Peterson & Lewis, 2006). Beyond the research for boys' preferences and boy-friendly approaches to close the gender gap, I felt that the pressing need for a greater grasp of the beliefs and practices within the social and educational context of literacy for boys in Maltese early education was required. This resonated with one of my preferred quotes as the daughter of a passionate diver, and a licensed diver myself: "He who should search for pearls must dive below" (John Dreyden, n.d.).

Before outlining the context and rationale of my study regarding boys and literacy, I must acknowledge from the outset the controversial aspect and contrasting views on boys' achievement in literacy, and also position myself theoretically. With Connolly (2004) and many feminist researchers (Epstein et al., 1998; Lucey, 2001; Reay, 2001), I do not believe that all boys are underachievers or that all girls are successful in literacy attainment. Instead, I understand that literacy learning outcomes and practices are subject to an array of complex influences which may include children's linguistic and literate experiences at home and school; notions promoted by popular media, poverty, class, race and other educational and social factors (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Griffiths, 2012; Marsh, et al., 2005). This also means that diversity within the groups referred to as the 'girls' and the 'boys', including their personality, ethnicity and social class identities, are acknowledged.

1.3 Context of my Study

The Maltese islands are geographically positioned at the heart of the Mediterranean and have the highest population density in Europe (MEDE, 2006). Education service provision in Malta and Gozo is offered through three school systems: state; independent/private; and church. Compulsory education provision in Malta stands at 60% for government schools, 30% of church schools and 10 % of independent schools (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, [DQSE], 2015). The majority of learners in the Maltese islands attend state schools (33, 021 learners; 98 schools) (MEDE, 2018a). These statistics further intrigued my interest to conduct this research in state schools. The three co-educational Maltese state schools chosen for my study were situated in different geographical positions on the island, and reputed to have children coming from diverse backgrounds.

The 'early years' refer to the phase in a child's life that spans from birth through to the age of seven or eight (Department of Education & Early Childhood Development & Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2009; OECD, 2001; World Health Organisation, 2009). In the educational context of this study, the terms 'early years', 'early childhood education and care' and 'early years cycle' refer to the phase whereby infants and toddlers aged zero to three attend childcare, three- to five-year-olds attend kindergarten and five- to seven-year-olds

join the first two years of compulsory formal schooling in primary schools, Years 1 and 2 (MEDE, 2012). Early primary years classes in Maltese state schools are physically located in primary schools that cater for children up to Year 6 (11-year-olds). In this study, classroom observations were conducted in three Year 1 classrooms (five- to six-year-olds).

One cannot ignore the complex linguistic landscape when it comes to literacy learning and early childhood education and care [ECEC] in Malta. Malta is a bilingual state with Maltese as the national language, and English and Maltese as the official languages since 1934 (Constitution of the Republic of Malta, 1974; Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006). Over 95% of the population in Malta use and learn Maltese as their first language and over 85% are also fluent in English with more than a third of the population being trilingual (mostly Italian); it is claimed that four- to five-year-old children are already functioning bilingually within a Maltese context (Camilleri Grima, 2016). Proficiency in both languages is needed for citizens' social success and economic survival, especially in countries like Malta where economic growth depends mostly on human resources (Bialystok, 2011). In Maltese schools Maltese and English are the two languages through which teaching takes place. This sociolinguistic scenario has implications for the future of our youngest citizens in Malta.

Since formal education starts at the age of five in Malta, all children experience English and Maltese lessons where reading and writing instruction in two languages with conflicting syntax is initiated. The *Early Childhood Education and Care: A National policy* document (MEDE, 2006) stated that:

> Once children are admitted to formal education, school becomes a very serious matter, even at the age of 5 and 6. Curricula and syllabi in some school systems are particularly rigid and demanding. Rather than learning through play, exploration, discovery, on-site inquiries and hands-on activities, children in classrooms are formally taught mostly factual information.
> (p. 39)

In 2007, the Department for Curriculum Management [DCM] (DCM, 2007) within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta, issued a mandated circular (DCM28/2007) emphasising the importance of time management in early primary classrooms, Years 1 and 2. In this circular, a sample timetable (Table

1.1) and specific guidelines for time management (Table 1.2) in Years 1 and 2, were provided.

The National Minimum Curriculum [NMC] (MEDE, 1999) was the first published curriculum in Maltese education, followed by the policy document *A National Curriculum Framework for All* [NCF] (MEDE, 2012). With reference to the first two years of primary schooling the NCF (MEDE, 2012) stated that:

> The NCF endorses the position recommended by the 1999 NMC which: ... regards the first two years of primary schooling as a continuation of the two-year Kindergarten period. This entails that the teachers adopt a pedagogy that develops knowledge, attitudes and skills which derive from concrete experiences. The 3-7 year period, considered as the pre-conceptual phase, must be regarded as the formative period which precedes the one during which the school experience becomes more formal.
> (p. 57)

This makes it clear that in both policy documents, 1999 and 2012, and also in the national policy for ECEC document published in 2006 (MEDE, 2006), the way the curriculum is presented for Years 1 and 2 is not in synergy with the teaching of subjects, syllabi and prescriptive timetable sample and guidelines provided in the mandated circular disseminated to all teachers of the early primary years in 2007. This circular (DCM28/2007) includes the specific ways in which English and Maltese languages and the literacy curriculum should be compartmentalised, timetabled and delivered in Years 1 and 2 (Tables 1.1 & 1.2), albeit the reference made to the cross-curricular approach promoted in the NMC (MEDE, 1999). The centrally-imposed compartmentalised primary syllabi for Years 1 and 2 is available online to date, and includes specific learning outcomes for oracy, reading and writing (Table 1.3) (MEDE, 2018b). This puzzling information, contradictions and incoherence further intrigued me to explore how teachers in early primary classrooms are interpreting the pedagogical tensions underlying such policies and circulars, and how these messages are impacting existing literacy pedagogy, particularly through the experiences of young boys' reading and writing in the early primary years.

TIME-TABLE
(Years 1, 2)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
08:30 – 08:45	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly
08:45 – 9:15	Religion	Religion	Religion	Religion	Religion
09:15 – 10:15	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
10:15 – 10:30	BREAK				
10:30 – 11:15	Malti	Malti	Malti	Malti	Malti
11:15 – 12:00	English	English	English	English	English
12:00 – 12:30	BREAK				
12:30 – 12:45	Reading Session	Reading Session	Reading Session	Reading Session	Reading Session
12:45 – 13:15	P.E.	Handwriting	Science & Technology	Handwriting	P.E.
13:15 – 14:00	Art & Design	Social Studies	Mid-Week Project (Expressive Arts)	Social Studies	Choosing Time
14:00 – 14:30	Storytelling	P.E.		P.E.	Talk About

Table 1.1. Sample timetable for Years 1 and 2 in state schools in Malta

Session / Subject	Number of Lessons / Sessions	Duration	Minutes per Week
Religion	1 lesson daily	30 min x 5	150 min
Mathematics	1 lesson daily	60 min x 5	300 min
English	1 lesson daily	45 min x 5	225 min
Maltese	1 lesson daily	45 min x 5	225 min
Social Studies	2 lessons (1 lesson a day)	45 min x 2	90 min
P.E.	4 lessons (1 lesson a day) (Lesson/s delivered by peripatetic or class teacher)	30 min x 4	120 min
Science / Technology	1 lesson a week (Lesson delivered by peripatetic or class teacher)	30 min	30 min
Art & Design	1 lesson a week (Lesson delivered by peripatetic or class teacher)	45 min	45 min
Expressive Arts - Drama/Art & Design/ Music/Movement) *(Mid-Week Project)*	1 session per week (Session delivered by peripatetic and/or class teacher)	75 min	75 min
Handwriting	2 sessions a week	30 min x 2	60 min
Storytelling	1 session a week	30 min	30 min
Reading Session	1 session a week	15 min x 5	75 min
Talk About Session	1 session a week	30 min x 5	30 min
Choosing Time	1 session a week	45 min	45 min
Assembly	5 times a week (once a day)	15 min x 5	75 min
1st Lunch Break	15 minutes - 5 times a week	15 min x 5	75 min
2nd Lunch Break	30 minutes - 5 times a week	30 min x 5	150 min
		Total	1800 min

Table 1.2. Guidelines for time management primary classes Years 1 & 2 in state schools in Malta

Learning Outcomes	Notes
PRINT CONVENTIONS	
1.3.1 **Begin to demonstrate knowledge of print conventions**	*Rules that govern the customary use of print in literacy*
❖ Demonstrate correct spacing of letters and words	
❖ Demonstrate correct directionality	*Start to write at the top left side of page, move to right, continue down the page, and know where to go on the following page*
HANDWRITING SKILLS	
1.3.2 **Begin to write letters and words correctly**	
❖ Begin to develop established pencil grip	
❖ Start to form letters which are clearly shaped and correctly oriented and controlling shape and proportion	*E.g.* *l, a, b, d, t, q, g* *Use the correct sequence of movement when writing letters*
WRITING	
1.3.3 **Convey meaning through drawing**	*Teacher may write down what the learner says about the drawing*
1.3.4 **With support draw and write words or phrases to communicate meaning**	*Learners draw a dog and may write 'dog', or 'My dog' or ' A dog'* …
❖ Write captions to a picture	
❖ Label a picture	
1.3.5 With support begin to write sentences from a given model	
VOCABULARY	
1.3.6 **With support begin to use in writing, theme-related words, sight words and vocabulary related to the classroom environment**	*Vocabulary presented with visual support in a context familiar to learners*

Table 1.3. Year 1 English primary syllabi - Specific learning outcomes for writing

1.4 Inspiration, Gap in Knowledge and Purpose of the Study

The study was inspired by: the absence of philosophical integrity in Maltese policy documents and mandated circulars within the early years sector; the existing concerns about and an urgent need to narrow the gender gap in literacy achievement in Malta (MEDE, 2014a); the statistical evidence related to boys' underachievement in Malta (Mifsud et al., 2000b; MEDE, 2013b, 2013c, 2015b, 2016); and the call for research in the areas of gender and literacy and in the transition phase from kindergarten to compulsory formal schooling in several Maltese policy documents and research (MEDE, 2014a, 2014b; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). Furthermore, my work was inspired and partly extends from the work of Alloway et al. (2002), *Boys, Literacy and Schooling: Expanding the Repertoires of Practice,* which concludes that in conceptualising an approach to boys' literacy learning, teachers should consider a broad view of literacy and expand their repertoires of practice to embrace physical, psychological, social and cultural practice.

Developments in literacy teaching and learning in the Maltese islands have recently been dominated by the design and implementation of the policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b) aimed at ensuring high-quality lifelong literacy practices among children and calling for research into gender differences in Maltese pupils' literacy:

> There needs to be a better understanding of the acquisition processes of Maltese and English and the teaching and learning strategies for the two languages in the early years. There are to be increased opportunities for research in these areas to guide relevant policies with specific emphasis on gender differences, etc.
> (p. 35)

The acknowledged need for local research in the areas of gender and literacy is echoed in the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta* (MEDE, 2014a), an educational policy priority, with one of the four broad aims that urges for the need to "reduce the gap in educational outcomes between boys and girls and between different schools, decrease the number of low achievers and raise the bar in literacy" (p. 3). To this, Weaver-Hightower (2003) demanded that whatever policies or practices change, the most crucial need is for research on gender to be conducted 'on the ground' in schools to avoid tensions and

assumptions that might eventually impact negatively on the schooling of both boys and girls. Griffiths (2012) suggests that there is the need to focus more on lived educational experiences to understand better social justice issues within education.

Early childhood experiences strongly influence lifetime outcomes (Heckman, 2017). Levy (2011) focused on young children's attitudes and involvement in learning during their school reading and writing experiences, and calls for future research that accesses young children's voices and includes not only the reading but also the writing aspect of early literacy learning, and the impact of schooling on young children's attitudes towards literacy. Levy's (2011) three recommendations were investigated within my study as I ensured that schooled early reading and also writing experiences were observed and the voices of all young boys participating in this study were heard.

Additionally, the local and international call for further research on children's experiences in the preschool to school transition phase contributed to my interest to narrow down and gain specific insight into five- to six-year-old boys' reading and writing experiences in three Maltese state schools (MEDE, 2006; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016; Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). This is especially pertinent in relation to the ECEC national policy document (MEDE, 2006) and the white paper on Maltese ECEC (MEDE, 2013a), both emphasising the need for seamless transitions in early childhood including the crucial transition from Kindergarten to Year 1 (the first year of compulsory schooling in Malta, age five).

Studies are essential to closing this gap in a bilingual context such as Malta, as well as, to create new knowledge on boys' early literacy learning for they are most likely to underperform and dropout from Maltese schools earlier than many girls (MEDE, 2013b, 2013c; Mifsud et al., 2000b). Given this significant gap in knowledge, my study aimed to create new understandings on the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' through young boys' lived reading and writing experiences in three Maltese state schools. Particularly, it aimed to delve deep and uncover the schooled reading and writing experiences of five- to six-year-old boys through: a questionnaire sent to all state school literacy and classroom educators working in the early primary years sector (Years 1 and 2); observations in three Year 1 classrooms; focus

groups with parents and boys; and interviews with Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and Year 1 teachers. In my study it was imperative to listen to the voices of young boys to gain authentic insight into how they experience literacy learning in Maltese state schools, in the hope that our educational system can respond to their personal and academic needs right from the start.

1.5 The Rationale

"All social research sets out with specific purposes from a particular position, and aims to persuade readers of the significance of its claims; these claims are always broadly political." (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007, p. 15). On the basis of this claim this section will further explain the rationale for choosing to focus the study on five- to six-year-old boys' reading and writing experiences in three Maltese state schools.

1.5.1 Personal positionality.

Why boys? Why literacy? Some interconnected questions about my choice of topic have drawn me back to examine particular memories from personal experiences:

1.5.1.1 As an educator.

> *Teacher: Can you tell me about your favourite book?*
> *Eight-year-old boy: I don't have a favourite book, I don't like them.*
> *Teacher: Not even one?*
> *Eight-year-old boy: No!*
> *(October 2013)*

At that particular moment in this conversation, I realised that I had a boy in front of me who had just finished the early years cycle of his educational journey, yet, the way he spoke about books was startling. He was so determined and firm in his tone of voice. I put some deep thought into it… but why did these words hit me deep? Probably it would not have been so alarming to others who consider similar boys and books to be incompatible, but in my case, this vignette was reminiscent of my childhood.

1.5.1.2 As a child.

Born into a very humble family, I was raised by two caring and loving parents. The eldest of ten brothers and sisters, my father had to help his mother in her daily house chores. He also had to play the role of the father figure from a very young age so he never had the opportunity to become literate. Having been the voice of my illiterate father throughout my childhood and adulthood became the impetus of my journey towards understanding literacy. For similar reasons, my mother terminated her formal education at an early stage, and this made literacy experiences a small part of our family life in our home during my childhood. Furthermore, my parents entrusted our education to the teachers and schools so we did not receive much academic support at home. I also shared my childhood with three brothers and a sister who were never keen on reading and writing. On the other hand, I became the first in my immediate family to graduate with a Master's. Having experienced both sides of the road, I know the confines of living as an illiterate person and the endless journey being literate provides.

1.5.1.3 As a parent.

Being a parent of two boys myself, the motivation for my study connected with the way some 21st century boys tend to be demotivated from school, particularly when it comes to reading and writing. As a parent and also as an educator, I often met parents of boys and educators asking: Why is this disinterest particularly directed towards reading and writing so common amongst boys? Though I knew that this phenomenon is complex and that there might not be a single solution, I desperately felt the need for further exploration to see if there is some way to make a difference.

Consequently, the presented personal vignettes and other parts from my story sparked my interest and set the wheel in motion to an intensive ride that evolved around young boys and literacy, as Lucas (2005) said "I am the researcher I am because I have experienced life in a certain manner" (p. 47).

1.5.2 Professional positionality.

Similarly, my rationale for focussing my study on boys, reading and writing in the early primary sector of Maltese state schools grew out of my work

experiences; over some sixteen years of teaching (fifteen of which were spent in the early years sector), as a Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency and my present roles of Education Officer with the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [DQSE] and Co-founder and Vice President of the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM). The voluntary position in the association allows me to keep active in advocating for quality ECEC in Malta.

Throughout these years, I constantly felt the urgent need for giving specific attention to the early literacy practices of the first two years of compulsory schooling (children aged 5-7 years in Maltese early primary schools) particularly during the first year (5-6 years). The first year of primary schooling in Malta is followed by one crucial transition (MEDE, 2006; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) - from Kindergarten to Year 1. Malta is amongst a small number of European countries where compulsory schooling and formal education start the year a child turns five (MEDE, 2013a). While this fundamental transition is considered as one of the most important stages in a child's foundations of literacy learning (Dale, 2008; Davis, 2013; Giles & Tunks, 2015; Pressley et al., 2001; Wharlton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998; Zambo & Brozo; 2009), my teaching experience in this phase leads me to the belief that this point was always given minimal attention within the early years context in Malta, creating discontinuity between one phase and another.

Literature reveals that when the continuity of service is not smooth, there is a higher risk of school failure and early dropouts due to an unprepared start to formal schooling and sudden sharp transitions (Britto, 2012). To date, the Maltese early years cycle in the existing education system (0-7 years) still lacks continuity between Kindergarten (3-5 years) and the early primary years (5-7 years) (MEDE, 2006; MEDE, 2013a). The white paper *Early childhood education and care in Malta: The way forward* (MEDE, 2013a) stated that, there is the need to address "seamless transitions as children progress through early years settings in non-compulsory services through the first years of compulsory education" (p. 8).

During 2014/2015, I worked as a validator and consultant in the writing of the *Learning Outcomes Framework* [LOF] (DQSE, 2015) project for the early years cycle (0-7 years). Throughout the process, I felt that there was a lack of local expertise and the issue on how reading and writing should be tackled with

the five- to seven-year-old age group proved controversial. Moreover, I often noted that several stakeholders in the Maltese education system portray reading and writing in the early years in varied ways. It was also evident through my experience as an educator that a surmounting pressure of formal teaching and learning and assessing of the acquisition of Maltese and English reading and writing skills as from the age of five infiltrated ECEC in Malta. This contrasted with my understanding of how young children learn based on my experience as an educator and the knowledge I have gained through my studies of ECEC.

The alarmingly rapid increase of literacy testing in the early primary grades of Maltese schools (DQSE, 2009) linked to my personal and professional positionalities at the time this study was conducted, give further weighting to my rationale for choosing to focus my enquiry on the lived reading and writing experiences of five- to six-year-old boys in three Maltese state schools. This is designated as a critical period that influences children's future literacy achievement (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Morrow, 1990; Nutbrown, 2006a; Palmer & Bayley, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Tompkins, 2013) and also identified as an under-researched area in the Maltese context (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016).

1.6 Research Questions Guiding my Study

My particular social position and constructed assumptions, which were then formed by theoretical perspectives drawn out from other theoretical meanings found in the reference to the literature, helped me to narrow down to my main research question and the interconnected subsidiary questions. These questions were a central component that linked me to others, including the choice of the methodological approach, in this study:

> Over-arching research question: Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?

The following sub-questions have guided the design of my enquiry:

1. What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?

2. How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?

3. What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

Three sub-questions provided finer detail to my study. Subsequently, data collection methods and analysis supplied answers to the sub-questions, collectively answering the main question. This will be further discussed and justified in Chapter 3.

1.7 Chapter Conclusion

"Where I am coming from as a researcher" explains the choice of topic for my study and how I want to study it (Sikes, 2004, p. 19). In this chapter, I have presented a brief overview of the background, context, purpose and rationale of this study that justify the choice of topic. I have also explained how my own positionality influenced by personal experiences, and my developed theoretical perspectives helped me discover my territory and develop the research questions for this enquiry. These questions guided me in choosing the conceptual framework that best suited this enquiry, and that laid the foundations of my philosophical assumptions within this study. Finally, the synergy between the theoretical linkages discussed throughout this chapter guided me in determining an explicit research design and the correct fieldwork. The established boundaries of this study allowed me to make a contribution to the existing knowledge that closed the circle of my research (Trafford & Leshem, 2009).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter reviews aspects of the literature based on three interlinking key concepts that underpin my work: boys' underachievement; early literacy learning; and school readiness (Figure 2.1). These three concepts were viewed through the lens of several theoretical perspectives which will be explained briefly in the first section of this chapter. In the second section, statistical data showing boys' and girls' performance in literacy, and various explanations offered for the term such as 'boys' underachievement' will be critically reviewed, both nationally and internationally. The controversial issue of gender and achievement is examined to contextualise my research in existing social and political debates regarding gender and literacy in diverse educational levels including the early years. The third section critically examines how the term 'literacy' is defined and how this impacts on what recent research and theory considers as effective and inclusive literacy practices in ECEC, particularly when it comes to the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Finally, I review relevant research on how school readiness is perceived, and how this influences boys and early literacy learning.

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        ┌──────────────────┐
        │      Boys'       │
        │ Underachievement │
        └──────────────────┘
         ↙                ↘
┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│ Early Literacy│ ←→  │School Readiness│
│   Learrning   │      │               │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
```
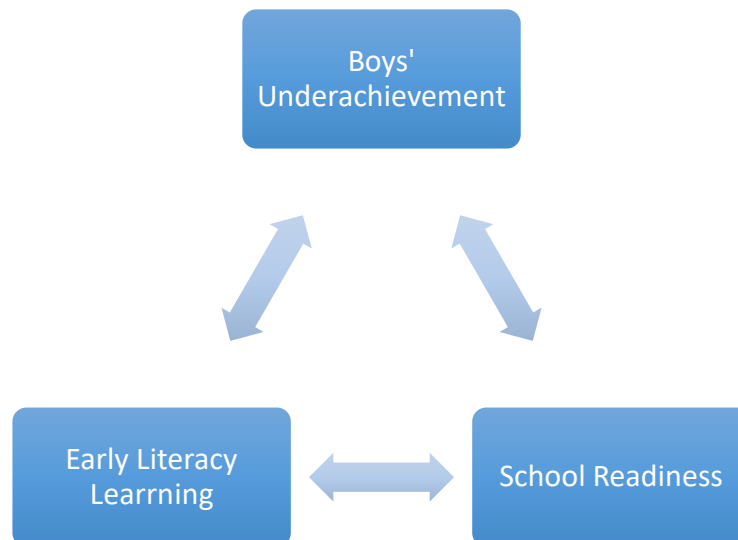
Figure 2.1. Three key interlinking concepts that underpin my literature review

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Ideas and concepts derive from assumptions about the nature of the world that emanate from personal experiences and that can be linked to theory. My ideas and previous assumptions about the phenomenon of boys' underachievement and early literacy education linked with some theories in the literature. These associations prompted me to reconsider some of the familiar ideas and former suppositions when I discovered hitherto unfamiliar theories.

2.2.1 Posthumanist theory.

Posthumanism offers a revalidation of the being through unthinkable ontological possibilities and a disruption of traditional dualisms, including: male/female, subject/object, human/animal-alien-robot (Ferrando, 2012). Therefore, posthumanism is grounded in the inclusion of perspectives and the acknowledgement that difference is rooted in human kind itself, "with all of its gendered, racial, ethnic, social, individual varieties" (Ferrando, 2012, p. 11). This means that no single human can represent humanity as a whole in the same way as no species can embrace any epistemological dominance (Ferrando, 2012). In terms of gender, posthumanist logic assists in the sense of revisiting and reconfiguring hegemonic framings of gender (Osgood, Scarlet & Giugni, 2015) by opening up to new possibilities that may contribute to a shift in the way we look at gender in the processes of becoming literate. This is an attempt to "deploying some post-humanist concepts so that inherent injustices and potentialities of reclaiming what we might mean by gender are explored" (Osgood et al., 2015, p. 349).

In light of this epistemological stance, this study does not self-limit its approach to a racist or sexist methodology, or as Ferrando (2012) defines 'hegemonic essentialism' (p. 11). Instead, by reflecting deeply on the human experience of young boys coming from diverse backgrounds and their lived schooled reading and writing practices, my study aims to rethink claims such as 'boys' underachievement' in an attempt to contribute to the fields of literacy and ECEC at large. The focus on boys is not based on the premise that girls cannot contribute to knowledge; instead this decision originates from the curiosity to challenge and face the hegemonic discourse on 'boys' underachievement' and the

search for knowledge to unravel the traditional stereotypical dichotomy between boys, girls and literacy through deep experiential insights.

2.2.2 Pragmatism and Emancipatory theory.

Positivist and constructionist paradigms underpinned most of the theories presented in the literature review of my study. The tensions between such paradigms in the literature review influenced my assumptions and I consequently incorporated pluralistic epistemological positions as this study's theoretical foundations to create new knowledge. This shift in thinking also influenced my epistemological stance within my scientific research approach as I acquired new knowledge in the field as a pragmatist researcher (this will be discussed further in Chapter 3). In exploring theories that relate to my work, I found that pragmatism is in synergy with posthumanism in a pluralistic philosophical sense as well as emancipatory theory as will be discussed below.

According to Dewey's theory (1916), the political and moral implications in pragmatism can be linked with social justice and the moral value of freedom to investigate what matters most and what is most meaningful. Gazing at the social world from this direction, I became cognizant of my predispositions and the values I cherish; of diversity, tolerance and acceptance; which fit perfectly in the mixed methods phenomenological research approach I wanted to position my work in. This impact of one's own bias, values and attitudes on the methodology, methods, analysis and interpretation in their research is defined as axiology, and these characteristics inspire pragmatism as a philosophy (Morgan, 2014). Who I am as an inquirer is also reflected in the prominent issue of the literacy gender gap in this social inquiry; an attempt to 'engage with diversity' (Greene, 2007, p. 29) and to recognise the importance of all learners' equal access to socially just pedagogies that enable learner agency (Blair, 2009) and produce enjoyable learning experiences (Griffiths, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015b; Lingard, 2005; Reay, 2012).

In recent years, heightened attention has been given to the issue of equity in education for all individuals, regardless of their diversities, to achieve their full potential (OECD, 2007). Griffiths (2012) argued that explanations for "social justice" are too "narrow" and so different social groups in the educational context

including "gender", "social class" and "race" may suffer some form of injustice (p. 666). International assessments keep showing that many learners are failing to acquire their basic skills to function in their societies (MEDE, 2013c, 2015b; OECD, 2014c). The OECD (2007) report argued that, "education systems need to be fair and inclusive in their design, practices and resourcing" (p. 11). The report sets out a challenge to "No More Failures" both in education systems and in individual learners, and puts forward ten steps that lead to major policy recommendations; including "responding to diversity" and setting "concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and drop outs" (p. 11).

Through an emancipatory lens this study utilises critical concepts developed in the work of Basil Bernstein (2000), a British social theorist, to theoretically reflect on the ways in which contemporary pedagogic discourse and pedagogic practice within an educational context value social justice. The key focus of Bernstein's (2000) theoretical thinking was a recontextualisation process where knowledge produced (mainly in universities) is transferred to locations of reproduction (mainly schools) - the pedagogic device - the ideologies which convert expert knowledge into pedagogic communication within classrooms and curricula (Bernstein, 1996). Bernstein (2000) recognised two types of pedagogy that construct and approach the curriculum in two different ways: performative and competence-based. A performative pedagogy which used to be termed the 'visible' pedagogy is underpinned by subject-based curricula, teacher control, good behaviour, standardised tests, and academic performance; while competence-based, formerly the 'invisible' pedagogy, (Child-Centred Pedagogy [CCP], falls under a competence-based pedagogy) focuses on learners' self-regulation, learners' 'innate' level of intelligence, topic based curricula, and children's needs and interests. As specified in the work of Hempel-Jorgensen (2015c), Francis and Mills (2012) pointed out the role of pedagogy in relation to educational inequalities, particularly, the need for pedagogies that require professional teachers (Reay, 2012), learners' agency (Boyles & Charles, 2012) and attention to learners' social contexts, diverse needs and identities (Lingard, 2005); these are qualities of a CCP that aims to emancipate and empower all children (Bernstein, 2000), however, this is not always the case (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c).

An individual case study found that in a classroom where CCP pedagogy was central, the influence of dominant gendered and classed discourses positioned working-class girls as inferior to middle-class boys (the intelligent and autonomous learner) and middle-class girls (the kind and supportive learner) within this particular context (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c). Similarly, Clark (1989) found that a synchronisation between the construct of CCP and gender stereotypes of boys is possible, and consequently argued that CCP discourse does not offer the opportunity for teachers to recognise and deal "with inequitable relations of power and gender production" (p. 243). MacNaughton (1997) claimed that the solution is to provide evidence of how teachers join in and negotiate in boys' and girls' experiences of gendering. Research shows that positioning (Holland, Lachiotee, Skinner & Cain, 1998) discourses are bred within educational environments and influence teachers' and children's perceptions based on constructs of the 'ideal pupil' (Becker, 1952) within different classroom contexts (Connolly, 1998; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c; Reay, 2012). Hempel-Jorgensen (2009) describes how the concept of the 'ideal pupil' is linked to dominant classroom performative or competence-based pedagogy as follows:

> In competence modes, the ideal pupil is seen by teachers as a creative self-actualising pupil who has freedom to negotiate independently of authority. In performance modes, the ideal is an other-realising pupil whose agency is constricted and defined by teacher-imposed structures in which their learning is oriented towards external goals, such as tests. (p. 437)

Several scholars also critiqued CCP in an attempt to reconstruct and reposition teachers and children at the centre of a pedagogy that serves as a democratic space for all stakeholders, and to address the low status of early childhood teachers in liberal democratic states (Dahleberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Langford, 2010; Moss, 2007).

Such prominence and quest for 'fairness' in pedagogic discourse and pedagogic practice combined with personal values led me to view the underlying concepts of this study through the theoretical stance of emancipatory theory, a social justice lens, with a concern for moving toward equity for all students. The

study is also supported by the perspective of a rights-based approach education for all (Council of the European Union, 2011; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2007) in endeavouring to ensure that young boys in Maltese schools are experiencing not just their right to education but also their right within education that takes into account their diverse needs as learners.

2.2.3 Socio-cultural theory.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory posits two foundational aspects of studying boys and literacy learning. First of all, it views educators as agents of culture who identify that learner actions at school are informed by their cultural knowledge and beliefs. Secondly, all children are perceived as cultural apprentices who are in a position to exercise learner agency and look for support from more knowledgeable others (adults and children) (Blair, 2009; van Lier, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Such support referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD] generates appropriately engaged interaction which can bring about learning which eventually results in independent child achievement (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Post-Vygotskian researchers coined this "guided participation" with more knowledgeable others to achieve new developmental goals as "scaffolding" (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry, & Göncü, 1998, p. 227, see also Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). This view of learning can be distinguished from performative pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000) or the transmission model where the focus is on individualized learning and learners acquire knowledge from the teacher in a more passive way.

The Vygotskian perspective helps the individual to see literacy in a broader context (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In this sense, this theoretical perspective impacted on my study in terms of the holistic way reading and writing are viewed, and acknowledges that literacy learning is not just about acquiring the skills needed to speak, read and write a language but rather how this is shaped by economic, social, political, and cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1988; Berger & Luckman, 1966). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that learning happens within a cultural context and children develop their literacy skills through their experiences in their social environment. While Piaget (1962) emphasized that the foundation of learning is discovery, a constructivist approach argues that learning

occurs when the learner interacts with their environment. Nonetheless, literacy reports surface the issue of gender differences in literacy attainment, and overlook the cultural and social worlds children bring to school (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). My study set out to explore young boys' reading and writing experiences in three Maltese state schools with learners from diverse backgrounds, and the perspectives and experiences of several stakeholders, including parents, to ensure that the knowledge constructed is not based on a sexist methodology but embedded within the social and cultural contexts of a group of young male learners in the Maltese islands.

As a researcher, looking at gender through a socio-cultural lens, it is important to note that gender is not viewed as binary (Warin & Wernersson, 2016), but as socially constructed through discourses and practices embedded in schools, cultures and social classes (Hammot & Sanford, 2008). The focus here includes how different stakeholders interpreted 'boys' underachievement' through their lived experiences and how such constructions impacted on young boys' experiences, involvement and attitudes during schooled reading and writing practices. Finally, findings from this study will look at constructive solutions and recommend suggestions to an educational response.

2.2.4 Theories of Childhood.

Conceptualisations of children and childhood are concerned with the nature and purpose of childhood, with what a child is, and how these terms are used and understood in society. The investigations carried out during the literature review also matched with my belief and early childhood perspective of children as 'agentic'; agents in their own learning and development; 'active learners' (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1962); and 'instinctive learners', young thinking people (Paley, 2008). Learner agency is fundamental to learning (Blair, 2009) as it is associated with lifelong learning and active citizenship (Pollard, 2010). This perspective of children as social actors who participate in their education and lives (Bernstein, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2011; Prout, 2002) and co-construct childhood with adults (Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009; Corsaro, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978) challenges the notion of the child as innocent and powerless. Children are now viewed as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' (Qvortrup, 1994; Uprichard,

2008). The view that the child has the potential to develop through meaningful active participation in a responsive environment is also supported by child-development (Donaldson, 1992; Nutbrown, 2006a), brain development, and neuroscience studies (OECD, 2007). In the same vein, constructivism theory posits that learners must construct knowledge through 'active' learning by making a link between what they are learning to what they already know (Dewey, 1916; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). "Knowledge-construction" and "meaning-making" are key to learner agency (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015a, p. 545).

Nonetheless, young children have often been perceived as passive recipients and objects of compassion in schooling (Lansdown, 2001; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Before the 1990s, childhood was often considered from a 'top-down' approach, however, the mandates of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNCRC] (United Nations, 1989) and the *General Comment No. 7* (United Nations, 2005) focused on the child and on listening to children's views and rights to express themselves. Many researchers acknowledged the validity of information about children's perceptions from questioning the children themselves (Chesworth, 2016; Clark & Moss, 2001; Dunn, 2015; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011; Langston, Abbott, Lewis & Kellett, 2004; Rhedding-Jones, Bae & Winger, 2008; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009; Scott, 2000). My study was also driven by a commitment to hear 'the voice of the child' (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003) and investigate the boys' perceptions on the schooled reading and writing practices they experience during their first year of compulsory schooling in Malta.

This section indicated how several theoretical perspectives stimulated my interest in scrutinising the evidence related to my choice of topic, and supported me in identifying the research boundaries that framed this study. The following sections within this chapter present a review of the literature linked to the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' and viewed through the lens of the theoretical perspectives presented in this section.

2.3 Boys' Underachievement: Evidence and Explanations

This section is structured into four sub-sections, where the first sub-section presents a quick overview of the global phenomenon of boys' underachievement.

It then focuses on setting the scene around the context, followed by an examination of the longstanding statistical evidence related to the gender gap in literacy achievement. The documentation is presented through a timeline of events, and extends to other countries around the world to examine related data in an international context. Finally, this analysis takes us back to the foundations of education and questions the root causes for the gender achievement gap.

2.3.1 Revival of the gender gap in literacy.

Literacy and gender differences have long been a concern in educational contexts (Cohen, 1998; MEDE, 2015b). In the 1970s, the introduction of international high-stakes testing revived the persistent gender gap in literacy (Education Quality & Accountability, 2008; MEDE, 2013c; National Assessment of Education Progress [NAEP], 2009; OECD, 2007, 2014a, 2014c). Mounting concern, debate and 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972), amongst researchers, policymakers and educators continued to spread worldwide and is still evident to date (Francis, 2006; Gambell & Hunter, 1999; Hall & Coles, 2001; Martinez, 2010; Palmer, 2009; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002; Rutter et al., 2004; Sanford, 2006; Smith, 2003; Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Subsequently, this brought about a shift from the substantial research concerning girls' inequalities and education (Arnot et al., 1999). Weaver-Hightower (2003) refers to this awakening of the male in educational research as the 'boy turn', and claimed that this had a positive impact on the understanding of gender and schooling. Several scholars claim that the new attention given to boys is part of the criticism against feminism (Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino & Meyenn, 2002; Yates, 2000). Other scholars view the gender agenda in education and schooling as a 'déjà vu' that shifted from promoting equal opportunities for girls to the concern of underachieving boys (Younger, 2015, p. 1). The history and the persisting concern about the gender gap in literacy attainment amplified my interest in a more in-depth exploration of the popular discourses and research on 'boys' underachievement' in the Maltese context.

2.3.2 Boys and literacy in Malta: The evidence.

The Maltese government, schools and parents were recently shocked by the outcomes of local and international literacy tests. These results led to concern

about the academic achievement of boys in Maltese schools (MEDE, 2013b, 2013c, 2015b, 2016; Borg et al., 1995; Mifsud et al., 2000b). This section will set the scene around the Maltese context for this thesis, focusing particularly on the statistical evidence that stimulated my research.

Borg et al. (1995) investigated the gender differences and achievement of 3460 pupils in the 11-plus examination conducted in Maltese schools. It resulted in girls outperforming boys in Maltese, English and Religion; however, the most marked differences were in the two languages. Due to rising issues related to illiteracy in Malta, the Ministry for Education and Employment and the Literacy Unit of the University of Malta carried out a survey of educational performance focused on reading attainment, which revealed the increased concern with boys' underachievement and literacy in Malta (Mifsud et al., 2000a). The following timeline, features the literature from national and international testing and other reports related to the gender gap in literacy attainment. This section examines Maltese trends over the past several decades, discusses where the gender gap in literacy stands today and asks: "To what extent do males in Maltese schools 'underachieve' in their literacy acquisition?"

2.3.2.1 National Literacy Survey: 1999-2002.

Similar statistical findings were identified through the first-ever Malta National Literacy Survey (MNLS) in March of 1999 (Mifsud et al., 2000b). Almost every child born in 1992 and attending state, church and independent schools (4554 children; six- to seven-year-olds) participated in this study. The survey revealed a gender gap in literacy attainment (also evident in the pilot study in 1998) (Mifsud et al., 2000b). Girls scored incomparably higher than boys both in the English and also Maltese languages. Mifsud et al. (2000b) stated that this extends "the finding of a gender difference in attainment in literacy to a second language - this appears to be the first case where such a difference has been found" (p. 10).

Three years later, in 2002, the same National Literacy Survey was repeated with the same cohort of pupils who were then in Year 5 (Mifsud et al., 2004). Once again, in this second major study, girls outscored boys in both English and Maltese literacy tests. The second survey implies that the clear and persistent

evidence of the wide gap in gender differences and literacy attainment (at Year 5 level) related to gender, may be considered as a burden for educationists (Mifsud et al., 2004), and indicates that early differences between boys and girls in literacy achievement should eventually even out given appropriate education. Consequently, Mifsud et al. (2000a) made precise recommendations, highlighting the crucial importance of dealing with such an overlooked issue: "Gender differences in attainment: action is required to ensure that boys do not fall behind in this important life skill. Gender differences may be reduced or reversed in other subjects and these may need their own strategies" (p. 5). The latter claim shows how the global concern of boys and literacy in education prevailed also in a Maltese context in recent years.

In addition to two National Literacy Surveys, Mifsud et al. (2004) reported a successful value-added study, which matched the data from the 1999 and 2002 surveys. The data matched amounted to 97% of the pupils involved in both surveys (4239 pupils from 96 schools in Malta; 2131 girls and 2108 boys). Maltese boys' and girls' progress throughout this span of time was parallel; however, the difference in attainment in favour of girls was retained. The gender gap did not widen but neither did it show signs of closure; boys attending primary schools were still falling behind girls, and the gap was not fading over time (Mifsud et al., 2004). This raises the question as to whether such findings impacted on stakeholders' perceptions and boys' early literacy learning in Maltese schools.

The evidence was followed by several literacy developments including early literacy intervention that started in Year 1 (withdrawal sessions for five-year-olds) and the call for complementary teachers conducting pull-out literacy sessions for children who did not fare well on a literacy checklist at the age of five. These policy decisions seemed to be based on the notion that in minimising the gender gap in literacy attainment, earlier is better. Furthermore, the establishment of the National Literacy Agency, the engagement of Heads of Department (Literacy), literacy support teachers, the implementation of school literacy programmes, and introduction of Family Literacy Programmes were all aimed to develop further literacy provision on the islands - but when the gender gap and the 'underachieving' boys are concerned, the question remains. Following the statistical evidence and efforts to eradicate the gender gap, it is still

important to ask, "are all Maltese boys having a solid start to fulfil their potential as stated in one of the aims of the NCF (MEDE, 2012)?"

2.3.2.2 Key findings from PISA: 2009, 2015.

In 2009, the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] study results reported that from all participating countries, Malta had the widest gender gap in literacy achievement (MEDE, 2013b). The overall average in reading ability was significantly lower in Malta than all OECD and European Union [EU] countries placing Malta 45[th] out of the 74 participants (MEDE, 2013b). The top four countries in this study were Shanghai-China, Korea, Finland and Hong Kong with an overall reading scale varying from 533 up to 556. It was interesting to note that in these countries children do not start primary school and are not exposed to formal education before the age of six, seven or eight.

 The PISA of 2015 reported that girls outperformed boys in all 72 participating countries, and Maltese girls exceeded the mean reading score of Maltese boys by 42 score points (MEDE, 2015b). This indicates that the gender gap in reading achievement may be narrowing after six years; however, it also indicates an enduring concern because the same gap is significantly larger than the difference in the mean reading scores of boys and girls across OECD countries (27 score points) (MEDE, 2015b). Such studies do not allow for in-depth investigations where boys from diverse backgrounds talk about or are observed during their literacy experiences in bilingual Maltese schools. Findings from this study provide for such data, which will eventually be discussed and presented in this thesis (chapters 4 and 5).

2.3.2.3 Key findings from PIRLS: 2011, 2016.

The international issue of gender imbalance in educational achievement was also maintained in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [PIRLS] (MEDE, 2013c), where 3598 Maltese students participated comprising of almost all 10-year-old students in the country. Maltese girls outscored boys by 18 points in the English test and 25 points in the Maltese test (MEDE, 2013c). The PIRLS 2011 report includes further statistical data that might shed further light on the gender gap in educational achievement (MEDE, 2013c). Primarily, the percentage

of Maltese pupils (16%) that dislike reading is marginally higher than the international average (15%). Secondly, the number of students (13%) that don't feel confident in reading is higher than the global average (11%). Thirdly, time was a common factor because throughout a whole scholastic year in Malta, the number of hours in language instruction amounts to 181; 51 hours less than the international average (232 hours). Indeed, the PIRLS 2011 report states that Malta has the lowest time spent reading (37 hours) throughout a whole year as part of language instruction from all participating countries (international average of 71 hours) (MEDE, 2013c). In the Maltese context, such evidence might question equity and the children's right to quality educational opportunities to grow into competitive and literate citizens.

Malta placed 40th out of 50 participating countries in PIRLS 2016 (MEDE, 2016). Students fared significantly worse than the 2011 reading test and female students consistently outperformed male students in both reading processes and purposes (MEDE, 2016). It can be argued that the demand for further investigation into the claims of 'underachieving boys' in Maltese schools give rise to a challenging opportunity that might need to be dealt with from its roots.

2.3.3 A snapshot of an international view of 'boys' underachievement'.

This section provides a general overview of how the discourses and evidence on 'boys' underachievement' impacted on some countries over the years. The move away from the male as the traditional breadwinner led to the 'crisis of masculinity' (Clare, 2001), the attention on masculine identity that funneled down to educational research; in Britain this overlapped with the awareness that girls outperformed boys in GCSE level (Francis, 2000). British media reports highlighted the concern of 'lost boys' (Gold, 1995) and higher authorities reinforced this issue, considering it as a rough patch in the British educational system (Younger et al., 2005). A wide gender discrepancy was also evident in the percentage of the 570,000 Reception children in England that reached the benchmark: 61% girls and 43% boys (Department for Children, Schools and Family [DCSF], 2010). In addition, data from the *Boys Reading Commission* shows that in three out of four schools, girls fare better than boys in reading (National Literacy Trust, 2012). Despite, the implementation of several programmes in England that were shown to increase the enjoyment of reading

(such as *Bookstart* and *Young Readers Programme*), less than half those involved extended their reading practice. Recently, the National Literacy Trust (2015) published a report stating that the gender gap is still a core issue in the English education system. This raises the question of the efficacy of similar stand-alone programmes and provides further evidence of the persistence of the gap outside Malta.

Like reading, writing is vital for the overall literacy development of a child (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley & Wilkinson, 2004). Writing is considered as a global problematic area in education (Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingsford & Hall, 2002; Clark & Teravainen, 2017), with studies showing that girls fare better than boys in writing (Dahl, 2012; Mead, 2006; National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002; Salahu Din, Persky & Miller, 2008; The United Kingdom Literacy Association [UKLA], 2004). Studies also indicate that the gender gap in writing has widened by the end of high school education (Dyson, 1993; Newkirk, 2006) whilst other research has claimed that males' become 'disengaged' and 'disenfranchised' from writing (Fletcher, 2006) or even start 'staring into space' (King & Gurian, 2006). This evidence suggests that the gender gap issue around writing still needs to be addressed (Barrs & Pigeon, 1998; Millard, 1997; Wood, 2000; Younger et al., 2005) and gives further weighting to my rationale for choosing to include young boys' writing experiences in the study reported in this thesis.

Other European countries follow the same pattern. In Germany girls gain better school results than boys, and Sweden's concerns relate with the issue of boys' social competence (Ohrn, 2001). In Belgium boy's culture is less researched and it is suggested that this is affecting the performance of secondary school boys (Van Houtte, 2004). 'Underachieving and underprivileged' are terms associated with some Australian boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001), and in 2015, the gender gap in favour of girls was wider for middle and high schools pupils across the US (Di Carlo, 2015). The concern on 'boys' underachievement' in the US paved the way to a rush in supporting single-sex schools for boys based on the assumption that these educational settings may improve boys' attainment (Times Educational Supplement, 2004). International evidence further reveals the need for insightful explanations to such a complex phenomenon.

2.3.4 Gender and literacy differences in early childhood.

The early years are crucial in the language and literacy development of a child since it begins at birth and continues to progress through life (Clay, 2001; Goodman, 1986; Hannon, 1995; Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005; Whitehead, 1990). A poor start in literacy creates a barrier to future success, and increases the likelihood of early school dropout rates, adult unemployment and low self-esteem (Silverstein, Iverson & Lozano, 2002). Yelland (1998) indicated that the field of ECEC has often overlooked the issue of gender and more recent research showed that gender was never considered to be part of the curriculum in the majority of countries (Connolly, 2004; Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000). Working for twelve years in a kindergarten classroom, followed by four more years in Years 1, 2, 3 and 4, I concur with both previous statements and this has stimulated my interest to scrutinise the evidence available on the gender gap in achievement through an ECEC perspective.

Several scholars suggested that differences in gender are not evident in early childhood (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Davies & Brember, 1999). Conversely, numerous studies showed that even in kindergartens and the first grade of primary schools girls outperform boys in early literacy development and basic literacy skills (Below, Skinner, Fearrington & Sorrell, 2010; Cobb-Clark & Moschion, 2017; Li-Grining, Voturba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreño & Haas, 2010; McCoach, O'Connell, Reis & Levitt, 2006; Niklas & Schneider, 2012; Paley, 1987). For example, Connolly (2004) showed how data related to gender differences present in GSCE results (UK) were also evident in the earliest years of schooling. Correspondingly, Chatterji's (2006) findings from his study of 2,286 kindergartens and first grade students showed that the gender differences in reading performance were already evident on school entry and increased in formal reading instruction during first grade. Cheng Lee and Al Otaiba (2015) examined the early literacy skills of kindergarteners with groups of different socioeconomic statuses. Findings from this study showed that gender gaps with a female advantage were evident among children from both high-poverty and low-poverty households. On the other hand, Cobb-Clark and Moschion (2017) found that gaps in early academic achievement were linked to: socio-economic status; gender gap differences across domains; and how the same gaps exist in early primary school before long exposure to gender-biased schooling. These

inconsistent findings reveal that literacy gender gaps from the earliest years cannot be easily explained (Ready, LoGerfo, Burkam & Lee, 2005) and that the difference seems to persist and also widen as boys and girls from diverse backgrounds experience different cycles of their educational journey.

It can be argued that emerging issues on gender, literacy and schooling are not solely about testing and competing but relate to the communities, cultural and social factors, national curricula and syllabus of diverse contexts. As an advocate for quality ECEC, I reflected on the outcomes of such statistical evidence, and recognised the importance of developing further insight into the schooled literacy lives of young boys in a Maltese context. It is important to understand whether all boys and girls are being understood from the very beginning of their literacy journey.

2.3.5 Etiologies of the gender gap in literacy

"Gender is a thick stew, with sex, biology, popular culture, and power bubbling just beneath its hot surface. And now literacy. No wonder conversations about gender are so explosive" (Fletcher, 2006, p. 21). The statistical evidence presented in the previous section and Fletcher's words reaffirmed that issues of gender and education are a highly disputable topic and a vast field (Connolly, 2004; Millard, 1997). To date, there is no single explanation of why some boys lag behind in literacy attainment (Cobb-Clark & Moschion, 2017). The reasons for such differences are diverse and complex (Younger, Warrington & Williams, 1999). Active debates on such explanations take place on an international level in search for a solution to minimise literacy difficulties and close or eradicate the gender achievement gap (Zuze & Reddy, 2013).

This section critically reviews different aspects of the literature that underpin several explanations for the popular gender gap in literacy attainment. This critical review seeks not to provide a solution for different literacy capacities between boys and girls but to objectively present these explanations through varied theoretical positions that may inform classroom literacy practice also in the early years. Consequently, the main scope of this section develops a critical reflection on significant discourses, and how these might influence the learning, language and literacy development of young boys. The key factors in theoretically oriented research that give explanatory prominence to gender

difference will be critically discussed in four sections, grounded in similar categorisations reported in a study on boys and literacy by Alloway et al. (2002) who suggested that the situation can be explained in terms of neuroscientific studies, availability of role model in schools, socio-cultural and socio-economic circumstances and educational experience. Finally, this section argues that the principles underlying theories behind gendered literacy differences need to be identified and connected to develop implications for classroom practice in the early years.
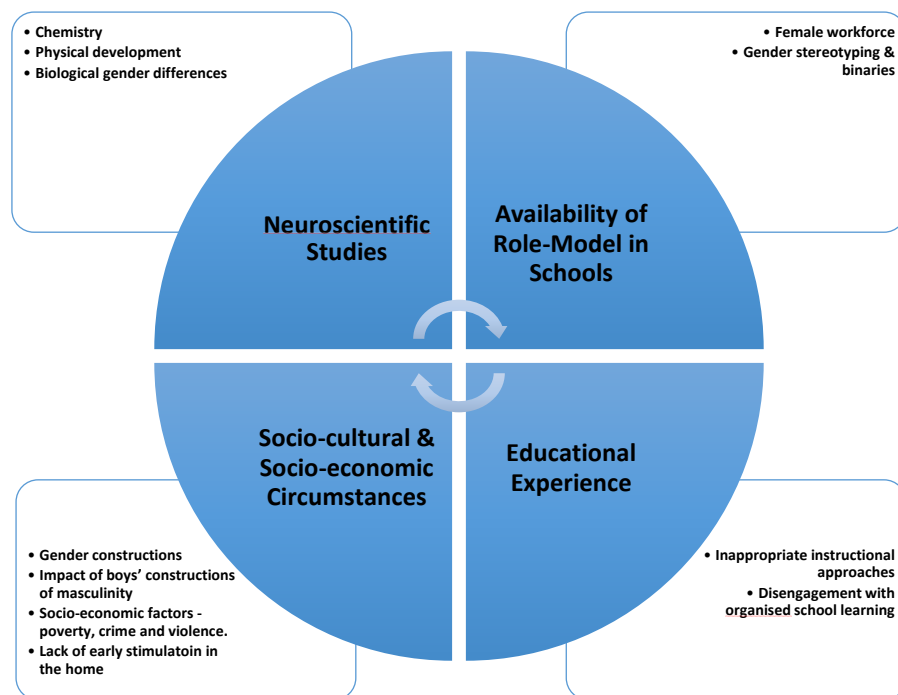
Figure 2.2. Four key theoretical explanations for the gender gap in literacy attainment

2.3.5.1 Neuroscientific studies.

Recent research affirms that differences between boys and girls are complex (Eliot, 2009; Sax, 2005). However, reference is often made to the difference in their cognitive and biological development (Biddulph, 1997; Hawke, Olson, Wilcutt, Wadsworth & DeFries, 2009; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). James (2007) claimed that several researchers from the field of neuroscience have

sought to better understand how the brain processes language and literacy. The brain is a complex organ and issues of gender, and literacy are complicated too (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Therefore, none of the explanations below will provide us with a definitive perspective. In the context of this thesis, the purpose is to develop some understanding of how the biological, cognitive and physical development of boys connects with literacy learning in ECEC.

According to Biddulph (1997), boys' brains are not connected from left to right as are the majority of girls', a boy will have more difficulty doing tasks that need both sides of the brain (such as reading and talking). The process of brain development can differ up to 1.5 years of age between that of a boy and a girl (Skolverket, 2006) and it has been suggested that the language areas of the brain of most five-year-old boys are very similar to those of 3.5-year-old girls (Sax, 2007). Biologically, these claims imply that girls could have a natural advantage in linguistic development (Eliot, 2009; Gurian & Henley, 2001). Such evidence might influence the way boys and girls are perceived during their early literacy development.

Other neuroscientists investigated gender differences concerning male reading skills deficits, finding that many boys tend to do better in visual rather than auditory processing, and both are fundamental to reading and writing skills (Naour, 2001). Consequently, this may inhibit their early literacy development especially when it comes to learn and be involved in activities that include sequential work, such as phonetic decoding and encoding to read and write, semantic skills and reading comprehension (Aaron, 1982; Halpern, 1997). This supports the view that boys and girls may react differently to experiences related to language and literacy, thus questioning how this might influence classroom practice particularly when formal schooling starts early.

The differences between boys' and girls' development are not just in the brain but also in their bodies. Sax (2005) claimed that boys and girls see differently due to the variation of the thickness of the retina. Research from the field of neuroscience indicated that girls have more hearing-related neurons than boys (Brizendine, 2006; Cone-Wesson & Ramirez, 1997). Phonological sensitivity has been claimed to be a good predictor of later literacy (Bryant, MacLean & Bradley, 1990; Ellis, 1990). Findings from a two-year longitudinal study in Malta suggested that girls possessed higher phonological skills than boys

on entry to school at age five (Martinelli, 2013). This has implications on the implementation of phonic programmes in the early years of schooling that require higher levels of phonological sensitivity, such as the tasks of phoneme (phonological unit of sound, for example, individual letter sounds) segmentation, phoneme counting and phoneme reversal (Martinelli, 2013).

Fine (2010) suggests that it is often the case that neurosexism finds its way through magazines and other published work forming a mistaken belief that differently structured brains create differently capable minds. Such findings promote hegemonic claims and differences between the groups of the 'boys' and the 'girls' and raise the question as to how these discoveries might be influencing boys and early literacy learning in Maltese schools. Findings from this study will discuss the extent to which several stakeholders ground their explanations in neuroscientific evidence and how this might be influencing young boys' reading and writing practices.

2.3.5.2 Availability of role models in schools.

The popular rhetorical literature in role-model theory speaks about boys being harmed by school and society and that schools are feminized (Biddulph, 1997; Brownhill, 2016; Hill, 2011; Pollack, 1998; Reed, 1999). Several scholars investigated the significance of same sex adult role models for boys in schools to develop their self-identity (Alloway et al., 2002; Booth, 2002). Consequently, men and male role models are considered to be of pedagogical benefit in some school systems, re-engaging learners by providing for boy-friendly settings. However, such theory ignores the efforts of female teachers who are capable of supporting the needs of boys in their schools (Ashley & Lee, 2003). Several scholars allude that male teachers are not the key to improving literacy learning for boys, as gender does not affect a teacher's competence (Francis, 2008; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Rowe, 2001). On the other hand, it is well-documented that female educators tend to disregard the interests of boys while promoting stereotypical feminine ways which automatically disadvantage boys and influences their performance in reading and writing (Evans & Davies, 2000; Gee, 1996; McCormack & Brownhill, 2014; Millard, 1997; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). For example, a teacher who does not allow for writing related to action, video

games, war and battle might discourage boys and their voices might be silenced (Fletcher, 2006; Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Hyde, 2004; Sax, 2005).

Literature suggests that educators need to be careful when choosing role models for learners so as not to promote any kind of gender stereotyping or gender binaries (Hammett & Sanford, 2008; Younger et al., 2005). It may be easy for educators to fall in the trap of treating boys and girls in homogenous groups, and continue to promote the notion of the dominant way of 'being a man' in society: hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Maynard, 2002; Mills, 2000). In light of this argument, my work attempts to improve the understanding - through several perspectives and experiences related to young boys and literacy - of how role model theory is conceptualised and consequently impacts on existing practices within the local context. Alloway et al., (2002) claimed that if schools draw upon neuroscientific or role model 'deficit' theories to understand the underachievement of boys they would never be able to benefit from a broad vision that will eventually support them in improving literacy learning (p. 56). It can be argued that role-model theory is not the sole solution to reach all children but rather one that creates more labels and divisions between boys and girls in our education system.

2.3.5.3 Socio-economic and socio-cultural circumstances.

Home and school environments impact on a child's academic performance making the socio-economic factor an important explanation that needs to be considered in the discourse of underachievement in literacy (Reid, 2011). The educational background of parents or guardians and low-income families limit accessibility to literacy activities at home (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Nettleford (2008) claimed that this might lead to violence in schools due to frustrations of inaccessibility to learning. Research shows that there is an increased risk of uneducated males engaging in crime and violence (Nutbrown, Clough, Stammers, Emblin & Smith, 2017; Reid, 2011). Kipnis (1999) pointed out that the majority of offenders in juvenile justice system are boys, and a higher proportion of those in prison struggle with literacy than those who are not. In 2012, 47% of UK prisoners said that they had no qualifications (compared to 15% of the working general population in the UK), 21% of prisoners needed help with reading and

writing, and 41% with education generally (Ministry of Justice [MoJ], 2012; Nutbrown et al., 2017). Due to such evidence, some parents may tend to have low expectations for males when it comes to academics and behaviour, and this has a damaging effect on boys' performance in literacy and school achievement (Reid, 2011).

Socio-cultural explanations have been prominent in the gender agenda; gender is viewed as a social construct whereby the social context influences who you are, your identity and the way you think and act (Fine, 2010). The behaviour of a male or female is influenced by their individual gender identities, and as such, from a sociological perspective, gender differences are also explained through cultural distinctions (Francis, 2000; Millard, 1997). Several scholars have claimed that the natural brain and physical structures are not the only explanations for gender differences in literacy and these can also be influenced by the child's early years experiences (Connolly, 1994; Kolb, Gibb & Robinson, 2003; Spedding, Harkins, Makin & Whiteman, 2007; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). This evidence provides a broader vision within the explanations for the gender gap in literacy, and therefore gave rise to more implications on how boys might experience schooled literacy in their earliest years in Malta.

In conjunction, Alloway's (1995) research on gendered interactions in the early years reported the stereotypical ways in which educators interacted with the young. The adults gave more attention to boys whilst being involved in a stereotypical masculine activity (such as constructing) and likewise with girls (such as during drama). The relationships educators created with the children and the masculine and feminine constructions in school cultures influenced student's engagement in learning (Alloway et al., 2002). Francis (1998) argued that there is one notion of 'masculinity' and one notion of 'femininity' which are oppositional and consequently shifting, yet flexible and contradictory. She further claimed that rather than different types of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' there are different strategies for the individual to construct themselves as masculine or feminine as gender identity blooms differently depending on the culture and class the individual experiences. It can be argued that how adults in early years settings and homes conceptualise boys and literacy might also be influencing existing boys' literacy identities.

In her bibliographic research on gender differences and early literacy, Farrugia (2014) concluded that gender differences and stereotypes must be taken into consideration when it comes to teachers' pedagogies and early literacy curricula as not to do so may hinder boys' literacy attainment. In the early years, teachers have tended to refer to children in a gendered way, such as 'good girl' and 'big boy' further promoting gender divisions as a dominant element of children's identities (Thorne, 1993). Research showed that the theory of social representation may support male and female educators in identifying their constructed thinking on gender and equality and how its association with traditional aspects impacts their teaching practice to improve their practice (De Sousa, 2011); this allows "for deep insight into common sense/'taken-for-granted' knowledge in a dialogical perspective of social representation" (Granbom, 2016, p. 89). Schools are in many ways infused with social constructions of gender that are continuously present, changing, and offer all children different notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (Marsh, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Cultural influences and school practices have implications for literacy curricula, schools and teachers' pedagogies, and raise the question as to whether more could be done to ameliorate the situation.

2.3.5.4 Educational experiences.

Following the statistical gap in performance between boys and girls, specific 'boy-friendly' strategies and programmes have been promoted in schools in an attempt to eradicate the 'underachieving boys' dilemma (Francis, 2006; Hammett & Sanford, 2008). Some of these programmes "have been identified as thoroughly counterproductive" (Francis & Skelton, 2005, p. 194). For example, in Ontario the Education Ministry published a curriculum resource document for educators entitled *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills,* claiming that reading clubs and other quick strategies improved boys' performance and engagement in literacy practice (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). With reference to such 'one-size-fits-all approach to boys' instruction', Pennycook (2011) argues that:

> Without a deeper understanding of how gender is enacted in the
> classroom and implicated in educational achievement, the female

teachers are unable to offer an analysis that might move them beyond
reinforcing the masculinization project the boys are importing from the
arena culture.
(p. 19)

Similarly, some scholars contended that the provision of resources that
relate to literary genres that promote violence and aggression give way to the risk
of reinforcing behaviours that promote disaffection from literacy learning and
limit the possibility of boys accessing a wider repertoire of literacies (Alloway et
al., 2002; Cremin, 2015; Hammett & Sanford, 2008). In light of this argument,
my study posits that discourses supporting individualistic notions of gender
should be challenged and more inclusive discourses about gender and literacy
supported.

Borg et al. (1995) stated that in Maltese primary schools, compliance with
adult demands was generally encouraged, and this increased the likelihood for
girls who tend to be more obedient to view school as a more welcoming place
than boys. Though this was reported two decades ago, Gropper, Hinitz, Sprung
and Froschl (2011) claimed that 21st century early years' environments are
resembling upper primary classrooms. These spaces are not taking into
consideration the developmental needs of young children, particularly some
young boys, who are being demotivated and stressed during their earliest years
due to the abrupt transition from play to academics (Gropper et al., 2011; Zambo
& Brozo, 2009). An early formal education system stifles such pleasures while
one-time fundamental foundations are being set (Sax, 2007; Wolf, 2007). This
evidence made me question what young boys would want to say about their
reading and writing experiences during the start of formal schooling at the age of
five, and how this impacted on their attitude and involvement in literacy learning
in two languages - as is the case in Malta.

2.3.6 Popular rhetoric on the crisis of boys' literacy

This section provides a merged view of the tensions embedded within the
distinct theoretical perspectives underpinning the rhetoric on the gender gap in
literacy. Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (2001) identify three dominant discourses
that summarise the gender gap explanations presented in this chapter: 'poor boys'
rhetoric refers to boys as victims of feminism and female-dominated schooling

that lead to girls' success; 'failing schools, failing boys' globalized neoliberal discourse that surfaces the concern that schools are not effective and subsequently fail boys; and 'boys will be boys' discourses are grounded in biological determinism enforcing binary constructions of gender. As public panic swells, biological determinist views and popular media headlines, such as 'The trouble with boys' (Guardian Unlimited, 2000) and 'The problem with boys' (The Observer, 1999) heat up departments of education around the world to try to find solutions to close the gender gap by funding several studies (Hammett & Sanford, 2008).

In conjunction, Hammett and Sanford (2008) argue that the constant panic on the phenomenon of boys' underachievement "might be useful to generate headlines or to draw attention but it is not helpful in creating depths of understanding and awareness" (p. 2). Several researchers contend that while quick-fix responses through psychological treatment and other simplistic solutions, such as boys' programmes and employing male teachers, seem to be the answer to calm down the panic, societal issues such as gender and literacy are complex and there is no one quick and easy solution to this multi-faceted issue (Francis, 2008; Kehler, 2008). Additionally, such categorised efforts in response to the crisis of boys' literacy aim at reaffirming dominant constructions of hegemonic masculinities in schools and impose binary hierarchical constructions of gender identity that lead to weighty consequences for gender equity (Alloway et al., 2002; Kehler & Greig, 2005; Lingard, 2003; Martino, 2001; Martino, 2008; Skelton, 2003; Youdell, 2004).

Through social structure and media, young boys and girls are already experiencing a world where gender is recurrently emphasized through conventions of language, colour, appearance, dress and segregation (Fine, 2010). Kehler (2008) pointed out that any efforts in criticising masculinities and encouraging social justice in schools tends to be easily derailed by other traditional approaches that embrace binary gender constructs. This conflicts with the targets of stakeholders concerned with principles of gender equity. Studies from Australia (Alloway et al., 2002; Rowan et al., 2002) and Canada (Bouchard, Boily & Proulx, 2003) provide an alternative perspective where masculinity and literacy crisis are viewed more broadly.

In sum, it was interesting to discover that essentialist and anti-essentialist mindsets underpin the literature in this section. Rowan et al. (2002) explain that essentialists believe that there are some essential and natural differences between boys and girls linked to their biological and psychological nature. On the other hand, the authors point out that anti-essentialist mindsets view behaviours or interests displayed by some girls and some boys as a production of diverse social and cultural contexts and not as natural. This explanation justifies the varied reactions, approaches and strategies used globally to address the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement'. Most of these approaches include male role models, single-sex classes, introducing books related to boys' interests and boy-friendly approaches to literacy instruction such as competition and technology (Martino, 2008).

The literature discussed in this section highlights the recent national and international situation relating to the global phenomenon of 'underachieving boys' in literacy attainment. It has also been argued that not all boys underachieve, and that boys can prosper and do well in their academic life. Studies remind us that inequalities in literacy achievement mean that some girls underachieve too whilst others seem to reach and exceed their high targets with relative ease. Nevertheless, the data presented is compelling in identifying gender as a critical variable to be considered in the teaching and learning of literacy skills. National and international test results highlight potential difficulties with the literacy competences of individual children, particularly some boys, however, their interpretations are not sufficiently reliable or useful for parents, educators and policymakers to act upon. Limited research has attempted to tap into the educational experiences of young boys in Maltese state schools in conjunction with the complex issue of gender differences in literacy attainment.

The following section moves from the evidence and explanations for 'boys' underachievement' to critically review literature that examine the multifaceted concept of 'early literacy learning' from a range of perspectives.

2.4 Gender and Literacy Learning in Early Years Education

Becoming literate is essential to becoming an active member of a society (Adams, 1990; Heckman, 2005; McPike, 1995). Literacy is key for children's success in life, and a crucial indicator of their contribution to a literate society

(EFA, 2006; Green et al., 2006; McPike, 1995). Young children's literacy development is a process that begins with the basics of understanding that print conveys meaning leading to learning how to become users of information and critical thinkers (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006). Therefore, it is important that early years education is of high quality to ensure effective literacy learning at the outset of the educational experience of each child.

Quality ECEC retains a powerful position in the agenda of several governments, researchers and other entities (Barnett, 2011; Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011; Heckman, 2011; MEDE, 2006). Nonetheless, the early years sector maintains the reputation that it is an underestimated area of interest endangered by "narrow curriculum control, economizing and bureaucracy", however, its valuable contribution to the overall education system should be recognised (Whitehead, 2010, p. xv). The early childhood years, from birth to age eight, have been established as a critical period of time for learning and literacy development (Bee, 1992; Centre for Community Child Health, 2008; Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 1993; Willis, S., 1995). Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) claimed that, "early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates, and enhanced productivity in adult life" (p. 1). Consequently, it is not surprising that early literacy learning is a contentious topic in today's early childhood educational arena (Carrington & Marsh, 2005; International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018).

To address the diverse needs of young children in pluralistic societies, early years pedagogies and educators play an important role in establishing how young male pupils grow into literate individuals (Gropper et al., 2011). Moreover, in today's classrooms it is challenging for educators to meet the diverse needs of each and every student (Cairney, 2010), provide for differentiated instruction and introduce them to a second language from their earliest years (Buysee, Pesner-Feinberg, Paez, Scheffner & Knowles, 2014), as is the case in Malta. Educators therefore need strategies to cope with the challenges they face from the earliest years in education and beyond.

A plethora of research findings have claimed that young children struggle to acquire the skills of reading and writing if they are not given the right

opportunities to do so from their earliest years (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Leslie, 2012; Rog, 2011; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Yet, the debate on how young children should experience literacy learning in ECEC perpetuates (Straus, 2013). In pursuit of this concern, this section attempted to define literacy and review a meta-analyses of global research on research-based, field-tested traditional and new early literacy strategies. Purposely, it also endeavoured to fine-tune the understanding of the complexity of what learning and teaching reading and writing might look like in early years education. To scrutinise this enquiry, I have been working on nine main claims embedded in the literature, which will provide a structure for discussion in this section:

- Defining literacy
- Early language and literacy learning in a bilingual context
- Early literacy learning: Theories that inform practice
- Playful pedagogies, pedagogic discourse, boys and early literacy
- Early reading debate
- Early writing debate
- Balanced literacy: In search for the right balance
- Boys' motivation and involvement in early literacy learning
- New literacies vs. traditional approaches to reading and writing

2.4.1 Defining literacy.

Literacy is a human right and at the heart of an *Education for All* (EFA, 2006). Debates continue about the way literacy should be taught as it is considered to be crucial to one's survival and success throughout life (Wray, 2002). On top of these pedagogical debates, there is the issue of what is meant by the term 'literacy', how individuals interpret it, and what it entails when it comes to the schooling of young children. Several definitions of literacy left their impact on the way educators translate this terminology into their every day practices (Freebody, Cumming & Falk, 1993; Larson & Marsh, 2015). An attempt to define the term 'literacy' will serve as a trigger to the forthcoming discussion.

The term 'literacy' used to be portrayed as the ability to read and write and the term 'illiterate' as the inability to do so (Roberts, 1995). Willis, A. I. (1997)

mapped out the shift in defining literacy: from 'literacy as skill' and 'literacy as school knowledge' to 'literacy as a social-cultural construct' (Vygotsky, 1978). The latter definition implies that as the social and cultural context of literacy changes, shifts in understanding what being 'literate' means will constantly be 'negotiated and renegotiated' (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a, p. 51). The literacy as social practice perspective moves from the 'autonomous model' - that tended to view literacy as a cognitive skill or as a set of transferable reading and writing skills - to an 'ideological model of literacy' where literacy is shaped by different political, economic, cultural and social contexts (Larson & Marsh, 2015; Moss, 2002; Street, 1984, 1993). Larson and Marsh (2015) argue that an autonomous model of literacy supports the curricula adopted in many countries.

Literacy learning is now perceived as multidimensional recognising both the home and school as learning environments (Marsh et al., 2005; Sulzby & Teale, 1986). Literacy is also being redefined in response to the influx of technology and digital literacy in today's world (Dunn & Sweeney, 2018; Gee, 2000; Luke & Carrington, 2002; Marsh et al., 2005; Marsh, 2007; Neumann & Neumann, 2017). This broadening of the term literacy intuitively leads to the plural term 'literacies' acknowledging the way literacy varies depending on context and purpose (Flewitt, 2008). The literature in this section identifies a paradigm shift in how 'literacy' is being conceptualised and this might have implications in the way young children feel about their experiences with reading and writing at home and school.

Literacy is also seen as the acquisition and the ownership of a particular language or languages through an integrated exposure of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills (Davis, 2013). Subsequently, learning to read and write is developed "in concert with oral language" (Strickland, 1990, p. 19). The complex unrelatedness of these aspects of literacy are rarely acknowledged in curricula for the early years, and if these forms of "languaging" are separated it will lead to irremediable harm (Strickland, 1990; Whitehead, 2010, p. 190). In terms of defining literacy, the literature here is indicating the important aspect for young children to have the opportunity to be exposed to language for learning purposes, and have the opportunity to talk integrated with their daily reading and writing experiences.

Nowadays, a literate person can be perceived, as explained by Ahmed (2011) "to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (p. 182). The word 'literacy' today is referring to different repertoires of communication and therefore, effective literacy instruction values these repertoires (Alloway et al., 2002). Due to changing forms in communication, information and mass media, children encounter and engage with various modes of representation (graphic images, video, audio, etc.) in multi-modal ways (spoken and written, visual and verbal, narrative and display) (Flewitt, 2008; Kress, 2010, 1997). In a new era surrounded by the Internet and social media the definition of literacy embraces the digitised formats human beings encounter daily (Carrington & Marsh, 2005; Kress, 2003; Marsh, 2010b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009; Weigel, James & Gardner, 2009). Media literacy, visual literacy and information literacy are popular in academic discourse, and these multiple ways of viewing literacy reaffirm the broadening of this concept (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2006). The policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b), presents a broad conceptualisation of the term 'literacy' to reflect the 21st century lives and experiences of today's students:

> Literacy can be defined as a set of cultivated skills and knowledge that serve as a basis for learning, communication, language use and social interaction. Literacy ranges from the basic ability to read, write, listen and comprehend, to higher level processing skills where the learner is able to deduce, interpret, monitor and elaborate on what was learnt. Since the advent of digital media, the definition of literacy has widened and progressed…When using digital media it is standard that learners transfer and process information through various means (textual, visual, audio and so on). It is necessary that learners are able to evaluate and manipulate the multimodal means to generate meaning.
> (p. 18)

In light of this broad view, the literature review in this section revealed that there are differing views of how literacy is defined and approached in the early years. On the one hand it is argued that literacy is narrowed down to the schooled practices that focus on "the ability to decode, encode, and make meanings using written text and symbols" (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p. 5, see also Bartlett, 2008),

while on the other literacy embraces a holistic educational view that aims to contribute to the development of modern literate societies (Ahmed, 2011; Carrington & Marsh, 2005; Davis, 2013; EFA, 2006 Kress, 2003; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Marsh et al., 2005; Roberts, 1995). Hannon (2000) proposes balance and a search for an agreement between the two contrasting views of literacy.

Taylor (2005) claimed that a broad view of literacy including informal non-academic literacy practices, supports educators in acknowledging what boys already know and scaffolds schooled literacy learning practices by bridging learning with the way they already read the world around them. The research presented in this section reveals that a global literacy shift occurred in a quick pace, however, the extent to which this shift is evident in the context of this study and how young boys react to it is still to be discovered.

2.4.2 Early language and literacy learning in a bilingual context

International research has long shown that language learning occurs naturally in an environment where children are active in meaningful contextualised opportunities that match their real life experiences (Dunn, 1983; Mills & Mills, 1993; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2005; Sammons et al., 2004). The language used in young children's educational journeys can have an impact on their future achievements (UNESCO, 2005, 2003). The early years are critical for young dual language learners [DLLs] who start experiencing the challenge of learning a new language while also attaining other fundamental skills (Buysee et al., 2011). Bilingual scholars claimed that DLLs develop their oral language proficiency and early literacy skills at different rates depending on the quality and quantity of exposure to each language and the learning environment they experience (Brisk & Harrington, 2007).

In Maltese state schools Maltese and English languages are used separately in written form, but the reality of instruction discourse always involved 'translanguaging', where educators and learners make sense through their linguistic resources (Garcia, 2009). Classroom discourse reflects the Maltese society outside school rooted in balanced bilingualism, where texts and Internet used by children are majorly done in English complemented with verbal

communication that is mostly done in Maltese (Camilleri Grima, 2016). Banković (2012) was the first scholar to look at language use in kindergarten classrooms in Malta, finding that the acquisition of English learning was prioritised in an educational context. Native language loss can impact negatively on communication, family relationships and may also lead to isolation (Anderson, 2012; Camilleri Grima, 2018; Tabors, 2008). Consequently, following the outcomes of research in language use within Maltese school contexts, the policy document *A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2015a) was published to promote bilingualism in the education of young children. The document highlights the opportunity for all children to develop "age-appropriate language skills in both Maltese and English (speaking, listening, reading and writing), giving special attention to oracy" (p. 6). Hammer, Lawrence, Rodriguez, Davison and Miccio (2011) claimed that if exposure to different languages is equivalent, sound language learning in these languages develops.

Several contemporary scholars contested the formerly held view that the learning of two languages simultaneously or sequentially impact negatively on the language and literacy development of young children (Goldstein & Bunta, 2012; Genesee, 2001; Nutbrown, 2018), and voiced the idea of learning one home language to assist second language learning (August & Hakuta, 2005; Bialystok, 2001; Meisel, 2006). The process of second language learning is much slower in the early years than it is during secondary schooling (Hernandez, 1993). Young children need to understand the new language, if not, language learning would be reduced to insignificant chains of symbols that make up words (Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999). Sollars and Pumfrey (1999) examined the teaching of English as a second language in one large state school in Malta with 156 six-year-old children. Findings revealed that a reciprocal model of teaching and learning (with an activity-oriented approach) was more effective than the transmission model (a skills-oriented approach) in oral comprehension and that drawing on a balance between both models assisted in the development of young children's second language learning. The reductionist pedagogical frame underpinning the transmission model does not align with the conceptions of first language acquisition and the cognitive development of young children (Cummins, 1984; Fisher, 1990). Similarly, August and Shannon (2006) concluded that DLLs need

to achieve a certain level of understanding in their second language before they can benefit from instructional approaches intended to improve their literacy skills. Within a bilingual context, this thesis examined the pedagogies underlying existing reading and writing approaches in three Year 1 classrooms, and how these impacted on the attitude and level of involvement of five- to six-year-old boys during Maltese and English lessons.

This section has briefly discussed the unavoidable impact of a unique sociolinguistic scenario that sets the background to the Maltese educational context, and some ways in which home and school experiences, particularly schooled language instruction, might impact on DLLs' language and literacy development. In the following section, the concept of early literacy learning will be critically reviewed through contemporary and longstanding theoretical perspectives, debates and evidence-based strategies to explore what current research constitutes as effective approaches to reading and writing for all 21[st] century young children.

2.4.3 Early literacy learning: Theories that inform practice.

Effective literacy pedagogy is entrenched in research into how young children develop and learn (Cigman, 2014). In early years education, there has been an emerging notable shift in the theoretical perspectives on children's learning particularly in 21[st] century research (Nolan & Raban, 2015). This paradigm shift moves from the 'ages and stages' developmental perspective most famously highlighted in Piaget's (1962) work - and others too, including Steiner (1996) and Montessori (1967), put forward suggested developmental 'staged' learning theories - to the view of the cooperative role of the adult as a co-constructor of learning and scaffolding learning in the child's ZPD while also valuing the social and cultural effect on the child's learning more associated with Vygotsky (1978); and also by Bruner (1986) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theories and assumptions that are formed influence the thinking, beliefs and actions of all stakeholders in education, including educators in classrooms, on how young children learn (Raban et al., 2007).

Throughout the years, kindergarten pedagogy was influenced by a number of theorists such as Friedrich Froebel who, in the mid-19th century introduced the notion of the 'kindergarten'; basing kindergarten approaches on learning on play

and in adult-directed activities designed to teach concepts and skills through toys, art, music and outdoor experiences (Wollons, 2000). Between the 1930s and 1980s the theory of 'reading readiness' influenced early childhood instruction (McMahon, Richmond & Reeves-Kazelskis, 1998; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Rog, 2011). This maturationist theory of learning (Mason, 1977) was based on the tenet that, there was a point in time which identified young children as being 'ready' or 'mature' to learn to read, and consequently reading instruction before the age of six-and-a-half was considered to be fruitless (Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Morphett & Washburne, 1931). Over time, the application of this theory shifted into a behaviourist learning theory; instead of waiting for a child to be ready, 'reading readiness' became the skills-based teaching of pre-requisite skills failing to consider children's development and ability to learn those skills (Downing & Thackray, 1971). Early experiences of literacy were overlooked due to the focus on mental and physical prerequisites for the effective learning of decoding skills (Merchant, 2008).

In 1966, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay challenged the 'reading readiness' theory as she made popular the term 'emergent literacy' to describe the nonconventional reading and writing behaviours (Clay, 1966). In the same vein, Teale (1986) and other researchers (Chomsky, 1972; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Lomax & McGee, 1987; Sulzby, 1985) recognised that children developed knowledge about early literacy before being exposed to formal instruction at school. Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) supported this theory of learning by showing how children as young as three can already identify labels and signs in their environments. The work of Smith (1971) and Goodman (1967) also highlighted the notion that reading is an active search for meaning. Emergent literacy affects the way literacy is taught at school as it looks at the literacy development of young children from a perspective of what children can do, rather than what they have yet to achieve, and challenges the 'reading readiness' perspective where learning to read is seen as a matter of development (Clay, 1966; Sulzby & Teale, 1986). An environment that promotes purposeful literacy activities and educators that treat young children as individuals are essential to keeping their continuous emergent literacy flowing (Clay, 2010; Zimba, 2011). The assumptions on the need for skills acquisition in learning to read held by the interwoven views of the developmentalist and behaviourist learning theories were

critically examined further in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, and so the 'reading readiness' approach began to fade away in some schools (Giles & Tunks, 2015). The same theoretical shift has helped other educators working in the early years to free themselves from advocates of reading readiness (Merchant, 2008).

Nonetheless, international research on literacy has focused more on reading and its prerequisite skills such as letter names, letter sounds, blending and segmenting (Gunn, Simmons & Kameenui, 2004). Furthermore, modern research claims that the remains of traditional approaches in today's early childhood curricula are a burden to the brains of many young boys who turn five because they are not ready to cope with an overflow of formal activities to sit down and to learn literacy skills in an explicit way through explicit programmes (Dale, 2008; Shaughnessy & Sanger, 2005). Sax (2005) claims that eighty percent of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] are boys, and that this puts a burden on their road to literacy. The literature in this section made me question: which version of the theories concerning young children's learning has ECEC in Maltese state schools tended to draw on and how is this impacting boys and literacy learning? In the next sections, more literature underpinned by the effects of the theoretical tensions and shifts presented so far will be reviewed in an attempt to identify current evidence-based efficient pedagogies that best help young children to learn to read and write.

2.4.4 Playful pedagogies, pedagogic discourse, boys and early literacy

Several scholars claimed that play is the medium through which young children learn best (Cigman, 2014; Elias & Berk, 2002; Hornbeck, Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Hui, He & Ye, 2015; Nutbrown, 2014; Piaget, 1962; Rogers & Lapping, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Siegler, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002; Vygotsky, 1966). Educationalists such as Frederick Froebel (1782-1852), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) held the belief that 'the first seven years of life are for play'. Moreover, psychologists Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) suggested that the first seven years are different from the later stages of children's cognitive development. Nonetheless, recent research showed that early learning standards and achievement outcomes such as the worldwide evidence on the gender gap in

literacy increased academic pressure and jeopardized the role of play in early learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Hall, 2005; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009; Nutbrown, 2018; Wohlwend, 2008; Wood & Atfield, 2005; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). In accordance with this, several researchers claimed that overloaded, top-down prescribed curricula and the absence of play dominated early childhood pedagogies, despite the consensus that formal approaches to teaching and learning in early primary classrooms are inappropriate (Dockett et al., 2007; Lubeck, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Stephen, 2006; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Some scholars have argued that educators faced an everyday challenge to include play in prescribed curricula due to the pressure of formal instruction and standardized tests that pressed down on the earliest grades (Barbour & Seefelt, 1993; Wood, 2007). This argument shows a need for a better understanding of play in relation to early literacy learning.

The attempt to eradicate play from early childhood heavily affects the area of early literacy learning more than in any other area in education, and regenerated the traditional perspective that 'earlier is better' in early literacy education (Harste et al., 1984; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Wohlwend, 2008) influenced by research such as the way forward to prevent reading difficulties (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The dichotomy between a play-based and formal pedagogical approach in ECEC creates an imbalance in the way literacy is taught to young children aged between three and seven years (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness & Trew, 2011). Both approaches influence the way reading and writing are perceived and approached in early childhood classrooms. Bernstein (1975) argues that play is pivotal to competence based pedagogies as it is the means by which children express themselves to adults in their learning environments, allowing the possibility for meanings to be identified through what is present. In sharp contrast, with performative/traditional pedagogy, curricula boundaries are valued more than the meanings of a child expressed through play and therefore the evaluation focuses on what is absent (Bernstein, 1975, 2000). Moss (2002) further argues that competence and performative based pedagogies never existed purely independent of each other but rather these two distinct models are always simultaneously evolving and active in scientific, social and political discourses related to the formation of pedagogic identities. Similarly, Rogers and Lapping (2012) contend that recent implementations of play-based

pedagogies comprise of contrasting elements of both competence and performative pedagogies.

Some researchers have attempted to bridge the dichotomies between work and play, and the informal and formal teaching and learning, as soon as children start their very first years in primary schools (Scully & Roberts, 2002; Walsh et al., 2011; Wood, 2007). Scully and Roberts (2002) suggested that literacy activities in the early primary grades can be made pleasurable by including active learning experiences which are healthy for the cognitive growth of both boys and girls in a classroom. They refer to such activities as 'playful literacy' suggesting that this does not discredit the free and spontaneous play that occurs in early primary classrooms, but extends play through the interaction of teacher-organised literacy instruction that makes particular learning experiences joyful and pleasurable. Another similar approach evolved around teachers in Northern Ireland and their engagement with a novel image of pedagogy in the early primary years, called 'playful structure' (Walsh et al., 2011). The 'infusion of playfulness' enabled educators to avoid pressure on young children at school and find ways to facilitate learning through high levels of engagement (Laevers 1993, 2000). My work will provide further insight into the play-literacy interface and young boys within the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

The significance of flexibility in the pedagogical and physical environment is pivotal to enhance learners' agency particularly through playfulness, varied resources and outdoor learning opportunities (Davies et al., 2013). Cigman (2014) showed how the power of play transformed young boys into excited and motivated writers pointing out the important principle of indoor and outdoor enabling environments for young writers that allow for playful, active and purposeful child-initiated literacy learning; provision of such an environment respects the learning styles and stages of development of all children including the 'energetic learning styles displayed by many boys' (p. xxi).

Knowles and Smith (2005), found that instructional literacy activities that were hands-on, multisensory, and that allowed for movement, challenge and competition, were apt to seem the most attractive and productive to boys. In a participatory research study 'buddy partnerships' between five- and 11-year-old boys were created, and findings revealed that this playful approach meant that these boys were able to communicate with each other on a level of 'shared

understanding' and motivated both young and older boys in reading (Levy, 2013). Stipek (2002) claimed that early-formalised school contexts impact on boys' learning as they grow up and their attention does not stretch, but instead shrinks and fades away. Nonetheless, there remain other ways of teaching literacy that put more emphasis on learning by rote, creating tensions and debates on the best ways of teaching literacy (Hannon, 2007). This adds to my justifications for choosing to have young boys' voices and their lived experiences with literacy in my study in the hope to contributing to this dichotomy from a fresh perspective.

Different countries adopt different curriculum, pedagogies and assessments for the education of young children. Hempel-Jorgensen (2015a) argued that socially just pedagogies including 'productive pedagogies' (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Lingard et al., 2001; Lingard, 2005), 'critical pedagogy' (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007), 'creative pedagogy' (Cremin, Burnard & Craft, 2006; Jeffrey & Woods, 2009) and 'transformative pedagogy' (Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004) are likely to improve disadvantaged learners' competence to exercise learner agency through the power of play, imagination, immersion, risk-taking and question-posing. These aspects are key features of 'Possibility Thinking' [PT], suggested as central to creative learning (Craft 2001b; Cremin et al., 2006; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2005). The term 'Possibility Thinking' [PT] was coined by Anna Craft in England to promote the democratic ideology of creativity in education systems (Chappell & Cremin, 2014). Cremin et al., (2006) outline PT as argued by Craft (2000, 2001b):

> … possibility thinking is implicit in learners' engagement with problems, suggesting that it is exemplified through the posing, in multiple ways, of the question 'what if?' and that it involves the shift from 'what is this and what does it do' to 'what can I do with this?' (p. 109)

In the early 21st century there was significant global development in research related to creativity and creative classroom practice (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Craft 2000, 2002; Cremin et al., 2006; Sawyer, 2010). For example, the English education system was characterized by an upturn in creative teaching strategies notwithstanding a parallel increase in performative pedagogy

(Cremin, Barnes & Scoffham, 2009; Galton, 2010). Studies of creative and playful pedagogies that nurture possibility thinking in the early years found that this practice was provided by teachers' 'standing back', profiling learner agency, and the permeation of time and space within enabling classroom environments (Craft, Cremin, Hay & Clack, 2014; Cremin et al., 2006). Such pedagogies, which are conceptualised as a process rather than prescriptive content transmitted to learners (Munns, 2007), challenge other practices and identify the role of pedagogy in engendering inequalities (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015a). It can be argued that the identified importance of creativity and play in learning might be jeopardized within a Maltese formalised schooling system based on imposed external syllabi at the age of five, and the existing pedagogic discourses created by an accountability culture where policy and practice are influenced by international comparison test results such as PISA and PIRLS.

From a Bersteinian perspective (Berstein, 2000), pedagogic discourse is produced through an interaction within and across discourse created by the state (the curriculum designers), an 'official recontextualising field' (ORF), and specialist educational practitioners in educational institutions (the teacher trainers and textbook writers interpreting the curriculum), a 'pedagogic recontextualising field' (PRF). Following the first National Literacy Survey in Malta (Mifsud et al., 2000), several policy documents were developed as a guide to early years educators. The importance of play and learning in recent research does not comply with the limited encounters of the word 'play' in Maltese education policy documents including the *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b) and the NCF (MEDE, 2012). Similarly, in the UK, the word 'play' is hidden in the recommendations put forward in OFSTED's *Bold Beginnings* report (Training Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children [TACTYC], 2017). Moreover, policies in the UK and the EU place their emphasis on neoliberal and marketised types of the value of education with minimal attention paid to intrinsic values such as enjoyment, autonomy, critical thinking and imagination (Griffiths, 2012; Francis, 2006).

Despite the absence of mention of the word 'play', the NCF (MEDE, 2012) document for the early years (0-7 years) advocates in favour of broad outcomes that encompass a wide variety of learning experiences and does not focus solely

on academic achievement. The work on the LOF (DQSE, 2015) project paved its way in Malta in 2015 after the recommendation of a learning outcomes approach put forward by the NCF (MEDE, 2012). The overall aim of this framework was to create a broad frame that allows for multiple ways where each child can acquire at his own unique pace the five core competences of the NCF (MEDE, 2012). Nonetheless, the underlying logic within the present NCF and the published LOF project for the early years (DQSE, 2015; MEDE, 2012) do not align with the existing timetabled, compartmentalised and prescribed syllabi young children experience as from the first year of compulsory schooling (MEDE, 2018b). Given the conflicting messages within the local pedagogic discourses created by curriculum designers, one may question how the present ORF (Bernstein, 2000) may be impacting young children's schooled literacy experiences in Maltese schools.

Furthermore, the *National Policy and Strategy for the Attainment of Core Competences in Primary Education* (DQSE, 2009) was documented to ensure the mastery of three Core Competences in the education system: Bilingual Literacy, eLiteracy and Numeracy in the first years of compulsory schooling. In this document the Maltese and English Core Competences Checklists 1, 2 and 3 were made available to teachers and schools in Malta (DQSE, 2009). These checklists were locally used by teachers as a guide for literacy instruction and to identify children, as from the age of five, who are not progressing satisfactorily in their Maltese and English literacy skills. After this summative assessment is carried out, the identified children would then be referred to start attending remedial literacy support which is locally known as 'complementary' sessions. The Core Competences Checklists are grounded in the work of cognitive psychologists, such as Ehri (1987, 1995), where a linear model to the skills, knowledge and understanding for reading and writing are introduced to children at particular ages. Such stage models of reading and writing acquisition do not conform with the philosophical integrity, underpinned by a CCP, of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) for the early years (0-7 years). CCP trusts teachers' professional judgements on the innate qualities of each learner rather than the assessment criteria of learners' performance, and standardised techniques based on the work learners produce (Bernstein, 2000; Langford, 2010). Similarly, Moss (2002) pointed out the contrast between UK's national policy document with other more recent official

documents making reference to the literacy curriculum. Such contrasting pedagogical discourses within an ORF (Bernstein, 2000) further stimulated my interest in exploring how these are impacting on boys and literacy within the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Overall, it is clear that recent research on effective early literacy learning highlights the need for playful, active and engaging literacy activities, indicating also, the effectiveness when this approach is permeated into the early and future years of primary schooling. This section also offered an insight into the contrasting pedagogical discourses within an ORF (Bernstein, 2000) through a synthesis of some official documents in order to draw attention to how these may be influencing ECEC, gender and literacy practice in a Maltese context. So, within the local concern with 'boys' underachievement', literature on the importance of play and literacy reinforces the need for boys' literacy experiences in the first two years of formal schooling in Malta to be explored.

In the following two subsections I present an overview of the literature concerning the longstanding debates on the teaching and learning of reading and writing in the early years.

2.4.5 Early reading debate.

The keystone of lifelong reading is placed in the early years (Sheldrick-Ross, McCechnie & Rothbauer, 2005). The best approaches or methods to teach reading and writing effectively have been long disputed globally (Adams, 1990; Chall 1967; Giles & Tunks, 2015; McGuinness, 2005; Wren, 2001). Moreover, the generated debate on literacy and how and when reading should be taught in the early years is endless, and does not yield a single clear-cut solution (Morrow, 2012; NCCA, 2012).

The first section of this literature review has shown how factors such as poverty, boys' and girls' brain development, as well as cultural and social backgrounds could influence young children's success in learning to read. This section will present a brief review of the literature surrounding the debate on the teaching of reading and what is currently viewed as effective evidence-based approaches to reading in the early years. The emphasis on the important skill in learning to read is to 'crack the code', and this sparks the debate on how this skill should be tackled in early years practice.

In a meanings-based approach to literacy learning, children are active constructors of their knowledge of print in purposeful reading and writing learning experiences and attention to letter-sound correspondences is given in context (Adams, 1990; Mason, Kerr, Sinha & McCormick, 1990; Stahl, 1992; Whitehead, 2010). Zeece, (2010) claimed that educators and all stakeholders in ECEC should make use of literature-rich interactions and strategies that help young readers develop print knowledge. The playful discoveries with books are often ignored in rigid curricula underpinned by more traditional literary approaches to reading (Harste et al., 1984). In Finland, a case study investigation with seven-year-olds concluded that students learned to read by constructing meaning in a purposeful environment through a meaning-based approach to reading instead of the former typically used drilling of synthetic phonic strategies (Korkeamaki & Dreher, 1996). This study emanated from a previous research study by Lehtonen (1993) with first and second graders, where teachers were concerned about the use of synthetic phonics and with young children' comments such as: "Teacher why did we do the lip movements and sound out like this 'miu, mau, mou'?" Such evidence questions existing emphasis on the implementation of phonic programmes in early years education under the widely held assumption that 'earlier is better' when fixing reading gaps is concerned.

Two recent publications - one in the US (NICHD, 2000) and another in the UK (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005) - viewed the teaching of phonics as the core in literacy learning, albeit no research had claimed that the absence of phonics instruction in early childhood could threaten future literacy attainment (Barnett, 1998). Several scholars also claimed that learners, including struggling readers, gain from explicit literacy instruction and this research also influenced policy and ways of teaching early literacy (Adams, Anderson & Durkin, 1984; Anderson & Scott, 1978; Blachman, 2000; Duffy, Rochler & Mason, 1984; Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983; Rosenshine, 1980; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson & Foorman, 2004; Solomon & Kendall, 1979; Winograd & Greenlee, 1986). Indeed, recent legislation continued to influence the teaching of reading around the world (Gamse, Bloom & Kemple, 2008) and the area of phonics (letter-sound correspondence) in reading development receives specific attention in the field of ECEC (Merchant, 2008).

An inclination towards phonemic awareness and phonetic instruction are rooted in a number of literacy programmes for young children (Hall, 2013).

Heilman (2005), claimed that the teaching of phonics is based on the principle that letters represent the speech sounds heard in words. An analytic approach to phonics instruction refers to the examination of the whole word and then by segment while a synthetic approach refers to the combination of words or letters and letter sounds (Merchant, 2008; Shaw & Davidson, 2009). A recent research study has confirmed that the long-term effect of a synthetic phonics approach in English, is more effective on boys than the analytic phonics method, and therefore suggests an early start to the teaching of synthetic phonics (Johnston, McGeown & Watson, 2011). It has been challenged that young children who learn letter sounds before they learn letter names show sustained improvement in reading (Jolly, 2008). In the same vein, Campbell, Torr and Cologon (2012) emphasized that phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency are crucial in the practice of learning to read, and Herold (2011) indicated the significance of systematically teaching the development of these skills. Campbell (2015) asserted that the use of 'Jolly Phonics' programme results in effective strategies for learning to read. The same programme was found to be successful with children from low socioeconomic backgrounds in mixed ability classes (Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012). As stated in the *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (Department of Education Science and Training [DEST], 2005) report, "direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read" (p. 11). Simultaneously, in England, the Rose Review report vis-à-vis the teaching of reading (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006) concluded that the teaching of synthetic phonics offered "the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers" (DfES, 2006, p. 19). Nonetheless, several literacy professionals criticised the teaching of reading through synthetic phonics (Walsh, et al., 2011; Wyes & Styles, 2007). These differing views of reading teaching were referred to as the 'reading wars' (Stanovich & Stanovich, 1999).

Other scholars pertain that phonetic instruction is more successful when it is integrated and contextualised within language arts (using of visual, verbal and written expression) to facilitate the engagement of children in their learning rather

than being taught separately (Lu, 2010; Merchant, 2008; Vernon-Fergans et al., 2012). Whitehead, (2010) argued that:

> Teaching the single sounds of letters as isolated decoding tricks does not work… However, recent curriculum legislation in England is not in agreement with this eclectic approach and early years practitioners are required to teach synthetic phonics and adopt the 'simple' view of reading.
> (p. 139)

In light of this argument, Jeynes (2006) reported that early childhood educators feel pressured to focus on isolated skill instruction and excessive drill even though Developmentally Appropriate Practice [DAP] is widely recognised as the best and most meaningful practice to teach reading in ECEC (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). In view of such practice, Marsh (Marsh &Vasquez, 2012) argues that emphasis on DAP, which is dominant in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001), does not meet the unique needs of all children if the curriculum constructed is underpinned by the notion of steps and stages. The use of workbooks, worksheets and rote drills during phonics instruction promotes the notion of 'ages and stages' to teach the identification of sounds and words to all children at the same time and in the same way, increasing the likelihood of producing a negative impact on their motivation and involvement in literacy instruction (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Turner, 1997; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman & Owocki, 2005). Mason (1986) claimed that there are many engaging ways for all children to understand words and numbers other than worksheets. Several phonics programmes and related textbooks tend to form part of early childhood practice as a solitary programme for literacy development that lack differentiation and dominates daily teaching of literacy skills from teacher to student in some classrooms (Siaulys, 2013). It can be argued that the teaching of phonics in repeated sequential steps in the early years might be jeopardizing the philosophical principles of a more child-centred, project-based approach (Malaguzzi, 1993) to early learning and the broader view of literacy as social practice.

The question of how to introduce phonics teaching in the early years might still confuse educators, especially in contexts similar to Malta where both Maltese and English lessons are introduced at the age of five. The Finnish curriculum for

students who are experiencing English as an additional language [EAL] recommends that up to the age of eight, it would best for EAL students to focus on comprehension and practising oral communication integrated through a thematic approach based on the children's interests and meaningful language experiences, and reading to support listening and speaking skills (NCCA, 2012). Such evidence inspired my interest to explore the impact of existing reading approaches on boys during Maltese and English lessons in early primary classrooms.

Early-targeted reading intervention programmes can be used to identify young children whose literacy skills are less advanced than their peers, and provide them with an individualised instructional modification with the likelihood of classroom withdrawal as another way to learn how to read (Duke, 2001). Recent research shows that pull-out reading programmes work well with those who tend to be poor in their reading and writing skills during their early primary grades (Scanlon, Vellutino, Small, Fanuele & Sweeney, 2005; Torgesen et al., 2001; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson & Hickman, 2003). Nonetheless, Clay (1987) stated, that it may be the case where children identified as 'learning-disabled' in their reading skills are not necessarily so because there is something wrong developmentally, but because those children's early instruction was not responsive to the way they learn. Indeed, Clay (1987) recommends that 'Learning Disabled' [LD] considerations should be delayed until the child has been given the instruction that meet their needs and time needed to overcome their respective early difficulties. Lyon, Fletcher, Fuchs and Chhabra, (2006) estimated that, high-quality class literacy instruction alone can enhance the reading and writing skills of young children and reduce the percentage of children who need one-to-one intervention. This view is supported by Alloway et al. (2002), as their findings showed that the implementation of effective balanced literacy instruction lowered the number of boys and girls that might have needed literacy intervention in the following year. Such claims put into question the efficacy of school strategies that focus solely on early reading intervention as the primary solution to narrow gender gaps and raise levels of literacy achievements.

Lomeo-Smrtic (2008) argued that ignoring best practices, teaching everyone in the same way, and rushing children to acquire their literacy skills is more likely to create future gaps where children can stumble and consequently be

left behind. Recent research questions the promotion of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and a 'one-phonics-programme-approach' in the early years (Altwerger, 2005; Meyer, 2002). Phonics teaching is just a means to an end and not the end of teaching reading successfully itself (Adams, 1990). Whitehead (2010) defined the phonics instruction approach in the early years as follows: "this unimaginative approach forces all young children, regardless of their individual literacy skills and experiences, to go through the phonics sausage machine" (p. 141). In addition, the author concluded that most critics of 'synthetic phonics only' concur that the people who succeed most within such an approach are the publishers of phonics programmes and textbooks.

Controversial issues, especially bound to the teaching of reading, are still evident to date and it seems that these disputes never cease to influence policy and instructional practices (Giles & Tunks, 2015). Moreover, several studies show how the identities of reading teachers are influenced by high stakes testing (Assaf, 2008; Dooley, 2005) in performativity cultures (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006; Troman 2008) and also how teachers' notions of reading identities limit children's identities as readers (Hall et al., 2010). One question that needs to be asked, however, is how teachers' professional identities, and reading teaching are impacting on boys' literacy learning experiences in Maltese early primary classrooms.

2.4.6 Early writing debate.

The art of writing is crucial for academic success and accomplishment outside school (Beam & Williams, 2015). Yet, it has been recently reported that many children are experiencing a lack of writing enjoyment (Clark & Teravainen, 2017). Early childhood practice must determine the understanding that writing is an act of communication and conveys meaningful and enjoyable messages in different ways (Browne, 2008). Practice that is based on emergent literacy theory is essential as it allows young children to understand the alphabetical system while playing indoors and outdoors, watching others write and autonomously write themselves symbols and patterns to pass on what they want to communicate (Browne, 2008; Teale, 1986). Several scholars emphasize the significance of mark making and drawings that precede conventional writing considering their connections with early representational thinking and intangible emotions

(Browne, 2008; Deguara & Nutbrown, 2018; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Hall & Robinson, 2003; Kress, 1997, 2000; Nutbrown, 2006b).

Valuing child-initiated mark making and drawings in the early years of education could enhance children's communication and literacy achievements in future years (Ahn, 2006; Wright, 2010). However, these are often undervalued in the early years when educators and parents are more interested in transcriptional skills which form letters and numbers in children's drawings (Whitehead, 2010). Schooled literacy practices that fail to recognise the importance of emergent writing will end up with young children performing decontextualised tasks such as copying without authentic purpose (Cigman, 2014; Nutbrown, 2006b). However, play is considered to be the medium that allows space for emergent writing, opportunities to explore writing independently, and with adult scaffolding, varied possibilities to extend writing meaningful practice for various purposes (Browne, 2008; Hall & Robinson, 2003; Nutbrown, 2006b).

A recent study by two Canadian cognitive psychologists Gene Ouellette and Monique Sénéchal found that invented spelling was key to reading success (Feldgus, Cardonick, & Gentry, 2017), and more effective than phonemic awareness instruction or alphabet instruction alone. Cigman (2014) witnessed a group of six-year-old boys in a Finnish kindergarten intently engaged at a writing table and concluded that the reasons they enjoyed it was because they were not forced to do it. Interestingly, the Finnish kindergarten stage lasts from three to seven years with no testing to distract educators from valuing the role of play in early childhood, and Finland has the top literacy results and minimal gender gap in achievement in Europe (Cigman, 2014). Conversely, writing may be portrayed as 'handwriting' and 'calligraphy' of unproductive correct copying rather than a form of thinking and communicating, increasing the risk of an excessive focus on transcriptional skills within classroom contexts that may harm young children's learning dispositions to write (Browne, 2008). Featherstone and Featherstone (2008) argued that professional educators need to be aware that children may learn more about reading and writing through the authentic messages signs and labels in their environment rather than controlled letters and words in core text books with no purpose. Scholarly evidence keeps showing us that a sense of confusion and misunderstanding among young children is major, especially upon entry into formal schooling leading to a detrimental effect on early literacy

learning (Brooker, 2002; Drury, 2007; Gregory, 2008). Such findings further justify my choice of conducting my fieldwork in the first year of compulsory schooling in three Maltese state schools.

It was recently reported that children's shared writing time with classmates was enriched through technology mediated writing instruction (Beam & Williams, 2015). Moreover, recent research also revealed that, when children engage in daily outside class writing, this is mostly dominated by technology-based formats (Clark, 2016). Story making apps were also identified as a tool that enhanced children's creativity in writing (Kucirkova & Sakr, 2015). Such evidence-based approaches to the teaching of writing give rise to implications on compartmentalised teaching and inflexible timetables in schools (Loerts & Heydon, 2017) that might constrain the possibility for children to experience serious involvement in writing and thus made me question: how are linguistically and culturally diverse young male learners in a Maltese context experiencing writing?

Following two disputable discussions on the teaching of reading and writing in the early years the literature showed that both aspects are underpinned by opposite philosophical paradigms, positivist and constructionist. It is a widely held view that a combination of both philosophies is the most effective, holistic way to help all students become skilled readers and writers through components that are research based (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998; Hoffman et al., 1998; NCCA, 2012; Pressley et al., 2001; Pressley 2006; Scully & Roberts, 2002; Siaulys, 2013; Wren, 2001). Similarly, Davis (2013) writes that a singular methodology or philosophy cannot be the key to an effective approach that reaches all children who are of different gender, have different abilities and different learning styles. Within the local concern on 'boys' underachievement' in literacy attainment combined with the never-ending wars on the best way to teach reading and writing, the big question remains: how are young boys doing during reading and writing practices in Maltese state schools, and most importantly, what can we learn from what they have to say about their own experiences?

2.4.7 Balanced literacy: In search for the right balance.

A popular concern in the teaching of literacy is grounded in the extent to which the teaching can be 'deliberate' keeping in mind two extremes of the

teaching spectrum: systematic and planned instruction or the provision of opportunities where young children can construct literacy learning in a social context (Hannon, 2007, p. 207). In light of this concern, the policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b), introduced for the first time the term 'balanced literacy' as an innovative approach to teaching and learning literacy in Maltese and English languages and recommended its implementation from the earliest years.

Balanced literacy is a proposed curricular methodology aimed to integrate the various modalities of literacy instruction to allow children to work at their independent levels of reading and writing with adult support (MEDE, 2014b). A balanced literacy approach is made up of several components to provide individual, small group, whole group, and meaningful literacy activities that reach out to all learners in the early years and beyond (Mermelstein, 2006; Pressley, 2006; Tompkins, 2013). The policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b) identifies these components as read aloud; modelled writing; interactive writing; shared/guided/independent reading and writing; and word study; and explains that through the combined efforts of children, educators and parents/guardians it will result in a successful learning environment. Consequently, the recent introduction of this strategy raised further questions as to how young boys were experiencing reading and writing in the early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools.

According to Davis (2013), the impression of what a 'balanced literacy' programme is made of still puzzles pupils in the education system. Frey (2005) defined balanced literacy as follows: "a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievements are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments in which teachers use various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control" (p. 272). The balanced literacy approach is underpinned by the 'Gradual Release of Responsibility' framework where the responsibility shifts from the adult as a model, to a joint responsibility to independent practice as the child takes full responsibility of their own learning; this may take place over different periods of time (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This framework embraces a number of theories: Piaget (1952) (cognitive structures and schemata); Bandura, (1992), (retention and motivation); Wood et al. (1976) (scaffolded instruction); and Vygotsky (1978) (ZPD). A

number of researchers explain that the balanced literacy system encompasses an authentic integrated approach that honours diversity as it combines several areas of literacy knowledge to reinforce each other and promotes social interaction that supports diverse, active and constructive learners to learn successfully (Blair-Larsen &Williams, 1999; Davis, 2013; Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik, 1999; Pearson, 1999; Spiegel, 1998).

In all, a plethora of findings from the field of early literacy research showed that best practices highlighted the benefits of maintaining a 'balance' in the instructional approach of beginning reading and writing (Lomeo-Smritc, 2008; Davis, 2013; Palmer & Bayley, 2013; Pearson, 1999; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald & Mistretta, 1997; Pressley et al., 2001; Pressley & Rankin, 1994; Spiegel, 1998). For example, this is evident in the work of Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) and a group of first grade teachers who demonstrated an integration of multiple goals into single lessons that formed meaningful patterns of instruction and authentic literacy experiences; a high-levelled 'balance'. In contrast, reading and writing time replaced by frequent copying from the board and worksheets were observed in other classrooms where literacy teaching and learning was considered to be less effective (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998). This is exemplified by Pressley et al. (2001), whose study with first grade teachers clearly indicated that the most effective literacy instruction for six- to seven-year-olds was characterized by a balanced teaching of skills in a context that was meaningful, a blending of multiple instructional components, positive reinforcement and avoiding focusing on one particular theory (the phonics approach or the whole language approach). Furthermore, Lomeo-Smrtic (2008), suggested that a balanced literacy approach is not just best practice for the early years, but also the best practice for the upper elementary grades.

Many have documented the effectiveness of the components of balanced literacy in schools. For example, Braunger and Lewis (2006) recommended shared reading and read-alouds as these practices create an opportunity for young children to play with language and develop phonemic awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes, i.e. units of sounds in a language). Shared writing is a strategy that creates the reading-writing link between read-alouds and shared writing (Mermelstein, 2006). Fountas and Pinnell (2012) proposed that one strong instructional support to reach all learners at their individual levels is guided

reading. This strategy is renowned to effectively improve the fluency, comprehension and word recognition (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; NICHD, 2000). Moreover, a buddy shared reading system where children of an older age group read to children of a smaller age group promoted self-confidence and success (Froese, 1990; Levy, 2013; Pappas et al., 1999). In all, balanced literacy evidence-based strategies promote the weaving of meaningful early literacy learning through motivational, authentic reading materials and not through drilled and isolated skills (Davis, 2013; Tompkins, 2013; Mermelstein, 2006). Davis (2013) concluded that the theory and practice underpinning balanced literacy allows for collaborative and child-centred learning: situations in which young children learn best.

According to Hawley and Reichert, (2010) boys are relational learners and to show high levels of productivity they need to connect with the educator who provides for a positive and meaningful approach to learning. Spiegel (1998) defined balanced literacy as an approach where educators needs to make daily decisions followed by their choices about the most effective way to support each child in becoming a better reader and writer. Moreover, research shows that at classroom level, a balanced literacy approach endeavours to meet the intricate literacy learning needs and match the level of cognitive development of every single child (Davis, 2013; Siaulys, 2013). This evidence implies that a balanced literacy approach might be responsive to some learners who struggle to cope with one-size-fits-all schooled literacy pedagogy or display disheartenment towards reading and writing.

2.4.8 Boys' motivation and involvement in early literacy learning.

Research shows that young children's excitement, involvement and motivation for learning often reduces as they grow older, with less opportunity to learn naturally through exploration and fun (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Mulvey, 2010; Stevens, 2006). Mulvey (2010) stated that classroom practice was the reason for boys' underachievement in the education system which also resulted in anti-social behaviour. Several scholars refer to this decline as the 'fourth grade slump' (Brozo, 2005; Cummins, 2001; Reading Study Group [RAND], 2002). Research repeatedly shows that boys fall behind (Gunzelmann & Connell, 2004;

Newkirk, 2006; Young & Brozo, 2001) and engage less in reading and writing (Martino, 1995, 2001; Millard, 1997; Wilhelm & Smith, 2001).

In many countries, an increased attention to the bidirectional relationship between motivation and reading attainment is evident in both policy and practice (OECD, 2002, 2010). Motivation to read is fundamental to reading achievement (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000; Retelsdorf, Köller, & Möller, 2011; Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012; Wigfield, 2000) and if learners experience lack of reading motivation, reading improvement may decrease (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Glenn (2008) claimed that in general male readers are alliterate; choosing not to read despite having acquired the skill of reading. Boys' reading behaviour and attitudes towards reading may be a question of a number of factors (Moss, 1999, 2000). A recent research project in four low socio-economic English primary schools found that boys' engagement with reading for pleasure is not just a gender issue, but also influenced by pedagogical practices and "deficit perceptions of boys' 'ability' labels, social class and ethnicity" (Hempel-Jorgensen, Cremin, Harris & Chamberlain, 2017, p. 11). This evidence made me question existing literacy pedagogies in Maltese schools, and how these might be impacting on young boys' motivation, involvement and attitudes towards reading and writing today.

When young children experience the pleasures and joys of reading and writing, they are more likely to learn in meaningful ways and construct their knowledge of the world around them, while in high-pressured structured classrooms such valuable learning opportunities might be missed (Wien, 2004). Recent research revealed that some early childhood settings still adopt a system young children dread; with an overflow of drill, no forms of play, text books, decodable books, worksheets, rigid schedules and purposeless activities to promote the initial teaching of reading and writing (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). These texts tend to simplify the rich complexity of spoken and written language, lack in aesthetic quality, promote stereotypes and avoid the excitement of powerful issues ending up in demotivating young learners towards reading and writing (Blank, 2012; King & Gurian, 2006; Whitehead, 2010). Meyer (2002) documented the stress displayed by young children during lessons that they found monotonous. Such evidence raises concern about the

future literacy competence and success of young learners who experience similar teaching approaches.

As Tompkins (2013) suggested, the roots of language arts must be profound and strong enough to nurture lifelong motivated readers and writers - male and female. Early childhood educators also have an important role in stimulating children's aspiration to write, and this very much depends on young children's perceptions of writing. In Cigman's study (2014), the young boys were motivated and engaged in writing projects as educators supported their holistic development through learning environments that acknowledged their learning interests and styles and so all children gained. Laevers and Heylen (2003) claimed that such deep level learning happens through involvement and this "only occurs in the small area in which the activity matches the capabilities of the person, that is in the 'zone of proximal development'" (p. 15).

The literature in this section stimulated my interest to gain insight into the level of involvement of five- to six-year-old boys during their schooled reading and writing practices in Maltese schools. The next subsection will explore other research findings that revolve around the significance of engaging young children in literacy learning.

2.4.9 New literacies vs. traditional approaches to reading and writing.

The terms "new literacies" and "digital literacies" refer to the correlation between literacy and technologies and are used interchangeably, also throughout this thesis (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p. 3). Young children learn to be literate in today's world not only by learning to read and write in "offline spaces" but also with the ability to understand screens and make use of different media, such as mobile phones and computers in "online spaces" (Marsh, 2016, p. 369, see also Bearne, 2003; Bonello, 2010; Carrington, 2005; Common Sense Media, 2011; Dunn & Sweeney, 2018; Kress, 2003; Labbo & Reinking, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Marsh, 2004, 2005a, 2005b,; Marsh & Hallett, 2008; Marsh et al., 2005; Neumann & Neumann, 2017; Twining et al., 2017). The global introduction of media requires young children to use and interpret a wide-ranging repertoire of representational modes and capacity to negotiate with different forms of literacy to function well in society (Aldhafeeri, Palaiologou & Folorunsho, 2016; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Marsh et al., 2005).

These "emerging digital literacy" practices (Marsh, Hannon, Lewis & Ritchie, 2017, p. 59) are developed and assembled under the pluralistic and broad term 'multimodal literacies' which incorporate all the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children develop to express meaning through printed, visual, spoken and digital 'literacies', including developing their competence with new technologies (Flewitt, 2008; Levy & Sinclair, 2017). Marginalized learners reap benefits when school literacy and multimodal literacies synchronise within literacy pedagogy (Siegel, 2006; Millard, 2003). In conjunction, Darmanin (2017) argued that "it would be futile for Maltese classrooms to be equipped with the latest digital technologies if their affordances were not fully realised" (p. 244). This has vast implications for today's schooling systems.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory described the influence of the environment on early literacy experiences. Despite the need to equip learners with sufficient skills and knowledge to enter the workforce in technologically driven globalized societies, the acquisition of print reading skill and the written mode of communciation in schools is still prioritised over other forms of reading and writing (Anning 2003; Loerts & Heydon, 2017; Luke & Luke, 2001; Marsh, 2003; Pahl, 2002). Gregory and Williams (2000) described this "schooled literacy" as a "narrow" vision of literacy supported by government initiatives (p. 34). Indeed, several studies showed that many schools reject the diverse literacies young children experience at home (Ashton, 2005; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel & Searle, 1997; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Marsh and Millard (2000) found that children who experienced a mismatch between their schooled literacy and out-of-school literacy learning experiences were at a disadvantage, especially when curricula restricted reading to particular texts. Such evidence conveys a challenge for several stakeholders working in the field of ECEC.

Certainly, recent research showed that new literacy studies challenge the narrowness of phonics instruction and other traditional approaches to reading and writing in the early years (Buckingham, 2004; Gillen, 2009; Marsh, 2011; Marsh et al., 2005; Marsh, 2014; Merchant, 2009). Whitehead (2010) noted some differences between existing phonics instruction practice in the early years and the new literacies young children are immersed in their homes and communities:

> New literacies are more visual, multilayered (visual, aural, mobile), requiring fine muscle control and activities that can be shared with others. In sharp contrast synthetic phonics training is 'slower' and follows a 'linear build-up'.
> (p. 148)

Print-based literacy has been the basis of school learning for centuries, and evidence shows that the concern with 'boys' underachievement' tends to redirect the focus on 'basic' literacy teaching to address the issue (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Simmons, 2001). For example, the 'pedagogy of poverty' (coined by Haberman, 1991, 2010) in low socio-economic school contexts and Bernstein's (2000) conceptualisation of 'performative pedagogy' (which prevails since the late 1980s) simultaneously require teachers to transmit knowledge to children and place emphasis on the testing of 'basic skills' in literacy and numeracy to raise test scores (Lingard, 2007). Conversely, Craft (2011) integrates children's digital lives with the PT theoretical framework and distinguishes four dispositions for learning in the digital age fitting into the following four dimensions (4Ps): pluralities (of identities), possibilities (active engagement, accessibility), playfulness (of engagement, the exploratory drive) and participation (democracy, dialogic voice). These 4Ps are positioned in the middle of a continuum that has performative pedagogy at one end and creative pedagogy on the other and all dimensions evenly hold at heart the 'little c creativity' (Craft, 2001b), defined as the key feature of everyday creativity, that also recognises the aspect of digital media. The work of Kucirkova, Littleton and Cremin (2017), showed how the 4Ps were developed to present reading for pleasure engagement through six key facets that distinctively illustrate young children's engagement with digital books.

Moreover, recent research pointed out the value of amalgamating children's cultural interests in the curriculum (Bonello, 2010; Dyson, 1997, 2002; Marsh, 2005a; Marsh & Millard, 2005; Marsh et al., 2005). Mangion (2012) found that young Maltese boys were more engaged during literacy activities that related to their popular cultural interests than other traditional modes. As Kress (2003) claimed literacy cannot be looked at in isolation any longer as writing is dominated by the "image" and books are dominated by "screens" (p. 1) and these have become the preferred modes of communication for young children and for many in today's world. This rapid growth of a global technological landscape has

created a change in contemporary childhoods (Burnett, 2010; Facer, 2011; Marsh, 2006; Wohlwend, 2010, 2011; Marsh, 2016). Reading on screens is not about reading from top to bottom anymore, and today's ability to write includes controlling a mouse and making use of a keyboard (Flewitt, 2008). It can be argued that a lack of understanding of literacy as a more complex social practice emanates from diverse assumptions underpinned by different theoretical perspectives on what early literacy learning and teaching at school should look like. This has implications for how the existing literacy gender gap might be addressed, and for the teaching of reading and writing today and how this is impacting on young children's experiences of early literacy.

From a posthumanist and emancipatory lens, the argument in this second section of my literature review stemmed from a search for inspirational and evidence-based early literacy practices that might challenge the notion of 'underachieving boys' and that nurture a culture where all young boys and girls can be viewed equally as readers and writers and allowed to reach their full potential. Subsequently, it set out to expand the knowledge and understanding of how young children become literate in ways that are equitable and respect their diverse development, prior knowledge and backgrounds at this early stage. It is also argued that pedagogical approaches in the early years are a step forward in addressing the core of the early literacy learning needs of all children respectively. As this literature review finds traditional and 'one-size-fits-all' (Spiegel, 1998) teaching methods and the pushdown approach to academics in early years education (Gropper et al., 2011) might fail to engage some young male learners in literacy learning (Mulvey, 2010). However, it is also argued that debates over the single best way to teach reading and writing in the early years is a never-ending controversy.

2.5 School Readiness and Literacy

Literacy is an area of study that continues to generate new research findings and inspiring theories. Perspectives and practices on reading and writing in early years education have been critically discussed in the previous section. This section deals with the *when* literacy should be taught, taking account of the theoretical tensions underpinning early literacy learning discussed in the former section and considering popular assumptions and discourses, such as when young

children should be ready to read and write, and when educators should start teaching reading and writing in the early years. Consequently, the review of the literature in this section will attempt to scrutinise further the contemporary issues rooted in the understanding of the notion of 'school readiness' and how the interpretations of its meaning might be influencing some boys, literacy education, pedagogical approaches and political decision-making on educational structures. These will be examined through three main claims embedded within the literature reviewed:

- Perceptions of school readiness, boys and early literacy learning
- The school readiness and early literacy learning link
- School readiness, school starting age, gender and literacy

2.5.1 Perceptions of school readiness, boys and early literacy learning.

School readiness is a concept that is frequently linked to early childhood policy and practice (Iorio, 2015). Beginning to learn how to read and write and the phrase 'getting ready to start school' are often closely associated with the term 'school readiness' and consequently this gives rise to standards for preschoolers in an attempt to address this issue by charting what children should be able to do before they start formal schooling (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Such evidence is linked to personal experiences, and explains my interest to further unpack the concept of school readiness and literacy in relation to the boys' and literacy debate within the context of my study.

Janus and Duku (2007) found that one of the strongest predictors from the five factors used in an assessment of school readiness was the gender of the child; boys were twice as likely to struggle with school readiness compared to girls. Moreover, Patrianakos-Hoobler, Msall, Marks, Huo and Schreiber (2009) discovered that boys who were born prematurely were twice as likely as girls to exhibit lower levels of school readiness. Research has also shown that academic disparities between boys and girls are evident as from kindergarten level (Entwinsle & Alexander, 1993; Lewit & Schuurmann-Baker, 1995). Within the context of the latter three studies 'school readiness' was defined as what young children are expected to know prior to formal schooling. Conversely, 'school readiness' in the universal sense is associated with future optimistic behavioural

and social competencies comprising academic performance and equity in primary and secondary levels of education (Britto, 2012). It is therefore imperative to note, as will be reviewed from the literature in this section, that different stakeholders in different contexts and cultures hold various conceptions about the meaning of 'school readiness' (Kagan, 1992; Linder, Ramey & Zambak, 2013) and this may impact the varied approaches to early literacy and particularly to the teaching of reading and writing.

As many have argued, humans are born ready to learn (Kagan, 1999; May & Campbell, 1981), yet debate continues on what it means for a child to be ready for school (Britto, 2012; Graue, 2006; Meisels, 1999). The definition of 'school readiness' is presently underpinned by highly contrasting views in the literature, as this section will demonstrate. Meisels (1999) and other scholars (Allen, 2001; Graue, 1993; Graue, 2006) define 'school readiness' under four major conceptualisations: "idealist/nativist", "empiricist/environmentalist", "social constructivist" and "interactionist", which will now be discussed briefly.

The *'idealist/nativist'* view portrays children as being ready for school when their level of development is ready thus eliminating the role of environment in enhancing a child's readiness. Such conceptualisations may encourage adults to delay school entry because they think that their children are not ready as in a study by Brent, May and Kundert (1996), where more than 16 percent of kindergarteners started school at a later stage than their peers. The majority of these children were boys and children from the youngest group.

The *'empiricist/environmentalist'* view of readiness is mostly determined by what children know (such as alphabet, colours, and shapes) followed by their behaviour - including an ability to sit still. Readiness here focuses on adults around the child and school programmes preparing "unready" children to succeed at school through their provision of experiences which will enhance knowledge and skills (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p. 338).

A *'social constructivist'* (Vygotsky, 1978) perspective sees school readiness in social and cultural terms, with the focus not on the child but more on the context in which the child operates; this depicts a child to be ready for one family or community and not the other.

The *'interactionist'* perspective, is on the child, the environment and the ongoing interaction between them to help all children nurture their positive

dispositions to learn. This perspective portrays children as being ready to learn and supports the importance of early experiences and relationships between the school and the child (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). In light of this perspective, High (2008) contends that it is the responsibility of all schools to work with families, be flexible and provide an environment ready for all children in their varying stages of school readiness to ensure seamless transitions in the Early Years. This view is also supported by several early childhood advocates, organisations and researchers (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years [PACEY], 2013; Shaul & Schwartz, 2014; UNICEF, 2010). Extensive research has implied that there is a strong link between school readiness and school completion, learning, future academic and non-academic success (Arnold, 2004; Jaramillo & Tietjen, 2001; Kagicibasi, Sunar & Beckman, 2001; Reynolds, 2000). Going back to the evidence on the gender gap in literacy attainment in the context of this study, such information raises the question as to whether all boys are starting school with the cognitive and social skills desired to succeed in school; whether Maltese schools are well equipped to address individual needs and the readiness of families and communities to support all children, including young boys, in their literacy experiences and transitions to school.

The four perceptions outlined above show that there remains a lack of agreement in the way school readiness in early years education is perceived. The importance of early years education was given due credit to ensure children's readiness for schools (National Education Goals Panel, 1995). During this interaction it is important that the child, families and schools work together considering the fact that school readiness is a time of transition (UNICEF, 2010). Within the concept of school readiness, 'transition' is defined as young children changing their learning environment, families getting acquainted to working together with educational institutions and schools providing for the diverse needs of children it caters for (Britto, 2012). Bronfenbrenner (1979) pointed out that children, schools and families need to be viewed under a larger ecological system while conceptualising school readiness since this has major implications. It is important that stakeholders view schools, families, and children as surrounded by the social, cultural and historical context (Rogoff, 2003).

2.5.2 The school readiness and early literacy learning link.

An emphasis on testing and academically oriented schools has replaced the importance on the development of the child (Linder et al., 2013). Indeed, literature shows that most parents think that for children to be ready for school they need to place emphasis on pre-academic skills and knowledge (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk, 2000; Harradine & Clifford, 1996). Iorio (2015) called for the break-up of a constructed "ridiculous readiness chain", "pushed up" from ECEC to adulthood that focuses on the outcome of producing employees instead of self-actualization and happiness (p. 1). The author contends that it is often claimed that children are not 'ready' for school; students are not 'ready' for work, as readiness here is perceived as an outcome that can be measured. However, the problem is that the skills for the modernised world of work out there cannot be measured; such as for example, being creative and critical. In relation to early literacy (Iorio, 2015) argued that the 'readiness' perception funnels down to ECEC and views early literacy as "a list of academic skills like identifying rhyming words and the alphabet" (p. 1).

As discussed earlier, similar views of school readiness are underpinned by empiricist views. Harry (1992) concluded that such conceptions derive from families' cultural and ethnic values and these might be different from the perceptions of stakeholders at school. On the other hand, further evidence showed that teachers in primary schools tend to give more importance to aspects of social and emotional development (Dockett & Perry, 2003). Although teachers tend to give less importance to academic skills, other studies revealed how teachers were in favour of parents being involved in reading and numeracy activities at home so that young children will be better prepared for school (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; Powell, 1995). The different emphasis on what it means to be ready for school urges the need to understand the concept more broadly.

Britto (2012) largely defined the school readiness paradigm in three dynamics: ready children; ready schools; and ready families. A ready child has the foundation skills and knowledge in a range of domains that allow for eagerness to learn upon school entry, and experiencing successful transitions to primary school learning environments (Lara-Cinisomo, Pebley, Vaiana & Maggio, 2004; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn & Mclanahan, 2005). This depicts a broader conception of school readiness, one that encompasses broad outcomes, including

physical well-being; approaches to learning; language; social and emotional and cognitive development as similarly stipulated in the Maltese NCF (MEDE, 2012). Motivation and attitudes towards learning such as perseverance, attention, and curiosity are considered to be key for readiness that perceives children's development and learning in a holistic way (Denton & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Bowman, Donovan and Burns (2001) claimed that school readiness skills are achieved from mastery of former behaviours and learned skills; for example, a child requires spoken language acquisition before learning to read and write.

Moreover, schools are defined as 'ready' when they support smooth transitions for families and their children (Lombardi, 1992; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Lastly, families' readiness for schools starts from birth and continues by being supportive and creating stimulating home learning environments (Bradley & Corwan, 2005). Parenting attitudes, knowledge and practices are strong predictors of 'ready families'. Lack of knowledge may lead parents to firmly believe that what their child should be able to do before school entry should be narrowed down to counting and alphabet or phonics instruction, and this may automatically influence the way children experience literacy in diverse home cultures that each individual child brings to school (Alexander, Entwisle & Bedinger, 1994). On the other hand, research shows that families who are responsive to their children during their early years promote a wide range of vocabulary, and better cognitive and social skills for learning (Eshel, Daelmans, de Mello & Martines, 2006). These are implications that may influence children's success so they certainly need to be understood within a socio-economic and cultural context.

The evidence in this section revealed a strong link between perceptions of school readiness and literacy learning, and that this is also influenced by sharp transitions and the age children start formal schooling in different countries and the pedagogical approaches they encounter. This further justifies my interest in creating new understandings on young boys' reading and writing experiences, particularly at the stage when they were experiencing the crucial transition to compulsory schooling in Maltese state schools.

2.5.3 School readiness, school starting age, gender and literacy.

For the purposes of this study, a brief history of school starting age is presented to better understand the reasons why formal and compulsory schooling starts at the age of five in Malta, and how this links with perceptions of school readiness and literacy pedagogies in early years. To date, many developed countries have a school starting age of seven, and place their emphasis on the well-being and the holistic development of children rather than the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (Dee & Sievertsen, 2015; Palmer, 2016). Politicians, rather than experts in ECEC, chose the age at which children start formal schooling (Palmer, 2016). In 1946, the Maltese education system was made compulsory in response to a high number of children absent from schools during World Wars One and Two (Zammit Mangion, 1992). In 1988, the age at which education became compulsory in Malta was lowered to five, paving the way for an earlier formal start to education (Zammit Mangion, 1992). Four nations of the United Kingdom and a selection of its ex-colonies and protectorates make up the 12 per cent of countries with a compulsory school starting age of five (Baldacchino & Baldacchino, 2017; Palmer, 2016). Malta was part of the British Empire for over 150 years, so it is not surprising that the present education system has some British connotations.

Several scholars concur that transition to formal schooling is a major challenge for early childhood (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014; Peters, 2010). Inopportunely, not all children experience a successful and positive start to school during this period of transformation (Margetts, 2007) and this leaves an impact on the learning and development in both short- and long-term academic achievements (Palmer, 2016; Sayers et al., 2012). In the same vein, several scholars claimed that the need to start formal schooling earlier is harming young children's attitudes towards schooling, particularly boys and those children from deprived backgrounds (Palmer, 2016; Gropper et al., 2011; Whitmire, 2010). Similarly, other scholars reported that highly educated parents were more likely to delay the start of schooling for their children, particularly if the child was a boy (Brent et al., 1996; Shephard & Smith, 1986).

Correspondingly, in Denmark one in ten girls and one in five boys experience a delayed start to schooling (Dee & Stievertsen, 2015). Academic 'redshirting' is common amongst US parents; a popular decision taken to delay

school starting age as a developmental advantage for their children; similar to Denmark, 'redshirting' is particularly common for boys and socioeconomically advantaged families (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Further, Elder and Lubotsky (2009) found that a delay in school starting age decreases the likelihood that children are diagnosed with ADHD between kindergarten and fifth grade. Literature in developmental psychology claim that children who start school at a later age benefit from a prolonged period of informal, play-based approach to learning that matches their language and literacy development and their capacity for 'self-regulation' when dealing with their emotional and cognitive situations at a young age (Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2011).

Conversely, Norwegian research has shown that delayed school starting age implied minimal negative effects on an IQ test at age 18 (Black, Devereux & Salvanes, 2011), with delayed school starting age linked to a reduction in males referred with mental health problems. Fredriksson and Öckert, (2013) found that raising the school starting age in Sweden slightly increased the possibility of successful educational achievement but did not affect future lifetime incomes. Findings from a more recent study in Denmark (where children begin school the year they turn six) disclosed that a one-year delay in the start of schooling leading to an extension of a play-based approach dramatically improved self-regulation, reduced inattention/hyperactivity at age seven, and found that self-regulation issues persisted at age 11 (Dee & Sievertsen, 2015). The presented findings in this section concur with the literature in developmental psychology that supports the extended exposure to play which promotes broader developmental gains in educational policies that delay the start of formal schooling (Dee & Sievertsen, 2015).

It can be contended that this situation is influenced by controversial perceptions of school readiness, and political decisions related to school starting age and the start of formal education. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there are those who advocate for inquiry-based, play-based pedagogy to make sure that young children are getting scaffolded language introduction, comprehension of vocabulary, hearing of the language, and the chance to explore how spoken language works prior to exposure to print. On the other hand, evidence referred to in this chapter also shows that a formal curriculum into the early years might be effective for some children in a classroom, but it might set the conditions for

some young children to fail if they don't have the language acquisition and cognitive development needed prior to entering the world of learning to read and write. This position within the gender and early literacy learning agenda has implications for young children's language and literacy acquisition, particularly to those who are exposed to two languages and formal approaches to literacy learning as from their earliest years. Undoubtedly, the literature reviewed in this section reaffirmed my contentions and augmented my interest to create new understandings on boys and early literacy learning in a Maltese context.

The literature in this third and last section of my literature review showed how the concept of 'school readiness' might be perceived in early years education, and its possible implications on how young children experience literacy learning. It is evident that contemporary issues of a cohesive understanding of 'school readiness' might promote the endurance of early literacy practices based on outdated traditional pedagogies (Britto, 2012). Young children's attitudes and dispositions towards learning, such as curiosity and perseverance, are important and these can only be promoted if schools and families look at children's preparedness for school not as a race but in a meaningful holistic way that meets their individual needs (Denton & Germino-Hausken, 2000). The summary of literature in this section reaffirmed Whitebread and Bingham's (2011) contention that whoever rushes young children into the formal learning of literacy to get them 'ready for school' must be misguided.

2.6 Chapter Conclusion

The literature review in this chapter synthesised contrasting theoretical perspectives and investigations related to the three key concepts at the core of this study: 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness'. The three concepts explored stimulated my interest to advance research in this field. This identified gap in literature helped me to create boundaries in my literature review.

This chapter set out by presenting the theoretical foundations that supported this thesis. Data achievement on the local and international gender gap in literacy has been examined, and several divergent explanations for boys' underachievement in literacy discussed to provide a background of the persisting issue that inspired me to challenge this phenomenon by gaining deeper insights

related to experience. In the second section, contrasting philosophical paradigms underpinning definitions of literacy, pedagogic discourses within policy development in the local early years context and early literacy pedagogy with particular focus on reading and writing have been critically reviewed and discussed. This body of literature also impacted on the choice of my research questions, methodology and methods as it urged a personal desperate need to listen to young boys' voices and document their experiences with reading and writing in Maltese schools. The following section of this literature review identified the link between conceptualisations of school readiness and early literacy learning. Once again a paradigm incompatibility underlying this concept emerged and evidence showed that this conflict has also influenced the teaching and learning of literacy in ECEC. The tensions in this last section of the literature helped me narrow down my focus and ultimately decide to involve all Years 1 and 2 (early primary) educators to acquire a snapshot of the bigger picture within Maltese state schools, as well as, delve deep in the reading and writing experiences of boys in three Year 1 classrooms since Year 1 is the first year of compulsory schooling in Malta.

It is clear that the overall works presented in this chapter are underpinned by theoretical tensions, conflicting interpretations and debates that attempt to conceptualise 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' with particular focus on how reading and writing is approached in the early years, and 'school readiness' in the educational agenda. Ultimately, the philosophical ties that underpin this literature as a whole had important implications on my epistemological position and the choice of my research design as will be discussed in the next chapter. Through the use of multiple methods my work identified a snapshot of how 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' are currently being conceptualised in a Maltese bilingual education context, and how this is influencing five- to six-year-old boys' attitudes and involvement in their daily reading and writing practices. Findings created new understandings from the merged perceptions that derived from several stakeholders' experiences including young boys' voices to ensure that boys in our society are being understood, and that all children are being provided with their right to equitable and quality literacy experiences in Maltese ECEC. Key findings of this thesis provide evidence on boys and early literacy learning from a new

dimension as a contribution to this field of study. In Chapter 3, I will also explain the methodological decisions, which were framed by the developed research questions that arose from the concepts presented in this literature review. In the following two chapters - 4 and 5 - I will report on the data produced by my study, and situate its analysis within the conceptual ground developed throughout this chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents and justifies my research methodology for this study. The literature offers various different definitions of methodology, and the concept of research methodology in my study takes up Clough and Nutbrown's (2002) observation: "one of the tasks for a methodology is to explain and justify the particular methods used in a given study" (p. 27). This chapter aims to do this by presenting a detailed discussion of the background, rationale and overall research process of my study.

Social enquiry begins with purpose, followed by specific research questions, enquiry designs and methods (Newman, Ridenour, Newman & DeMarco, 2003). This section begins with a concise overview of the research approach used in this study. It is followed by an explanation of how my theoretical perspectives helped me develop the research questions as well as a discussion of the most suitable conceptual framework that laid the foundations of my philosophical assumptions within my study. Finally, Chapter 3 concludes with an articulation of how the theoretical connections discussed throughout this chapter guided me in determining an explicit research design and decisions about fieldwork.

3.2 Overview of Methodology

The study begins with the general terrain and understanding of the relationship between the popular rhetoric on the phenomenon of boys' underachievement, and Maltese early primary teachers' beliefs and practices (Years 1 and 2) through an online questionnaire. Concurrently, this study will take the narrow path to investigate the techniques and methods used in three state schools, and how these impacted on the involvement in learning and attitudes of five- to six-year-old boys' reading and writing experiences (Year 1). Using a mixed methods phenomenological research [MMPR] approach, I sought to answer my research questions through an online questionnaire, observations and by giving voice to young boys, teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents of boys. Bringing the various lived experiences related to boys' reading and writing practices through several perspectives; including young boys' voices; and observations from the data together, findings from my study

created new understandings to ultimately answer the main research question. The following sections will break down this overview into different steps, and the rationale of the methodology for this study in further detail.

3.3 The Research Question and Subsidiary Questions

In this section I will present and discuss how my developed theoretical perspectives assisted me in narrowing down to my main research question and the three interconnected subsidiary questions. As briefly explained in the introductory chapter of this thesis, these questions were a central component that linked me to other components, including the choice of the methodological approach, in my research study:

Over-arching research question:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?

The following sub-questions have guided the design of my enquiry:

1. What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?

2. How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?

3. What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

The theoretical perspectives drawn out from the literature, and the research questions above contributed to the process of determining the boundaries of my thesis, and generated the conceptual framework which guided the development of my research design (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). In the following sections I will provide an in-depth account of the research process for this study.

3.4 Background and Rationale for Mixed Methods Phenomenological Research [MMPR]

Education is one of the domains in social science that is complex and requires multiple ways of knowing, strategies and tools to understand human practice (Greene, 2007). When the purpose of an inquiry is "complex (as it often is), it is necessary to have multiple questions and this frequently necessitates the use of mixed methods" (Newman et al., 2003, p. 169). Indeed, mixed methods research advocates comment that the main rationale for a mixed method approach is that no singular method in isolation would be sufficient enough to answer the research problem successfully (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006). In the same vein, Greene (2007) contends that "the overall broad purpose for mixing methods in social inquiry is to develop a better understanding of the phenomena being studied" (p. 98). Similarly, this study has more than one question to answer and the main purpose of the enquiry is to create new understandings on the key concepts under scrutiny.

Scholarly research has advanced and consequently shifted its focus to the inclusion of certain qualitative methods within a mixed methods research framework (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). One example is the mixed methods version in phenomenological research [MMPR], "that combines phenomenological methods with methods grounded in an alternative paradigm within a single study" (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Indeed, flexibility and adaptability are identified as the greatest strengths of phenomenological methodology (Garza, 2007). Therefore, this philosophical tradition can be modified to integrate mixed methods research even though it is not formally conceptualised (Mayoh & Onwegbuzie, 2015). Phenomenology is a human science approach that was conceptualised by Husserl in 1931. The philosophical research tradition of phenomenology is based in the work of philosophers who explored human experience as the departure point of philosophy (Todres & Holloway, 2006). The central theoretical point of view of phenomenology is to cultivate a better understanding of individuals' experiences through the perception of the experiencer (Curtis & Mays, 1978; English & English, 1985; Giorgi, 2009).

Similarly, in an attempt to unpack the concept of the complex phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' within Maltese early years education, my study

employed phenomenological methods with methods grounded in an alternative paradigm including an online questionnaire. The methods were used concurrently to create new understandings on how young boys experienced reading and writing through the perceptions of young boys and several stakeholders. I selected a mixed method design as a basis for MMPR (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) that allowed me to quantitatively appraise the degree to which selected popular constructs related to 'boys' underachievement' were related to participants' lived experiences with boys and literacy in Maltese state schools.

Quantitative data was also used to identify boys' involvement in learning during their reading and writing experiences, and to transform data from the open-ended questions in the online questionnaires to excel bar graphs for triangulation purposes. Simultaneously, the chosen design permitted the collection of qualitative feedback to garner in-depth participants' experiences with young boys and literacy, boys' experiences through their perspectives and also the witnessed scenarios of the young participants themselves during their schooled reading and writing practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Consequently, this justifies the reason why a MMPR (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) worked best in my study to allow me to interpret the human experience as lived by young boys and several stakeholders, and identify similarities with gathered quantitative data to get closer to reality and answer my research questions in the optimum possible way. Furthermore, as pointed out in similar research processes, the MMPR approach assisted my research with representing the complexity of the phenomenon being studied and provided a more in-depth analysis of qualitative data and analysis from multiple viewpoints (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

Another justification for mixing descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1931) with methods grounded in a postpositivist paradigm in a MMPR is to make a conscious effort to minimise my role as a researcher on the data by using 'scientific phenomenological reduction' (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 96). This means that the common features of an experience are identified in both sets of data, and merged to create deeper and more insightful understandings of the lived experience of young boys during their reading and writing practices. In the same vein, Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie (2015) further claimed that, "these similarities arguably provide a justification for combining descriptive

phenomenology with quantitative methods concurrently because the axiological parallels would allow for a single research goal to be identified" (p. 96).

According to Greene et al. (1989) there are five key motivations for mixing methods within a single study: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. Phenomenological reduction that underpins the component of descriptive phenomenological enquiry and postpositivist enquiry in my study further helps to justify triangulation purposes grounded in an attempt to increase the validity of data and minimise researchers' bias (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Finally, the methodology chosen for my study may contribute to the gap in knowledge identified by recent calls for researchers and methodologists to explore further the MMPR methodology (Johnson, McGowan & Turner, 2010; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

This section briefly set the background to explain how a phenomenological research method worked well as a component of a mixed method research approach in my study. The overall research process that included a MMPR model based on the principles of a convergent parallel design approach to mixed methods research designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) will be rigorously described in the next section.

3.5 My Scientific Approach

In this section, I use Crotty's (1998) framework to describe in further detail how my previous assumptions and theoretical perspectives drawn out from the review of the literature influenced my research process that provides a foundation for a MMPR. Crotty (1998) defines the research process in "four elements that inform one another" (p. 18). These basic elements include ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. All four elements informed the approach selected for this study (Figure 3.1). The following subsections will discuss how I synthesised the interdependent components of my theoretical and conceptual framework as the study progressed.

Ontology	• Positivism - Constructivism
Epistemology	• Pragmatism
Methodology	• Mixed Methods Phenomenological Research (MMPR) model based on the adoption of principles of a Convergent Parallel Design to Mixed Methods research
Multiple Methods	• Online questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and observations
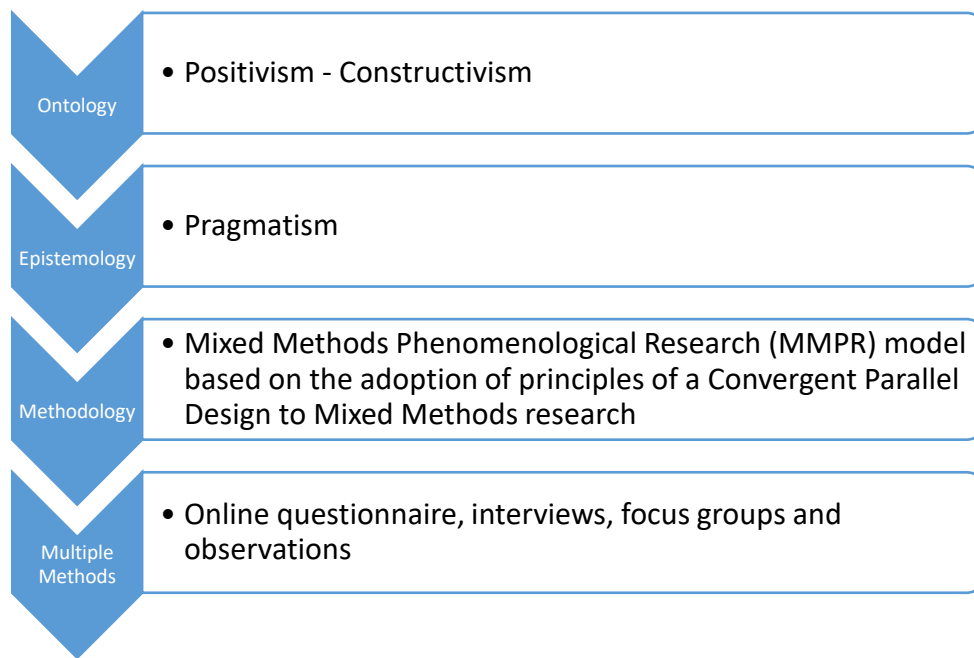
Figure 3.1. Illustration of the four basic elements of the research process of my study (model adapted from Crotty, 1998)

3.5.1 Ontology and epistemology: The middle position.

According to Morgan (2007b), "within science studies, the consensual set of beliefs and practices that guide a field is typically referred to as a 'paradigm'" (p. 49). A paradigm "takes a stance on the desirability and possibility of achieving objectivity in social inquiry, and offers a position on the nature of truth and on the character of reason and its efficaciousness" (Greene, 2007, p. 51). Incompatibilists argue that philosophical distinctions between positivist and interpretivist paradigms are abundant and that this makes their respective paradigms and methods impossible to mix in a single research study (Howe, 1988). Consequently, purists advocated their preferred paradigm as of higher importance for conducting research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzi, 2004). According to Johnson et al. (2010), paradigmatic differences can be negotiated through the use of multiple methods within a single predominant paradigm.

The philosophical foundation of pragmatism provides an overarching 'umbrella' paradigm to this study as it is more associated with a 'pluralistic' view and practicality; this version of paradigm uses the epistemological stance of making use of "what works" to address research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 41, 78, see also Greene, 2007; Kuhn, 1970; Morgan, 2007b). In

the same vein, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) describe pragmatism as a paradigm that offers "an immediate and useful middle position philosophically and methodologically" where the inquirer decides to "choose the combination or mixture of methods and procedures that works best" for answering the research question/s (p. 17). It is a widely held view within the arena of mixed methods research that paradigms do not always lead to particular research methods (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Indeed, in the case of this study, the MMPR design chosen, informed the selection of my philosophical assumption or "worldview" as defined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, p. 45).

Pragmatism is one of the alternative paradigms, an epistemological approach identified by various researchers as one of the best worldviews for mixed methods research designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2007; Howe, 1985, 1988, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). The focus within this paradigm is on the questions asked and the use of more than one method to answer the questions of a research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Green & Caracelli, 2003; Miller, 2006). This study rejects the historical dualisms and accepts the incorporation of both realistic and constructivist epistemologies, the interaction of values in inquiry, the relationship between the paradigm and practice.

Theoretically, the worldview element of ontology in pragmatism embraces single and multiple realities and as a pragmatist researcher, it also sets me free from forced selection between the theoretical perspectives of postpositivism and constructivism in my MMPR (Feilzer, 2010). Indeed, the philosophical tradition of pragmatism stands as a middle ground to longstanding philosophical dualisms (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As Robson (1993) claimed, researchers do not have to "be the prisoner of a particular research method or technique" (p. 291). This view is supported by Greene (2007) who states and provides evidence that an inquiry may be enriched by inviting multiple and diverse ways of knowing into the same study. These pluralistic philosophical stances are likely to create tension that might turn out the best potential of a mixed methods study, the notion of just mixing the methods within a given paradigm would be " a missed opportunity for fresh perspectives, new insights, ideas previously unimagined!" (Greene, 2007, p. 53).

The theoretical freedom in the ontological and epistemological stance I adopted within my MMPR study - underpinned by pragmatism and also influenced by posthumanism - proved vital in producing fresh knowledge and understandings without the restrictions of pure paradigms that could have silenced voices that supported me in achieving more comprehensive answers to my questions.

3.5.2 Methodology: Choosing a MMPR research model.

The purpose of this inquiry focuses on creating new understandings related to the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' in my context by using multiple methods to increase validity and minimise bias (Greene et al., 1989). It therefore made sound methodological sense to use an online questionnaire, interviews, observations and focus groups for the purposes of triangulation. A MMPR investigation was chosen as the methodology for this study as it matched with the way I needed to address the research problem and questions of this inquiry.

To answer the first question, this study will primarily set out the general terrain by trying to understand the relationship between rhetorical discourse and research on school-based issues related to boys, and literacy learning in early childhood, and Maltese early years teachers' beliefs and practices in Maltese state schools. Concurrently, the other questions related to the same facet of this phenomenon will be answered through an in-depth investigation on how five to six-year-old boys are experiencing reading and writing in three Maltese state schools. My MMPR study was consequently carried out by using survey methodology in combination with data from observations, focus groups and interviews to understand the boys' experiences better (Yin, 2006). As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the multiple methods used in this approach were chosen to ensure 'convergence' between the findings to create new and richer conceptualisations on boys and literacy in a Maltese context. For this reason, the nature of my MMPR fits perfectly with how Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) defined and recommended the most well-known of the six mixed methods design strategies, "The *convergent* parallel design" (p. 69). Indeed, one of the potential models for MMPR is based on a 'convergent parallel' approach to mixed methods

research designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) claimed that, "a persuasive and strong mixed methods design addresses the decisions of level of integration, priority, timing and mixing" (p. 68). These principles were duly considered and the decision points thought through. This procedure formed the foundation for my rationale of the chosen MMPR model based on the 'convergent parallel design' to mixed methods research that will be explained in further detail in Figure 3.2.

Creswell & Plano Clark: Four principles of 'convergent parallel design'	• **The way in which this principle is adopted in my study**
Level of interaction	• Data collection of the online questionnaire and the methods used to collect data from the three Maltese state schools were independent of each other
Priority	• Equal priority was given to all the methods used as they have an equally important role to address the research problem
Timing	• The different methods used were used in parallel though independently i.e., during a single phase of the study
Mixing	• For the purposes of this study, findings from the online questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and observations were merged during the final interpretation stage

Figure 3.2. The way in which the principle of the 'Convergent Parallel Design' is adopted in my study (adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)

As shown in Figure 3.2, the "convergent parallel design" refers to a design where the researcher collects and analyses a number of data sets in a single phase of the study and merges them during the stage of interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 77). This assisted me as the researcher to cross-validate, confirm and discuss my overall findings after phenomenological and complementary data were collected concurrently and analysed independently (Patton, McIlveen & Hoare, 2008; Winston, Dunbar, Read & Francis-Connolly, 2010). The latter affirms the reason why this study has adopted the all-encompassing worldview of pragmatism as the mixed methods design chosen to answer the research questions

does not require the need to shift from one worldview to another (for example from postpostivism to constructivism). Therefore, I have worked within a conceptual framework that supports me in the implementation of the research methods and ensures "that the resulting design is rigorous, persuasive, and of high quality" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 68). In addition, the chosen explicit model for MMPR based on the concurrent approach to mixed methods research design is feasible for this study when considering the complex nature of my topic; the various methods will allow me to use a different lens to capture the same phenomenon in this inquiry, and thus develop a better understanding pertinent to my context (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). Two sets of independent results will be briefly discussed independently and finally interpreted, synthesised and compared during the main discussion in the analysis, findings and discussion in Chapter 4. Research that adopted the process of MMPR model based on the concurrent approach proved to be of huge advantage in terms of holistic discussion and structure (Gupta, Paterson, Lysaght & von Zweck, 2012; Winston et al., 2010). Had I used qualitative measures exclusively to capture the lived experiences of boys' reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools, I would have missed important constructs and issues about this phenomenon in the context of this study.

Another reason for choosing the convergent design was the limited time span for data collection due to my full-time job. Collecting data in one phase sounded very efficient and applicable to my personal circumstances at the time. Moreover, the convergent design also made sense in my position since I found it to be easy to use and understand. Choosing this design as a basis for my MMPR methodological approach enabled me to assess the quality and meaningfulness of this phenomenon from teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and the young boys' perspectives on reading and writing practices using classroom observations, interviews and focus groups. On the other hand, the closed and open questions in the online questionnaire helped me to obtain a clearer picture of what other teachers working in early primary of Maltese state schools thought about this phenomenon in a school-based context to enrich the interpretation of my findings and minimise my bias as a researcher. According to Mathison (1998) the use of triangulation can lead to results which are partially consistent and Cook (2004) claims that if results are contradictory, then it would

be the case of an 'empirical puzzle' underpinned by unexpected and interesting insights.

Each of the approaches used has its strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, one approach could not have been enough to address the different research questions in this study. In other words, both methods have equal value to enable me to comprehend the research problem of this study better. As explained earlier, this design was planned to allow for the methodological triangulation of data by using a combination of different methods, such as questionnaires, observations and interviews and this "helps to balance out any of the potential weaknesses in each data collection method" (Gray, 2004, p. 33).

The 'convergent parallel design' was also chosen to get closer to reality and acquire a complete understanding of the topic in the context of a Maltese early years education. I considered the fact that the merging of both different strands of data is a challenge when implementing a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The findings from the chosen design were interpreted and synthesised and created new understandings that addressed the research questions in my enquiry and made a valid contribution to the fields of gender, literacy and early years research (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Moreover, the chosen MMPR model based on the 'convergent parallel design' allowed me to present a visual display to provide a more substantial picture of the merged findings at the end of Chapter 4 (Figure 4.17).

Howe (1988) suggested that one should move to whichever methods work best when conducting MMPR. The next section will illustrate how the methods chosen best answer my research questions, and how these took on quantitative, qualitative and mixed forms (Johnson & Turner, 2003), supporting the view that methods are not necessarily linked to paradigms (Johnson et al., 2010).

3.5.3 Methods: Procedure, design and collection.

The procedural framework of this study had a scheduled timeline of six months from October 2016 to March 2017; this included the pilot study and the main fieldwork. The chosen timing for the course of this study provided enough time and flexibility to use a rigorous research design (Creswell et al., 2003). Further details on the thoroughness of my research design will also be discussed in this chapter. Data collection and analysis for this study were planned in one

phase and divided into four steps to be contingent on children, class, school, and context schedules, as well as to fit in the time span I was allowed to be absent from my full-time job. The participants chosen for each method in this study are presented in Figure 3.3 followed by the procedural framework including the methods chosen in Table 3.1.

Online questionnaire: All state school classroom and literacy teachers working in the early primary years - Years 1 & 2

Observations: Three groups of five- to six-year-old boys in three Year 1 classrooms

Interviews: Three Heads of School; three Heads of Department (Literacy); and three Year 1 teachers

Focus groups: Three parents' (of boys) focus groups; three boys' focus groups (five- to six-year-olds)

Figure 3.3. Methods and participants

Procedural Framework in Implementing a MMPR based on the principles of a Convergent Design to mixed methods research (adopted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)	
Step 1a Design of online questionnaire which included both open and closed questions to answer the research question:	Step 1b Design of the interviews, focus groups and classroom observations to answer the research questions:
What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?	How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices? What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?
Methodology and Participants: Online questionnaire The questionnaire was sent to literacy and classroom teachers who work in co-educational Maltese early primary state schools (i.e., teachers working with five- to seven-year olds: classroom teachers, literacy support teachers, complementary teachers)	Methodology and Participants: Three co-educational state schools in Malta Observations in three Year 1 classroom (five- to six-year-olds) in three state schools situated in different geographical regions in Malta focussing on: literacy pedagogy used to promote reading and writing during Maltese and English lessons and the involvement of young boys in learning during these practices (using the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning – Table 3.2). Interviews with three Year 1 teachers, three Heads of Department (Literacy), and three Heads of School from the three schools concerned. Three focus groups with five- to six-year-old boys; one group from each school. Three focus groups with parents of boys; one group from each school.
Collection of the online questionnaire data (collected concurrently with step 1b): Ethical procedures – obtained permission to carry out study from: The University of Sheffield and the state school sector.	Collection of the data from each school (collected concurrently with step 1a): Ethical procedure – obtained permission to carry out study from: The University of Sheffield and the state school sector in Malta.
Tools 'Google forms' online tool used for dissemination of questionnaire; it consisted of nine closed questions and three open-ended questions (Appendix F).	Tools Audio recorder, field notes in the form of a prepared observation schedule, tablet device and the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven Scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994).
Step 2a Analysis of the Quantitative Microsoft Excel bar graphs for closed-ended questions analysis in questionnaire (not more than 9 closed questions). NVivo software for open-ended questions (not more than 3) - data from the open-ended was also counted and transformed into Microsoft Excel bar graphs.	Step 2b Analysis of the Qualitative data: Verbatim transcriptions of interviews held with practitioners, Heads of schools, Heads of Department (Literacy), boys and parents, and narrative recordings of classroom observations were transferred to NVivo software. A Thematic Analysis approach was used. The five-level descriptors of the Leuven Scale of Involvement in learning (Table 3.2) was used during classroom observations and data transformed into Microsoft Excel bar graphs.
Step 3 An interpretation and brief discussion of the separate results was presented after I analysed each method independently.	
Step 4 Interpretation of the merged results provided an answer to the over-arching research question to produce a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in my context: Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?	

Table 3.1. Procedural framework

3.5.3.1 Designing and collecting data from the online questionnaire.

Online questionnaires are increasingly used in research (Nulty, 2008). In my study, an online questionnaire was sent to all early primary classroom teachers and literacy teachers (complementary teachers and literacy support teachers) who work with children in the early primary grades of a Maltese state school (Years 1 and 2; children aged five to seven years). One of the reasons for choosing an online questionnaire was the possibility it provides for ease of access to teachers (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna & Chapman, 2004; Salmon, Deasy & Garringan, 2004; Watt, Simpson, McKillop & Nunn, 2002). Albeit paper-based surveys are well-known for high response rates (Cook, Heath & Thompson, 2000; Nulty, 2008), in my study, a paper survey handed out in a face-to-face environment in all schools would have taken longer and this was not possible due to my work commitments at the time.

Nonetheless, I planned to boost the chances of a high response rate by keeping the online questionnaire very short, a two-minute task (Dillman, 2007; Quinn, 2002) and as suggested by Zúñiga (2004) I sent three repeat reminders via email. Making it easy for participants to access the URL in the email sent and assuring participants' anonymity of their responses were other strategies used to target a higher response rate (Dommeyer, Baum, Chapman & Hanna, 2002; Quinn, 2002). It is well documented that the higher number of measures taken, the greater the chances of an online survey having a higher response rate (Ballantyne, 2005; Nulty, 2008), and this was the case in my study as will be explained in Chapter 4. The questionnaire incorporated nine closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions (Appendix F).

Three main reasons underpinned the rationale for choosing to use an online questionnaire in my study. Firstly, it was sent to all early primary teachers in Maltese state schools to set the scene and understand the bigger picture better, considering the level of complexity of the phenomenon being researched. Secondly, data from the questionnaires provided me with the ability to answer one of my research questions by identifying, in a broad sweep, the trends in attitudes and present experiences in schooled literacy practices and how these relate to the rhetoric on 'boys' underachievement' in media and educational research (Creswell, 2009). Finally, data from the questionnaire was also merged

with interviews, focus groups and observation data collected from the three schools for purposes of triangulation and to provide a more 'rounded' understanding of the issues, therefore reducing the element of bias in this study. Internal and external validity in relation to generalisability and rigour in terms of measurement of the online questionnaire were both taken into consideration, and the method was also piloted (Bryman, 2001; De Vaus, 2001) (the pilot study will be explained in further detail in section 3.7 of this chapter).

The semi-structured online questionnaire was adapted from the research project on *Boys, Literacy, and Schooling* by the Australian researchers Alloway et al. (2002). The reason why I considered the latter questionnaire as an ideal guideline is because it evoked inspiration of some of the concepts I wanted to investigate when it comes to boys and early literacy learning in my context. The instrument created for this study consists of two sections (Appendix F). In the first section, I made use of ordinal measurement scales including Likert scale items (Bell, 2005; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In the closed-ended questions teachers in the early primary years had the option to agree, disagree or remain neutral on a five-point level scale in relation to popular statements extracted from the literature and popular discourses around boys and early literacy. Critiques of Likert items in general claim that binary answer formats (yes/no responses) capture direction effectively related to the intensity of beliefs whilst responses to Likert items are contaminated with response biases following the choice of the level of intensity (agreement/disagreement response) (Dolnicar, Grun, Leisch & Rossiter, 2011; Paulhus, 1991; Peabody, 1962). Other scholars claim that binary formats are easier for respondents to complete (Dolnicar, 2003; Preston & Colman, 2000). Another agreeing-response bias is acquiescence, which occurs when participants respond to positively worded questions in a more postive way and produce a negative output to more negatively worded questions irrespective of the content of the questions (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). Recent research shows that surveys that are designed as all positively worded or all negatively worded, or a balance of both, will not prevent acquiescence bias (Hutton, 2017). The challenge to counteract for such bias maybe due to several factors, including individual-level determinants such as age, gender, level of education attainment, and also cross-national differences (Rammstedt, Danner & Bosnjak, 2016). In the context of this study, the choice of

the five-point level scale answer format and the way the survey was worded was influenced by similar previous measures used in the work of Alloway et al. (2002) on boys and literacy to answer one of the research questions. Nonetheless, to counterbalance for any agreeing-response bias (since the adapted questionnaire was conducted in a different context), the outcomes of the Likert scale items of this study were then triangulated with other qualitative data collected from the same online questionnaire and also from other methods that provided a deeper insight to the statistical findings. The second section of the questionnaire had three open-ended questions and asked teachers about their experiences with gender and the reading and writing strategies they use in the early primary years of Maltese co-educational state schools. The online platform 'Google forms' was used to collect the data from the questionnaire.

3.5.3.2 Online questionnaire sampling and design.

For the purposes of this study, this survey required quota sampling, a sampling strategy that enables the representation of all teachers in the early primary years sector from the wider population (Cohen et al., 2007). As this study sets out to investigate boys and literacy in the early primary years of Maltese state schools, this sampling was most suitable as it "gives proportional weighting to selected factors (strata) which reflects their weighting in which they can be found in the wider population" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 114). On another note, having teachers working in a Maltese bilingual context as participants, I was confident that they would not encounter any difficulties if the questionnaire were created in the English language. Once set, the online questionnaire was piloted with the assistance of several indispensable friends who have worked as teachers in the early primary years and who were not part of the chosen sample. The proposed questions were carefully redrafted after the pilot work to enhance reliability and avoid misinterpretation of questions in the online survey (Cohen et al., 2007). The pilot enabled me to have a rough estimate of time to complete and develop trial coding for analysis through Google Forms (Bell, 2005; Clough & Nutbrown, 2002; Cohen et al., 2007).

3.5.3.3 Context and rationale of the three Maltese state schools chosen.

Parents in Malta have the option to send their children to co-educational state schools, which are fully funded by the state and found in all the main towns and villages. All the primary and secondary state schools are grouped into ten colleges that serve different regions of the Maltese islands. In the context of this study, three different early primary settings in Maltese state schools are presented. The three state government schools selected represent a range of social, economic and cultural contexts within the data as a whole and reflect early childhood primary settings that serve monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, monocultural and multicultural families within urban and coastal communities of the Maltese islands. Figure 3.4 presents brief details about each of the chosen settings. Pseudonyms and further detail will be presented in 'Ethical procedures' (Section 3.8) and Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Maltese state school 1	• Located in a seaside town in Malta. The school catered for learners coming from different levels of socio-economic backgrounds (mainly monocultural).
Maltese state school 2	• Based in a large town in the island. The influx of foreign people settling in Malta increased the number of learners of a foreign origin in this school (mainly multicultural).
Maltese state school 3	• Situated in a small coastal town in an area of socio-economic disadvantage in Malta (mainly monocultural).

Figure 3.4. Brief details about the three chosen state schools in Malta

I chose to conduct my enquiry in state schools since it is the sector that has the largest percentage of compulsory education provision in Malta, and consequently a higher percentage of children attend state schools (DQSE, 2013, 2015). In addition, a local study revealed that some children who attended state

schools and schools situated in particular regions in our islands tend to perform at a lower average score in literacy attainment (Mifsud et al., 2000a). The fundamental reason for choosing to focus on three schools is to get a fuller picture of the young boys' lived reading and writing experiences through the different perceptions of the several participants including young boys who were coming from different backgrounds and contexts within Maltese state schools. Furthermore, opting to collect data from three state schools, no more no less, is to have each of the three schools representing different geographical regions in Malta (Northern region, Inner Harbour region and Outer Harbour region), which are broadly representative of different socio-economic backgrounds. Another reason I chose to have this study partly embedded within three regions in Malta is to avoid having results that could have been influenced by potential regional influences in one area.

3.5.3.4 Designing and collecting data from three state schools in Malta.

In adopting a phenomenological approach through data collected from three Maltese state schools, I endeavoured to "discern the essence of participants' lived experiences" in relation to boys and their reading and writing experiences in the first year of compulsory schooling following two years of Kindergarten (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018, p. 35). Phenomenological data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Making use of different qualitative data in the three state schools chosen was key to facilitating triangulation during analysis and interpretation stages to answer my research questions (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Quantitative data was also collected by using the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994), a tool for systematic classroom observation through direct observation to provide more detailed and precise findings, minimise researchers' bias, and increase the validity of boys' lived reading and writing experiences (Mayah & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

Three Year 1 teachers (teaching five- to six-year-olds), three Heads of School, and three Heads of Department (Literacy) from each state school participated in individual interviews to allow for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions on 'boys' underachievement', and their individual experiences with

young boys, reading and writing throughout early primary school. For the same purpose, parents and their young boys in each of the three chosen classrooms were invited to take part in focus group meetings. Two focus groups were conducted in each school setting; one with five- to six-year-old boys and another with the parents of boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

Overall, through the created design and data collected from three schools I was able to answer my research questions meaningfully and enrich my findings embedded in boys' reading and writing lived experiences within the early primary years with stronger arguments (Hamilton et al., 2013). Findings from the three schools allowed me to analyse, synthesise the patterns, similarities and differences of the themes derived from the voices of all the participants. Moreover, the merged results helped me to draw out a better understanding of the lived experiences and views in relation to boys and literacy within a Maltese context (Bassey, 1999; Yin, 2013).

3.5.3.5 Sampling of the three schools.

In this study, three schools from the sixty-seven primary state schools in the Maltese islands (MEDE, 2018b) were chosen through convenience sampling. The sample was chosen from those schools to which I had ease of access (Cohen et al., 2007), where I was already familiar with the environment, and the Heads of School whom I approached personally were sent an information letter requesting permission to include their schools in the study. This procedure will be described in further detail in the 'Ethical procedures' (Section 3.8). Furthermore, each Head of School preferred to identify the one classroom I would be conducting my research in (Cohen et al., 2007) and all three Year 1 teachers in each of the schools concerned agreed to participate. The data from the three schools was collected through multiple methods that will be illustrated in the following sections.

3.5.3.6 Observations: Three Year 1 classrooms (five- to six-year-olds).

The element of phenomenology in my MMPR study also underpinned my decision to observe the behaviour of young boys daily, for one week in each school, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of their lived schooled

reading and writing experiences. This enabled me to verify through triangulation of findings the claims made by several stakeholders' about the lived experiences with young boys and reading and writing practices in Year 1. All boys (8-10 in each classroom) were invited to participate, and I received five parent consent forms (Appendix C) from two schools, and four parent consent forms from the third school allowing me to record the observations and non-verbal behaviours of their sons in the respective Year 1 classrooms. Consequently, for the purposes of this mixed methods phenomenological enquiry, observations gave me the opportunity to collect 'live' data from the boys' experiences during reading and writing practices (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 396). This method enhanced the validity and authenticity of my findings as the study did not rely solely on the second-hand accounts obtained from the online questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. In the same vein, Robson (2002) claimed that "what people do may differ from what they say they do, and observation provides a reality check" (p. 310). The reason for wanting to conduct each observation in a one-week timeframe was to have a reasonable amount of time distributed amongst the three schools, and to ensure continuity of the observations across a whole week.

I adopted the role of 'observer as participant' from the continuum of researchers' role in observation as offered by Gold (1958). The role of the 'observer as participant' is the most ethical approach to observations, as the participants are informed by the researcher's activities and the researcher is more focused on collecting data rather than being involved in the activity to be observed (Adler & Adler, 1994; Kawulich, 2005). Therefore, by adopting this theoretical stance to conduct my field observations, I aimed to "catch the dynamic nature of events" related to the lived experiences of young boys during their schooled reading and writing practices (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 397).

During the direct structured observation I used two types of observation schedules that were collated in one prepared schedule (Appendix E) (Bryman, 2016). I sought similarities and differences to capture the effect of the pedagogical styles on the level of boys' involvement during reading and writing practices through:

- direct observations in the form of a prepared structured observation schedule using narrative descriptions (Appendix E); and

- the Leuven scale of involvement in Learning (Laevers, 1994) - five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) - to measure the level of boys' involvement in each of the reading and/or writing practices observed.

The prepared observation schedule was piloted in a separate school and revised prior to the start of the actual fieldwork in the three schools. A clear focus was needed to keep focused on what had to be observed and the pilot study was beneficial in achieving this target (Bryman, 2016). This was mainly based on the approach to schooled reading and writing in Year 1, the role of the adult in class, the environment, the description of the reading or writing activity and the non-verbal behaviour of boys was rated by using the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994).

Level 1- Extremely low

Activity is simple, repetitive and passive. The child seems absent and displays no energy. They may stare into space or look around to see what others are doing.

Level 2 - Low

Frequently interrupted activity. The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around.

Level 3 - Moderate

Mainly continuous activity. The child is busy with the activity but at a fairly routine level and there are few signs of real involvement. They make some progress with what they are doing but don't show much energy and concentration and can be easily distracted.

Level 4 - High

Continuous activity with intense moments. The child's activity has intense moments and at all times they seem involved. They are not easily distracted.

Level 5 - Extremely high

The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period.

Table 3.2. The Leuven scale for involvement in learning: Level descriptors

According to Nisbett and Watt (1980) direct observation provides trustworthy evidence in exploring what is actually happening in classrooms. This opportunity allowed me as a researcher to enrich the rest of the data gathered to finally answer my main research question that sought a clearer understanding of how young boys experienced reading and writing. The narrative data collected from structured observations also allowed for documenting the pedagogic style of the reading and writing practices young boys were exposed to in three Maltese early years contexts (Cohen et al., 2007).

The five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven Scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994), underpinned by Experiential Education [EXE] theory, allowed for obtaining data through non-verbal behaviour. EXE theory forms part of the theoretical framework of this study as it derived from a personal search for knowledge that may shed further light on what counts as quality early literacy learning for all. EXE theory endeavours to answer the complex question of what counts as quality in education using concepts developed within an innovative project 'Experiential Education'. Figure 3.5 shows Laevers' (1994) three categories for assessing the quality of an educational setting: treatment characteristics (e.g., classroom environment, teaching methods); outcomes, measurements of the effects of education (e.g., short term-success to the next stage/long term-development of attitudes); and process variables, emotional well-being and involvement (e.g., dimension of student activity and quality of interactions, point of measurement is the child and practice is described from the child's perspective).
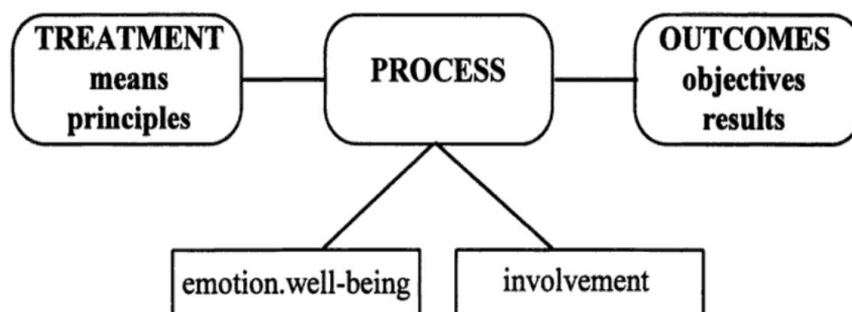
Figure 3.5. Emotional well-being and involvement as process variables in Experiential Education [EXE] theory (Laevers, 1994, p. 162)

The 'process' variable reveals how a certain method or approach affects the child, taking into account the child's characteristics that define an authentic effect of the educational environment (Laevers, 1994). In terms of 'outcomes' an interesting perspective emerges as, "without doubt the child's action is a more precise point of reference for the assessment of quality than the teacher's efforts" (Laevers, 1994, p. 160). Therefore, through the lens of EXE theory, the focus is neither on the pedagogy or outcomes but on the experience. For example, the question to determine quality for the purposes of my study would rather be: how are boys getting on during their experiences with reading and writing practices in early primary classrooms? Indeed, this theoretical perspective impacted on my choice of a mixed methods phenomenological research approach that views human experience as the root of philosophy (Todres & Holloway, 2006).

In the context of this enquiry, an early question was: how am I going to find out what counts as quality reading and writing practices from boys' perspectives? While well-being and involvement within the 'process' category are two crucial factors that determine a good school (Laevers, 1994) my study will focus on the second criterion, of 'involvement' of young boys during their reading and writing practices to answer my research questions. Involvement is central to EXE theory; the quality dimension of the criterion of 'involvement' in learning is the exploratory drive, "the need to get a better grip on reality, the intrinsic interest in how things and people are and why reality is like it is" (Laevers, 1994, p. 163). This is a contrasting view to that of a 'transmission' model where pre-existing content is transmitted to the learner (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Laevers (1994) further contends that, "if we want developmental changes to occur we have to activate the exploratory needs… involvement only occurs in the small area where the 'task' matches the capability of the person" (p. 163).

Interlinking my personal interests in quality ECEC and literacy, I decided to use the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven Scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994) to assess the quality of learning through five- to six-year old boys' reading and writing experiences. This tool was crucial for my study, since the analysis method of part of the direct observations relied heavily on these scales that involved the assessment of non-verbal behaviour (Laevers, 1994). The level of involvement in learning was rated between levels 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest (Table 3.2). Being the only researcher conducting these classroom

observations and interpreting the collected data, it was not possible for me to undertake any calibration activities (i.e. such as co-observations or debate and discuss level ratings) in relation to the use of the Leuven scale tool (Laevers, 1994), this is acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, I made sure that the level of involvement in learning was only identified following each reading or writing experience observed and double checked after reading the notes taken during all observations.

In each school, ratings from the five consecutive days of observing boys' level of involvement in learning during reading and writing practices was then analysed by manual counting, and then entered into Excel bar graphs. On the other hand, narrative data collected from the prepared observations schedules were filed and some of the scenarios are presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Research shows that the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data for classroom observation take a more comprehensive picture of what happens in classrooms (Bryman, 2016; Good & Brophy, 2000; Waxman, Huang & Shwu-Yong, 1999). Lastly, the time that I spent doing classroom observations (one week: approximately 25 hours of observation in each school) provided me with "thick descriptions" of the lived experiences, and as a result, the collected data was "strong on reality" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 405).

3.5.3.7 Semi-structured interviews: Year 1 teachers, Heads of School and Heads of Department (Literacy).

Following the observation phase, face-to-face interviews with three Year 1 teachers, three Heads of School and three Heads of Department (Literacy) allowed the participants to express their lived experiences with young boys and early literacy learning in Maltese state schools (Cohen et al., 2007). In all, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted within the three schools during the week of observation. Since the three schools were chosen through convenience sampling the three Heads of School and the Head of Department (Literacy) in charge of each school were invited to be interviewed. The Heads of School preferred to choose the three Year 1 classroom teachers and classrooms themselves for the interview and classroom observations within each school. All nine participants accepted to be interviewed. The reason for preferring to have the

same Year 1 teachers to interview as the ones where the observations took place, was to be able to triangulate findings.

The nine semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate the procedure of qualitative analysis and to minimise researchers' bias (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2007). Before conducting the main study, the interviews were piloted with other teachers and one Head of School, who do not form part of the chosen sample. Questions were carefully redrafted after the pilot work to enhance the reliability of the questions and avoid misinterpretation (Bell, 2005; Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007). Most of the questions were related to the open and closed questions used in the online questionnaire (Appendix F) (adapted from the study of Alloway et al., 2002) for triangulation purposes.

3.5.3.8 Focus groups.

Focus groups are not commonly used as a research technique by qualitative researchers (Basch, 1987; Bers, 1989; Gilflores & Alonso, 1995), but they are increasing in popularity. It is important to note that there is a distinction between focus groups or focused interviews and group interviews (Bryman, 2016). Group interviews involve several people discussing a variety of topics. On the other hand, focus groups or focused interviews create a situation where opinions are formulated and contrasted and provide the space for the expression of feelings, attitudes, reactions and doubts interviewees have about the concrete theme (Bryman, 2016; Gilflores & Alonso, 1995). Therefore, to extract the required information participants need the moderator or facilitator (the person who runs the focus group) and the group context. In this study, focus groups were used to get a more comprehensive picture of boys' lived reading and writing experiences through the lens of two different groups of participants: the boys' parents and the five- to six-year-old boys themselves.

Participants in focus groups are particularly chosen because they have similar characteristics and information to share, which in turn elicit a variety of views on the issue in question (Bryman, 2016; Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956; Robert-Holmes, 2005). Watts and Ebbutt (1987) highlight that the interaction between the participants throughout the discussion is equally important to the

interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer. Hence, the main focus should be on the participants' viewpoints, the emerging discussion, and "the joint construction of meaning" around the topic and not on interviewing a group of participants (Bryman, 2016, p. 501). Through these challenging views, the moderator may end up with more realistic accounts, as participants are stimulated to think and revise their views at that point in time. In both situations the focus group method in my study was chosen to understand better how young boys experience schooled reading and writing practices and create meanings around it through interaction as it naturally happens in everyday life to evoke themes and support whatever patterns developed from the data (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) draws the attention of researchers by claiming that the power of focus groups lies in them being focused. Consequently, to keep my focus groups focused I established some simple rules to ensure all voices were heard, and that everyone had a clear understanding of the purpose of the discussion.

3.5.3.9 Focus groups: Parents of five- to six-year-old boys.

Gil Flores and Granado Alonso (1995) claimed that, "Focus groups can offer enlightenment" (p. 86), and that the "dialogue activates participants' memories and experiences" (p. 99). The rationale for the parents' focus groups in my enquiry was to evaluate different views from the parents of the five- to six-year-old boys, in-depth explanations and to create further understandings of their sons' experiences.

Three groups of parents of five- to six-year-old boys from the classroom chosen in each of the state schools were chosen for this enquiry through purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). The concern of 'no shows' on the day was taken care of by Wilkinson's using strategy of over-recruiting (Wilkinson, 1998). All the parents of boys in each of the three classrooms (since this was not a large number; eight to ten maximum) were invited and the number of consent forms returned was counted prior to confirmation. According to Morgan's (1992) rules of thumb, a focus group project most often recruits six to ten participants per group. In my study, two groups of five parents and one group of 4 parents returned their respective consent forms and accepted to participate - they all attended. Another factor that positively influenced the number of parents

participating in the focus group is that I decided to ask the Head of School for permission to call all the boys' parents in the Year 1 classroom after I sent the consent form to explain in further detail what my study concerned. The call was greatly appreciated by all parents, and some claimed that they preferred the verbal explanation even though forms were sent in English and Maltese (Appendix B). I also called those parents who agreed to participate two days before the focus group as a reminder, which they all appreciated.

Interviewing a group of parents enabled me to analyse the views and diverse lived experiences of a whole group of parents of the young boys attending state schools located in different regions around Malta (Cohen et al., 2007). Throughout the collection of this data, I took on the role of a moderator in a focused discussion on the phenomenon of this enquiry (Morgan, 1997a). The popular discourse on 'boys' underachievement' and the Year 1 reading and writing practices their sons experienced in their respective contexts were discussed within each group. Since the questions were predetermined and the data were compared and triangulated, according to Morgan (1997a), these focus groups were conducted with a high level of moderator involvement.

One of the reasons for choosing to conduct a focus group is to make it easy and more comfortable for parents to speak up on this topic (Gil Flores & Granado Alonso, 1995). Moreover, focus group data offered a different form of phenomenological data embedded within MMPR and this is seen as an essential piece to complete the jigsaw of boys' reading and writing lived experiences in this enquiry. The three focus group discussions were audio recorded. All recordings (English, Maltese and Italian languages were used during one of the parents' focus groups: Maltese was used in the other two) were transcribed verbatim in the English language (for audience purposes) and a thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the transcript data, as will be further explained in the data and analysis section of this chapter (Cohen et al., 2007). To avoid inconveniencing parents, all three focus groups were conducted 45 minutes prior to the end of the school day so they would be able to collect their sons after the focus group interview ended; to the appreciation of the parents. The piloting stage of the focus group will be explained in section 3.7 of this chapter.

3.5.3.10 Focus groups: The boys.

My study was bound by a commitment to hear the 'voice of the child' (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003). The concept of children's participation and listening to children in research is about recognising young 'active' participants as 'agentic', capable to decide, speak, and make their voices heard, and how their contribution is understood and taken into account (Woodhead, 2010). Young children are different from adults as they perceive things in a different way, and I agree with Cohen et al. (2007) who stated that it is valuable and just to try and understand the world through the "eyes" of children rather than through the "lens" of an adult (p. 374). Conducting research with young children might be challenging but research repeatedly shown that it is not impossible and above all that it is necessary, and that their contribution is now recognised as legitimate (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellet & Robinson, 2004; Long, 2007; Porcellato, Dughill & Springett, 2002). Writing at a time when it was unusual to interview young children, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) claimed that young children are able to share their views, therefore, their voices need to be heard and their perspectives taken into consideration when it comes to policy making and the implementation of programmes within which they will be involved. Moral issues related to young children's vulnerability when involved in research studies are common, however, as Long (2007) argued "it is equally important that in seeking to protect the vulnerable we do not also silence them" (p. 485). Regrettably, "there are still many instances where young children are effectively silenced" (Nutbrown, 2018, p. 64).

Based on these assumptions, three groups of boys from the three Year 1 cohorts were chosen through purposive sampling to participate in my study (Bryman, 2016). All boys in each class were invited since there were not more than 8-10 boys in each class (adopting the same principle used for the focus groups with parents). Participation was confirmed after the consent form was received. I received five parent consent forms from two of the schools, and four parent consent forms from the third school. According to Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, and Wilsdon (1995) a group of four to five children is ideal to ensure having three of the selected children interacting and participating. The parents who gave their consent for their sons to participate in the focus groups

also gave me permission to photograph the boys during the classroom observations and use the images to steer the focus group discussion of their reading and writing experiences. Individual interviews with young boys could have been used, however, as Cohen et al. (2007) claimed, in focus groups, children may be less intimidated than in an adult-to-child interview.

Meaningful research methods are necessary when involving young children in research so as to allow them to be engaged, participate actively, and provide them with an appropriate setting to share their experiences and perspectives (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996; Porcellato et al., 2002). Focus group were selected as the best method for researching young children's views in this study because they allowed for the accommodation of diverse needs and kept the whole process lively (Krueger, 1988) and of interest to the children. The qualitative method created space for social interactions, sharing their meanings, and experiences and feelings about the same topic (Shaw, Braidy & Davey, 2011). My study used several strategies to engage boys during the three focus group interviews as described below.

Five- and six-year-old research participants are considered vulnerable by virtue of their age, therefore, verbal consent was obtained from the boys themselves using a conversational question-and-answer process which was witnessed and signed by their Year 1 classroom teachers (Fraser et al., 2004; Long, 2007; Porcellato et al., 2002). The Year 1 teachers were welcome to the room while the focus group was being conducted, if they so wished. A child-friendly booklet was prepared (Figure 3.6) and the boys were given a choice to make a thumb print (as a nose) in a smiley face if they consent to participate or in a sad face if otherwise. Both the Year 1 teacher and I signed an approved consent form (Appendix C) if the boys' assented. All boys in my study were given adequate time to choose whether they wanted to take part and sign the consent form, and they were also informed that they were free to refuse to answer questions, withdraw from the interview, and choose not to be audio recorded (Bell, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007; Punch & Oancera, 2014). They were also reminded that they could leave anytime they wished to. In this case, they did not want to leave, since they were totally immersed and seemed to enjoy the active group discussion. This procedure was piloted in another school as will be explained later in this chapter.

Figure 3.6. Child-friendly booklet used for boys' assent

In the context of my study, each of the three focus groups was presented as a short discussion more like a group circle time. The focus group interview or "conversation" (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003, p. 120) was set in another classroom or the library. These were rooms the boys were already familiar with in the same school (Shaw et al., 2011). As research participants, young children need to be given the opportunity to voice their views in an interview set in a non-threatening environment where they feel comfortable, and this is rightly so if they are interviewed together with other peers (Cohen et al., 2007; Porcellato et al., 2002; Robert-Homes, 2005). "The issue here is to try to make the interview as informal as possible" because this will involve a group of young children (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 375). The use of the rooms for the focus groups within the school settings was possible through the permission of the Heads of School, and being familiar with the space helped all boys feel more at ease and thrilled to participate.

The interviews with the boys took place during the last day of the week I was observing them in their classrooms. This gave them time to familiarise themselves with me as a researcher and build a relationship of trust that may help in making them feel comfortable to speak in front of me (Barley & Bath, 2014; Punch 2001). Priority was given to the well-being of the children above the data to be collected (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003). Two of the focus group interviews were conducted in Maltese and one was done in English, since in one of the

schools there were two English and two Italian boys participating in this study. All five boys in this focus group, including the Maltese speaking boy, were able to communicate in the English language. The boys were free to answer in any language they preferred. Being fluent in Italian, I managed to comprehend and ask questions in Italian whenever needed. Open-ended questions were asked "to avoid a single answer type of response" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 375). The questions (Appendix D) were related to their schooled reading and writing experiences and linked to the pictures of themselves (with parental consent, Appendix C) taken while they were participating in a reading or writing activity to steer discussion.

All boys were informed about the procedure of the focus group after they gave their individual assent (Darbyshire, Schiller & MacDougall, 2005) and they were also reassured that there were no right and wrong answers to avoid any signs of pressure (Punch, 2001). I wanted to make sure that the information would be elicited in ways that were respectful to the boys considering that young children also have valuable perspectives that should be given due perspectives by adults in their environment (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The audio recorder intrigued many of the boys so they were given the opportunity to hear their voices after the introductory part of the focus group. This allowed me to test the equipment before we began, as well as enrich my rapport with the young boys. They were amazed to hear their own voices. The focus group started off with an 'ice-breaker' activity where everyone, including myself, shared our names, surnames, where we live and also one thing we liked doing. The quick activity helped to reduce any anxieties and resulted in being fun for all.

After the focus group starter, an emotion card with three small faces (happy, neutral and sad, Figure 3.7), was distributed to each boy, and I explained that they were going to be shown a picture of themselves during their classroom activities on a tablet device. The young boys were also told that if they wished they could point at one of the faces to show how they felt and maybe add anything else they would like to say about that particular activity. This strategy kept the children active as when they looked at the image on the tablet they pointed at one of the faces, and also traced the mouth of the face they chose with their finger. The boys also expressed how they felt when they experienced schooled reading and writing practices. Long (2007) appealed that appropriate

means are required to ensure that all children retain their interest and attention while the focus group is being conducted. As a "discussion facilitator" (Rober-Holmes, 2005, p. 13) in three of the focus groups conducted with young boys, I was interested in ways they could respond to each other's views about the schooled reading and writing practices they experienced as a group rather than as individuals (Bryman, 2016).
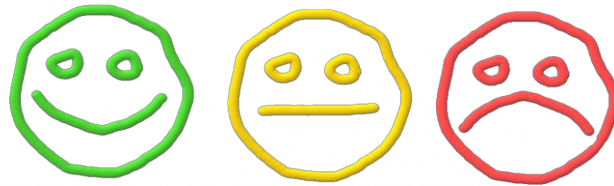
Figure 3.7. Sample of an emotion card used during boys' focus groups (showing happy, neutral and sad faces)

I found the focus groups with young boys to be the most enjoyable part of my data collection as some unexpected insights into the boys' schooled reading and writing experiences emerged. During the three group conversations the power dynamics shifted in favour of the young boys (Brooker, 2001). This method recognised children as active participants and experts while also acknowledging the importance of the voices of young children to be heard (Fraser et al., 2004; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; Porcellato et al., 2002). Cognisant of the potential risk of having young children re-voicing each other during focus groups I employed child-friendly engaging methods (Hunleth, 2011) and planned to modify questions whenever needed to help them express their thoughts, feelings and encourage more detailed individualised responses (Cameron, 2005). It was imperative that my study would not be another inquiry where children's voices are muted (Balen et al., 2006) because they are viewed as incompetent and immature to serve as informants about their own experiences (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). I should stress, however, that one effect of focus group methodology can be to built a group view or position, on a topic (Nutbrown & Clough 2007) thus - as with focus groups conducted with adult participants - the views expressed are not identified with individuals but a perspective on the issues

generated with in a group experience. That said, Nutbrown (1996) stated that the opportunity for children to be research participants rather than subjects should be presented to them as a right. Through an emancipatory lens I concur with Nutbrown (1996) that including young boys in my study provided them with the equal opportunity and right to have their voices heard. Moreover, I intended to "listen" and "give voice" respectively "to children's voices" (Schnoor, 2012, p. 2, see also Dalli & Te One, 2012) through a more transparent interpretation and representation of boys' voices - without any filter (James, James & McNamee, 2004). Consequently, in this thesis, young boys' claims are presented in the language they preferred to use during the focus groups together with a translation of each statement in the English language for audience purposes.

3.6 Rigour of My Research Design

3.6.1 Trustworthiness.

A repertoire of methods allowed me to extend the breadth and range of inquiry and depth of understanding in my proposed inquiry (Greene, 2007; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003). Keeping in mind that different stakeholders including teachers and policymakers, would be the audience for my study, a MMPR design was a perfect fit to improve the trustworthiness of the data (Andrew & Halcomb, 2009; Bassey, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interpreted results from quantitative and the qualitative elements would increase the credibility, validity, utility, transferability and reliability of my findings (Cohen et al., 2007; Guba, 1981; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2008). To make sure these criteria were met, the following measures were implemented:

1. Credibility. The inclusion of an online questionnaire that was sent out to 400 teachers in the early primary years took into consideration the fact that this would increase this thesis' credibility in the eyes of the audience of this thesis (Bryman, 2016). I felt that the questionnaire data would be more familiar and acceptable to potential readers and policymakers. With regards to this inquiry, I have always believed that the qualitative data collected would be more insightful, however, excluding the quantitative part would have resulted in missing out on knowledge. Consequently, the triangulation of data in the design applied to this inquiry automatically enhanced the credibility of the findings.

2. Validity. In my study, validation was conceptualised within its convergent research design. As suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), to address potential issues in data collection, data analysis, interpretation and when both strands of data were merged, strategies need to be used carefully to minimise the validity threats. In view of this recommendation, the following strategies were used, underpinned by the convergent parallel design chosen for this mixed methods study:

- *Data collection issues*: To avoid potential bias of one data collection method over the other I used separate data collection procedures. Both sets of data were collected during the same period of time and concluded on the same day. To increase descriptive validity and strengthen findings from the data collected, I asked all adult participants during the interviews and focus groups for clarification of answers so they could modify their responses if need be.

- *Data analysis issues*: Data analysis was kept very straightforward by counting codes and themes through the use of a step-by-step thematic analysis. Patterns of commonalities and differences were assessed among the data collected from various groups who acted as participants in this study.

- *Interpretation issues*: To minimise the issue of divergent findings or contradictions the data was re-analysed and the procedures were evaluated. Moreover, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and the use of data reduction through thematic analysis and NVivo 11 was chosen on purpose to minimise the possibility of researchers' bias.

- *Merging of data issues*: Both sets of results were analysed independently and merged concurrently during the final stage in a way to be given equal importance.

3. Utility. Some researchers prefer methods that are based on mixed methods methodology as it is more likely to produce findings that will have utility (Bryman, 2016). In this study, adopting a MMPR enabled the findings to speak to policy and also academic audiences. The mix of both approaches to this inquiry deepened the understanding of 'boys' underachievement' discourses in relation to schooling and early literacy learning in Maltese state schools. This would not have been possible if one method was used.

4. Reliability (Dependability) and Transferability. To ensure the reliability of the methodology and methods used in this study, attention was devoted to the

detailed reporting of the processes involved. Indeed, the MMPR model based on the principles of a convergent parallel design to mixed methods research, how the data was collected, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the chosen model to conduct this enquiry was thoroughly discussed in this chapter. Additionally, the purpose for delving into in-depth descriptions of the data analysed was to make information meaningful for transferability to future research.

 5. My role as a researcher. I conducted my study with a background of 16 years of teaching experience in the fields of ECEC and literacy. My major influences as a researcher in this enquiry included my personal experience of childhood, motherhood and teaching in a boys' school for five years; knowledge through research of good practices in early literacy learning; the recent working experiences as a Senior Manager with the National Literacy Agency (during data collection) and to date as an Education Officer with the Quality Assurance Department within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. As explained earlier, one of the main reasons for choosing a MMPR model based on a convergent parallel design was to address the role of subjectivity inherent to my role as as researcher through 'scientific phenomenological reduction' and the possibility to triangulate data through the multiple methods used (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

 In all, a MMPR offered multiple perspectives on the lived experiences of boys and literacy in Maltese early years education honouring the complexity of human experiences. As evident in this section, the need to use multiple methods to answer my research questions and adoption of the principles of a convergence design in mixed methods provided offsetting bias and boosted the validity and credibility of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2007; Weisner, 2005). In addition, the number of stakeholders involved and the triangulation of methods in my study offered deeper and more inclusive understandings of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

3.7 The Pilot Study

 The questionnaire was piloted amongst a group of early primary classroom and literacy teachers who did not form part of the study. Most of the teachers were ex-colleagues, and this worked well in terms of critical feedback and ease of access. The teachers found the questions easy to reply to, and one of the

comments led to a reconsideration of the order of the questions. Consequently, I decided to reorder the questions in a way that increased the flow of the tool's text (Appendix F). The questionnaire was then finalised, uploaded in 'Google forms', and disseminated to all classroom and literacy teachers working in the early primary years of state schools in Malta via email.

I tested the tools used to collect data from the three state schools chosen for my enquiry by conducting a pilot study in one primary state school in Malta. The school for the pilot study was not one of the three schools chosen to be part of my main fieldwork. Since I knew the Head of School personally, access was granted very quickly. For the plan of the pilot study to work out, I was given permission to be three days away from my full-time job during that particular month. Consequently, the pilot project consisted of three full school days of observation (18 hours of classroom observation). I also conducted interviews with the Head of School, the chosen Year 1 teacher, and two focus groups with parents and boys. Prior to the start of the pilot project, I asked the Head of School to let me know the date of the parents' day during that term, and I linked the date and time of the parents' focus group with the day the parents were to be at school. This worked well, and five parents agreed to be part of the focus group. They declared that it was convenient for them to have the focus group on the same day as the parents' day as they did not need to take another day off from work. This was a factor that I took into consideration and consequently made sure that I chose a convenient time for the parents' focus groups of the main fieldwork.

The observational framework (Appendix E) used during the pilot provided me with an effective tool to keep record of the actions taking place in order. The section which referred to the pedagogic style of the literacy practices boys were exposed to, provided me with a free space where I could elaborate on the teaching and learning of reading and writing that was being observed. I found the instrument was effective to use for the upcoming main fieldwork. Pictures of boys were taken during all the reading and writing events and were used during the focus group interviews with the young boys. The environment was also another relevant section in the observational framework. In the last section of this framework I made use of the five-level descriptors of child involvement (Table 3.2) in the Leuven scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994). The structured scale system assisted me in directly observing the level of involvement

in learning of the young boys' experiences during their daily classroom reading and writing activities.

The pictures taken throughout the reading and writing activities were critical to elicit discussion between the boys in the focus group. It was my first experience of having young children as participants during a research study, and I must say that it was the most exciting part of the pilot study. The witnessed consent form and the boys' assent to using the booklet featuring smiling and frowning faces proceeded in a plain sailing manner during the pilot study. The boys dipped their thumbs in paint and stamped it on the smiley face without hesitating as they were curious and were overjoyed at being part of this task. Even though my stay in their classroom spanned only three days, the friendly rapport we established put my mind at rest for the main fieldwork as I was to spend one week in each school. Consequently, they were thrilled by the fact that they were about to participate in an activity I prepared since I was never involved in anything during their class activities. It was fascinating to see how they interpreted each image shown on a tablet device and how the conversation flowed from one boy to the other. There were times where this group of five- to six-year-old boys had different opinions about the same reading or writing activity. One boy seemed to use the word "all right" very often when he was asked how he felt, so I decided to create an emotion card for the main fieldwork where the boys could express their feeling by pointing or finger-tracing one of the faces, and perhaps facilitate the way they could express themselves. Indeed, the emotion cards (Figure 3.7) given during the main fieldwork kept the boys more active during their discussion and provided the option for all boys to express themselves verbally and/or non-verbally.

The procedure of the focus group with parents worked out well. The circle layout of the chairs made everyone feel at ease and an icebreaker at the start helped with the process of getting to know each other better in only a few minutes time. The room was very quiet and this helped in keeping the flow of the vivid conversation between the parents. The interviews with the Head of School, Head of Department (Literacy) and the Year 1 teacher ran smoothly. The Head of Department (Literacy) was the one who worked in the school I piloted the study in. One of the questions for the Head of School was removed as it turned out to give a similar response to the one preceding it, so it was better to amalgamate the

two together. Together, the outcomes from the pilot study contributed to the process of reviewing the questions, and reflecting on the approach to be used with the different participants of the main study.

3.8 Ethical Procedures

Cohen et al. (2007) highlight a major "ethical dilemma" in research that depends on the ability of the researcher to "strike a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects' rights and values potentially threatened by research" (p. 51). Therefore, ethical issues cannot be overlooked. It is crucial for the researcher "to be aware of the ethical principals involved and of the nature of concerns about ethics in social research" to make informed decisions (Bryman, 2016, p. 123). The main areas of ethical concern tend to centre on: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception (Diener & Crandall, 1978). In my enquiry, I made sure that I was well informed on these areas of ethical concern prior to the planning, designing and important decision making taking place, as will be discussed in this section.

The first step was to gain approval for my study from the University of Sheffield and the Research and Policy Development Directorate within the MEDE in Malta (Appendix A) that enabled me to conduct my enquiry as planned. To ensure the well-being of participants involved, I identified issues that related to potential harm in my study and discussed how these could be minimised and addressed in four steps:

1. Maintaining privacy. Interviewed adults interviewed and teachers that were to be observed in this study - considering that the participants might feel uncomfortable with the situation and concerned that the findings will put their employment or reputation at risk, it was made clear to all participants (Appendix B) that the data collected and finally presented will be anonymous and treated with confidentiality. At no point could the participants be traced or identified. The teachers were also informed on how to contact my Supervisor and/or Head of Department, or ultimately the Registrar and Secretary of the University if following participation they experience stress or have any other concerns about the research. It was my responsibility to do my best to provide complete information about the nature of the study to the participants, as well as take extra

precautions to try to avoid revealing identifying characteristics about the three state schools in Malta.

2. *Rapport and friendship.* Throughout my fieldwork I was careful to develop a good rapport with the participants. Friendship may have pushed adult participants to disclose information that they may not want to. Therefore, I was extremely careful not to develop any harm or distress in this respect. I made sure to provide an environment that is trustworthy and be sensitive to the power I hold as a researcher over participants during my fieldwork. I avoided the creation of a situation where I got very close to the participants in my study, and avoided offering counselling of any kind if or when they asked for it.

3. *Intrusiveness.* I was very careful not to intrude on the participants' time, space and personal lives (Bryman, 2016). Adult participants might not have wanted to be observed in their schools/classrooms for this study or for some reason they might not have felt comfortable to talk about this phenomenon. Moreover, in conducting parents' focus groups I could have been taking up their personal time. Consequently, all participants were well informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can also withdraw from the study at any point during their involvement. Furthermore, I made it very clear that they should not feel penalised for doing so. As regarding the interviews and focus groups with parents, I made sure to have a reasonable estimate of time for participation, and invited them to attend before they picked up their boys from school to make it more convenient for them. Neutral locations (mainly school libraries) were used for the discussion so as not to invade in their personal spaces such as their homes.

4. *Data Interpretation.* During the interpretation stage I was vigilant to avoid misstatements or misinterpretation. It was my responsibility to interpret the data cautiously and present evidence so that others can decide to what extent my interpretation is credible. During the interviews and focus groups, all adult participants were asked if they wanted to clarify or modify any of their responses. Data was then transcribed verbatim in the English language. Young boys' voices were transcribed verbatim and presented in the language they used during the focus groups (Maltese, English and Italian) and also translated to the English language for audience purposes.

The advantages of informed consent is that it gives the "respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications

of their participation at the outset" (Bryman, 2016, p. 131). In my study, the next step after the ethical approval (Appendix A) was to send an email to the three respective College Principals of the three schools I intended to conduct my research in. In this email I included an information letter (Appendix B) about my study and also requested permission for an appointment with the concerned Head of School. Permission to meet with the three Heads of School was granted in no time. I personally approached the Head of each of the state schools (chosen through convenience sampling) and explained my study while also providing them with a detailed information letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) for the interview (Punch & Oancea, 2014). One of the letters requested permission for the pilot study and the other three letters to conduct the main fieldwork in three state schools (Appendix B). Assurance of integrity was highlighted in these letters, and it was also stated that the schools that were chosen would not be identified in any reports. In the same letter, I pointed out that the schools might finally benefit from the sharing of the outcomes of this study and that this may, in turn, be of benefit to their respective schools. Access was granted from the three state schools. Permission was also granted from the Research and Policy Development Directorate within the MEDE in Malta (Appendix A) to distribute the online questionnaire via email to teachers in primary state schools and to conduct the main fieldwork in three schools using the methods concerned. Finally the respective Heads of School signed the consent form.

During the first steps of implementation, a covering letter (Appendix B) accompanied the email where the online questionnaire link was sent to all classroom and literacy teachers working in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Aims for the chosen study were clearly identified together with further details on time to complete, anonymity, confidentiality, permissions acquired and what to do should they have any queries (Cohen et al., 2007; Mouly, 1978). The next step of ethical procedures was to obtain written voluntary informed consent from the adult participants to be interviewed.

An information letter (Appendix B) together with the respective consent forms (Appendix C) were distributed to all adult participants involved and requested acknowledgement of comprehension from the participants on the full information provided. Confidentiality of records (how it will be stored and

destroyed) and anonymity were also highlighted in this form (Bryman, 2016; Cohen et al., 2007). In the information letter sent to Year 1 teachers (Appendix B), I made it clear that they were going to be observed for a period of one week. An additional letter of information was forwarded to invite parents of boys to take part in the focus groups (Appendix B). All participants were given adequate time to decide if they wanted to take part and sign the consent form, and they were also informed that they are free to refuse to answer questions, withdraw from the interview and choose not to be audio recorded (Bell, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007; Punch & Oancea, 2014). All adult participants were given the opportunity to obtain further information and answers to questions related to the study before signing. The form also provided information on contact information of myself as the primary investigator, the supervisor of my study and the University's Registrar and Secretary in case they needed to ask further questions after the consent has been signed. All participants received a copy of the informed consent.

Research with children involves the collaboration of different 'gatekeepers' such as the parents and school staff (Cree, Kay & Tisdall, 2002). An information letter was sent to parents requesting parental informed consent for their boys to participate in the focus groups, and also ensuring anonymity and confidentiality (Appendix B) (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). This letter requested parental permission to take pictures of the boys during their reading and writing practices. All parents were reassured that these pictures would be used for focus groups purposes only, and that each picture would be deleted thereafter.

In addition to parental consent, on a simpler level, I obtained boys' "assent" (agreement) to participate (Kellett & Ding, 2004, p. 166). Considering that five- to six-year-old boys are vulnerable participants, oral consent from the boys themselves through a conversational question-and-answer setting was witnessed by one adult employed in the respective school. The young boys were also informed well about the interview and given the right not to participate if they do not wish to; the boys were also told that they could stop at any time during the interview (Fraser et al., 2004; Porcellato et al., 2002). As explained earlier, a child-friendly booklet was prepared for all boys concerned, and they were given the choice to make a thumb print (as a nose) in a smiley face if they consent to participate, or in a sad face if not. Both the witness and I signed an approved consent form if the boys' assent was positive. The issue of not "wasting"

children's time was addressed during the piloting of the focus groups by concentrating on what children "liked" and what did not make sense to them (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003, p. 119).

All data submitted was held in accordance with the University of Sheffield data security policies. Since Malta is a small island state, it was a priority in the context of this study to ascertain that I protected the privacy of each participant and that the confidentiality of the data is guaranteed. I made it clear to all participants that the data collected would be anonymised including the names of the schools concerned. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the privacy and protect the schools and participants involved. This assisted in establishing trust between myself as the researcher, and the respective participants. It also maintained the participant's dignity, reduced worry, felt respected, and gave all participants control and promoted autonomy.

The paper data collected during the fieldwork and equipment tools used were secured and stored in a locked cabinet at my home residence. These included consent forms, anecdotes, journal, camera and audio recorder. The electronic data from questionnaires and transcriptions (audio recordings) were saved in separate electronic folders and secured on a password-protected system with care to ensure confidentiality. The analysis of the data took place at my home residence and was solely carried out by myself as the only researcher of this project. The data was to be made accessible to the public after the completion of my thesis. All data was presented anonymously. Personal information was secured at all times and destroyed after completion of the study. All consent forms were stored in a secure location and will be retained for a period of three years following the completion of the research (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.9 Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), researchers follow similar steps and decisions in a mixed methods study in order to represent, interpret and validate the qualitative and quantitative data and results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Following the choice of a MMPR model based on a convergent parallel design to mixed methods research that best fit the purposes of my study, data collected from interviews, focus group, observations and an online questionnaire were analysed separately using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Both

sets of findings were then merged to answer the main research question and create new understanding on the phenomenon in question. The analyses procedure used reflected the hypothesis of this study and the response to the research questions. Since my MMPR is based on a convergent parallel design in mixed methods research, I developed an adopted visual model (Table 3.3) to explain how I followed the six steps Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) recommended as analyses procedure for a convergent design mixed methods study.

Online questionnaire data analysis procedure	General Procedures in Data Analysis (adopted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)	Interviews, focus groups and observations data Analysis Procedures
1. Each data entry in the online questionnaire was assigned a numeric value automatically through 'Google Forms'. 2. The open-ended questions in the online questionnaire were prepared to be entered in NVivo 11.	Preparing the data for analysis	1. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into word processing files, for analysis. 2. Transcriptions were then checked for accuracy to enter the qualitative data into the analysis software programme NVivo 11 for coding and analysis.
1. Data was inspected visually. 2. Checked for general trends and distributions in the data from the visual forms created through 'Google Forms' online questionnaire. 3. Read all the data in open-ended questions to develop a general understanding.	Exploring the data	1. Read all the data transcriptions to develop a general understanding. 3. Recorded initial thoughts and wrote short memos in the margins to help in organising the data.
1. Pie charts were automatically created through 'Google Forms'. 2.Data from the three open-ended questions were quantified and transformed into Excel bar graphs and also coded through NVivo 11 (transformation of data explained in further detail below). Furthermore, emergent themes from the open-ended questions were also coded through NVivo and used for triangulation.	Analysing the data to address the research questions	1. Data was coded and analysed by using thematic analysis (further details in this section) using NVivo 11. 2. Labels were assigned to codes. 3. Codes were grouped into recurring themes 4. Identified smaller set of themes - dominant themes. 5. Observational data using the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994) was counted and entered into Excel bar graphs.
1. Pie charts were transformed into Excel bar graphs. 2. Results from open-ended questions in online questionnaire were represented in emergent themes and also into bar graphs for triangulation purposes.	Representing the data analysis	1. Represented qualitative findings from interviews, focus groups and observations in emerging themes. 2. Observations: Presented three Excel bar graphs as the outcome of data collected through the use of the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994) together with tables that provided further description of the reading and writing practices observed.
1. Online questionnaire was interpreted separately to answer one subsidiary research question and also interpreted simultaneously with the other findings during the final phase when the data was merged. 2. Results were compared with past literature and theories. 3. Findings were merged.	Interpreting the results	1. The results of each method were interpreted separately and also when combined. All results were interpreted through an assessment of how the research questions were answered. 2. Findings were compared to literature. 3. Personal meaning and reflection to the findings. 4. Findings were merged.

Table 3.3. General procedures in data analysis (adopted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)

As illustrated in Table 3.3, data analysis based on a convergent parallel design occurred in three distinct points:

- First an independent analysis and interpretation of the online questionnaire, to answer the first subsidiary question;

- followed by a presentation of findings and interpretation from the multiple methods used in the three state schools to steer discussion, and answer the other two subsidiary research questions; and

- the merging of both data sets to give an overall interpretation and answer the main research question.

Outcomes from interviews, focus groups and the open-ended questions of the online questionnaire developed overlapping themes and these were triangulated prior to the overall merging of findings to ensure that my story is told in the best way possible to comprehensively answer all my research questions. According to Greene (2007), "the interpretations of the meaning of the mix - reside in the cognitive processing of the inquirer" (p. 143). A side-by-side comparison strategy was adopted to compare both sets of results for merged data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This means that both sets of data were presented together in a discussion which became "the vehicle" for merging the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 223). Conclusions were made from the similarities and differences which emerged (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Bryman, 2007; Slonim-Nevo & Nevo, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

In this study, the observed boys' levels of involvement during schooled reading and writing practices and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were reduced to numeric counts to inform the rest of the quantitative and qualitative data (Bazeley, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This strategy provided for a more comprehensive and detailed picture of the findings, that also assisted me in the process of merging this study's findings. The qualitative data chosen was quantified as follows:

- *Observations*: scores were assigned to the theoretical model of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994) – five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) - and a rubric was developed to score qualitative responses on a five-point scale i.e., the number of times each level of involvement appeared in the reading and writing activities observed.

- *Three open-ended questions in the online questionnaire*: manually counting the number of times a theme or code appears in the data using NVivo 11.

A number of authors have addressed this interactive analytical strategy in mixed methods literature (Bazeley, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Onwuegbuzi & Teddlie, 2003; Caracelli & Greene, 1993). In 2006, Teddlie and Tashakkori referred to this process as 'conversion' and highly considered it as one of the design features in mixed methods research. Several themes emerged from the open-ended responses of the online questionnaire. Each theme was binarised by assigning a score of one or zero for each individual in the sample. Therefore, a display with Excel bar graphs was created to compare the number of counts for each individual to the themes that emerged from the open-ended questions. During the interpretation of my findings I further explained the significant relationship found among the transformation data with the other data, and what meaning was drawn from this relationship (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The online questionnaire's close-ended responses were automatically analysed through the Google Forms document throughout the process of data collection. With each response, the pie chart graphs updated the statistical results until no more responses turned in. The questionnaire was sent via email three times (Zúñiga, 2004); the last one indicating that there was no need to send the questionnaire again since just a few replied. The main turnout occurred when the first two emails were sent. The final set of statistical data was earmarked for transformation into Excel bar graphs for independent analysis, and later on for triangulation purposes during the final interpretation stage.

Qualitative data were analysed through Thematic Analysis [TA]. This analysis strategy is a popular method amongst phenomenological researchers and

is commonly used as a reduction method when coding data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Roulston, 2001). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) TA is attuned with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms and its openness offers a flexible research tool to generating rich and complex data. The theoretical flexibility TA provides is in line with the epistemological stance of pragmatism and my decision to conduct a MMPR. TA also matched with my intention to minimise researchers' bias and create new understandings on the lived reading and writing experiences of the young boys. Moreover, individual interviews and focus group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim (Cohen et al., 2007). The computer software programme, NVivo 11, was then used to assist with categorising, coding, and data storage.

Preparation of the data for the software and the qualitative methods that were used required me to transcribe all the audio recordings from the individual and focused interviews. Participants were asked to choose the language they would like the interviews to be conducted in (Maltese or English). All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the English language, as everyone felt more confident to speak Maltese. I knew that this would take longer but I preferred to put the participants' preferences before mine throughout the study. The task of transcribing the focus groups' data was more time-consuming and complicated than the conventional interviews. The challenge was to take account of who was talking in the group and what exactly was being said when participants talked over each other (Bryman, 2016). Having a high quality microphone was of great help in this case.

Braun and Clarke (2006) described TA within several stages that are the clear guiding set of principles to be conducted in a rigorous way. Subsequently, to analyse the qualitative date collected from the nine interviews and six focus groups within the three schools chosen I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of TA (Table 3.4).

Phase	*Description of the process*
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 3.4. Six stages to conduct Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Common patterns began to emerge during data transcription. Repeated reading of the transcriptions to search for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) led to more indicative codes and these were then inserted in the software programme NVivo 11 for organisational purposes. All data were categorised and sorted in the emerging codes. The emergent patterns and themes

were directed by the data - inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) - these were related to the conceptual ground of the study and consequently potential themes developed. Most of the themes were further cut down to fewer themes as some could be easily merged in one heading. A thematic 'map' was finally generated - this is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis (Figure 4.16). The final themes formed a firm foundation for me to present my findings. Finally, selected extracts from the data were used and substantiated with relevant literature to produce a scholarly Analysis, Finding and Discussion chapter for this thesis.

The field notes from the observation schedules were reread immediately after they were produced, to make sure that what I wrote was ready for the analysis phase of my study. Observational schedules were also typed and filed in NVivo 11, and repeatedly read before identifying the scenarios that are presented in Chapter 4. To strike a balanced representation of the overall classroom observations, I decided that it would be ideal to present two scenarios from each school indicating two contrasting levels of boys' involvement in learning during reading and writing activities.

After the first two distinct points of the analysis procedure were finalised, I worked to merge and interpret the final results to answer my main research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). At this final stage of my analysis and findings, I discussed in what ways triangulation of all methods used made sense together and produced new understandings on the key concepts being explored. It was challenging to merge the different sets of data in a meaningful way. Nonetheless, substantiating the overall findings acquired through the research process of my MMPR with the literature relevant to the conceptual grounds of my study allowed for the creation of new and insightful understandings concerning young boys and literacy in Malta (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Denscombe, 2008; Hanson, 2008).

3.10 Methodological Limitations

A potential limitation of this study is that it focused mainly on boys and their reading and writing practices within Maltese state schools therefore this might provide a partial view of boys and early literacy learning in Malta (considering that are three sectors for educational provision). Notwithstanding, taking into account the purposes of this study, the use of mixed methods

phenomenological research and the inclusion of several stakeholders, it is hoped that this study would serve as a contribution to the existing local gap in knowledge and as a resource to parents, teachers, literacy teams, policymakers and other stakeholders interested in gender equity and the quality of early literacy learning in Maltese schools. Alternative monomethod designs for this study would not have captured the required strong and credible perspective on young boys' lived schooled reading and writing experiences. It is hoped that the findings from my MMPR study will create new understanding of how young boys and their reading and writing experiences are positioned in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

3.11 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter was pivotal in providing a background for a better understanding of the synergy between the theoretical linkages within this study. It showed how pre-research assumptions linked to several theoretical perspectives, formed the conceptual grounds, and how this provided direction towards determining a theoretically flexible explicit research design and the correct fieldwork. In the subsequent chapters I report on the data produced by the study, and situate its analysis within the established conceptual grounds. Finally, the conclusions from the merged findings are aligned with the components of this study's conceptual framework to reinforce the research's theoretical foundation (Trafford & Leshem, 2009).

Chapter 4: Analysis, Findings and Discussion

4.1 Chapter Introduction

Following an adoption of the principles of a convergent parallel design in MMPR (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2016; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) the data analysis, findings and discussion in this chapter will be presented in three distinct points to answer the research questions of this study (Table 4.1). The three subsidiary questions and main research question of this enquiry will be addressed through these points. The first two sections will present an independent analysis and presentation of the findings from an online questionnaire sent to early primary teachers from three Maltese state schools. Findings from the online questionnaire answered the first subsidiary question, and findings from the second section countered for the second and third subsidiary questions (Table 4.1). In the second section, findings from the focus groups, interviews, and open-ended responses from the online questionnaire were merged for purposes of triangulation to make sense of the data and answer the third subsidiary research question in the best possible way.

Relevant literature will be linked to each section to steer discussion emanating from the presented findings. The main discussion will be presented in a third section which focused on an argument grounded in the comparison of data from the online questionnaire sent to all state schools and data from the three state schools to create new understandings of the phenomenon of this study. Robson and McCartan (2016) support similar reasoning in undergoing investigations as they claimed, "Go for whatever approach best tells the story that you are presenting" (p. 495).

Question number	Research Questions: 3 subsidiary research questions and 1 over-arching research question	Methods
1	What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?	**Online questionnaire:** classroom teachers and literacy teachers working in the early primary years of Maltese state schools
2	How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?	**Observations:** three state schools; three Year 1 classrooms (five- to six-year-old boys)
3	What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?	**Interviews**: Heads of School; Heads of Department (Literacy); Year 1 teachers. **Focus groups**: Parents' focus groups; boys' focus groups (five- to six-year-olds)
4	Over-arching research question: Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?	**Interpretation of the merged results** will provide an answer to the over-arching research question. Identify content areas, similarities and differences between all methods used for data collection in this study.

Table 4.1. Methods matrix underpinned by the principles adopted from a

Convergent Parallel Design in Mixed Methods (Creswell & Plano Clark,

2011).

This mixed methods investigation had four major functions that formed the phases of its organisation and the presentation of analysis, findings and discussion in this chapter:

- Tapping into the views and experiences of early primary teachers (Years 1 and 2; teaching age group five- to seven-year-olds) in Maltese state schools, and comparing them with relevant global research and popular discourses relating to explanations for boys' underachievement and the concepts of early literacy learning and school readiness. ⌐SEP⌐

- Investigating schooled reading and writing practices in three Year 1 classrooms (in 3 different state schools) and its impact on five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning.

- Drawing together statements from early primary years teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents of young boys in three Maltese state schools, with a design which focuses on the voices of five- to six-year-old boys.

- Mixing the findings from the online questionnaire and the overall findings from the three state schools to understand the complex phenomenon of this study better.

Consequently, in the sections that follow the analysis, findings and a brief discussion of the first three of the four functions above are presented separately to answer the three subsidiary questions. This will be followed by an overall discussion emanating from a mix of the key findings of the four methods used to create a richer conceptualisation of the phenomenon in question. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 5) a summary of the overall findings will be presented to put forward the recommendations to all stakeholders in education, as well as implications for policy and practice.

4.2 Findings from the Online Questionnaire

The online questionnaire method in this study assisted in providing a richer picture and setting the general terrain of the phenomenon under investigation in a Maltese context. As explained earlier, the questionnaire (Appendix F) was adapted from the work of Alloway et al. (2002) on boys, literacy and schooling. The study by Alloway et al. (2002) inspired the roots of this enquiry since similar data from a Maltese context seemed to be lacking. The method used also served for purposes of triangulation during the comparison phase of this MMPR study.

The online questionnaire (developed through Google Forms) was sent out to four hundred teachers in the early primary years of all Maltese state schools in 2017. The participants in this online survey were early primary classroom teachers (teaching five- to seven-year-olds), literacy support teachers (providing classroom teachers and complementary teachers with in-class and pull-out literacy support) and complementary teachers (providing literacy support to children as from the age of five, mainly through pull-out and also in-class sessions). The purpose for selecting this particular group of participants was to include those teachers involved with the daily literacy pedagogies and practices during the first two years of compulsory schooling in Maltese state schools (Years 1 and 2).

The online questionnaire was presented in three sections:

- Section 1 sought background information on teachers (their age, current role, teaching experience). ⌞SEP⌟

- Section 2 contained Likert-scale items, where teachers indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with nine statements (drawn from research and literature).

- Section 3 (optional) asked questions related to gender and existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

The online questionnaire in this study was driven by the following subsidiary research question:

What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?

The highlighted words 'a two-minute online questionnaire' in the subject line of the email sent to all participants might have been key to a positive response from the questionnaire data in my study. A total of 193 out of 400 participants (48%) responded to the online questionnaire within a few weeks. The majority responded in the first two weeks following a second reminder. The rate of responses for the nine Likert scale items ranged between 190 and 193. As to the three open-ended questions (these were optional) the response rate ranged between 114 and 162. The favourable outcome, which will be rigorously analysed and interpreted below, enabled me to describe, explore and contextualise through an educator's lens the boys and literacy phenomenon within an early years school-based Maltese context and how this relates to similar research in the field. Likert scale items were underpinned by popular discourses in media and educational research related to the concepts of 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' and the open-ended questions focused more on existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Overall, data collected from the online questionnaire provided me with another tool to dig deeper in this complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Table 4.2 displays the level of participation by gender, age, the teachers' respective role at that point in time, the number of years of teaching experience and the number of professional development courses relevant to literacy education undertaken in the past ten years. The statistical data presented in Table 4.2 reaffirms that similar to other countries around the world, Malta has a high percentage of female teachers in the early years (93.8% of the respondents were female) (Brownhill et al., 2016; Darmanin, 2012). The number of literacy support teachers (15) who took part in this questionnaire was less than the rest due to the fact that this group of teachers formed part of a small team in each of the ten college-based system in Maltese state schools. The level of participation of Year 1, Year 2 and complementary teachers was very similar (58-52-68 teachers). Likewise, the respondents' age range was varied equally between a 20-60+ years

continuum and this was also recurrent in the teaching years of experience (0-20+). The majority of the respondents stated that they attended ten or less professional development courses related to literacy and this finding reflected the fact that the importance of literacy and literacy professional development courses recently gained its popularity in Maltese schools (MEDE, 2014b).

Gender	Number of participants	Percentage rate %
Men	12	6.3
Women	181	93.8
Current role in Maltese state schools		
Year 1 Teacher	58	30.1
Year 2 Teacher	52	26.9
Literacy Support Teacher	15	7.8
Complementary Teacher	68	35.2
Age		
20-30	47	24.5
30-40	69	35.9
40-50	54	28.1
50-60+	22	11.5
Teaching experience		
0-5 years	36	18.8
5-10 years	27	14.1
10-15 years	40	20.9
15-20 years	39	20.4
More than 20 years	49	25.7
Number of literacy PD courses in the past 10 years		
0-5	63	32.6
5-10	63	32.6
10-15	40	20.7
15-20	16	18.3
More than 20	11	5.7

Table 4.2. Online questionnaire: Levels of participation as reported by respondents

The first statement in the questionnaire presented a neuroscientific claim that underpins one of the popular explanations for boys' underachievement in literacy attainment.

Figure 4.1 indicated that the majority of the respondents (43%; 83 out of 192 teachers) preferred to remain neutral in response to this statement. On the other hand, 28% (54 out of 192 teachers) believed that the difference between girls' and boys' brain development influenced boys' early literacy learning. The remaining 18% (34 out of 192 teachers) disagreed. The unstableness of these results revealed the possibility of an ambiguity and uncertainty on aspects of the topic.
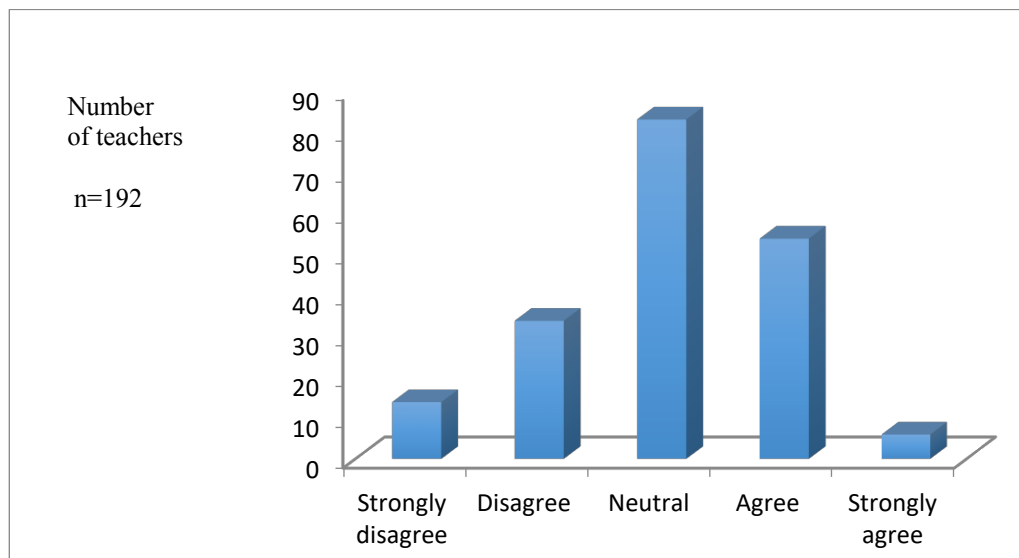
Figure 4.1. Online questionnaire statement 1: The difference between boys' and girls' brain development account for boys' early literacy learning

Several claims in research on gender and brain development indicated a difference in the way boys' and girls' brains develop, especially in the early years, and highlighted how such awareness might be useful for teachers to inform their classroom literacy pedagogies and practices (Biddulph, 1997; Hawke et al., 2009; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). It is evident that a consistent ambiguity on biological explanations to the complex phenomenon of boys' underachievement is felt both in the global educational research available and also through the cautious reactions of Maltese early primary teachers (Biddulph, 1997; Bray,

Gardner & Parsons, 1997; Pollack, 1998; Sommers, 2000; Warrington & Younger, 2000).

Moreover, it was interesting to note in the responses above that similar to various prominent discourses in literature, a higher number of Maltese teachers in the early primary years tended to view the innate biological differences between the sexes as a factor that influences boys' literacy attainment when compared to those who disagreed with the statement (Brizendine, 2006; Gurian, 2001; Pollack, 1998; Skolverket, 2006). Scholars argued that the biological and cultural explanations for gender differences cannot be treated separately, especially when it comes to the development of a reading and writing brain (Connolly, 1994; Hart & Risley, 1995; Morisset, Barnard & Booth, 1995). This raises the question as to how this fusion of assumptions and beliefs might be impacting on the literate experiences of boys in co-educational early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools. Data collected from the three state schools will provide further insight into this controversial argument in a Maltese context.
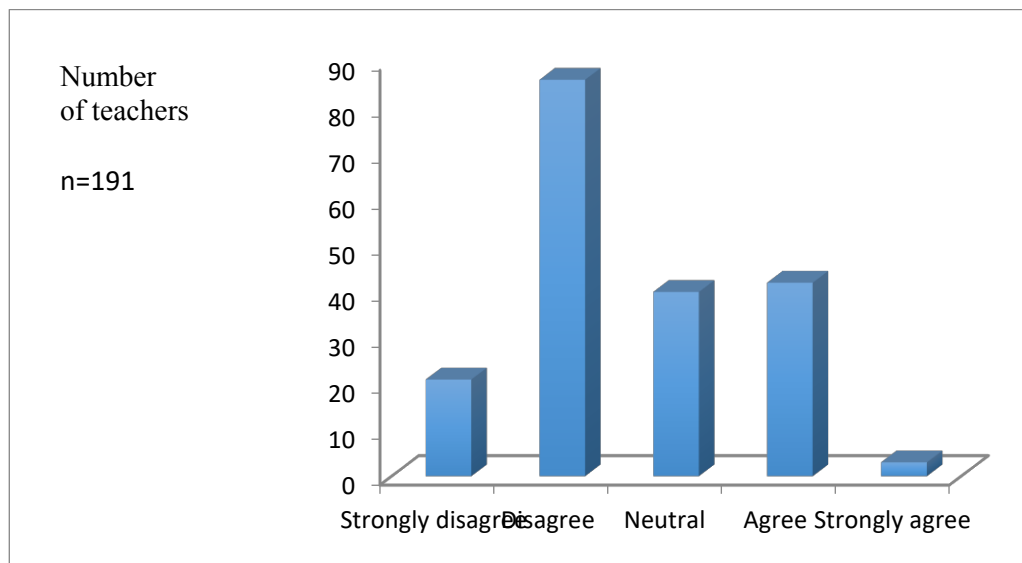
Figure 4.2. Online questionnaire statement 2: Boys are not ready for formal schooling at the compulsory entry age (Year 1, five- to six-year-olds)

It is clearly evident in Figure 4.2 that 56% (107 from 191), the majority of the participants, disagree with this claim. On the other hand, 20.8% early primary teachers (40 out of 191) were uncertain and 23.5% of the respondents (45 out of 191) agreed. In the homogeneous claim above boys are perceived, as not being

'ready' for formal schooling, and it is evident that most of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Literature shows that there has been a major shift in the way 'school readiness' could be interpreted (Allen, 2001; Britto, 2012; Graue, 1993, 2006; Meisels, 1999). For example, if the claim was interpreted based on what the child knows (alphabet, shapes etc.) the outcome would mean that the majority of respondents believed that 'unready' boys were well prepared to cope with formal schooling at the age of five in Maltese state schools (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Conversely, the majority of respondents could have interpreted the claim as boys are ready to learn and that the content to be taught could be delivered in ways that meet their unique needs. Consequently, the responses to this statement might be based on different interpretations of 'school readiness' and these will be explored further in the narrative responses within this study as the interpretation of this claim has an important influence on how boys might be experiencing early literacy learning.
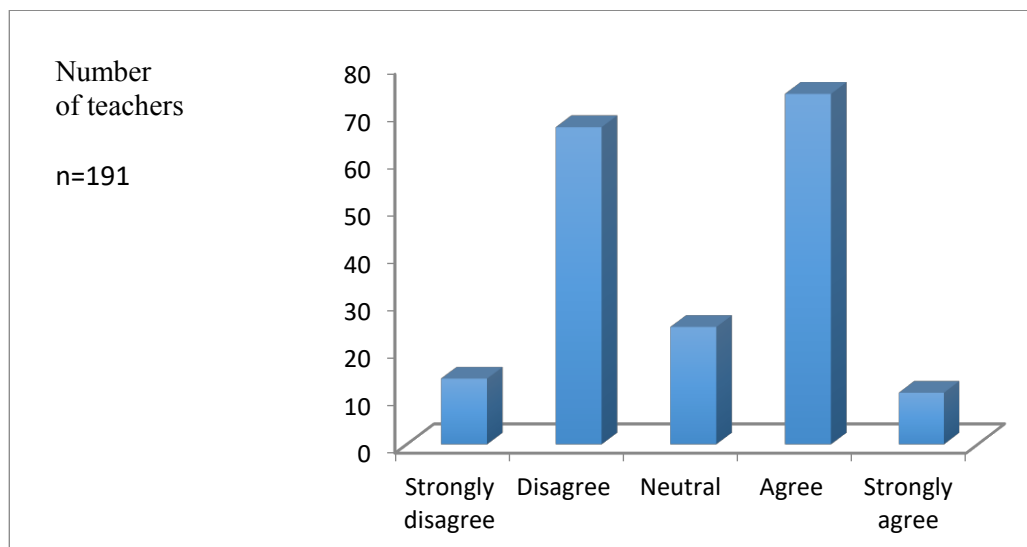
Figure 4.3. Online questionnaire statement 3: There are not enough books of high-interest value to boys available in schools

Figure 4.3 shows that 44.5% (85 out of 191) of the respondents agreed that books that match boys' interests were not available in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Another 13.1% (25 out of 191) questioned the availability of such books. Notwithstanding, 42.4% (81 out of 191) of the respondents (42.4%) disagreed with this statement. The major response to this claim relates to

a recent research study by Dobbs-Oates (2011) who claimed that in pre-school classrooms and at homes books appeal more to females' interests (e.g. fairy tales) and the author adds that such adult book choice might influence the reading interests of boys. Research also showed that some boys might be banned from reading what they are interested in and are often disciplined for not being traditional (Millard, 1997; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Notwithstanding, in the context of this study a significant number of the respondents disagree with this claim resulting in a tie to whether books match boys' interests or not in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Some scholars argued about literary genres that promote aggression and might backfire by reinforcing bad behaviours and disaffection of literacy learning within schools (Alloway et al., 2002; Hammett & Sanford, 2008). In this study, data collected from the three Maltese state schools, and including young boys' voices, allows for a deeper insight into the complexity of such popular claims in media and educational research.
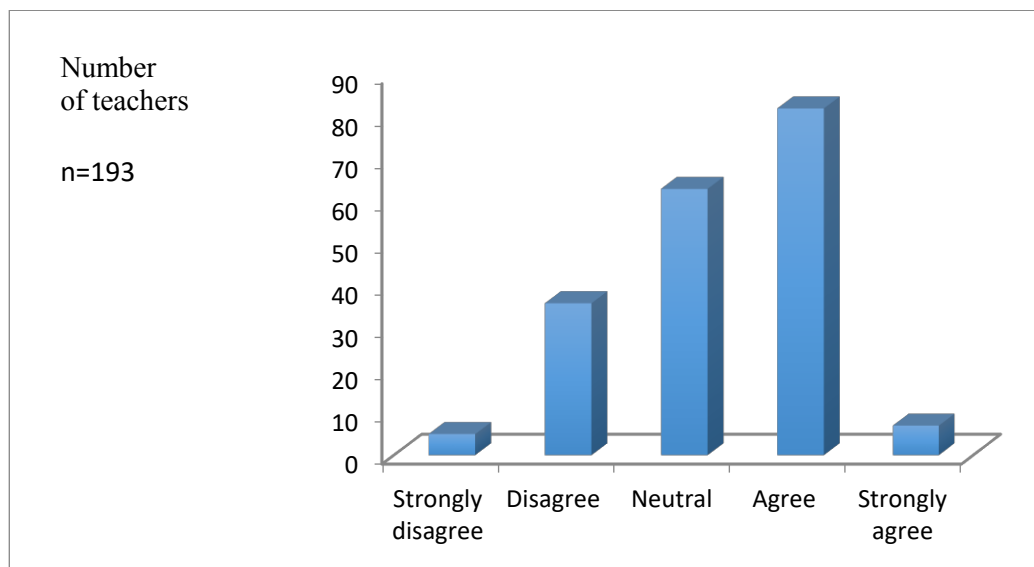
Figure 4.4. Online questionnaire statement 4: Boys prefer technological forms of literacy to print-based forms of literacy

In Figure 4.4, statistical evidence showed that the majority 46.1% of teachers (90 out of 193) favoured the popular rhetoric and support studies showing that young children, including boys, prefer technological forms of literacy during their schooled literacy practices (Kress, 2003; Marsh 2010).

Nonetheless, 32.6% of the respondents (60 out of 193) were not sure about the validity or non-validity of this statement and a minority of 21.3% (41 out of 193) maintained that boys preferred print-based forms of literacy. The latter two results that add up to more than half of the respondents to this claim might have implications in the way boys in Maltese state schools experience literacy at home and the way they are experiencing it at school as has been discovered in recent research (Marsh, 2010b). Further insight on this aspect will be explored in this chapter.
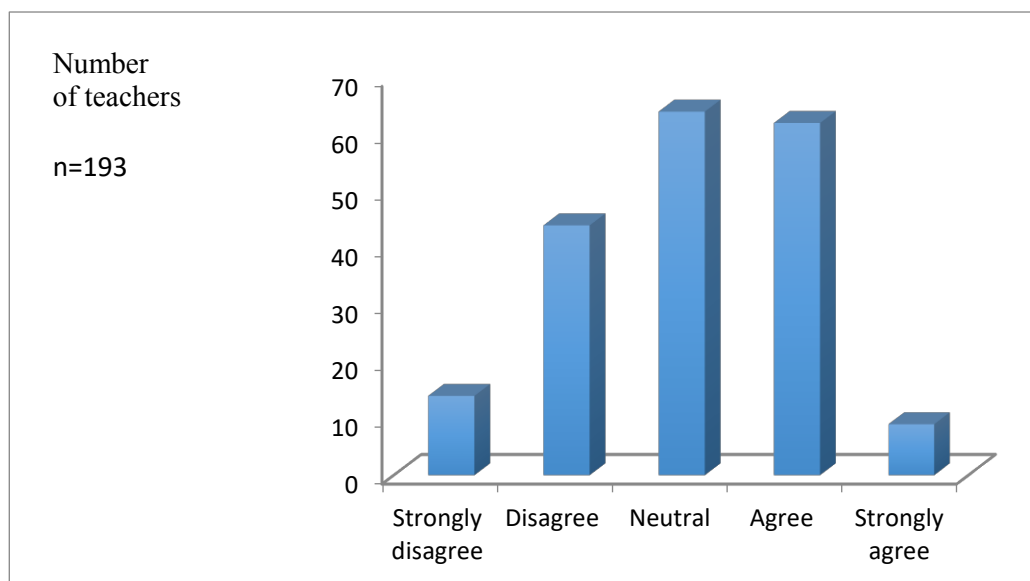
Figure 4.5. Online questionnaire statement 5: If more adult men were involved with teaching/volunteering to role model and support boys in reading and writing activities, boys' literacy learning would improve

There were more participants in favour with this popular claim (36.8%; 71 out of 193 teachers) rather than against (30.1%; 58 out of 193 teachers). Alloway et al. (2002) claimed that if schools draw upon role-model theories to understand boys' underachievement they would never be able to adopt a broader view that would allow for the improvement of literacy teaching and learning. Nonetheless, 33.2% of the respondents (64 out of 193) seemed quite sceptical about this statement. The ties in the responses once again reflect the theoretical tensions that underpin the literature on similar claims. Indeed, other studies and policy

documents argued about the benefits of having males as role models, particularly with boys (Brozo, 2002; Gold & Reis, 1982; OECD, 2017; Owens, 2010).

On the other hand, research claimed that gender differences in the role of an educator do not affect teaching and learning (Driessen, 2007; Sokal & Katz, 2008). In the same vein, it is believed that factors such as gender, race or class do not determine teaching quality (Bricheno & Thornton, 2006; Francis, 2008; Rowe, 2001) and that there is no specific research claiming that male professionals have an impact on learners' academic performance (Brownhill, 2016). In the sections that follow, this study will provide further evidence and discussion on how this claim is conceptualised within the local context.
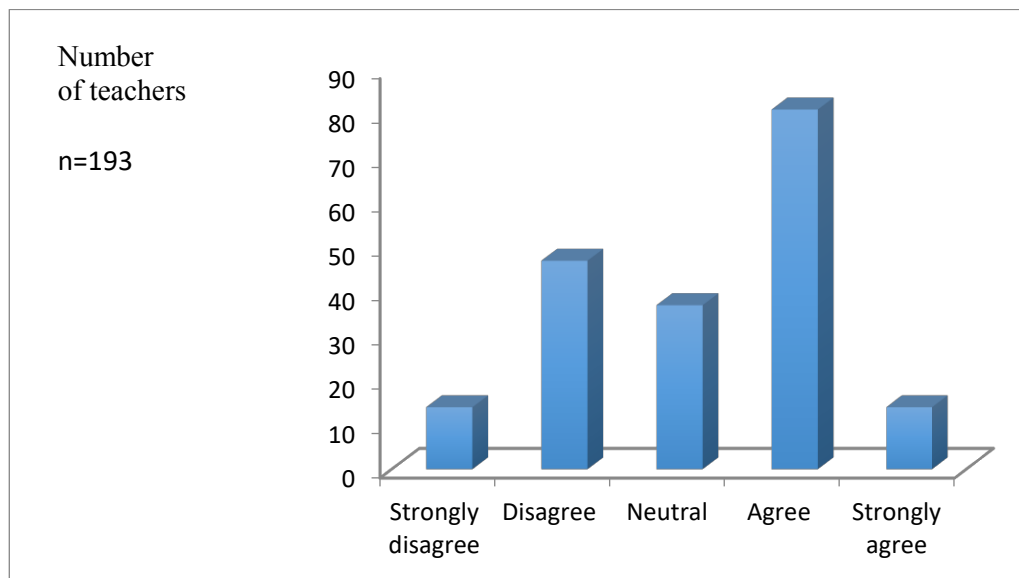
Figure 4.6. Online questionnaire statement 6: Some boys have more difficulty with reading and writing than girls do

Figure 4.6 shows that almost half of the respondents (49.3%; 95 out of 193) concur with the popular international and local research evidence indicating that from a young age some boys struggle more than girls when it comes to reading and writing (Dent, 2017; MEDE, 2013b, 2013c, 2015b, 2016; Mifsud, 2000). Another 19.2% (37 out of 193 teachers) of the participants preferred not to comment on whether they agree or not with this statement and 31.7% (67 out of 193) of the respondents disagreed. The overall outcome of statement 6 has implications on how some boys might be conceptualised in relation to reading

and writing within a Maltese context and raises further questions as to whether the responses in favour would be exerting any influence on the experiences of the boys' reading and writing in early primary classrooms. Further insights from the data collected within three Maltese state schools will provide this study with more detail on how young boys are positioned in relation to the existing reading and writing experiences within early primary classrooms.
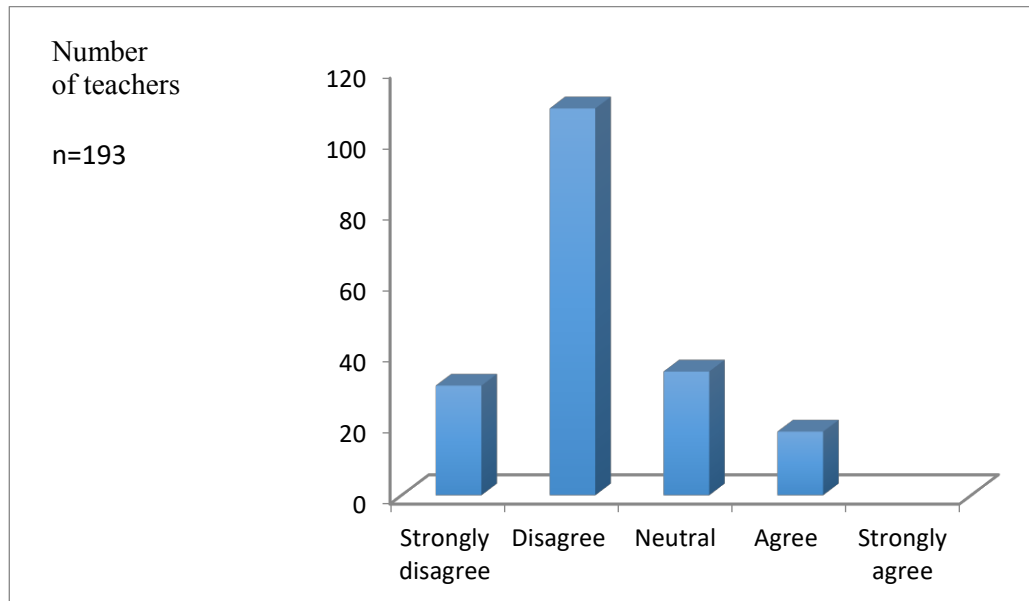
Figure 4.7. Online questionnaire statement 7: Boys often think that reading and writing activities are more appropriate for girls and women

A possible explanation for the high percentage of respondents (72.6%; 140 out of 193 teachers) in disagreement with this statement might have been that teachers had more working experience with young boys. A low percentage of 18.1% (35 out of 193 teachers) were uncertain and a minority of teachers 9.3% (18 out of 193) agreed that some young boys viewed reading and writing as more fitting for girls. The popular issue with how boys identify themselves with reading and writing was much more evident in studies that involved older boys or adult males (Alloway et al., 2002; Gilbert, 1998; Rowe, 2001). Popular discourses and research findings claim that social constructions of masculinity are established amongst boys and this influences their attitudes and performance in literacy (Fine, 2010; Francis, 2000; Millard, 1997). In the context of this study, it is interesting to note, however, the fact that some teachers (9.3%) might have had

experiences with some young boys who were already viewing reading and writing as a female activity.
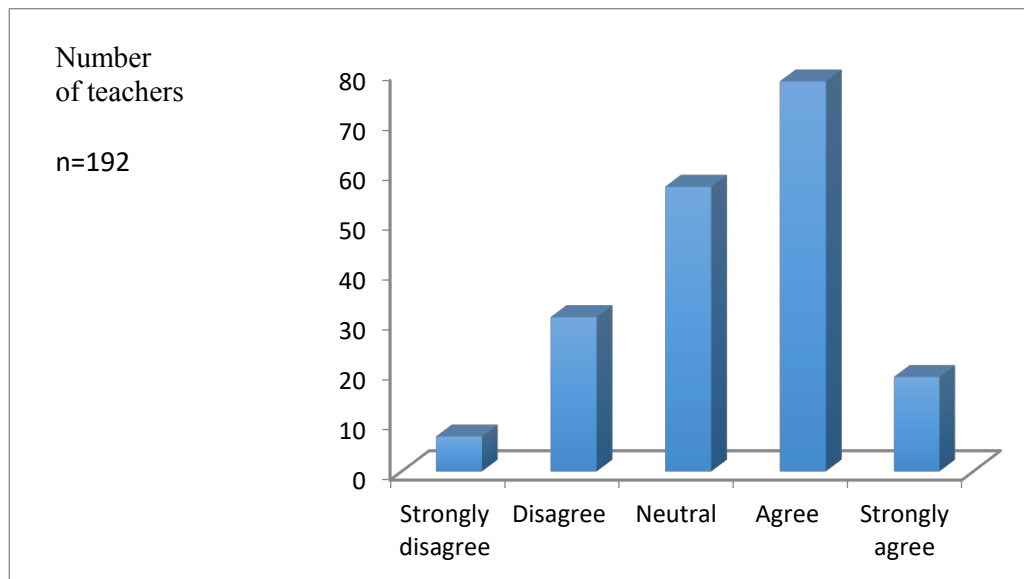
Figure 4.8. Online questionnaire statement 8: Educators need to understand more about gender and literacy instruction in the early years to improve boys' literacy learning

The majority of respondents in Figure 4.8 (50.5%; 97 out of 192) revealed a need for further awareness and deeper understanding of the aspect of gender and early literacy learning. A lower percentage rate of 29.7% (57 out of 192 teachers) are not uncertain about whether such professional development would lead to an improvement in the early literacy learning of boys, while 19.7% (38 out of 192 teachers) feel that they don't need further understanding of the topic in discussion. There seems to be frequent uncertainties and different perspectives in the data presented in this section that might shed further light on the response to this statement in figure 4.8. Some scholars recommend that schools need to provide resources, continuous support and professional development that includes a deeper understanding of how the social construction of gender is transferred in a classroom context (Alloway et al., 2002; Pennycook, 2011).

Number
of teachers

n=193
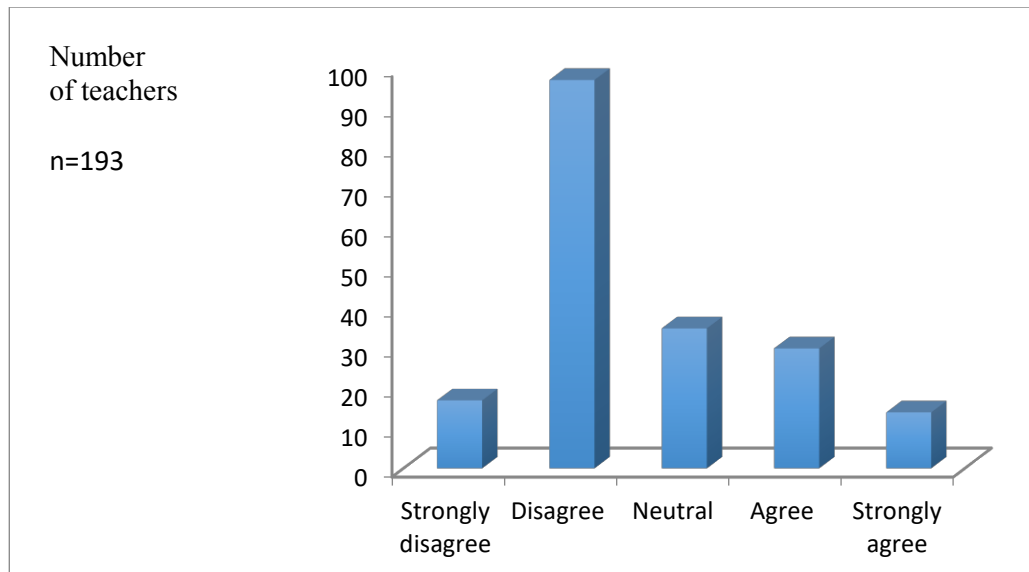
Figure 4.9. Online questionnaire statement 9: Many current literacy practices in early primary classrooms do not motivate boys to engage in literacy learning

It is notable that the majority of the respondents 59.1% (114 out of 193) claimed that early primary literacy practices in Maltese state schools motivated boys to engage in literacy learning. On the other hand, 18.1% (35 out of 193 teachers) were unsure and 22.8% (44 out of 193 teachers) reported that schooled literacy practices at this stage of the early years cycle in Maltese state schools did not engage boys in early literacy learning. Studies showed that diverse pedagogical approaches could produce a positive or a negative effect on boys' engagement during schooled literacy activities (Cigman, 2014; Mulvey, 2010; Stevens 2006). Once again, uncertainties in findings from Figure 4.9 question existing practices and their impact on young boys' literacy learning in a Maltese context. Data from the three state schools will provide more detailed findings related to the latter query, and these will be compared with the findings presented in Figure 4.9.

4.2.1 Online questionnaire: Responses to open-ended questions.

Section 3 of the online questionnaire permitted for optional open-ended comments from teachers on gender and the present schooled reading and writing practices in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. The ten most

prominent responses from the three open-ended questions were categorised and quantified into Excel bar graphs. Some of the teachers' most notable accounts were also provided to show how the categories in the three figures originated.

Question 10: Online questionnaire

What particular teaching-learning strategies have you found to be successful in improving reading and writing outcomes for both boys and girls in the early primary years (Years 1 and 2)?
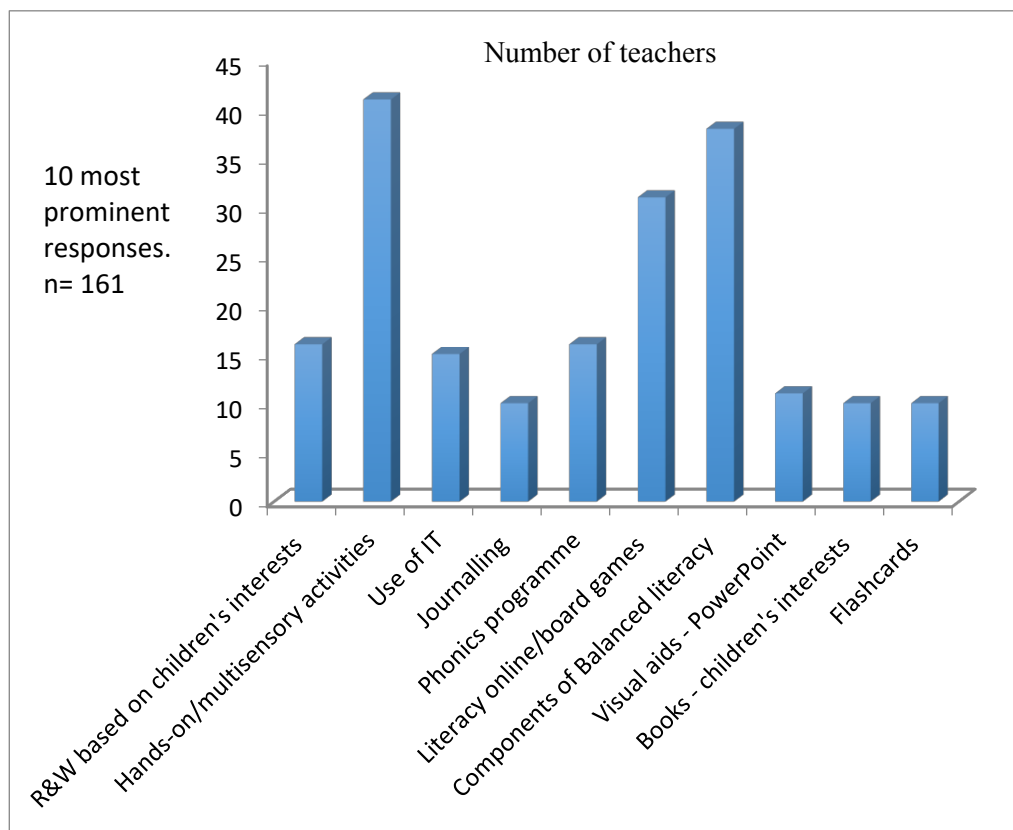
Figure 4.10. Ten most prominent responses to open-ended question 10 in the online questionnaire

A total of 85% of the teachers (161 out of 195) responded to optional question 10 in the questionnaire. The following are some accounts from the three most prominent categories emerging from the teachers' responses to question 10 in the online questionnaire:

1. Hands-on/Multisensory activities

Hands-on activities, using magnetic/plastic letters, interactive whiteboards, magnetic whiteboards, writing in flour/sand, paint, tablets etc.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Multi-sensory techniques - salt trays, play-dough, shaving foam, magnetic letters etc.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

2. Components of Balanced Literacy

Shared Reading and shared writing. Instill in children a love for books, and present reading and writing as meaningful and purposeful activities they can relate to and adopt.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Shared reading and guided reading, modelled writing and independent writing, e.g., journal writing and prewriting to drafting strategies; reference to editing conventions, e.g. use of capital letters, spaces between words, use of full stop etc.; encourage publishing of children's work - sharing of writing and receiving positive feedback.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

3. The use of IT and board games

IT and online literacy games.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Games; involving board games and online games.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

The majority of teachers agreed that hands-on learning is the best way to improve the reading and writing outcomes of five- to seven-year-old boys and girls. Balanced literacy pedagogy was favoured as one of the effective strategies that engaged both boys and girls at this level in the early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools. The use of interactive literacy games as well as board games were also popular amongst the teachers' responses. Figure 4.10 shows that the most effective reading and writing strategies used with young boys and girls in Maltese state schools seemed to be directed towards a more active and hands-on approach. It is interesting to note that phonics, flashcards and the use of PowerPoints were rated as some of the least effective reading and writing strategies with young children in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Question 11: Online questionnaire:

Have you found particular teaching-learning strategies that appear to work better for boys' reading and writing practices in the early primary years (Years 1 and 2)?
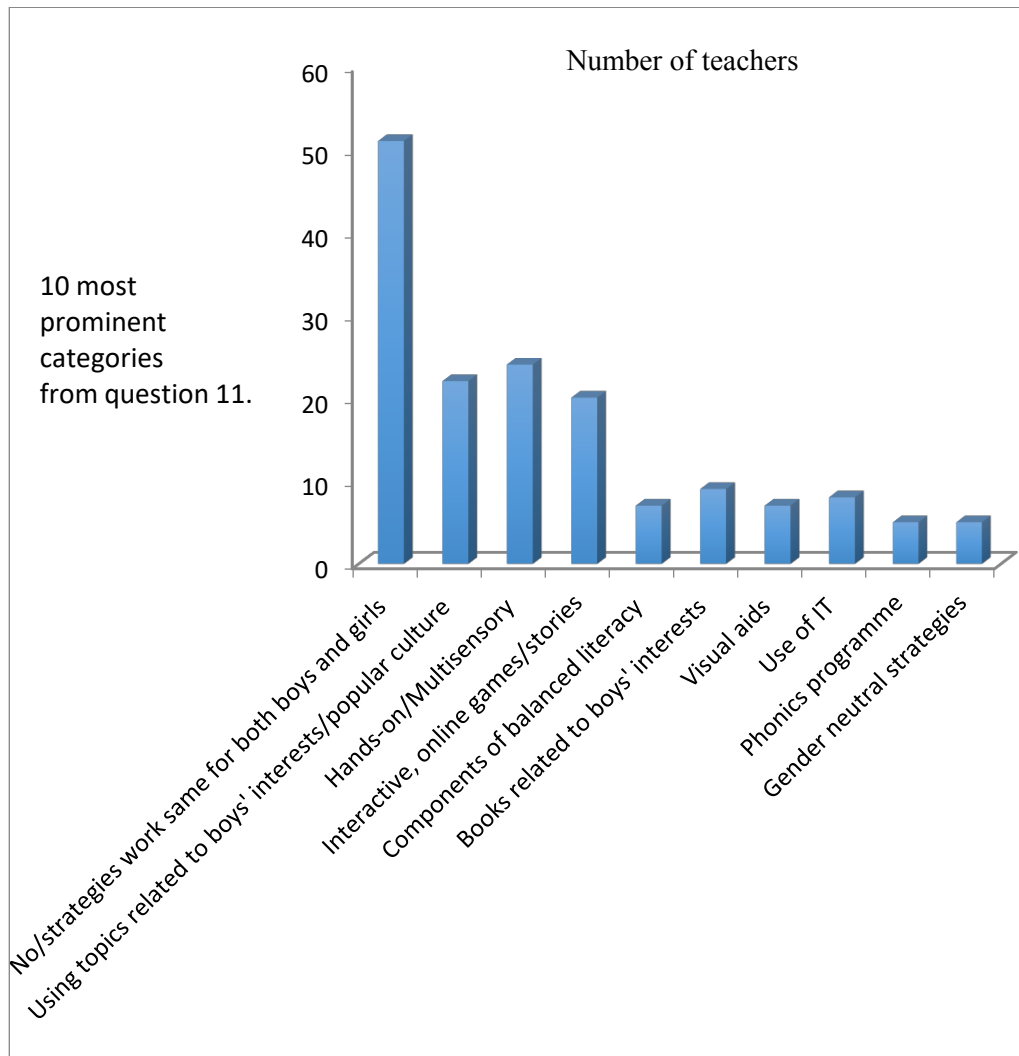
Figure 4.11. Ten most prominent responses to open-ended question 11 in the online questionnaire

A total of 78% of the teachers (152 out of 195) responded to question 11. The majority of the respondents (34%; 51 out of 152) agreed that there were no particular strategies where boys seemed to be more engaged with when it comes to reading and writing. Once again, hands-on and multisensory strategies were favoured as the most effective strategies for boys (16%; 24 out of 152 teachers) followed by the connection between boys' out-of-school interests and their early

years reading and writing practices (14%; 22 out of 152 teachers). Interactive online games were once again considered to be motivating for boys and the learning of reading and writing at this level (13%; 20 out of 152 teachers). The following are some teachers' accounts of the most prominent categories in response to question 11:

1. Hands-on/Multisensory activities

Hands-on, in a playful way… not straightforward onto the copybook using a pencil!
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Boys prefer hands-on activities, which stimulate their curiosity and technical skills.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

2. Using topics related to boys' interests/popular culture

The topic must be of interest to them and have a purpose for reading or writing.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Giving them reading and writing tasks related to their favourite themes.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

3. The use of Information Technology

Do not focus much on handwriting because most boys can't bother and make more use of IT. Boys love online games, experimenting and discovering.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Boys like games and they love to use the interactive whiteboard.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

In all, data from these two open-ended questions revealed that teachers in Maltese state schools seemed to agree that hands-on and the use of IT were the most popular effective strategies with both boys and girls and also boys in relation to reading and writing in their early primary years. Findings from the open-ended comments seemed to indicate that some popular strategies such as phonics systematic instruction for early reading success (Campbell, 2015; Herold, 2011; Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012) is not so effective with young children including young boys in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Question 12 in the online questionnaire:

Do you have general comments about boys' learning which makes their approach to literacy in school different from girls in general?

10 most prominent categories in question 12. n = 114
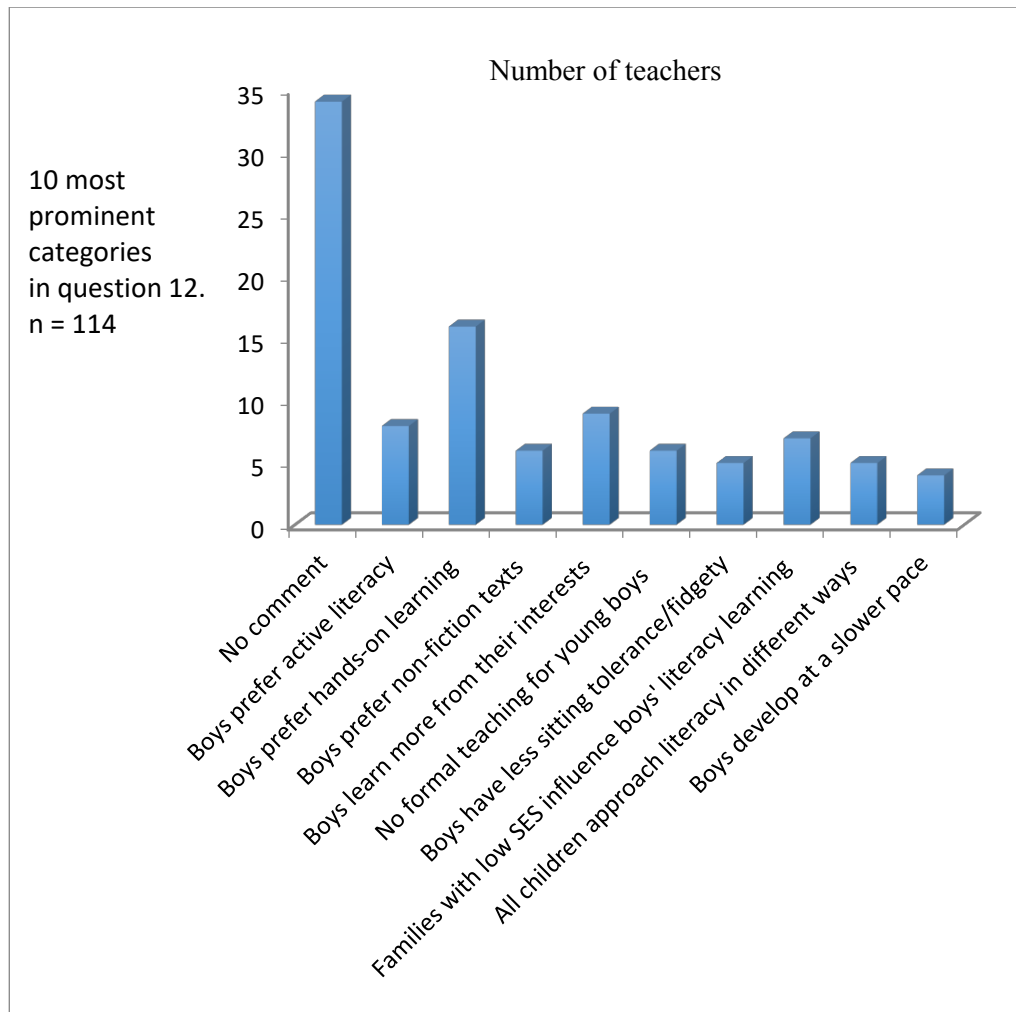
Figure 4.12. Ten most prominent responses to open-ended question 12 in the online questionnaire

A total of 58% of the respondents (114 out of 195 responses) reacted to question 12. Nonetheless, the most prominent category in question 12 indicated that teachers did not have any comments to question 12 (30.7%; 35 out of 114). Similar to Alloway et al.'s (2002) study in Australia, findings from this questionnaire revealed recurrent hesitations when teachers are exposed to sharing their views on this topic. It could be argued that the majority of early primary teachers did not feel confident to express themselves about the complex phenomenon of boys and literacy in general. Indeed this was the question with

least respondents from the three open-ended questions and the majority (30%; 34 out of 114) preferred to write the word 'No' in the comment section. The following are some examples that revealed the most prominent categories from those respondents who opted to comment on question 12 (69.3%; 79 out of 114):

1. Boys prefer hands-on learning

I find that boys may have less concentration and so they will need more help from complementary teachers. But once they are in a small group they tend to concentrate more especially if the lesson is hands-on and not delivered in the traditional way.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Making learning enjoyable and hands-on using different strategies so children do not get bored… When this is lacking the gap between pupils continues to widen.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

2. Boys and active literacy

Boys are less sedentary than girls in my opinion. Having them work in groups and moving around the class allows them to shift their attention to the task at hand and focus more.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Several boys are more energetic than other boys and girls. They need to be physically involved therefore they need action. School rigidity does not motivate such young boys.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

3. Boys' interests

I noticed that boys prefer to choose non-fiction books rather than storybooks from the school library. Their eyes glisten when they see a scientific book full of real photos. However, in general there is lack of reading material which target boys' interests.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

In my opinion, the majority of boys tend to be more technical and tend to be inclined to specific topics. Educators should focus on these topics to get the boys on board in a literacy programme.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

In summary, the data drawn from the open-ended responses of this questionnaire showed that teachers involved with this particular age group noted that boys preferred a 'hands-on' and 'active' approach when it comes to early

literacy learning (five- to seven-year-olds). This is in line with international popular rhetoric and research on boys and literacy (Cigman, 2014; Hanford Morhard, 2013; Stipek, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Furthermore, taking into account boys' interests when it comes to planning for reading and writing was also popular as a strategy that increased engagement. Related to this finding, Pennycook (2011) posits that teachers who position themselves within discourses that promote 'boy-friendly' quick strategies to minimise the statistical gender gap, "a neoliberal agenda of recuperative masculinity is reinstated in the classrooom, and gender justice is no longer served" (p. 11).

Another common prominent category was a sense of movement, interaction with games and also online games related to literacy which reflect recent research on the effectiveness of integrating home literacy experiences into schooled literacy practice (Buckingham, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005). The research-based components of a balanced approach to literacy instruction were viewed by early primary teachers as strategies that fit well with the literacy learning of both boys and girls of this age group. This finding relates to research showing the effectiveness of balanced literacy pedagogy with young children and learners in upper years (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999; Davis, 2013; Mermelstein, 2006; Pearson, 1999; Pappas et al., 1999; Spiegel, 1998; Tompkins, 2013). Conversely, findings from the open-ended comments challenged the popular rhetoric and evidence-based research claiming that phonics instruction is a successful teaching and learning strategy for reading in the early years (Campbell, 2015; DfES, 2006; Herold, 2011; Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012).

4.2.1 Response to research question 1.

> What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?

The aim of the questionnaire was not to critique the perceptions of teachers but rather to use its findings as a representation of their perceptions when it comes to boys and early literacy learning in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. From the explorations and examinations of the association between the popular rhetoric and discourses on boys' underachievement and early primary years teachers' views, beliefs and practices presented above, two powerful

messages were drawn out. These messages are compatible with the long-debated presumptions, discourses and relevant literature around boys' underperformance in literacy attainment, early literacy learning and school readiness.

Firstly, the findings were rather characterized by recurrent hesitations, conflicting interpretations and varied understandings to the statements and questions put forward, similar to the findings of an Australian research from where this questionnaire was adopted (Alloway et al., 2002). This contentious evidence also aligns with the long-debated and controversial popular international claims on boys and literacy learning, which remains a contested topic in the social sciences (Alloway et al., 2002; Connolly, 2004; Fletcher, 2006; Francis, 2000; Hammet & Stanford, 2008; ILA, 2018; Palmer, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Whitmire, 2010). Additional, teachers who participated in this questionnaire tended to favour the popular homogenic discourse in media and educational research related to biological and role-mode theory as solutions that lead to the improvement of boys' literacy learning. This was just as evident in the study of Alloway et al. (2002). In recent research it is argued that such popular discourse gained its popularity through media and published work, and subsequently it effortlessly impacts on teachers' and parents' conceptualisations of boys and literacy; particularly due to the widely held belief that differently structured brains create different minds (Alloway et al., 2002; Fine, 2010).

Secondly, another proposition brought to the fore by the overall responses revealed an intermittent reference as to which literacy pedagogies are key to effective teaching of reading and writing with young boys and also boys and girls in the early years. The majority of respondents to the open-ended questions claimed that a pedagogy underpinned by active and multisensory hands-on learning, use of technology and a balanced approach to literacy instruction are key to engage young boys and also both boys and girls in Maltese early primary classrooms. Similarly, literature and research studies repeatedly show that a playful and balanced approach to the teaching and writing respects the development and engages young children in the best way they could possibly learn (Davis, 2013; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Mermelstein, 2006; Siaulys, 2013; Tompkins, 2013).

Findings from the online questionnaire above were pertinent to answering my first subsidiary research question and to setting the general terrain before

presenting findings from the three Maltese state schools in this chapter. The online questionnaire in my study further proved its worth at the stage where findings from all the methods used were converged. In the next section, data from classroom observations, interviews and focus groups with several stakeholders from the chosen schools will be presented to shed further light on the conflicting perceptions and existing hesitations put forward by 48% of the teachers who daily deal with boys and literacy learning in the early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools.

4.3 Findings from Three State Schools in Malta

4.3.1 The context.

As explained in the previous chapter, the two main reasons for choosing three schools were:

- to create richer understandings of boys' lived reading and writing experiences through young boys themselves, and the perspectives of several stakeholders; and

- to represent educational settings situated in both the Northern and Southern geographical regions of the island, reputational of different socio-economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds across the Maltese islands.

The three primary mixed gender state schools that were chosen for this enquiry formed part of three different colleges. As explained earlier, Malta is a small island state and I had to be extremely cautious to safeguard the promised anonymity to all stakeholders involved in this thesis. Consequently, the context of each of the three schools (Figure 3.4 in Chapter 3) will not be described in great detail and throughout the study (for example geographical regions were not mentioned as this would have made it very easy for any local to identify the schools where the investigation took place). Pseudonyms will be used for each school and all participants in this study to assure complete anonymity. Considering that the context of the study is an island surrounded by the

Mediterranean Sea I decided that names of sea creatures in the Maltese language would be appropriate pseudonyms for the three schools: Sawrella (mackerel); Rużetta (pearly razorfish); and Awwista (lobster). On the other hand, all participants were referred to by different popular names used on the Maltese islands. These names replaced the birth name of each participant.

Data from the three schools was collected during the same period the online questionnaire was sent out to educators, between January and March of 2017. In the sections that follow the main findings and analysis from the three schools will be presented to answer the second and third subsidiary research questions of this study.

4.4 Classroom Observations

One week of observations were conducted in each of the three schools. I recorded my observations by using a self-created observational framework (Appendix E). Fieldwork notes were also taken in my research journal whenever I felt that a particular moment might be useful to record in order to support the data I was collecting by using the observational framework. Since teaching is compartmentalised in the early primary years of Maltese state schools I recorded the teaching and learning of reading and writing practices during Maltese and English lessons. As explained in the methodology chapter of this thesis, the involvement of boys in learning during the reading and writing practices observed was recorded by using the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven Scale for involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994).

It was impossible to include the observation scenarios of each of the lessons observed during the three weeks of observation within the three schools. Consequently, in the following section, I decided to present two scenarios, one related to reading and the other to writing showing two contrasting levels of boys' involvement in learning within each Year 1 classroom. Nonetheless, an excel bar graph and a table will be presented together with the two scenarios in each school to present the level of involvement during all the reading and writing activities observed. This data provided answers to subsidiary question 2 of this enquiry:

Research Question 2

How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?

4.4.1 School 1: Sawrella School.

Sawrella was one of the co-educational Maltese state schools where learners were mainly monolingual and coming from different levels of socio-economic backgrounds. Staff members and children used Maltese as their first language. The environment of the Year 1 classroom I conducted my one week of observations in, was a room full of groups of small tables and chairs facing an interactive whiteboard. A small kitchen area and a book corner were spotted, however, children never made use of these areas during the week of observations. Number, letter charts and flash cards in English and Maltese were displayed and covered most of the walls in the classroom, hanging from other strings across the room. There were also shelves holding stacks of copybooks covered in different colours and several piles of Maltese, English and Math workbooks. At the back of the classroom there were four computers on four separate tables facing the wall opposite the interactive whiteboard. These were not used during the time I spent observing in this classroom. On each wooden desk all children had two strips of paper laminated and taped on the surface. One of the strips had the Maltese 30-letter alphabet and the other strip showed the numbers up to 20. There were 19 children in this classroom, 10 of which were boys. I gained consent from parents to observe the reading and writing practices of five of the boys in this class. Maltese was the first language of most of the boys in Sawrella School. Those children who did not cope with the classroom's literacy instruction at the age of five were screened for their reading and writing skills. If the outcome of the checklist assessment (DQSE, 2009) turns out to be unsatisfactory, these five- to six-year-old year old children would then attend literacy pull-out sessions with the complementary teacher of the school.

The following are two samples of literacy scenarios observed during the week I spent in Sawrella School. Both scenarios will be followed by a discussion on how the schooled practices impacted on the five- to six-year-old year old

boys' involvement in learning and the extent to which the pedagogy used in both scenarios relates to current research.

Sawrella School, scenario 1: Shared reading during a Maltese lesson.

Finishing off a writing task on a workbook, John told his Year 1 teacher excitedly: "Miss, read us a story!" The teacher waited for everyone to finish their workbook tasks and gathered all the children on the carpeted area. She chose a big book from the class library. The boys were hooked and Lee proudly told his schoolmates that he knew the story already. The teacher read the title, introduced the author and also commented on the blurb. The boys I observed were alert and highly participated when their teacher questioned. Zak (who was always pointed out during other schooled literacy practices for being slow and absent) was surprisingly excited, engaged and interested throughout the session. It was a Maltese story, and considering the fact that most of the boys spoke Maltese in this class they were able to comprehend well. Some of the boys jumped up and repeated the gestures the teacher acted out while reading. The teacher also referred to particular letters and letter sounds from the text. The boys observed were all engaged and repeated the letter sound the teacher pointed out and laughed. Shared communication between teacher and children in the classroom was present at all times. Some boys added information and described in detail the images in the big book. The teacher encouraged them to blend some words to guess what the dragon ate. Boys were eager to do so and some of them managed. Steve noted a 'dash' in a sentence and asked his teacher to explain and he also linked the story to a film he watched recently. The teacher extended the session by showing the children a clip of an alligator in English. All boys were involved and got super excited while they jumped, danced and attempted to sing in English. It was interesting to note that John who looked rather passive in the workbook task, participated and replied to questions in English. Karl spotted the difference between the crocodile in the story and the one on the clip. The level of engagement of boys was intense, and it was observed that they participated and communicated more often than girls. This activity occurred once during the one week of observations in Sawrella School.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 5 ('The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period').

Sawrella School, scenario 2: Maltese writing task (assessment).

The children in class were told that they were going to do a task so that the teacher will get to know what they have learned about Maltese so far. The school bags were placed on the desks so that it will serve as a barrier between the five-year-old children. Therefore, they were not able to steal glances at each other's work during this literacy assessment task. All children were told to remain silent and seated during this task otherwise no points will be given. A pack of four A4 sheets was distributed; one for every child. At some point or another during this writing task all boys that were being observed got up and asked their teacher what they had to do next. They did not manage to work it out independently as the text seemed beyond their ability to read and comprehend. Their emerging invented spelling and reversed letters were rubbed off, and they were told how to write the words correctly. Most of the boys struggled and yawned while trying to figure things out. On the other hand, two of the boys coped quite well but still asked for support from their teacher, as they were not able to complete all the exercises on their own. The exercises were very similar to grammar exercises found in textbooks. All boys observed used the rubber most of the time, as they felt uncertain and seemed confused. At one point some boys were on page 4 and others were on page 7. Zak looked tired and told his teacher: "I'm tired, Miss". The teacher argued that some children could not cope with the task because parents did not work with the children at home. In the meantime, most of the boys ended up playing with their rubbers, sharpeners and pencils or their bag. Some children approached me to help them. They were desperate for support to get it done. The first boy that finished did so after 50 minutes. The teacher urged all children to hurry up as break time was approaching. She explained that this Maltese assessment was too long and that the exercises in the pack were all covered during previous Maltese literacy lessons in class. She also explained that

the English assessment was shorter. Some of the boys observed took more than 1 hour to finish in the best way they could.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 2 ('The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around').

During the week I spent in Sawrella School, the level of boys' involvement in learning during other reading and writing practices was counted by making use of the five-level descriptors (Table 3.2) of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994). Figure 4.13 shows how this data was analysed (counted manually and entered in an excel bar graph) to indicate at one glance the level of five- to six-year-old year old boys' involvement in learning during the reading and writing practices they experienced in Year 1.
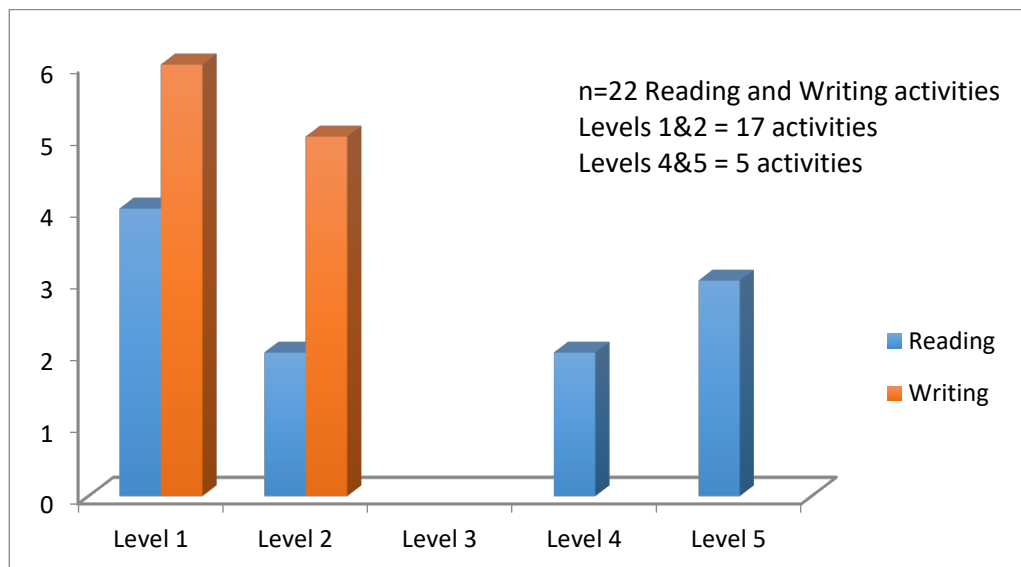
Figure 4.13. The level of involvement in learning of five- to six-year-old boys during reading and writing practices in Sawrella School (Level 1 being the lowest)

Table 4.4 explains in further detail the most commonly observed schooled reading and writing practices the boys experienced in one week, and their level of involvement in learning (Laevers, 1994):

Sawrella School *Reading practices in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement in learning (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)*	*Sawrella School* *Writing practices in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement in learning (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)*
Clapping syllables to read words - level 2	Writing on lined copybook - levels 1 and 2
Repeating words read by teacher from the interactive whiteboard - level 1	Writing letters on mini-whiteboard - level 2
Phonics instruction and blending of 'CVC' words using the interactive whiteboard as a PowerPoint presentation - level 1	Writing on worksheets - level 2
Active exposure to print through online rhymes - levels 4 and 5	Writing on workbook - level 1
Shared reading from interactive whiteboard - level 4	Writing the same word for several times on the copybook to memorise it - level 1
Shared reading from big book - level 5	Writing during a summative assessments (4 worksheets) - level 2
Decoding of words during shared reading - level 5	

Table 4.3. Most common observed reading and writing practices five- to six-year-old boys were involved in during a period of one week in Sawrella School

Going back to the first scenario, the high level of involvement of the same boys who experienced classroom passivity in other lessons was clearly evident. As explained by Mermelstein (2006) shared reading is an evidence-based effective strategy that allows learners to be involved and focus on the meaning and the syntax while the teacher focuses on the text and visual grapho-phonic system. Similarly, in this scenario, boys were engaged, as they were able to focus on the Maltese language and the discussion that emerged in a way that made sense to them. It was evident that the shared reading activity was an effective

reading strategy (Braunger & Lewis, 2006; Pappas et al., 1999) that allowed the teacher to meet the diverse and unique needs of the boys in her class. The teacher encouraged them to join in by challenging them to decode some consonant-vowel-consonant [CVC] words (e.g., pig); she knew where they stood in their ability to decode and tried to scaffold their learning. This is in line with effective evidence-based theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and an active balanced approach to teach reading and writing in the early years (Davis, 2013; Tompkins, 2013) that also impacted positively on the young boys' observed reading experience during a Maltese lesson.

The level of involvement was different from copying CVC words or blending and segmenting CVC words by rote and looking at the interactive whiteboard for a long period of time. Through shared reading, underpinned by balanced literacy pedagogy, the five- to six-year-old boys were engaged as the words they were decoding were contextualised and made sense to their experience at that point in time. Reading was being taught in a way that made sense to them. This evidence of deep level learning during shared reading aligns with findings from a recent study by Price-Mohr and Price (2017) where evidence suggested that four- to five-year-old boys learn to read more easily using the natural-style language of 'real' books and a mix of whole word and synthetic phonics approach. Indeed, some boys also related the story to their personal experiences, a first-hand observation of 'reader-response theory' (Farnan & Kelly, 2006) and the teacher 'scaffolded' children's learning through their 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzàles, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Malaguzzi, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). At one point, the Year 1 teacher in Sawrella School claimed:

> *It is incredible to see the literacy that emerges during a shared reading session. No wonder they get so bored doing their homework and all the time they spend writing in class! It's not about what they tell you to do you have to know what's best for your children in class.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

The Year 1 teacher also pointed out that two of the boys I observed go to complementary literacy sessions because they struggle to cope with the school's literacy requirements influenced by the existing early primary centralised syllabi and Maltese and English literacy checklists (DQSE, 2009). Both boys turned five

in November, so they were the youngest in class. She also noted that the two boys from ten who coped with the literacy work done in class were those that had turned six in January (eldest in class). This evidence shed's further light on the school starting school age debate and the harm in children's learning, particularly boys, when formal schooling starts early (Gropper et al., 2011; Palmer, 2016; Whitmire, 2010).

In the second scenario the decrease in the level of boys' involvement is evident. The task did not have a purpose and was not meaningful to them, therefore it was very difficult for them to stay focused during the Maltese writing task that was taking place (this task might be defined as a summative assessment). The attempt to try to work out exercises, which seemed to be above their level of competence, made them enter into a world of passivity making some of the boys 'yawn'. It was annoying for all the boys observed to stay quiet; they wanted to talk, they needed to talk, and express their thoughts. This task was not consistent with how research defines effective writing practice in the early years. Writing in ECEC is done for an authentic purpose and not for testing, it is explored independently by young children and adults scaffolding their meaningful practice (Browne, 2008; Cigman, 2014; Hall & Robinson, 2003). Research also showed that invented spelling is not to be 'rubbed off' but to be incorporated in schools as it was found to be more effective than phonemic awareness and alphabet instruction (Feldgus et al., 2017). This second scenario within a Maltese context is another example of performative pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000) where learning is connected to a culture of high-stakes testing and good behaviour to prosper and of how this controlled pedagogy impacts on the relationships between teachers and learners (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009).

Figure 4.13 and Table 4.4 show that the boys observed were passive and involved at the low levels of 1 and 2 during 17 from the 22 reading and writing practices observed. Even though the Year 1 teacher seemed to prefer a more-play based and child-centred approach to early literacy learning, it was often evident that an academically oriented approach based on the principles of behaviourist theory (Pavlov & Anrep, 2003; Skinner, 1974; Watson, 2013) and a 'one-size-fits-all' (Spiegel, 1998) approach underpinned the literacy pedagogy in this Year 1 classroom. As evident in other research involving boys and literacy, the boys observed in Sawrella School were often silenced to try and get everyone listening

and focused to complete the assigned reading or writing tasks (Fletcher, 2006; Gurian & Ballew, 2003; Hyde, 2004; Sax, 2005). Research showed that low teacher expectations where what teachers seek is student compliance rather than curiosity or involvement influence the education experiences and outcomes of learners (Besançon & Lubart, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 2017; Weinstein, 2002). There were moments also where some boys were told to sit down otherwise they will be given more worksheets to write. On the other hand, the boys who managed to finish their tasks earlier had the option to open their colouring book, which was always under their desk. Consequently, the boys were impeded from being challenged further, and instead were forced to use colouring-in books as time-fillers. While the boys coloured in, the teacher had the time to go round the class and check whether all the children had finished their workbook or copybook task independently. Most of these reading and writing practices were decontextualised, meaning each task had no meaning or purpose for the boys observed (for example: copying from the whiteboard, spelling and filling in the blank spaces in worksheets). In light of these findings UNESCO (2015) reported that:

> With so many differences, children need to learn in a variety of ways - not just by copying information from the chalkboard onto a slate or into a notebook. Copying from the chalkboard is probably one of the least effective ways for children to learn.
> (p. 8)

Finally, it is evident that boys' deep level learning was not often observed during reading and writing practices in this Year 1 classroom. Consequently, this made some of the five- to six-year-old boys struggle more than others to fit in a rigid centralised system grounded in prescriptive syllabi that transformed into explicit classroom pedagogy constraining the young boys to reproduce what they were told to do. It was strikingly evident that most of the boys observed tended to be less sedentary and involved throughout the teacher-led and structured reading and writing practices. In conjunction with the overall findings from the classroom observation conducted in Sawrella School, recent research shows that such traditional approaches are a burden to most boys who turn five as they are not

ready to sit down and learn literacy in an explicit way (Dale, 2008; Shaughnessy & Sanger, 2005).

4.4.2 School 2: Rużetta School.

Rużetta School catered for around 800 students, with 10 percent of students coming from several foreign countries. Consequently, a diversity of ethnic, social, cultural and religious characteristics in the school was present due the recent influx of foreign students. The Year 1 classroom where I conducted my observations consisted of groups of small tables and chairs facing the interactive whiteboard in class. Classroom wall displays consisted of alphabet charts, behaviour charts, and sight words flash cards. In one of the corners there was a small-carpeted area with a few cushions and around 20 books. These were never used during the week of observations. A tiny table with four foil trays filled with rice, sand and salt were available for children to write the letter of the day in (this was done by taking turns, one at a time, for a few seconds during the English lesson). A tall piece of furniture with six shelves was filled with workbooks and copybooks. There was another cupboard where the teacher kept more copybooks, workbooks and worksheets. On one side of the classroom there stood four personal computers, which were never used throughout my five-day visit at Rużetta School.

In a classroom of 20 children there were 10 boys who were all invited to participate. Consent was obtained from five parents of boys within this class: two Italian, one was English, and two were Maltese. A fixed daily timetable was in place. For the first term (Sep-Dec) all children were introduced to English lessons and in January they were then introduced to Maltese lessons. On average English lessons lasted for one hour daily and Maltese lessons lasted for 45 minutes daily. English lessons were delivered as a whole group. The following two different scenarios will describe how five young boys experienced reading and writing in one of the Year 1 classes in Rużetta School.

Rużetta School, scenario 1: Read aloud, English lesson.

Ms Miriam distributed a textbook to all children. The children had to look for a particular page on the book. Sam banged the book on his head and stood up.

The other boys were looking at the pictures in the textbook. Ms Miriam silenced the children so that she would be able to read aloud and explain what was going to happen. Then she put on the audio and the children listened to a recorded voice reading the story aloud to them. Luca and Beppe acted out the sound of the drum and laughed. All the boys were engaged and smiling. Carlo banged on the table pretending to have a pair of drumsticks. Ms Miriam called out two of the boys to act out what they just heard. Their faces glowed. While they represented their thoughts through their actions they tried to remember what they heard through the audio and repeated the words in English. The other boys and children laughed and were all engaged watching the drama going on. Sam managed to remember and repeat the exact words he heard from the text.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 4 ('The child's activity has intense moments and at all times they seem involved. They are not easily distracted').

Rużetta School, scenario 2: English phonics lesson.

(The English lessons observed during one week were structured and planned following a commercial phonics programme). Ms Miriam started off by revising yesterday's letter sound 'x'. All the boys observed were sitting down in their chairs facing the teacher. The song of the letter 'x' was on with moving images projected on the interactive whiteboard. Three of the boys I observed did not join in. Carlo and Luca had their heads on the table and they seemed to feel sleepy, while Ben rubbed his eyes. Ms Miriam read the learning intention of the lesson displayed on the wall and a flash card with the letter sound 'qu' was then introduced. Ms Miriam explained that they will be seeing this digraph and writing it during the lesson. Most of the boys observed were not looking at the teacher during this explanation. Ben and Luca stood up from their chair. It was then time for group work. Children were told to sort 'qu' word cards, those with no 'qu' to be placed in a trash bag. All boys got excited as soon as they had the cards and bag on table. Children were not allowed to touch cards before the teacher gave the signal. Beppe touched one of the cards and was told that if he touches before the signal he will not play and start writing on his copybook instead. Beppe said

"No!" All five boys were engaged and enjoying the sorting. This hands-on activity was over after two minutes and all children were told to sit down again. Children were silenced and told what was coming up next: "We had fun playing, now it's time to work." Copybooks were distributed to all children. Sam started to bang his chair. Carlo and Luca bit their nails. Ms Miriam modelled what they had to write on their copybook and reminded them that this work is not going to be done in groups. Ben rubbed his eyes again. It was noted that most of the boys did not have the correct pencil grip as yet. The teacher went round the tables rubbing off any letters that did not have the correct letter formation. Luca wrote 'g' instead of 'qu'. Sam was told to rub off his 'quilt' as it looked like a 'spider'. The task was to write 'quack' and 'quilt' for ten times each. Some boys took more than 20 minutes to finish. After 15 minutes, Beppe rubbed off all his words even though he managed to do them (very often children were told that 'ugly' letters are to be rubbed off). As soon as they finished this task all children were told to copy their homework from the interactive whiteboard. Ben asked: "Do we have to copy all of that?" Luca was still writing his words and he was told to hurry up and write.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 2 ('The child will be engaged in the activity for some of the time they are observed, but there will be moments of non-activity when they will stare into space, or be distracted by what is going on around').

Figure 4.14 shows the boys' level of involvement in learning during all the reading and writing practices they experienced while I conducted my one week of observations at Rużetta School (using the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2).
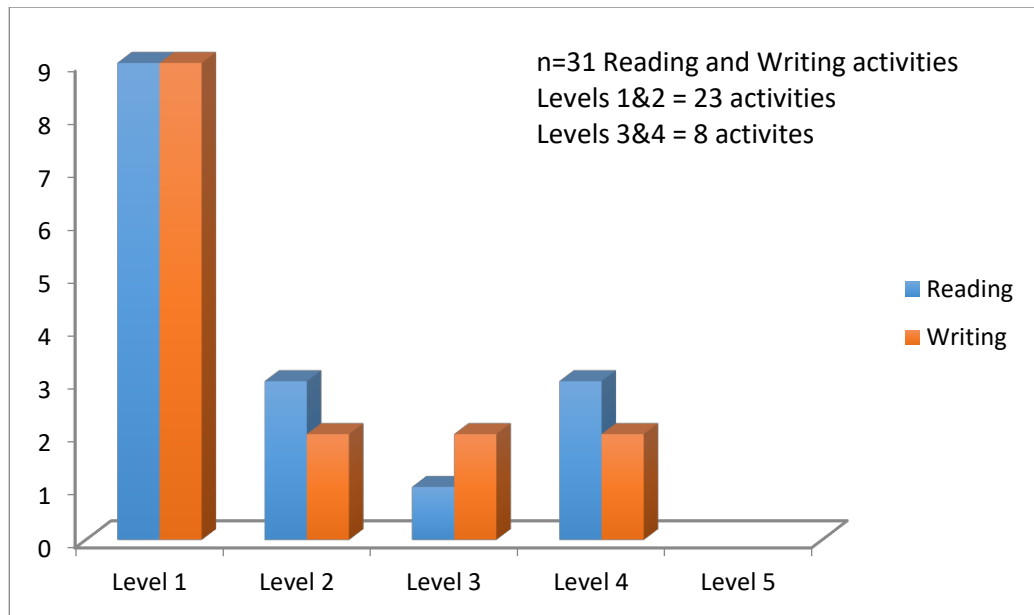
Figure 4.14. The level of involvement in learning of five- to six-year-old boys during reading and writing practices in Rużetta School (Level 1 being the lowest)

Table 4.5 explains in further detail the reading and writing practices boys experienced during observation week at Rużetta School and their level of involvement during these schooled literacy practices in Year 1.

Rużetta School Reading practices in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)	Rużetta School Writing practices in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)
Clapping syllables in words - level 2	Writing on lined copybooks - levels 1&2
Repeating/reading/blending words from the interactive whiteboard - levels 1/2	Copying diary from interactive whiteboard - level 1
Phonics & blending CVC words from the interactive whiteboard - levels 1/2	Writing with coloured chalk - level 3
Active exposure to print through online rhymes - level 4	Writing on workbooks/copybooks the same word for a number of times - level 1
Drama and read aloud session from textbook - level 4	Waiting for their turn to write one letter in sand/salt-paint tray - levels 2 to 4
Hands-on group work cards and bottle caps with letters - blending - levels 3 & 4	Writing letter in air and body movements - level 4

Table 4.4. Most common reading and writing practices five- to six-year-old boys were involved in during a period of one week in Rużetta School

The two scenarios presented in this section show how the boys' level of involvement in learning changed drastically from one lesson to the other. Figure 4.14 showed that reading and writing practices for five- to six-year-olds in Rużetta School were mostly grounded in structured, teacher-led activities focusing on the teaching of synthetic phonics through decontextualised practices in both Maltese and English lessons. Scenario 2 showed the low level of involvement during phonics practice as most of the time the boys observed were passive and exposed to drill and rote learning to remember the sounds and the spelling of the words. On the other hand, lessons that incorporated read-alouds, hands-on activities, and active literacy such as drama and rhymes seemed to be more meaningful and engaging for the five culturally and linguistically diverse boys observed in this class.

Research has shown that most boys tend to be better in visual rather than auditory processing, and this may inhibit their early literacy learning especially

when it comes to sequential work such as phonetic decoding (Aaron, 1982; Halpern, 1997; Martinelli, 2013; Naour, 2001). There were instances where the level of boys' involvement in learning increased during the phonics lessons observed. This happened when the Year 1 teacher allowed the young children to play card games related to the sound of the day or write the letters in salt trays for a few minutes. It was made clear that this was time for 'play' and that they had to hurry up to start their 'work' after. The same dichotomy between work and play and informal and formal teaching and learning in early primary classrooms was bridged in recent research studies by including more active learning experiences and extending play in teacher-directed activities (Scully & Roberts, 2002; Walsh et al., 2011) and this pedagogical shift impacted positively on the learning and engagement of all children involved. Research shows that the permeation of unhurried and engaging learning experiences in the early years impacted positively on children's involvement in learning as possibility thinkers within an enabling context and through flexible classroom pedagogy where "the rhythm of learning was governed by engagement rather than the clock" and "the learners' work became the learners' play" (Cremin et al., 2006, pp. 115-116).

Similar to Sawrella School, most of the boys observed in Rużetta School urged for the need to move or stand up from their chairs during lesson time. Indeed, research showed that active literacy that allowed for movement seemed to be the most attractive to boys (Knowles & Smith, 2005). Indeed, most of the boys observed were not praised for their sitting tolerance in the same way as others. Several scholars attested that female educators tend to promote feminine stereotypical behaviour in class and this may in turn influence boys' learning (Evans & Davies, 2000; Gee, 1996; McCormack & Brownhill, 2014; Millard, 1997; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Moreover, cooperation and communication were limited during the one week of observations as all children had to sit quietly and do assignments. Play was very limited and rarely integrated with reading and writing activities. A few minutes of playing with bottle caps with letters, letter cards or writing a letter in a salt tray was considered as the playtime of the day. The great divide between work and play was present at all times. Literature shows that that the inclusion of play in classrooms facilitated language and literacy learning (Harste et al., 1984; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Whitehead, 2010) and increased children's level of engagement (Laevers, 1993, 2000). Most of the

teaching and learning related to reading and writing observed was based on the visual strategies of pictures, flash cards, PowerPoint presentations of letter sounds displayed on the interactive whiteboard and other props. This led to an imbalanced pedagogical approach to reading and writing, mostly teacher-led, where lots of repetition, chanting of letter sounds and drilling took place.

The boys observed missed out on opportunities to experience literacy through authentic texts, make meaning out of contextualised experiences, active engagement and movement. There was less freedom and time to adapt to children's individual needs for learners to engage in child-initiated activities. Furthermore, boys were exposed to text using workbooks, copybooks, homework and looking at the interactive whiteboard for most of the time spent in class. The main pedagogical focus in this Year 1 classroom seemed to be on constrained skills (phonics, spelling, grammar and punctuation). Paris (2005) indicated that these skills provide minimal contribution to lifelong literacy development. Moreover, Poest, Williams, Witt and Atwood (1989) found that young boys who were involved in tasks such as forming small letters were less enthusiastic than being involved in a gross motor activity.

There was also limited evidence of a culture of reading and writing for pleasure. Boys were not read to during the week I was there conducting observation. The only read-aloud session observed was the one presented in Scenario 1. Reading and writing were mainly delivered as a task to complete and the focus was on the end product. Literature shows that a positive disposition to literacy is created through a culture of reading and writing for pleasure (NCCA, 2012; Whitehead, 2010; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Ms Miriam claimed that: "Most of the teachers at this level are afraid of hands-on work groups in class", and that "one of the boys, if I ask him what letter they learnt today, he mentions the one of yesterday." This element of teachers' fear for play-based approaches and sense of confusion among most of the young boys observed during reading and writing tasks was felt throughout observation week and this might have implications for the rethinking of literacy learning in early primary years. Findings from the group interview with these boys in this chapter provided the study with further insight about their perceptions of these early reading and writing experiences.

4.4.3 School 3: Awwista School.

My last week of observations was conducted at Awwista School. Learners in this school were mainly monocultural, speaking Maltese as their first language. Maltese and English lessons lasted round 60 minutes each. The seating in the classroom was formal; six wooden benches faced the interactive whiteboard. There was enough space for two children to sit down on each bench. There were two tiny tables in class, labelled 'Maltese books' and 'English books'. Children were allowed to take a book when they were ready from their tasks or between lesson times. At the back of the classroom, four tables with personal computers on them faced the wall. These were never used during the week I spent in the classroom. A piece of furniture had five wooden shelves where eight stacks of workbooks and eight stacks of copybooks stood piled up. Displays on the walls consisted of a weather chart, crafts that looked pretty much alike, the Maltese alphabet, numbers 1 to 20, and a feelings chart.

Ms Connie, the Year 1 teacher in this school, claimed that more boys than girls attended complementary lessons (pull-out literacy lessons for struggling learners) in Awwista School. Based on the outcomes of literacy checklists (DQSE, 2009) and the inability to cope with the prescriptive syllabus, half of the five- to six-year-old children in this Year 1 class attended pull-out complementary lessons for support in their reading and writing competences. There were 12 children in this classroom, one teacher and one classroom assistant. I gained parents' consent to observe four boys in this classroom. Maltese was their first language. The following scenarios will provide narrative descriptions of some of the activities observed and identify the level of the boys' involvement in learning while experiencing different reading and writing practices in Awwista School.

Awwista School, scenario 1: Dialogic reading in the outdoor area.

(Note: Dialogic Reading is a reading practice where questions are asked and followed with more expanded questions to improve literacy and language skills through the use of picture books). Excitement was in the air as soon as Ms Connie told the children to get their cushions so that they could go outside and read a story. Isaac said: "Let's read the one we read last time. Can we have it for home

too, please?" Ms Connie chose a big book, a picture book. The title was in Maltese "Żaqqinu", it was about a fat snake that loved to eat. The children sat down comfortably on the cushion in the school's yard. Three of the boys I observed lay down flat on their tummy to listen to the story. Ms Connie started by showing them the cover and giving them some information while also leaving room for questions and discussion. Tim was the first to answer. The other boys also participated actively in the session by answering questions and describing the images in the big book. Ms Connie asked why they think that the snake was fat and Tim immediately replied: "The snake is fat because it eats unhealthy food!" He linked this with the topic going on in class (healthy food). The four boys observed were calm, fully engaged listening to their teacher's soft tone of voice and also participating. Ms Connie reminded them that they have to come up with the story so they had to help her. She guided them and prompted them to elicit more information from them. All children were hooked. Matthew and Paul got closer to the book as they got more and more interested in what's coming up next. Other boys followed. Tim and Matthew also added words to the sentences Ms Connie started. Isaac was able to come up with names for the characters. The children were told that they have to remember the story they were creating together as they had to write about it the week after. As Ms Connie changed the intonation of her voice at a particular point during the story, Paul replied to her question in the same intonation and touched the face of the snake in the book. All the boys observed were immersed and involved in what was going on. Ms Connie concluded the activity with other literal and inferential questions. The activity was over after 35 minutes. Ms Connie then gave the children permission to run in the yard and they did so cheerfully.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 5 ('The child shows continuous and intense activity revealing the greatest involvement. They are concentrated, creative, energetic and persistent throughout nearly all the observed period').

Awwista School, scenario 2: Maltese grammar lesson.

The aim of this lesson was to teach five- to six-year-olds how to use the verb "ħa" (meaning "to take") in different sentences. Ms Connie started off with a PowerPoint presentation sharing with the children different sentences with the verb "ħa". Matthew asked to be excused. The other three boys I observed were fidgety and moved on their chair during this presentation. Tim yawned and after a few minutes Paul knelt down on the floor. Isaac stood up. The level of noise in the classroom rose. The PowerPoint explanation was still going on. Ms Connie decided to stop and told the children that they will have the workbook for homework related to the verb "ħa". Then she explained that they would do a similar exercise in class as practice for homework. Ms Connie told the children that she wanted to see how neatly they could write by copying the eight sentences she was writing in different colours on the whiteboard. The date, title of the lesson and the eight sentences were prepared on the interactive whiteboard for the children to copy. In the meantime the four boys observed played with their pencils or talked to their peers. The classroom assistant distributed the narrow lined copybooks, and sat down between Matthew and Paul to help them. Ms Connie explained that they were going to work out the grammar exercise orally together and then they had to work them out independently. Isaac asked: "Do we have P.E. lesson today?" (physical education session outdoors with another teacher). The teacher refused to answer as he asked the same question several times during that day. During the oral explanation Paul started to chew on his pencil and the other three boys seemed absent. Ms Connie had to draw the attention of some of the boys observed during her explanation to have them sit down and listen carefully. After the explanation they were told to start off using their pencil and copybooks. Ms Connie took their Math workbook and sat at her desk correcting, while all the children started their writing task independently. Matthew took out his bottle to drink. Tim got out of his place and walked around the classroom chewing his pencil. He was told to go back to his place and continue his work. After some time Ms Connie went round the classroom to check on their work, and pointed out that the boys' work was messier and that they were not writing in the narrow line. Girls were praised for their neat writing. Paul started to scribble on his copybook instead of copying the sentences. He was

told to rub off everything. Tim seemed confused and rubbed off everything too. Ms Connie asked why he rubbed it off. Tim just looked at her. The teacher informed the children that they are working on sentences now and that the work is getting harder. The children were also told that if they will be good they would be given permission to use the play dough after the lesson. The whole group was thrilled and yelled: "Yeah!" The children who were ready before their peers were told to work on a worksheet or do some colouring-in. The lesson ended after 90 minutes.

Boys' level of involvement according to the Leuven scale of involvement: Level 1 ('The child seems absent and displays no energy. They may stare into space or look around to see what others are doing').

The following figure represents the boys' level of involvement in learning during 23 reading and writing tasks observed during one week in Awwista School (using the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2).
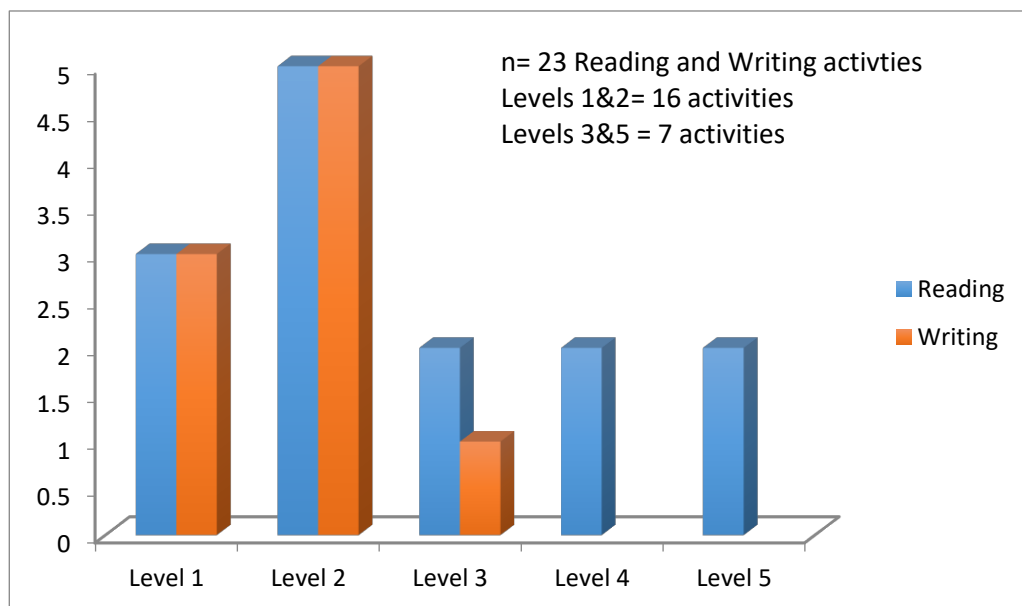
Figure 4.15. The level of involvement in learning of five- to six-year old boys during reading and writing practices in Awwista School (Level 1 being the lowest)

Table 4.6 explains in further detail the schooled reading and writing tasks five- to six-year-old boys experienced during observation week at Awwista School and also their level of involvement in learning.

Awwista School Reading tasks in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)	Awwista School Writing tasks in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and boys' level of involvement (according to the five-level descriptors of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning - Table 3.2)
Spontaneous paired reading between lessons - levels 4 & 5; Independent reading between lessons - free choice of books - level 4; Read aloud session - level 3	Writing on copybook (narrow lines) - level 2
Phonics & blending CVC words from interactive whiteboard - levels 1 & 2	Copying sentences from interactive whiteboard - level 1
Exposure to print through online rhymes - level 3	Writing on workbook - levels 2 & 3
Flashcards and drilling of phonic sounds - level 2	Waiting for their turn to write one letter in sand/salt-paint tray - level 2
Dialogic reading - level 5	Waiting for their turn to write on interactive whiteboard - level 2
Core text book accompanied with songs - level 1	Writing the same letter for 36 times on copybook - level 1
Maltese grammar and vocabulary taught through PowerPoint presentations displayed on interactive whiteboard - level 1	Dictation - spelling test of words studied at home and written at school. Corrected by teacher - level 1

Table 4.5. Most common reading and writing practices five- to six-year-old boys were involved in during a period of one week in Awwista School

Similar to the findings in the other two schools, the pedagogy that was often used was teacher-led and more like an "I do, you copy" approach. The dialogic reading scenario and spontaneous peer reading between lessons were the only two activities where boys were fully engaged. Research showed that practising dialogic reading from a very young age raises stronger readers in the future (Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne & Crone, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1998). The engaging process follows the principle of ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) and pedagogies

associated with Possibility Thinking (PT) where teachers position themselves as agents of possibilities and give the opportunity to learners to position themselves as decision-makers (Cremin, Chappell & Craft, 2013; Cremin, et al., 2006). Language and questioning are key during dialogic reading making it an effective pedagogical strategy for the early language and literacy development of DLLs (Whitehurst et al., 1988). In Awwista School's Year 1 classroom, reading and writing opportunities that make literacy learning as meaningful and prioritised learner agency were minimally observed in one week.

Throughout most of the reading and writing practices observed there seemed to be a sense of constant pressure to complete workbooks and copybook tasks. When children had some free time the teachers rushed to finish correcting their homework and classwork. The teacher often used the interactive whiteboard to teach reading and writing skills during English and Maltese lessons. Consequently, the boys observed were required to be silent most of the time. Homework was given daily and young children had to study six words for Monday's dictation every weekend. Dictation consisted of a weekly spelling test in the classroom. Children were often told as a reminder that their tools in class are the 'pencil', the 'rubber' and the 'ruler'. It can be argued that literacy in this classroom was focused more on how literacy could be taught and learned in a formal way (Blackledge, 1999) rather than valuing literacy as a social practice (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000). Blackledge (1999) posited that when literacy is viewed as social practice it, "is driven by qualities of the individual's engagement in particular literacy practices" (p. 180).

My study revealed that young boys' level of involvement in learning during most of the reading and writing practices in three Maltese state schools was low as evident by the five-level ratings of the Leuven scale of involvement in learning (Table 3.2). This was particularly evident in Scenario 2 (Awwista School), where it was interesting to observe how the same five- to six-year-old boys whose 'exploratory drive' (Laevers, 1994) triggered with dialogic reading showed passivity and disengagement in a Maltese grammar lesson. It was also noted that during similar passive classroom literacy tasks boys were often told off and girls were praised for their sitting tolerance, and for being quicker in their reading and writing tasks and for writing neater (as evident in scenario 2). This was also clearer in the other two schools. Several scholars affirmed that boys are being

harmed by schools that are feminized (Biddulph, 1997; Brownhill, 2016; Hill, 2011; Pollack, 1998; Reed, 1999) and that this might be promoting some stereotypical feminine ways that might influence boys' literate identities and their reading and writing performance (Evans & Davies, 2000; Gee, 1996; McCormack & Brownhill, 2014; Millard, 1997; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Further, such pupil labelling in relation to what constitutes an 'ideal pupil' (Becker, 1952) for teachers within dominant classroom pedagogies (in this case performative pedagogy) may lead to blaming if the pupils concerned do not fit to classroom standards (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009). This gives rise to implications on the way young boys might be conceptualised by adults in their environment in relation to reading and writing within a Maltese context. Research also showed that traditional approaches are a burden to the brains of boys who turn five as they are not ready to cope with an overflow of formal activities to sit down and learn literacy skills in an explicit way through explicit programmes (Dale, 2008; Shaughnessy & Sanger, 2005). In this study, most boys observed within the three schools struggled to cope with the required tasks and showed passivity particularly when they experienced decontextualised phonics instruction in both Maltese and English, drilling, grammar lessons and copying tasks.

Moreover, it was noted that some of the young boys observed in Awwista School often asked for outdoor time or to be excused during reading and writing practices (Scenario 2). Scholars pointed out that most boys find difficulty with fine motor skills when compared to girls in the early years and this leads to less enthusiasm than when being involved in a gross motor activity (Cohen, 1997; Poest et al., 1989). Several researchers suggested that such excitement should be noted and integrated with early literacy learning (Benenson, Apostoleris, & Parnass, 1997; Booth, 2006; Knowles & Smith, 2005). Cigman (2014) claimed that enabling indoor and outdoor environments for young writers respect the learning styles and stages of development of all children including boys who tend to display their energy for learning more often than girls as evident in the findings of my study.

The early writing practices observed were mostly based on conventional transcription skills and spelling/copying without authentic purpose. Consequently, writing was not based on emergent literacy theory where writing is viewed as an act of communication that conveys meaningful and enjoyable

messages in different ways (Browne, 2008; Griffiths, 2012; Teale, 1986). Indeed, findings from this study also showed how some boys, when asked to write, tended to promptly and undesirably ask: "Do we have to copy all that?" The 'rubbing off' technique to ensure correct letter formation and spelling was also frequently noted during writing practices making most of the boys observed feel anxious and confused. This is not in line with recent research that has repeatedly shown that play and a balanced literacy approach are key to allowing space for emergent, independent writing and invented spelling that allow for an adult to scaffold and extend children's meaningful practice for various purposes (Browne, 2008; Feldgus et al., 2017; Hall & Robinson, 2003; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Mermelstein, 2006; Tompkins, 2013; Wood, 2013).

During observation week the Year 1 teacher claimed that, "most of the boys here have ADHD or are hyperactive, it's always boys, I have to continually stop them during the lessons or confiscate their pencil cases, look at all of them, they are always moving." Evidence from all classroom observations conducted within this study showed that such behaviour often occurred when the reading and writing activities were passive and teacher-led. It is important to point out that some of the boys observed seemed to be quicker than others at finishing off their workbooks and copybook tasks, however, they also seemed to display a sense of reluctance and tiredness in such activities. In light of this argument, McGill-Franzen (2016) argued that the teaching of reading needs to be playful and inquiry-driven in order for the literacy skills of five-year-olds to improve.

4.4.4 Response to research question 2.

> How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary
> state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in
> literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on
> effective early literacy practices?

Overall, evidence from the three state schools reaffirmed that five- to six-year-old boys were more engaged and involved in literacy learning when they experienced active, purposeful and meaningful reading and writing practices. Twelve years after the publication of the ECEC national policy document (MEDE, 2006), this study reconfirms that formal instruction in early primary is the pedagogy underpinning the teaching and learning of reading and writing

based on the use of commercial programmes to teach synthetic phonics, "abundant" workbooks, lined copybooks, rubbers, rulers and pencils (p. 39). Evidence also shows how the ORF (Bernstein, 2000) in the context of this study, especially those official government circulars and policies promoting a prescribed curriculum and literacy checklists in the early primary, has transformed into a conceptualisation of literacy "as if it consists of a set of discrete skills that can be taught in isolation" (Larson & Marsh, 2015, p. 4) within the three classrooms observed (PRF). Research showed that such a linear model of literacy education (Ehri, 1987, 1995) in the early years ignores the benefits that active involvement and hands-on experience can have on the intellectual growth of young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Whitehead, 2010; Wohlwend, 2008).

It was also frequently observed that most boys did not manage to end a 45-60 minute sedentary lesson without asking to be excused, getting up or fidgeting. Strong teacher control and the expectation of having boys simply being compliant to sit down and carry out teacher-set tasks seemed to be at the expense of nurturing young boys' intrinsic need to volitionally engage in most of the reading and writing practices observed. Similarly, recent research shows that the negative impact of such restricted performance pedagogies (Bernstein, 2000) on involvement in learning, learners' self-perceptions and equality in education persists (Auld & Lee, 2005; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2009; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c; Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2017; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Munns, Sawyer & Cole, 2013, Lingard, 2007; Belfiore, Auld & Lee; Smyth, McInerny & Fish, 2013; Waxman, Padron & Lee, 2010). The reading experiences observed in the three classrooms were more in line with the evidence-based strategies linking to direct and systematic phonics instruction within a performative pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000; Campbell, 2015; Herold, 2011; Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012). Findings from my study question the effectiveness of phonics explicit and systematic direct instruction in the early years since it was constantly evident, in the three schools, that during the sedentary and drilling approach most five to six-year-old boys were not involved in deep level learning and this decreased their interest, motivation and engagement.

It was also noted that Year 1 teachers' efforts and desire to integrate some components of a balanced literacy approach to the teaching of reading and writing within the existing curriculum-centred system in early primary was evident. It

was unlikely for the boys observed to experience a play-based CCP, as proposed in the NMC (1999) and the NCF (MEDE, 2012) for the zero- to seven-year-olds. In addition, the observed reading and writing practices left no room for the expression of meaning through digital literacy and other new modes of representation or time to build on the prior knowledge boys gained through their social literate experiences outside school. Consequently, as recent research affirms these boys were missing out on the effective evidence-based opportunity to develop their competences with new technologies (Marsh, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005; Labbo & Reinking, 2003; Kress, 2003). Observations revealed that new literacies were being prioritised by the acquisition of print during the crucial first year of compulsory schooling in the three Maltese state schools concerned. This finding aligns with other research that has also shown how literacy tends to be narrowly defined in educational practice (Anning, 2003; Luke & Luke, 2001; Marsh, 2003; Pahl, 2002). In the next section several stakeholders and the young boys themselves will share their views on the existing reading and writing practices in Year 1 classrooms. Findings from the interviews and focus groups provided deeper insight into the developing argument.

4.5 Interviews and Focus Groups

As elaborately discussed in Chapter 3, TA was used to identify patterns, themes and relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that provided an answer to the third subsidiary question of my study.

Research Question 3

What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

The results of my rigorous TA from the interviews and focus groups conducted in the three state schools indicated two categories that aimed to respond to research question 3 substantiated with 11 significant themes (Figure 4.16). The developed themes originated from the interviews and focus groups conducted with three Year 1 teachers (teaching five- to six-year-olds), three

Heads of School, three Heads of Department (Literacy), three groups of parents of five- to six-year-old boys, and three groups of five- to six-year-old boys.

In this section, key findings and discussion stemming from stakeholders' perspectives on 'boys' underachievement in literacy' and the concepts of early reading and writing and school readiness in three Maltese early primary school contexts are presented. The perceptions of five to six-year-old boys on their lived reading and writing experiences in their first year of compulsory schooling were merged with the adults' views to gain further insights on each emerging theme. Comparable sets of understanding from teacher respondents to the open-ended questions in the online questionnaire (which was disseminated to 400 teachers working in the early primary sector in Maltese state schools) were also merged to support the emergent discussions within this section and provide a richer answer to the third subsidiary research question. The data collected from the interviews and focus groups were divided in two separate categories to give a structure to a response to research question 3:

- Stakeholders' explanations for 'boys' underachievement' within three Maltese state schools.

- Stakeholders' and five- to six-year-old boys' perceptions on existing reading and writing practices in three Maltese state schools.

The following figure represents the 11 dominant themes that emerged from the two categories mentioned above.

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┌────────────────────────┐        ┌────────────────────────┐
│ Category 1: Stakeholders'│       │ Category 2: Stakeholders'│
│ explanations for 'boys' │        │ and five- to six-year-old│
│ underachievement' within 3│      │ boys' perceptions on     │
│ Maltese state schools  │        │ exisiting reading and    │
│                        │        │ writing practices in     │
│                        │        │ 3 Maltese state schools  │
└────────────────────────┘        └────────────────────────┘
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Category 1:
- Development, 'readiness' to formal education and mindsets
- Male role-models, boys and the early primary years
- Pedagogy in the early primary years of Maltese state schools
- Society, culture and young boys' literacy learning in a Maltese context
- No difference claims

Category 2:
- Young boys, books and reading
- Young boys, phonics and bilingual education
- Young boys and balanced literacy
- Young boys and writing in the early primary years
- Young boys, work and play
- Young boys, school readiness, transitions and literacy

Figure 4.16. Thematic 'map' (Braune & Clarke, 2006): Categories and dominant themes as a response to subsidiary research question 3

All themes will be presented and discussed through quotations from the transcripts and citations from relevant literature. This section aims to dig deeper and gain fuller insight into how boys and literacy are conceptualised within a Maltese culture and the lived reading and writing experiences of young boys through the perspectives of different stakeholders and the voices of five- to six-year-old boys.

4.5.1 Category 1: Stakeholders' explanations for 'boys' underachievement' within three Maltese state schools.

In this category the following five themes underpinned by biological, role-model, educational and sociological theoretical explanations for boys' underachievement and lack of engagement in schooled literacy practices drew from different popular discourses, cultural influence and personal experiences of stakeholders within three Maltese state schools:

- Development, 'readiness' to formal education and mindsets
- Male role models, boys and the early primary years
- Pedagogy in the early primary years of Maltese state schools
- Society, culture, and young boys' literacy learning in a Maltese context
- No difference claims

The five emergent themes derived from the applied TA will be presented separately, however, it is good to note that some stakeholders drew on a range of explanations and offered a comprehensive perspective throughout.

4.5.2 Theme 1: Development, 'readiness' to formal education and mindsets.

For some of the professionals in schools the tendency was to view the biological/developmental aspect between young boys and girls as one of the main reasons that might link with the future gender gap in literacy attainment:

> *I think that boys in the early years take longer to develop so that might be another factor. Boys' development in early years is slower than that of girls.*
> *(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)*

> *Boys do not reach the expected level same as girls do. I think that boys take longer to understand and get the concept, this is in general but not always.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

Boys talk at a later stage and generally develop at a slower rate so I think that they are not yet ready for formal schooling at age five.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Similarly, most parents explained 'boys' underachievment' by grounding their claims in the construct of biologically fixed traits that different boys and different girls must be born with. They seemed to agree with the belief that children are born with innate characteristics, natural personalities, and intellectual and moral qualities that impact on their future performance in literacy attainment:

I think it is the character; my youngest son picks quickly and is reading earlier than my elder son.
(Ms Alessandra, parent, Rużetta School)

I do not believe that there is a significant difference at that particular age. It all depends on the character of the particular pupil and his/her likings.
(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)

The psychologist Dweck (2012) argued that most people believe that pupil intelligence and qualities are fixed traits. Similarly, a significant number of stakeholders within this study agreed that children are born with different personalities, mentalities, and a set mindset/intelligence that will determine their future engagement with literacy and academic success (Dweck, 2012). The author further explained that, on the contrary, in a growth mindset people believe that intelligence and qualities can be developed through hard work and dedication. It can be argued that such assumptions might have implications on the relationships between adults and young boys and with the way boys are positioned within literacy learning in the local context.

In summary, biological/developmental explanations were largely common amongst professionals and parents in Maltese state schools. These were believed to be a crucial factor in determining boys' and girls' performance in literacy. The homogeneous claim that 'girls are quicker to learn' was common amongst the respondents who were involved with early literacy in primary classrooms on a day-to-day basis. In the same vein, several scholars blame the innate biological and developmental differences between the sexes as the source to the gender gap in literacy and claimed that these should be taken into consideration when it comes to literacy learning (Biddulph, 1997; Bray et al., 1997; Eliot, 2009; Gurian,

2001; Sax, 2007; Skolverket, 2006; Sommers, 2000; Pollack, 1998; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Conversely, Alloway and Gilbert (2002) and Hoptman and Davidson (1994) argued that biological differences could not account for the groups of boys that outperform girls due to their high levels of social and economic resources available to them. According to Alloway et al. (2002) this narrow perception does not help in trying to improve early literacy learning for boys.

4.5.3 Theme 2: Male role models, boys and the early primary years.

In this study, several stakeholders assumed a strong status regarding the absence of male educators and male role models in the early years and home, and how this had an adverse effect on the boys' engagement and performance in reading and writing:

> *I believe in this! It's a problem always having a female teacher. From 110 staff we have eight males in this school. Yes it affects, a lot.*
> *(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)*
>
> *Yes I believe it would. We don't have it though. I believe that we would see a difference in the students' progress if we had more males in the education system.*
> *(Ms Charlene, Head of Department, Literacy, Sawrella School)*
>
> *I think that having male teachers would be absolutely great for my twin boys.*
> *(Ms Katia, parent, Awwista School)*

The importance of having a father as a role model of literacy tasks at home was also amongst teacher talk in this study:

> *I think it depends on the environment at home too. If at home they see dad reading, it makes a difference.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School).*

Other participants argued that school practices might be feminized and expressed their concern that this might not be enough to engage boys' during schooled reading and writing practices:

A male teacher would think more about what the boys would like as activities.
(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)

My nephews, two boys, were in Year 1 and when they were in kindergarten they used to say that they wish to be in the Sir's classroom because he is a male and because he is a better teacher than the female teachers. Yes it makes a difference.
(Ms Joanne, Head of Department Literacy, Rużetta School)

I think that having male teachers would be great for our boys even when it comes to their behaviour.
(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)

Some parents in one of the focus groups pointed out how their young boys often complained about the female teacher's choices in the classroom:

My son complains that the teacher always shows cartoons for girls in class.
(Ms Lorna, parent, Awwista School)

Yes my son mentions that too. He wants the teacher to put on some cartoons for boys.
(Ms May, parent, Awwista School)

Conversely, some professionals viewed role model theory in relation to 'boys' underachievement' from the other side of the coin. They suggested that boys might prefer female educators, "the mother figure", and that in a mixed gender school system male-educators might be disengaging girls:

Male teachers have similar interests and could relate to boys' experiences, like sports. Yes there was a very good response with boys, but I think it can work the other way round for girls. When it comes to a mixed class, having a male or a female educator, there is always an advantage for one side of the coin, an imbalance.
(Ms Jessica, Head of Department Literacy, Awwista School)

Role model explanations are popular in discourses, media and literature on the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' (Alloway et al., 2002; Hill, 2011; Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarski & Skovera, 1996; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). There is no specific research claiming that male educators improve learners' academic achievement (Brownhill, 2016; Martino, 2008) and other scholars argued that

gender differences do not determine educators' competence and thus it is not the solution to eradicate illiteracy for boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Francis, 2008; Rowe, 2001). Concurrently, the majority of the data shows that stakeholders from the three state schools were more likely to relate their provided explanations for 'boys' underachievement' to the need for boys to be exposed to male role models to engage them more and improve their early literacy learning. As indicated earlier in thesis, Alloway et al. (2002) argued that both biological and role model theories are viewed as explanations that could lead to medical intervention or restrict professionals' views to try and understand the complexity of boys' underachievement and demotivates the urge to act upon the improvement of literacy learning for all. These findings are supported by the view of Rowe (2001) who claims that the gender of the educator or the learner is not as important as the effective teaching and learning strategies being used.

4.5.4 Theme 3: Pedagogy in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

While biology and role model theories were seen by a significant number of stakeholders to be crucial in determining boys' and girls' future literacy performance, some others believed that educational and sociological explanations had an influential impact on young boys' literacy learning:

> *I think that it's not about being a boy or girl, it's about the methodology, we have to reach everyone. I remember I had a group of boys in a complementary session and one of them told me "it is quite boring here" - he was talking about his classroom teaching and because of his homework. I used to do guided reading with them, higher order thinking skills, etc. he enjoyed that.*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

Similarly, open-ended comments from educators in the online questionnaire indicated that the pedagogy underpinning reading and writing practices in the early primary years was not based on careful observations so that educators knew the right time to meet the diverse needs of both boys and girls:

It may be true that boys are more mathematically minded than girls, while girls appear to do better in literacy and languages, but with the right approach from an early age, boys will be successful in literacy and writing too.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

A structured pedagogy that 'favours' girls was considered by some participants to be affecting young boys' classroom literacy performance:

At times the situation educators put the children in affects whether or not that child develops his potential. Even the way they present resources and the way learning is organised, it favours girls indirectly and stifles boys.
(Ms Jessica, Head of Department, Literacy, Awwista School)

Findings show that professionals rather than parents surfaced the issue around present pedagogies in Maltese state schools and the concern that such a formal one-size-fits-all system is not enabling boys to reach their full potential, and that "girls in our school system fit in a better way". The three Heads of Department (Literacy) interviewed, specifically agreed that sound early years' pedagogy is crucial in determining progress in boys' literacy learning and that the current formal system is not allowing young children, particularly boys, to flourish when it comes to reading and writing practices. This finding relates to the emphasis expressed by Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) that "pedagogy is central to the achievement of socially just education" (p. 601). It was also observed in these comments that some professionals tended to refer to boys and also girls as a homogeneous group of learners. As previous research and literature pointed out this might have implications in the way the diverse needs of different boys and different girls are perceived (Alloway et al., 2002; Cigman, 2014; Hammet & Stanford, 2008).

4.5.5 Theme 4: Society, culture, and young boys' literacy learning.

Whilst some scholars believe that pedagogical factors are a crucial factor to the improvement of boys' literacy learning, along the same lines, others suggested that a change in the social and cultural experiences of the child might narrow the gap (Smyth, 2007; Sommers, 2000). In my study, some participants from the three schools theorised that social constructions of gender such as

masculinity and differences between femininity and masculinity affected boys' learning, engagement or attitudes towards literacy:

> *There are males who have the masculine mentality and don't want to do anything related to academics.*
> *(Ms Giulia, parent, Rużetta School)*

> *For example one of the boys in class, he's so boyish and I don't care that phonics books won't work with him.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

> *Boys tend to be more nonchalant about school than girls and maybe that is how they view schooling even from a tender age as theirs. Parents' views about schooling might also affect the way they picture school… boys tend to have a more 'rough' approach towards school while girls should always be prim and proper.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

Such claims surfaced constructed views on masculinity within a Maltese context, and it is likely that within these statements boys seemed to be stereotypically positioned as a homogeneous group that is disengaged from academics. In view of this argument, Claxton (2008) pointed out the hazardous mistake educators make when they confuse disengagement with the learners' performance and abilities. Besides, literature confirms that gender identity is socially constructed influencing who the individual is and the way he/she thinks, behaves and acts (Fine, 2010; Francis, 2000; Millard, 1997; Spedding et al., 2007). This view is supported by other scholars (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Connell, 1996; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Lingard & Douglas 1999) and countries like Australia have worked around such socially constructed stereotypes in their national policies (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997).

Moreover, stakeholders offered other sociological explanations related to boys' ideas of being male when it comes to schooled literacy practices in the early years of Maltese state schools. Teachers and parents commented on boys' behaviour at school and home as something out of the norm. Girls' behaviour was more associated with the way children should react to literacy pedagogy while boys' actions seemed to be resistant to the early literacy tasks presented at home and school. Furthermore, such unwished-for male oriented behaviour in early

literacy tasks or "undesirable practices" as termed by Alloway et al. (2002, p. 98) was also seen as a factor that influenced boys' literacy performance in a Maltese context:

On the whole girls perform better than boys. The attention of girls is much better, they want everything done neatly, in order… Boys are more like spontaneous. This reason might be hindering boys from performing better than girls.
(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)

I see girls as focused and determined… more precise. Girls want to obey and boys are scruffy. Boys don't listen to what others have to say. They have different mentality.
(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)

In a society like ours, matriarchal, mothers spoil their boys, it can be something psychological after all... When I used to teach in primary, I often pushed girls to be independent and I can't understand why.
(Ms Carmen, Head of School, Rużetta School)

Moreover, parents' elaboration on similar claims pointed out that young boys at home do "not care about neatness in writing" while young girls' handwriting is "impeccable" and that the attention of girls during literacy tasks "is much better." These findings, influenced by gender constructions, question the way some young boys might be constructing their literate identities in relation to schooling and literacy tasks in a Maltese context and how this might be impacting on their performance in future years. Research studies showed that behavioural gender differences are evident from an early age, long before children can form any notions of socially constructed gender (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Connellan, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Batki & Ahluwalia, 2000). On the other hand, Alloway et al. (2002) found that the relationships between teachers and children and the masculinities and femininities created within school cultures, impacted on students' engagement with learning. Research also showed that the theory of social representation might support educators to identify their constructed thinking on gender and how it is associated with traditional aspects within diverse cultural contexts to improve their teaching practice (De Sousa, 2011). It can be argued that such socially constructed gender binaries grounded in cultural influences and existing school practices in early years relate to literacy learning in a Maltese context. Consequently these might have implications for boys' early

literacy learning with early years settings, literacy curricula and teachers'
pedagogies.

Some Heads of School and Heads of Department (Literacy) from the three
schools agreed that family support had an influential impact on the early literacy
learning of boys and also girls:

> *Home background makes the difference not gender. When they have*
> *backing from home we manage to get the children there, but with no*
> *backing from home we won't manage at all.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*
>
> *Practice makes perfect! What starts at school should be continued at*
> *home by parents! A good teacher manages to find time every day to train*
> *the pupils in spelling, reading and writing. But this is not enough for*
> *fluency in reading and writing. Parents have to help their children after*
> *school hours.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

Professionals also spoke about financial stability and the helplessness of
families with a low socio-economic status to prepare their children for the literacy
demands of schooling in early primary. This notion conformed to local research
where it was evident that Maltese children from low socio-economic backgrounds
struggled in their literacy attainment at school (Mifsud et al., 2004). Moreover,
data from my study revealed that a number of teachers in Maltese state schools
complied with the argument that the solution to keep up with the school's literacy
requirements and perform well at early primary level is highly dependent on the
families' commitment at home. Having said that, literature affirms that schools
tend to reject the diverse literacies young children experience at home (Ashton,
2005; Lankshear et al., 1997; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Marsh and Millard (2000)
found that children who experienced incompatibility between their schooled
literacy and out-of-school literacy learning experiences were at a disadvantage. In
sum, findings within this theme give rise to implications for young boys and
literacy learning as it gauges existing perspectives on how literacy might be
interpreted within Maltese state school cultures and the society at large.

4.5.6 Theme 5: No difference claims.

Finally, an interesting finding from this enquiry was that some stakeholders who may have provided various explanations related to the boys' performance in literacy, simultaneously challenged existing evidence on the popular rhetoric and existing evidence that underpins the homogeneous claim of 'boys underachievement in literacy':

> *During my years of teaching I never noted any differences between the sexes. Gender was never an issue of success.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*
>
> *I think it's a misconception. Boys are not always underachievers. This year I have more girls going to complementary sessions (literacy support programme); five girls, two boys.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

These findings indicated that a minority of stakeholders might not be viewing boys or girls as a homogeneous group as they clearly acknowledged the diversity and needs of each and every child irrespective of their gender and performance in literacy. On this note, a teacher who responded to the online questionnaire highlighted that: "Although the notion is that boys find reading and writing practices to be more challenging, I do believe that it depends on many factors and that for girls it might be the same!" Such claims revealed that some stakeholders did not view gender as two separate categories but as socially constructed through traditional gender discourses and practices grounded in different school, social class and cultures (Vygotsky, 1978).

4.5.7 Response to question 3: Part 1.

What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

The following is a brief summary of the findings related to stakeholders' views of the popular phenomenon of 'boys underachievement in literacy' to address the first category of subsidiary question 3 of this study. Primarily, I would like to point out that the purpose of the response to this research question was not to critique the views of stakeholders on boys and literacy performance.

Instead, it aimed to take these statements as a representation of the discourses available in the social media and literature and see what can be learned from a Maltese perspective.

Overall, the findings indicated a similarity between stakeholders' views on the phenomenon of boys and literacy performance and the popular explanations evident in the literature available. The hot tensions underpinned by diverse philosophical assumptions related to the controversial topic are also present within early primary state schools and social culture in Malta. Similar to the findings in the study by Alloway et al. (2002), findings from interviews and focus groups, as well as, the open-ended comments of the online questionnaire showed that within an early primary years context in Maltese state schools, the majority of stakeholders relied on biological or role-model theory as an explanation for boys' underachievement.

Moreover, it was also evident that mindsets, readiness for formal instruction, pedagogy, family support, and socio-economic status were amongst some of the explanations given for the homogeneous claim that boys underachieve. An interesting find was that fewer stakeholders viewed gender within the underachieving boys discourse as socially constructed and that therefore they claimed that there are no gender differences in relation to literacy. This was evident in comments like, "misconception", "studies like this and society are passing on the notion that boys are different in learning to read and write" and "I understand that research may state otherwise, however, to every research there is another research, which drops the first argument." It can be argued that in conceptualising 'boys' underachievement' broadly, some stakeholders were able to view boys as readers, writers and achievers, and the failing boys and literacy agenda as a phenomenon that could be challenged. Consequently, my study also revealed that a significant number of participants' beliefs seemed to be grounded in a narrow definition of the concept of 'boys' underachievement' in literacy while it was less evident that stakeholders viewed the concept in question in broader terms. These findings might have implications on the way young boys experience schooled literacy.

The next section provided further insight into the phenomenon under scrutiny by looking deeper into the existing reading and writing practices in early

primary through the perspective of the same stakeholders and the voices of five-
to six-year-old boys.

**4.5.8 Category 2: Stakeholders' and five- to six-year-old boys'
perceptions on existing reading and writing practices in three Maltese state
schools.**

This section provides key findings emerging from the views of Year 1
teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy), parents of boys, and
five- to six-year-old boys on the existing schooled literacy experiences in three
Maltese state schools. Together with some of the open-ended teachers' responses
from the online questionnaire, these findings provided a comprehensive response
to the second part of subsidiary research question 3.

Research Question 3

What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department
(Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these
stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing
practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

The emergent themes from the several perspectives in this second category
unpacked further and linked two key concepts grounded in this enquiry within the
lived experiences of young boys reading and writing practices in three Maltese
state schools: 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness'. Overall, the two
categories provided a comprehensive and richer answer to subsidiary question 3
situated within the conceptual ground developed through my personal
experiences and literature review. The following are the six themes that emerged
from this category by using TA:

- Young boys, books and reading
- Young boys, phonics and bilingual education
- Young boys and balanced literacy
- Young boys and writing in the early primary years
- Young boys, work and play
- Young boys, school readiness, transitions and literacy

The story of each developed theme will be discussed through the lens of the participants in the context of each state school concerned, including young boys' voices, and supported by the views of early primary teachers who participated in the open-ended comments of the online questionnaire.

4.5.9 Theme 1: Young boys, books and reading.

Findings revealed that five- to six-year-olds boys in Maltese state schools seemed to be more attracted towards books that match their interest. In addition, professionals in schools claimed that they noted a lack of such books in the early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools:

> *I think we need more books for boys. The phonics books we have the decodable ones, these are all related to something like 'Mum's this' and 'Mum's that', you know what I mean for boys these are not attractive.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

> *Most of the time the books you find in classrooms are fiction and we know that not all books are attractive to boys.*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

A number of responses from educators through the online questionnaire supported the idea and need of having books that match young boys' interests:

> *Boys enjoy it when we read stories together on the big screen about things they love; e.g. Pokemon, cars, bikes, etc.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

Only one Year 1 teacher from the three state schools indicated otherwise:
> *I think that nowadays we are giving a lot of importance to literacy. Now we have more books and big books in Maltese. Children love big books, they get excited. Boys and girls love it.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

The freedom to choose books at this level did not seem to be a common practice in Year 1 classrooms:

> *If they were in upper primary yes I would let them choose but since they are so young no, the books are levelled, so I say this is right for them.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

One of the Head of Departments (Literacy) pointed out her concern about the teachers' choice of books and the efficacy of early literacy learning for boys:

For example non-fiction books are not used in classrooms. Some activities which educators present, I feel it's as if they are sending the message to boys: "You do not need to participate" the spark fades away; there is no spark for participation anymore. I think this might be affecting boys' literacy learning.
(Ms Jessica, Head of Department, Literacy, Awwista School)

Parents argued about the eBooks their young boys received from school or the lack of opportunity the boys had to get library books for home use:

I am disappointed with the eBooks sent home as I find that they are girlish. They're not appealing to boys.
(Ms Grace, parent, Sawrella School)

I would be very happy if the teacher sent a book so that we can read it together at home.
(Ms May, parent, Awwista School)

In the same vein, one Head of Department highlighted the common concern of the lack of library books sent home in Year 1:

Some educators give them books for home once a week at this level, as record taking takes a lot of time, and they say that they cannot afford doing it more often. I see that as a pity, they read the book, take it back to school, but they cannot change it! I don't agree!
(Ms Charlene, Head of Department, Literacy, Sawrella School)

Several scholars believe that children's interests including those of boys should be acknowledged to ensure that boys won't be turned off and spend less time reading (Brozo, 2002; Booth, 2002; Neu & Weinfield 2007; Fletcher, 2006; Guzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe & Hardenbrook, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; van Lier, 2008). According to most participants in this study young boys seemed to favour non-fiction books and other books that match their interest but these were not easily available in their classrooms. In the same vein, several scholars claimed that the extending gap between home and school literacy experiences for boys increases demotivation and disengagement leading to reading failure in future

years (Alloway, 2007; Rowan et al., 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Conversely, other scholars see the promotion of books related to boys' interest as a solution that further promotes gender binaries and biological determinism (Hammet & Stanford, 2008; Martino, 2008). Here is what the five- to six-year-old boys in my study had to say about books they like and dislike when shown pictures related to books they have at school and reading that took place in a Year 1 class during observation week:

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year-olds).

Non mi piaciono i libri della scuola. Lo preso quello di 'Cars' a scuola, mi piace. Ci sono altri che non mi piaciono.
I don't like them the ones at school. I took the one about 'Cars' from school, I like it. There are some others that I don't like.
(Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

I like them both. (Luca, English first language)
(Sam, Carlo, and Ben agreed with Beppe.)

Boys' voices from Awwista School (five- to six-year-olds).

Għax ngħejja nieħu ktieb. Għax ma jkollix aptit.
I get tired taking a book. Because I wouldn't feel like it. (Matthew)

Ma jogħġobnix, għax lanqas nibda nifhem; il-kelmiet wisq tqal.
I don't like it because I don't even understand; the words are too difficult.
(Paul)

Għax ikunu tqal u ngħejja.
Because they are difficult and I get tired. (Isaac)

Jien inħossni 'happy' għax nista' naqrahom il-kliem.
I feel happy because I can read the words. (Tim)

Researcher: Do you like the books you have at school?

Jien il-kotba tad-dar inħobb għax jien għandi ktieb tal-'animals' u jogħġbuni.
I like the books I have at home because at home I have a book about animals and I like them. (Tim)

Tad-dar jogħġubini jien.
The ones I have at home I like. (Isaac)

Anke jien, tad-dar jogħġbuni.
Me too, I like the books I have at home. (Matthew)

Anke jien li għandi d-dar jogħġbuni; ta' Batman.
Me too, I like the ones I have at home; about Batman. (Paul)

Anke jien għandi Batman.
I have Batman too! (Matthew)

Anke jien għandi wieħed ta' Batman.
I have one of Batman too! (Tim)

Boys' voices from Sawrella School (five- to six-year-olds).

Jien inħobb il-ktieb li qiegħed fid-dar tan-nannu, qiegħed ġol-ixkaffa,
imbagħad tal-gwerra.
I like the book which is at my grandpa's home, it's on the shelf, it's about
the war. (Karl)

Researcher: Do you like the books from school?

Le, ma jogħġbunix għax meta nlesti l-ħowmwerk il-'mummy' tgħidli ejja
ħa naqraw u jien ma nkunx irrid naqrahom il-kotba tal-iskola għax
niddejjaq.
No, I don't like them because when I finish my homework mum tells me to
read school books and I don't want to read them because I get bored.
(Karl)

Jien inħobbhom il-kotba imma ma nħobbx il-kotba li tagħtina t-'teacher'
biex naqraw id-dar għax tqal.
I like books but I don't like the books the teacher gives us to read at home
because they're difficult. (Lee)

The rest of the boys who participated in the focus group at Sawrella School agreed that they did not like the books they take home from school. It is clear that overall the young boys confirmed what several stakeholders claimed. Most of the five- to six-year-old boys did not always find books that matched their interests at school, and they were restricted when it comes to choice. Similarly, Neu and Winfield (2007) found that boys in general resist the books suggested by their teachers and subsequently recommend that teachers should let boys choose their books freely. This seemed to be switching off the pleasure of books and reading for the majority of the boys interviewed in the three focus groups. On the other hand, most of the five- to six-year-old boys showed more excitement and interest in the books they have at home - related to their real life experiences, media and popular culture - and complained about the difficulty of the text in schoolbooks. Literature shows that if media, popular culture and technology are valued in

schooled literacy practices young children's motivation and engagement would increase as their constructed literate identities are acknowledged (Carrington, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2003, 2010a; Marsh et al., 2005; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Marsh & Millard, 2005). Millard and Marsh (2001) argued that:

> … at a time when literacy practices are changing, both at home and in school, it is imperative that schools examine the materials they provide to ensure that the interests of all children are reflected in the text made available for sharing in the home.
> (p. 37)

Some scholars also pointed out a disconnection between reading at home and reading at school that appears to be common especially when it comes to young men (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Sullivan, 2009).

In all, findings within this section showed that having less choice, high expectation of reading and comprehension levels at this age, sending books for young boys to read independently at home and having parents forcing the reading of these texts might be jeopardizing the pleasures and joy that open the doors to lifelong reading for the majority of these boys (Griffiths, 2012). "A good reader has both skill and will. In the 'will' part, we are talking about motivation to read. A student with skill, may be capable, but without will, she cannot become a reader" (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010, p. 16). The following subsection delves deeper into this aspect of reading motivation and five- to six-year-old boys' reading experiences in Maltese state schools.

4.5.9.1 Young boys, reading and motivation.

Most parents from the three focus groups showed concern as they noted that their young boys' lacked motivation to interact with schoolbooks that were sent home:

> *If boys see reading boring from the age of five, it's not good. There is no enthusiasm at all.*
> *(Mr Mauro, parent, Rużetta School)*

> *He is not motivated yet to go and pick up the schoolbook book himself and read.*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*

On the other hand, teachers and parents from Sawrella School pointed out how five- to six-year-old boys were motivated and engaged when adults read other books to them and the positive influence of other family members reading at home:

> *Yes he asks me to read to him before we sleep. My son has a library in his bedroom and I tell him to choose a book. Yes he asks: "Are we going to read today?"*
> *(Ms Grace, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *He sees his brother reading sometimes he asks to read as well.*
> *(Ms Nina, parent, Sawrella School)*

Parents and teachers shared their diverse experiences as well as concerns for the five- to six-year-old boys' ability to blend sounds and read and their motivation towards reading at this early stage:

> *When he comes to read the book he's not motivated. He is much happier when he looks at the pictures. I have to pick the book, sit down and read with him.*
> *(Ms May, parent, Awwista School)*

> *My son can sound out the letters but he cannot read yet.*
> *(Ms Alessandra, parent, Rużetta School)*

> *Now that some of them are able to blends sounds into words, they are able to read some words from books.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

One of the Year 1 teachers acknowledged the difficulty some parents encountered when asking their young boys to read and she also mentioned new schoolbooks that were about to be used for the first time:

> *They take books from classroom library and I tell parents to send me comments, for example they write: "this book was difficult for my son to read." Now we have more books some boys can read.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

It seemed that the main aim for taking books at home at this level is to read the text independently rather than to enjoy a book with parents or guardians. Most of the comments revealed that the five- to six-year-old boys were not ready to

blend sounds or read fluently at this stage, and this reading practice concerned most of the parents of these boys. Year 1 teachers were also aware that these books were challenging for some boys to read independently. On the other hand, one parent argued that:

> *There needs to be more story telling in Year 1, and because of their age I think that they can teach reading and writing in a fun way. So when they grow they get to like it! At least when they think of reading and writing they see it as exciting and not boring… after all they are just five!*
> *(Ms Grace, parent, Rużetta School)*

Ms Connie explained how all boys and girls in her class were engaged and highly motivated when reading happened outdoors:

> *I am thinking of when we do a reading lesson outside in the ground instead of in class. Both boys and girls are more engaged. We do story telling with big books, yes they enjoy it, at least they have time to move a bit.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

Moreover, all teachers and some parents from the three schools agreed that the use of technology motivated and engaged boys during their school and home reading practices:

> *It was surprising that when we gave them eBooks, boys were the ones who read more books.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

> *When we use computers or when they get out of their place to use the interactive whiteboard, yes it attracts them more.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

> *The teacher sends eBooks on the website… in the evening my son says: "let me check whether the teacher has sent me a book today so that we can read it!"*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*

Nonetheless, as stated by one Head of Department (Literacy), digital literacy did not seem to be a popular practice in the early primary classrooms of Maltese state schools:

> *Unfortunately, it's not that much into practice in the early primary years. If there is more emphasis on digital literacy and most importantly, the way it should be used, instead of having passive children, they become in charge of their own learning.*
> *(Ms Jessica, Head of Department, Literacy, Awwista School)*

One Year 1 teacher expressed her concern for her effective use of electronic modes in early literacy pedagogy to meet the needs of boys in her classroom:

> *For example technology, I give them more cards to play with, I do activities on the interactive whiteboard but I don't think that is enough for boys. I think that is something I need to improve as a teacher… I need to make more use of technology.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

The same need was also evident in recent studies where teachers struggled to integrate digital resources into schooled literacy practices (Abrams & Merchant, 2013; Burnett, 2015; Fenty & McKendry Anderson, 2014; Flewitt, Kurcikova & Messer, 2014). McDougall (2009) has also documented the identity crisis of teachers due to recent developments in literacy and the digital divide. Boys' motivation and interest in technology was particularly evident during the focus group in Awwista School as I asked spontaneously about what they like doing best at school:

> ### Boys' voices from Awwista school (five- to six-year-olds).
>
> *Inħobb immur fuq il-kompjuter.*
> *I like to use the computer. (Paul)*
>
> *Meta nużaw il-kompjuter!*
> *When we use the computer! (Tim)*
>
> *Iva, il-kompjuter!*
> *Yes, computer! (Isaac)*
>
>
> *Anke jien inħobbu!*
> *I like it too! (Matthew)*

Findings from this section revealed a deadlock between the way parents and professionals perceived motivation to early reading. Some parents seemed to be

concerned with the way their boys were reacting to the books they had to read at home, while some teachers seemed to hold accountable family support when it comes to some boys and their motivation in class. Fewer parents were satisfied with the way their boys managed to read their schoolbooks independently, however, they were more concerned that their five- to six-year-old boys were not able to read at the age of five. History of early literacy learning in literature explains how behaviourist learning theory looked at 'reading readiness' as the effective learning of decoding skills, and ignored children's development and ability to learn those skills (Downing & Thackray, 1971; Merchant, 2008). This study has shown how most five- to six-year-old boys enjoyed being read to, and attempted to try and make sense of the text together with adults in their environment; however, it is clear that the focus from most of the parents at home and teachers in three Year 1 classrooms concerned was more on the decoding of text and the concern of not being able to read. In addition, evidence showed how some five- to six-year-old boys' motivation to "go and pick up a book" is out of the question let alone attempting to make meaning out of the printed text.

Findings further revealed the young boys' interest in engaging productively with electronic modes of communication and how this medium motivated them towards reading. Research shows that young children today are accessing text in a variety of modes in their out of school lives (Labbo & Reinking, 2003; Marsh, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005; Kress, 2003) and this has influence in the way literacy is redefined in response to digital literacy (Gee, 1996, 2000; Luke & Carrington, 2002). As claimed by several scholars, (Anning 2003; Bearne, 2004; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Marsh, 2003; Pahl, 2002; Luke & Luke, 2001) this study also showed that print reading skills seemed to prevail in early primary classrooms within Maltese state school underpinned by a limited vision of literacy that tends to neglect literacy as social practice. Marsh and Millard (2000) argued that the rejection of children's home literate experiences in schooled literacy practices especially when reading is reduced to particular texts puts children at a disadvantage.

The boys' voices will provide further insight into how they feel about classroom reading and their general attitude towards books in Year 1 (most of the boys pointed at a sad face on the provided emotion cards when the picture of one of the boys holding a book in his hands in class was shown):

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year olds).

There are a lot of tricky words. I find it difficult to read. (Luca, English speaking)

I don't like it and I don't like books. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

I like it when my mum reads. (Luca, English first language)

Mi piace leggere e anche i libri mi piaciono.
I like reading and I like books too. (Carlo, Italian first language, English second language)

I feel sad. I will be tired. (Ben, English first language)

I like them, because I like to read. (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)

It is evident that existing reading practices in the three Maltese state school concerned tend to be promoting undesirable reading practices for most of the five- to six-year-old boys participants in this study. Literature shows that children who experience pleasant reading interactions may develop an interest in continuing to engage in such interactions and in learning how to read (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). A minority from the 15 boys that participated in the three focus groups claimed that they enjoyed reading books because they were able to read independently. Some of the boys claimed that they preferred to read with an adult. Such evidence supports Whitehead's (2010) claim underpinned by socio-cultural theory where she emphasized the importance of young children reading and writing with a supportive adult as they "are thinking at full stretch" (p. 182).

It can be argued that how reading is being introduced within the first year of compulsory schooling in Maltese state schools might be motivating and engaging some five- to six-year-old boys who are able to read fluently at this age. Therefore, I ask: Is existing practice ensuring that just at the right time every child's unique needs are met to develop their full potential and nurture their innate motivation to explore books and reading in the same enthusing way as when they were babies? In light of this query, Zambo and Brozo (2009) claimed that due to an increased focus on skill acquisition in the early years most boys see themselves as less able readers and writers, and will lose enthusiasm in activities

that focus around these skills. Indeed, the three Year 1 teachers from different state schools declared that they often used competition and reward systems to increase boys' motivation towards reading and writing practices that needed to be covered in the syllabus:

> *I tell them that if they work and read more, they will gain more stickers.*
> *There is always that one boy that says "Oooo I don't want to". I just can't*
> *believe that this system is not effective with him!*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

It can be argued that some teachers might search for quick-fix strategies that promote extrinsic motivation to address young boys' engagement during formal and structured reading and writing tasks. Conversely, several scholars found that children maintain their motivation to read if they experience activities they do for their own sake, triggering their intrinsic motivation within a meaningful social activity that makes them feel competent (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). It can be argued that present schooled reading practices did not fit with the diverse needs, interests and development of the group of heterogeneous boys in a Year 1 classroom and this might have repercussions on the development of some boys' intrinsic motivation and how they view themselves as readers in future years.

4.5.9.2 Young Boys and reading time in the Year 1 classroom.

This study found that teachers did not find much time to read to five- to six-year-old children during their first year of schooling in Maltese state schools. Two main reasons were priority given to phonics reading programmes in Year 1 and the notion that time spent on skills-based approaches is more effective for the teaching and learning of reading:

> *We do not have time to read in class. Last year I used to do it fifteen*
> *minutes a day. Maybe as we approach the end of the phonics programmes*
> *in English and advance in the Maltese alphabet we start fifteen minutes of*
> *reading. But personally I think that it should be more than fifteen minutes*
> *a day.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

Similar comments from early primary teachers further confirmed the indications from previous evidence that children in a Year 1 classroom seemed to be more exposed to the decontextualised reading and writing tasks i.e., the decoding of text rather than listening to text being read out and the opportunity to make sense of it. Similarly, an ethnographic study in reception classrooms in England, where the education system is similarly controlled by the neoliberal principles of accountability and testing, found that priority was given to the achievement of academic skills (Bradbury, 2013). Further comments revealed that Heads of School held a different perspective on the ways reading was being tackled and how reading time was being managed in Year 1 classrooms:

> *They have a lot of resources. Time spent reading in class depends mostly on the teacher. I have teachers who do activities related to a book and check on the students' comprehension. However, I have other teachers who just do the reading and that is it.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*

> *Reading helps when they read at home. At school they just do that reading slot and that is ok. It is obvious that others struggle because they don't read at home.*
> *(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)*

Overall, teachers and Heads of school seemed to be aware that less reading time for pleasure occurred in Year 1 classrooms. Data further revealed that the Heads of Department (Literacy) also seemed to be aware of of such situations and surfaced the importance of increasing the time spent reading during this transition phase in the early years cycle of Maltese state schools:

> *As regards to time spent reading in class at this level, we are very far far away! There has to be more reading time at this level.*
> *(Ms Charlene, Head of Department, Literacy, Sawrella School)*

Parents from all three focus groups conducted also expressed their concerns about the reading time their boys were exposed to in Year 1 classrooms:

> *My son says that he feels excited when he visits the school library but he never mentioned that his teacher read a book to them in class.*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*

I agree, reading doesn't happen often at school.
(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)

Several studies found that boys enjoy reading less than girls do (St. Jarre, 2008; Clark & Foster, 2005; Jones & Cartwright Fiorelli, 2003). Sanacore (2002) claimed that lifetime readers are established in the evolvement of a love of reading. Literature also revealed that the enjoyment of reading (Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999) is connected to the achievement of reading (McKenna & Kear, 1990). In my study, findings indicated that apart from not finding books that match their interest at school and at time there was no opportunity to take books home, five- to six-year-olds boys in Year 1 classrooms within the concerned three Maltese state schools, seemed to spend limited time interacting with books or listening to stories at school. The amount of time spent reading increases the vocabulary, fluency and comprehension of a child making it a crucial factor in determining the reading outcomes in future years (McGeown, Norgate & Warhurst, 2012).

This sheds further light on the nurturing of intrinsic motivation and the promotion of a love of reading in the existing reading practices five- to six-year-old boys are experiencing within Maltese state schools. Alvermann (2001, p. 680) argued that, "the possibility that as a culture we are making struggling readers out of some adolescents who for any number of reasons have turned their backs on a version of literacy called school literacy is a sobering thought."

4.5.10 Theme 2: Young boys, phonics and bilingual education.

4.5.10.1 The impact of phonics instruction on five-to six-year-old boys.

This sub-theme will delve deeper into how different stakeholders view present classroom pedagogies and practices used to teach reading and writing. All children in Year 1 classrooms were exposed to formal English and Maltese lessons. Most of the participants in all three schools made reference to the phonics programmes used in class to teach the English language. During the observations, I confirmed that a similar approach to teach reading was used during Maltese lessons. In conjunction with the longstanding early reading debate in existing research (Levy, 2011) the hot tensions between a skills-based

(phonics-based) and meanings-based (whole language approach) surfaced amongst participants' discourses in the context of this study. Some Heads of School and Year 1 teachers saw the creation of workbooks by teachers and synthetic phonics teaching as a priority at this level:

> *The phonics programme was chosen by the teachers, and they used it well, they worked collaboratively, they also created workbooks for Year 1 children, so that helped a lot.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*

> *Teachers created the phonics workbooks here because of the English language. I think I like this as it has a variety and it doesn't have just writing (pointing on dotted letters in workbook) but also reading (the participant was pointing at a page with sentences and a blank space where children had to fill in the missing word).*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

Adversely, parents of young boys viewed their sons' experiences with phonics from a different lens:

> *They are teaching them with sounds so he tried to sound out some words, not like the way I was taught, totally different. I still don't agree with phonics.*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*

One of the Heads of School claimed that trying to agree with one view of how reading and writing should be taught in early primary is not conducive to learning:

> *Before we had the problem of phonics and not phonics, look and say and not look and say, which definitely confused teachers' brains… The advantage is that now with school development planning, where before it used to be like, you have to do phonics, you have to do phonics… no, now you plan according to the students' needs. I think that it's not all about phonics but a mixture of everything.*
> *(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)*

Some Heads of Department (Literacy) revealed their concerns about schooled pedagogies used to promote reading and writing in Year 1, and reaffirmed the parents' concerns on the phonics takeover in the early literacy instruction of Maltese and English:

That's another concern for us, in reading they focus on segmenting, blending, and a bit of spelling. As to comprehension same, they are not tackling it, the focus is more on reading the word, "barking at print". In the past years there was a huge focus on phonics instruction and they took it over as something to replace what is being done in the school. That's something I'm concerned about… at kindergarten level, when I tell teachers to teach letters through books and play, they think that socio-dramatic play and dress up is not useful anymore! It's like… when they get to know about something new, instead of digging deeper, they eliminate other good practices and focus on that one thing.
(Ms Charlene, Head of Department, Literacy, Sawrella School)

Parents shared their experiences of how they viewed and dealt with the existing schooled beginning reading instruction system and their young boys at home. Comments revealed that not all of the boys who were experiencing a phonic-based approach seemed to be able to cope with its demands in the Maltese state schools concerned:

He is interested in the first sounds of words, but not to write or try to read some words. I tell him that the word starts with "ċ" for example but he's not interested to blend the words so far.
(Ms Giulia, parent, Rużetta School)

My son gets confused with letter sounds too.
(Ms Lorna, parent, Awwista School)

Words and phrases such as 'confused' and 'not interested' were prominent in the data, adding to the notion of a negative circle when speaking about the experiences of the majority of the boys and their reading practices. Findings from this study show that different boys were at different stages on their continuum of literacy learning to face the reading set programmes presented to them at school. Participants' declarations revealed that teacher-led phonics programmes seemed to overpower reading for pleasure and child-centred, meaning-based approaches in the lived literacy experiences of young boys in this context. This is what young boys had to say about the phonics instruction they experienced during Maltese and English lessons in Year 1.

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year-olds).

The five- to six-year-old boys in Rużetta School were shown a picture with flash cards used for the teaching of phonics (mostly used for the daily drilling to

learn the relationships between graphemes-phonemes/letters-sounds). Most boys pointed to a sad face on the provided emotion cards:

> *I do not like it. (Ben, English first language)*

> *I do not like it either because there are loads of letters and I get tired. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)*

Carlo and Sam also agreed that they find it tiring and that they don't like it. Luca was the only boy to claim that he liked the drilling exercise.

The five- to six-year-old boys in Rużetta School were also shown a picture of the interactive whiteboard they had in class with an image of a three-letter word. Every day they had to produce the sound of each letter and blend, e.g., "/d//a//m/ = dam" repeating after their teacher:

> *I felt so and so, because I don't like it that much. Sometimes I don't know them. (Luca, English first language)*

> *I don't like them because then you need to do the letters on the book. I don't like to write them too. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)*

Another picture showing another phonics PowerPoint on the interactive whiteboard during a Maltese lesson was shown to the boys during the focus group in Rużetta School:

> *I feel so and so, because sometimes I sleep and then I wake up again. (Luca, English first language)*

> *I like it (low voice and no excitement). (Ben, English first language)*

> *I feel happy if I say them all because then the teacher will be proud of me. (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)*

> *A me non piace perché dobbiamo ripetere.*
> *I don't like it because we have to repeat. (Carlo, Italian first language, English second language)*

Boys' voices from Awwista school (five- to six-year-olds).

The boys participating in the focus group of Awwista School were also shown a picture showing the interactive whiteboard while the teacher was delivering a phonics lesson. As soon as I showed the picture on my tablet all boys pointed at the sad face on their emotion cards and surprisingly declared:

> *Għax għajnejja, ma nistax il-ħin kollu nħares lejn dak, inħossni qisni norqod imma hekk.*
> *Because my eyes, I cannot look at that all the time; I feel like I'm sleepy but that's the way it is.(pointing at the interactive whiteboard on the picture). (Tim)*

> *Jien meta nara dak, għajnejja jibdew juġgħuni, u qisni ħa nkun ħa norqod.*
> *When I look at that, my eyes start hurting, and I feel sleepy. (Isaac)*

> *Jien tuġgħani għajnejja u nħossni norqod.*
> *My eyes hurt and I feel sleepy. (Matthew)*

> *Jien joqgħod juġgħani għonqi meta nħares lejn dak.*
> *My neck hurts when I look at that. (Paul)*

Boys' voices from Sawrella School (five- to six-year-olds).

In Sawrella School the image showed was that of an interactive whiteboard with the letter slides where all children had to produce the sound of each letter and blend the words (once again all boys pointed to a sad face):

> *Jien kont ser norqod hemm.*
> *I was going to sleep there. (Mark)*

> *Anke jien ridt norqod.*
> *I wanted to sleep too. (Zak)*

> *The rest of the boys declared that they wanted to sleep or felt tired too.*

The boys in Sawrella School were also shown a picture of one of the walls in the classroom with flash cards with a picture and a word on them. All children had to split the word in syllables and clap, blend or identify the beginning sounds in each word. Most of the five- to six-year-old boys pointed at the sad face or at the face with no expression on their emotion cards and this is what they had to say:

Ma jogħġbunix għax niddejjaq noqgħod ngħid ħafna kliem.
I don't like them because I get bored saying many words. (Steve)

Jien niddejjaq noqgħod nagħmel dawk il-kliem kollha, noqogħdu
nitkellmu /s/ /o/ /d, u niddejqu ngħidu l-ittri aħna.
I get bored doing all those words, we have to say /s/ /o/ /d, and we get
bored saying the letters. (Mark)

Jien iddejjaqt ħafna minnhom.
I am very much bored with them. (Zak)

Jien niddejjaq għax għandna bżonn ngħidu l-ittri u nċapċpu. Nilħaq
ngħejja.
I get bored because we have to say the letters and clap. I get tired. (Lee)

Jien inħossni tajjeb għax naqra l-kelma 'rocket' u jien inħobbu r-'rocket'
ħafna.
I feel good because I can read the word rocket and I like the rocket very
much. (Karl)

A highlight and one of the purposes of this study was to make the voices of young boys heard during their early literacy learning journeys. I must admit that the responses to how they felt about their daily phonics-based reading instruction in both Maltese and English were quite surprising and also quite worrying. It was clear that the majority of the boys observed, with different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, did not find sedentary phonics instruction engaging and motivating. Consequently, findings from this study might be challenging to some stakeholders who favour a phonics structured approach to reading instruction (Campbell, 2015; Campbell et al., 2012; DfES, 2006; Johnston et al., 2011; Jolly, 2008; Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012). Most of the young boys' comments aligned with the views of Heads of Department (Literacy) on excessive phonics instruction in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Some boys might have been learning the skill to decode at this age. However, findings from this study show that almost all five- to six-year-old boys within the three schools did not pass on exciting comments about the synthetic phonics direct instruction they experienced.

Maltese and English lessons lasted for 45 minutes, and sometimes even longer. The hours children spent looking at the interactive whiteboard to blend letter sounds every day seems to add to the negative circle in the way they are introduced to the beginning teaching of reading. In the same vein, several

researchers claimed that teaching that resembles upper primary education in the early years and ignoring the developmental needs of young children, especially boys, might nurture a demotivating attitude towards literacy learning (Gropper et al., 2011; Wolf, 2007; Sax, 2007; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Further, the use of the interactive whiteboard in the three classrooms observed was being used as a resource simply to improve normal practice rather than to change curricula and pedagogy as a result of recognising the changing nature of literacy in a digital age (Burnett, Dickinson, Malden, Merchant & Myers, 2004; Darmanin, 2017; Marsh, 2007).

4.5.10.2 Phonics, bilingual education and five- to six-year-old boys.

In addition to the findings in the previous sub-theme related to the teaching of reading in early primary classrooms, formal literacy instruction in two languages and the use of English commercial phonics programmes at the age of five concerned most of the parents:

> *He's feeling confused though with the recognition and writing of the letters in Maltese and English, the 'c' strong and soft etc.*
> *(Mr Silvio, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *Yes, yes even my son, for example the 'u' for umbrella it makes the 'oo' sound in Maltese, he is getting confused there too. The phonics, for us are very strange.*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *Reading is not in his first language at school so he sees reading as boring as he does not comprehend!*
> *(Ms Nina, parent, Sawrella School)*

Similar discussions emerged during parents' focus groups at the other two schools. This added a sense of confusion amongst most of the young boys concerned. Consequently, boys' difficulties to cope with phonics instruction in two languages at the age of five brought about the pressing need for more information; or adversely, a call for the elimination of the phonics system from the parents' end:

I don't think that this is a school issue; it has to come from the education
as they push the phonics system.
(Lara, parent, Awwista School)

I agree too.
(Ms Lorna, parent, Awwista School)

Other parents in other schools told me they have the same phonics system,
so not the teacher, the education system has to change this.
(Ms Katia, parent, Awwista School)

Furthermore, data revealed that the recent influx of foreign children in Maltese state schools also impacted on the way languages were being taught in early primary classrooms:

I cannot compare the teaching of Maltese here with the teaching of
Maltese in another state school where the majority of students speak
Maltese as their first language. That is why the school has to adopt its
practice and tailor to meet the needs of particular students. The one-size-
fits-all approach has to stop.
(Ms Carmen, Head of School, Rużetta School)

On a different note, one early primary educator from the online questionnaire explained how she attempted to adapt phonics instruction to contextualise it and make it meaningful to try and meet the needs of the diverse young children in her classroom:

Keeping the Maltese context in mind, when I teach phonics I don't use all
the programme (all the sounds presented) as I believe that children learn
or are more ready to learn if they are presented with words that they use
in their own everyday life.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

The findings in this sub-theme revealed that the overemphasis of drilling and direct synthetic phonics instruction seemed to be having a negative impact on the way most boys were experiencing literacy education in a bilingual, and for some multilingual context at home and school. According to several stakeholders' claims the introduction of an English phonics programme in Year 1 was confusing most boys' language and literacy learning at this level, as they were not understanding the meaning of repeating letter sounds and this impeded them from practising and enjoying their second language learning at this level. On the

contrary, data also revealed that when an adult promoted the second language through the reading of books and phonics programmes were adapted and made more meaningful it made more sense for boys at this age and scaffolded their language and literacy learning. In the same vein Sollars and Pumfrey (1999) claimed that young children need to understand the new language, if not, language learning would be reduced to insignificant chains of symbols that make up words.

Young children in Maltese state schools can have English as their first, second or even third language nowadays and consequently for some their first language might not match the main language used at school. In this study, it was revealed that all children were being exposed to the teaching and learning of two languages, so they had to learn the language and literacy skills simultaneously. A study in a Maltese state school concluded that it may be too early to introduce English as a second language for children in Year 2 (six- to seven-year-olds). Instead, at this stage it may have been wiser to introduce the reinforcement of academic skills in their first language (Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999). A context-reduced formal setting that relies on the teacher's oral language explanation may impede young children to learn Maltese and English in a bilingual context (Chen & Mora Flores, 2006). Conversely, literature shows that in a more context-embedded and language-rich classroom prioritizing dialogue (Gibbons, 1991) young children may connect their knowledge of their primary language to the new language or languages. Chen and Mora Flores (2006) suggested that programmes provided should be academically and linguistically balanced and fit in with each child's ZPD of both literacy and language simultaneously. This has implications for the existing formalised and skills-based approach in early primary education, and on how English and Maltese should be presented in a Maltese context, considering existing mandates, the recent influx of foreign children in Maltese state schools, as well as the diverse needs of young children in the early years.

4.5.11 Theme 3: Young boys and balanced literacy.

As stated in the literature review, the policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b) recommended a balanced approach to literacy instruction for the early years. The data below will show how

attempts to implement the balanced literacy approach impacted on the stakeholders' views of reading and writing practices boys were being exposed to in three Maltese state schools:

> *We did shared reading, guided reading, paired reading etc. But some people never change. They have their positive side too, they are good teachers, but they are wary of and hesitant to try new ways of teaching. They do request for more PD session to learn more though.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*

In the same vein, Head of Department's (Literacy) comments revealed that they thrive to make sure that in early primary a balanced approach to literacy instruction is being implemented (MEDE, 2014b):

> *I think that when it comes to shared reading, it's impressive. But still existing practice worries me. For example, an educator tells you, 'yes I do shared reading' and then I discover that they do just one book every term in class. Everyone in the school including the school management team is satisfied that they are doing one big book and one shared reading lesson every term and personally that leave me speechless!*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

Similarly, several other stakeholders within Maltese state schools confirmed that they witnessed the effectiveness of a balanced approach to literacy. However, findings also revealed that there seems to be some restrictions or limitations in the extent to which such practice was being implemented in the early primary years. The following is what five- to six-year-old boys had to say about their experiences of some components of a balanced literacy approach to literacy learning.

Boys' voices from Awwista school (five- to six-year-olds).

I witnessed a minority of two episodes where components of balanced literacy were used from the three weeks I spent doing observations in the three state schools. As explained in detail in the scenario data from my classroom observations earlier in this chapter the boys in Awwista School experienced dialogic reading in the outdoor area of the school. As soon as I showed the picture I took during this session, the boys raised the level of their voices in excitement, and pointed at the happy face on the emotion cards:

Jien ħassejtni 'happy' għax qrajna storja.
I felt happy because we were reading a story. (Paul)

Jien ħadt ħafna pjaċir!
I enjoyed it very much! (Matthew)

Jien inħossni 'happy' meta naqraw barra mill-klassi.
I feel happy when we read out of class. (Tim)

Boys' voices from Sawrella School (five- to six-year-olds).

At Sawrella School the boys experienced one shared reading session in Maltese during the week of observation. All boys pointed at the smiley face on their emotion card, and in unison said: "Happy!"

Togħġobni dik!
I like that! (John)

Nieħu gost meta t-'teacher' taqra ktieb!
I like it when the teacher reads a book! (Zak)

Jien nieħu gost ukoll.
I enjoy it too! (Mark)

These findings revealed that all boys' responses to their experiences of being read to by their teacher were more exciting when compared to the impact of the rest of the pictures related to more sedentary and structured methods of teaching reading. It was clear from their enthusiasm that this reading practice was meaningful, purposeful, and fitted perfectly with their diverse developmental, linguistic, literate and cognitive needs as they were all fully engaged. Evidence from my study might be useful in supporting recent research, where it is established that a balanced literacy approach endeavours to meet the complex literacy learning needs and complements the level of cognitive development of every single child (Davis, 2013; Siaulys, 2013).

4.5.12 Theme 4: Young boys and writing in the early primary years.

Literature affirms that as from the very first years of schooling educators report that girls write more than boys, and also use a broader range of genres in their writing (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a; Alloway & Gilbert; 1997b; Poynton 1985). In the context of this study, all three Year 1 teachers interviewed noted

similar differences in the ways groups of boys and girls approached writing at the age of five:

> *I think that the greatest difference one can see between boys and girls at this stage is in writing. Boys do not care about the lines on paper, they go out of line when they write, up and down. Boys struggle with handwriting skills when they come to write; much, much, much more than girls do.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

> *Even girls are hyper but boys got that a little bit more, sometimes I tell them go and have a walk to the bathroom and then come back to the classroom.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

Other Maltese state school early primary educators, respondents from the online questionnaire, agreed with the teacher's hegemonic claims from the three schools:

> *Even when it comes to writing, it is harder for boys to hold the pencil.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

> *But when it comes to a written task, boys often take less risks and their creativity is much less than that of girls.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

It was interesting to find out that from all the evidence collected a few teachers' responses through the online questionnaire attested that:

> *In my class, boys love writing more than girls and they write way more, both during structured writing and free writing journals.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

> *Boys love hands-on, they are mostly technical buddies and therefore prefer to touch and explore more than just going straight to writing. This is also seen in girls though. The brighter, vast and more interesting creative ways to read and write make the students love reading and writing much more.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

The latter claims give rise to questions such as: Are the problem the boys? Or some ways writing is being introduced is not meeting the literate needs of diverse groups of boys within early primary classrooms? The following comments revealed that writing practices seemed to be looked at as a heavy burden for teachers in the early primary years of Maltese state schools:

Writing we have a lot! The workbooks, they write during science, music…
writing is in all lessons.
(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)

Student centered lessons and hands-on keep students more engaged, thus
improving literacy. Writing is still a big problem though.
(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)

Moreover, the existing formal writing practice focused around transcriptional skills (referred to by most educators in the comments as 'handwriting' practice, 'worksheets' and 'work') in early primary state schools, seemed to be reviving the traditional constructed notion of 'patient girls' and 'hasty boys' amongst several stakeholders in the context of this study:

Writing is not the same, girls are neater, boys are messier… men, doctors,
you never recognise what they write.
(Mr Silvio, parent, Sawrella School)

Generally, girls write more in years 4, 5 and 6… even if you find a
creative boy, he does it in a hurry, or he writes messily, it does not come
from his heart. We had a girl she wrote a book, but her father has a good
position, you know.
(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)

Boys, they are so excited that they know what they are doing; then they do
their work quickly and "addio" (i.e., "bye") to the neat handwriting.
(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)

Moreover, concerns on existing formal writing practice and young boys' early literacy learning were evident in claims made by teachers and Heads of Department (Literacy) comments:

I know that we have to emphasize on neat handwriting but when I see
boys excited and eager to jot the words down I tell myself: Shall I stop
them or not? I don't want to stop their enthusiasm. They used to tell us
that it is ok if they don't write exactly in the line the most important is that
they know the letter formation, so even if it is a little above or below the
line it is ok. Year 1 we write in special lines and Year 2 they write in
narrower lines.
(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)

Schools are way back in writing than in reading at this level. It's true they
don't find time for reading but writing it is much worse. Writing strategies

> *are not implemented in all schools… I think that there is much more work to be done when it comes to writing in the early years.*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

The existing formal instruction to writing in early primary classrooms seemed to be making its way in the home literate experiences of young five- to six-year-old boys as the most prominent words in several claims were 'neatness' and 'rubbing off':

> *My son is startled when I rub off something for him; I tell him that he has to write in the line and not writing the letter above the line, half up the line and half down the line!*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*

So far, stakeholders' claims on existing writing practice in Year 1 classrooms revealed that the concept of writing in the early years is being interpreted in diverse ways. Writing instruction in early primary seemed to be of a burden and concern amongst several teachers. A minority of teachers claimed that writing was fun and engaging with young boys and this was mostly linked when they used a play-based and fun pedagogy. Findings also revealed how existing formal approaches to writing in early primary classrooms influenced the literate home experience of young boys and the way parents perceived writing in the early years. Research has shown that before young children learn how to write conventionally they are are able to independently produce writing that represents their thoughts and understandings (Browne, 2008; Cigman, 2014; Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Lancaster, 2003; Teale, 1986). However, room for young boys to express their thoughts through independent and free writing seemed to be limited in their schooled literacy experiences in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Evidence also shows that within the context of this study the social and cultural contexts of the young boys seemed to be put aside as the tendency of promoting further binary constructions of gender surfaced. Children were often categorised, as several stakeholders' claims show, into the 'slow and messy boys' and the 'quick and neat girls' when it comes to writing conventionally in the early years. Similarly, literature shows how social discourses have informed pedagogy, constrained learner agency (Blair, 2009) and positioned some learners as less

'good' than their peers due to constructed ideologies of the 'ideal learner' (Bradbury, 2013; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Jones, 2005). From a feminist poststructural framework, some scholars claimed that the constructed stereotype of girls as the 'successful' learners may position them as the 'invisible' learners within classrooms, increasing the likelihood that the needs of disengaged or underachieving girls are overlooked (Charleton, Mills, Martino and Beckett, 2007; Jones, 2005; Myers, 2000).

Findings from this study show that such gendered aspects of classroom interaction link with the extent to which the impact of current classroom writing practice in early primary has on the existing and future literacy learning of the young boys observed within Maltese state schools. Once again, these findings question equity in the traditional formal approach to early writing instruction mainly grounded in the value given to transcriptional skills (e.g. handwriting, letter formation etc.) (Whitehead, 2010) and how this is ultimately impacting on the constructions of boys' literate identities within a Maltese culture. What would boys' future attitudes towards writing be if they experience schooled literacy practices that make them believe that their writing is 'slow' and 'messy'? The following are the young boys' responses to the pictures of themselves copying from an interactive whiteboard to their lined copybooks using pencils which was the most common writing practice observed:

Boys' voices from Sawrella school (five- to six-year-olds).

(Most of the boys pointed at the sad face on the emotion cards)

Jien inħossni mdejjaq għax irrid noqgħod niftaħ il-basket u nġib il-lapes.
I feel sad because I have to open the bag and get the pencil. (Lee)

Anke jiena nħossni mdejjaq, għax ikolli bżonn noqgħod indawwar rasi għax ma tantx tara hux.
I feel sad too because I always have to turn my head because one cannot see properly aye. (Karl)

Jien ma niħux gost għax inkella ngħejja nikteb ħafna, idejja tibda tuġgħani ħafna (jipponta lejn il-minkeb u l-pala ta' jdejh).
I do not like it because I get tired of writing too much, my hand hurts very much (pointing at elbow and palm of hand; most boys in this focus group agreed that they experience the same feeling when they write). (Mark)

Jien inħossni 'happy' għax inħobb nagħmilhom.
I feel happy because I like to do them. (John)

Jien nieħu gost nagħmilhom imma subgħajja xorta juġġħuni.
I enjoy doing them but my fingers still hurts. (Zak)

Another picture showed the same boys from Sawrella School writing the same letter for a number of times on their lined copybook using their pencils (the copybook was to be taken home to finish off the task for homework):

Niddejjaq nagħmilhom.
I hate doing them. (Mark)

Anke jien inħossni imdejjaq għax niddejjaq nagħmilhom u ndum biex inlesti.
I feel sad too because I get bored doing them and it takes me too long to finish. (John)

Iva, indum ħafna.
Yes, it takes me very long. (Mark)

Jien niddejjaq għax inkun irrid nagħmlu kollha l-iskola ħalli ma jkollix ħowmwerk id-dar. Kuljum ikolli l-ħowmwerk.
I get bored because I would like to do it all at school so that I don't have any homework. I have homework every day. (Karl)
(In the parents' focus group, Karl's mother claimed that her son enjoys doing homework and has no problem at all; he is one of the eldest children in class, and according to his teacher he excels in class work tasks).

Jien idejjaqni wkoll għax indum biex inlesti u ngħejja. Ma nħobbx nagħmlu l-ħowmwerk.
I don't like it too as I take long to do it and then I get tired. I don't like doing homework. (Steve)

Similar findings emerged from the boys' focus groups at Rużetta School and Awwista School.

Boys' Voices from Rużetta school (five- to six-year-olds).

The young boys at Rużetta School were shown a picture of the interactive whiteboard and a three-liner titled 'Diary for homework'. All children had to copy the visible text on the large screen to their lined copybooks using their pencils. Only one of the boys pointed at the happy face on the emotion card:

I don't like doing this. (Ben, English first language)

I feel sad doing that because I don't like writing much. There are lots of letters, lots of different letters. I like letters but only one letter (pointing at the sad face on his card). (Luca, English first language)

Non mi piace perché ci sono tre, e non ci riesco a farle tutte.
I don't like it because there are three lines and I don't manage to write them all. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

They are too hard. My hands feel hard. (Ben, English first language)

I am happy for my hands because they are not hurting, because I go faster. (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)

My hands hurt too. (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

My hands don't like it. (Luca, English first language)

Boys' voices from Awwista School (five- to six-year-olds).

The latter picture was very similar to the one I showed to the five- to six-year-old boys during the focus group conducted at Awwista School. This is what they had to say:

Jiena nħobb nikteb id-'diary'.
I like writing the diary (displaying no enthusiasm). (Tim)

Jien niddejjaq nikteb.
I don't like writing. (Isaac)

Kultant subgħajja juġgħani għax nagħfas ħafna.
Sometimes my finger hurts because I press too hard. (Matthew)

A remarkable finding from this study was how the same boys reacted differently when they were shown pictures of when they experienced a more fun hands-on approach to writing practice. This finding conformed to the comments from early primary teachers who argued that a more play-based pedagogy motivated young boys in early literacy learning. All boys observed in the three Maltese state schools concerned were infrequently exposed to similar schooled literacy practices:

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year-olds).

This group of boys was shown a picture of when some of them were writing letters in Maltese using coloured chalk on black paper. All boys got excited and pointed at a happy face on their cards.

> *I like it because I like colours! I have one like those at home! (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)*

> *I am happy because it's fun! (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)*

> *I like it too because it's messy! (Ben, English first language)*

> Researcher: Do you prefer to use chalk or a pencil when you write?

> *All boys: Chalk! Chalk!*

Boys' voices from Awwista School (five- to six-year-olds).

At Awwista School boys were shown a picture of themselves writing with a marker on a mini whiteboard. All the boys pointed at the happy face on their cards:

> *Jien inħobb nikteb fuq il-bord!*
> *I like to write on the board! (Isaac)*

> *Jien nieħu pjaċir ukoll!*
> *I like it too! (Tim)*

> *Jien inħobb il-'markers'!*
> *I like the markers! (Matthew)*

Most young boys in the three Year 1 classrooms concerned experienced unattractive writing practices due to excessive focus on copying from the board, transcriptional skills, and a formal approach to writing instruction in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. It is evident that this affected the way most boys were perceiving writing at the age of five. Research shows that frequent copying from the board and similar passive classroom writing tasks were considered to be less effective (Cigman, 2014; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998). In this study, the boys' comments on their experiences of teacher-led, repetitive and decontextualised paper and pencil writing tasks surfaced a negative thread

amongst the majority of the boys and included common words such as 'tired', 'hurts', 'bored', 'I don't like writing' and 'sad'. This is supported by Cigman's work (2014) with young boys and writing where she claimed that, "Writing can be a painful process when letter formation, is emphasized over the message being communicated... For many children, and in particular many boys such as Aiden, writing becomes disturbing and painful" (p. 15). Similarly, Ivinson and Duveen (2006) specify how learners' learning dispositions are influenced by classroom pedagogies.

My study revealed that young boys expressed their enthusiasm and increased their involvement and motivation to learn when they experienced fun and play-based writing tasks, as for example when they used the different mediums other than a pencil in Year 1 classrooms: 'I like to write' and 'it is messy!'. Consequently, evidence from this study raises the concern on the well-being, literacy learning and long-term effects on the development of boys' identities as writers considering the time being spent copying from the interactive whiteboard to enhance their transcriptional skills rather than the creativity and holistic aspect needed to grow into passionate writers.

4.5.12.1 Workbooks, textbooks, worksheets, homework, dictation and young boys.

The use of commercial textbooks, workbooks and worksheets were prevalent amongst the schooled writing practices five- to six-year-old boys were exposed to in the three Maltese state schools. All Heads of Department (Literacy) interviewed disagreed with the use of workbooks, worksheets and textbooks at such an early stage and were concerned about the way such practice impacts literacy learning, particularly when it comes to boys:

> From my experience in several schools, I observe that when workbooks are used with this age group, girls tend to accept and handle the situation better whereas boys, I often witness misbehaviour.
> (Ms Charlene, Head of Department, Literacy, Sawrella School)

> As to writing, my concern is, that they don't leave room for emergent writing to develop. They do a lot of fill in workbooks and worksheets, way beyond what young children are capable to do… for example invented spelling is absolutely not in our culture, not in our classrooms and even

> *parents don't know about this. I feel there is a wall blocking the creative writing to emerge. They think that young boys and also girls are not capable of writing! It is disappointing when teachers create a workbook, they bind it, they photocopy it, children pay for it… whether this resource assists in meeting the unique needs of all students in a classroom it doesn't matter. Then everyone fills it in and they continuously declare that they do not have time to do reading or they do not have time to do journaling. I feel we block their learning, we do not let it emerge; we shut it down.*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

Conversely, one of the Heads of School interviewed insisted that the use of such tools were viewed as effective practice to prepare children for their transition to compulsory schooling (the year when a child turns five):

> *We started with this book, every week we send a worksheet home to the Kindergarten children with the letter of the week. We had a lot of opposition from the educators concerned but the parents liked it. So children are now entering Year 1 with a system. Yes we increased a lot of writing activities and yes it was successful.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*

Such contrasting views question the way these conflicting messages might be impacting early primary teachers' literacy pedagogies and young boys' early literacy learning experiences. In one of the schools, what parents 'liked' seemed to take over what teachers recognised to be as effective schooled literacy practice in early years. Whitehead (2010) suggested that professionals in schools need to be aware of the relationships between literacy, schooling and societies so that they will be able to respond to families' anxieties and pressures put on school staff. It is evident from the Heads of Department (Literacy) statements that in most Maltese state schools, early literacy learning focused mainly on the acquisition of transcriptional skills when it comes to writing albeit the recent support from college literacy teams to include a more child-centred balanced approach to literacy learning in early primary. According to one Head of Department (Literacy), evidence of 'misbehaviour' from boys during such traditional practice was often evident. This aligns with research where it was concluded that classroom practice was the reason for anti-social behaviour (Mulvey, 2010).

Parents also expressed their views and concerns on the use of commercial textbooks and workbooks and the way writing was being tackled in their son's Year 1 classrooms:

> *Here they start letters in kindergarten and when they started letters in Year 1, I felt we went a step back; they do them on the dots and in kindergarten they did not use dots. This is confusing my son!*
> *(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)*
>
> *In Kindergarten they used to write letters with the tail and no dots and this year with dots only. No consistence. He's finding it very difficult to write them now. Even some handouts, when they print them out it is not the same the print. It's confusing my son.*
> *(Ms Alessandra, parent, Rużetta School)*

Likewise, the three Year 1 teachers interviewed in three different schools claimed that most workbooks were 'repetitive', 'confusing' and even 'annoying' to five- to six-year-old children, particularly boys:

> *Writing we have a lot! Writing is the workbooks and copybooks in Year 1. For both boys and girls these are annoying. It's too much repetition (it was a book filled with dotted letters; each page had over 30 dotted letters). This confuses children especially in our school since we have children speaking different languages. This I think we cannot eliminate as we're forced to do it (pointing at one of the Maltese grammar workbooks). One of the boys last time told me: "Miss how boring this is!" What can I tell him? You are right?! Sometimes I see that they are not coping to do all the letter formation requested, so I cross a line in the middle of the page, at least they manage to do half the page. Then there are the copybooks too... I have boys that need more help with copybooks. These copybooks take a lot of time to distribute, stick pictures, and write words, never-ending... (teacher sounded exhausted as she said this).*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

During the three focus groups, parents also expressed their concerns about their five-year-old boys' resistance to completing the assigned homework and dictation (weekly spelling tests) schooled writing tasks. One of the Year 1 teachers explained what entails when it comes to homework as writing practice for young children in her class:

> *Maltese homework, for example, if in class we did a row of writing words, the column next to it, on the same page, they do it at home and it is exactly the same for spelling revision purposes. It is always like that.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

The dictation (weekly spelling test) involved having five- to six-year-olds study a list of words, and then the teacher reads those words aloud and the children had to remember the words and jot them down on copybooks. These are then corrected by the teacher; calling the children one by one to come next to her for correction (noted during classroom observations). The data revealed an emerging common trend when it comes to parents' concerns regarding homework and dictation used as writing practice in Year 1 classrooms, and the impact these two strategies have on five- to six-year-old boys:

> *I agree that homework is too much in Year 1. The writing work he does not manage to finish in class with the others, the teacher sends it home and then we have seven or eight different types of homework.*
> *(Ms Nina, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *My son, when I mention the studying and writing of the school dictation at home he says: "Uff erġajna!" ("Oh no, not again!").*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*

Findings from this theme showed that all Year 1 teachers sounded heavily exhausted when they spoke about the textbooks, workbooks, worksheets and copybook work. These resources seemed to be created by teachers themselves, or as claimed by some other teachers, they were forced to use them as part of the school syllabus in Year 1 classrooms. Most parents questioned the restrictions their boys experienced to write in 'narrow lines' or on 'dots', and sounded nostalgic about the writing opportunities their boys had in Kindergarten; for example, to be free to write on blank paper. It is evident that existing writing practice in early primary is not in line with effective evidence-based strategies underpinned by emergent literacy theory where learning to write in the early years is seen as a product of development, a meaning-making approach and not as an end product (Clay, 1966; Teale, 1986). Several researchers pointed out the presence of reading and writing 'readiness' systems based on textbooks, worksheets and purposeless practice in the early years (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Lomeo-Smrtic, 2008; Wharton-McDonald et al.,

1998). Furthermore, a number of newspaper articles report that literacy skills practice through flashcards, workbooks and worksheets are replacing play time in the early years (Hemphill, 2006; Weil, 2007). King and Gurain (2006) attested that such formal instruction does not fit in with the diverse developmental needs of young children at this stage.

Moreover, findings also showed that the majority of the parents agreed that the daily and weekly writing tasks of homework and dictation are a burden to the family and to the majority of five- to six-year-old boys in the three Year 1 classrooms concerned. Recent research showed that there is no evidence that homework improves the academic performance of primary school children while in high school it provides some moderate academic benefits (Shumaker, 2016). Research also confirmed that homework at primary school level fuels negative attitudes toward schooling, causes physical and emotional fatigue, and limits play time for children (Cooper, 2007). In line with Vatterott's (2009) suggestions for more focus on the quality of homework and efforts to eliminate homework with young children, findings from my study question the effectiveness of homework in the early primary years and its long-term effect on young boys' attitudes towards writing.

Nonetheless, it seems that homework will continue to be part of the early primary school curriculum as recently the government launched a National homework policy for all children in Malta and Gozo where it is clearly stated that for early primary children (Years 1 and 2; five- to seven-year-olds) it is ideal to have a maximum of twenty minutes homework daily (Iversen, 2018). As to the weekly spelling test, Whitehead (2010) asserted that attention to spelling is successful when children have developed a confident reading ability. In my study most boys were not able to read at the age of five but they still experienced weekly spelling tests in English and Maltese. This has implications on the way spelling tests may impact on some boys' attitudes and motivation towards writing. It can be argued that existing formal writing instruction might be rejecting the possibility for children to experience fun and meaningful writing experiences during the first year of compulsory schooling. To substantiate this contention, here is what five- to six-year-old boys from three Maltese state schools had to say about their writing experiences that mainly included copybook writing, worksheets, textbooks, workbooks, homework and dictation.

Boys' voices from Sawrella School (five- to six-year-olds).

In Sawrella School, the boys in the focus group were shown a picture of one of the boys writing on his copybook three columns of letter b (No one pointed at the happy face on the emotion card):

Ma tantx ħadt gost nagħmilhom għax idejja juġgħuni.
I did not really enjoy doing them because my hands hurt. (Mark)

Dak ħafna xogħol.
That is a lot of work. (Jamie)

Ħafna juġgħuni.
They hurt a lot (pointing at the palm of his hand). (Zak)

Tiegħi 'infinity' juġgħuni.
Mine hurt infinitively! (Lee)

Jien inħossni 'all right' imma ngħejja.
I feel fine but I get tired (pointing at the face with no expression). (John)

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year-olds).

The boys participating in Rużetta School's focus group started off the discussion by commenting on a picture of one of the boys writing the same letter in several lines and divided by three columns in his copybook:

I don't like it because I work a lot. I feel sad. (He was pointing at the sad face on his emotion card). (Luca, English first language)

I like all the letters and words (He pointed at a happy face. In class, Ben was noted to be able to finish such tasks earlier than his peers. (Ben, English first language)

I feel happy when I do them because I learn the letters.
(He pointed at a happy face. In class, Sam was also noted for his ability to finish similar writing tasks earlier than his peers. (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)

I don't like it. My hands feel sad when I do that. (He was pointing at a sad face on his emotion card). (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

Not that good. My hand did not want to write (in a sad tone). (Carlo, Italian first language, English second language)

Boys' voices in Awwista School (five- to six-year-olds).

During the focus group in Awwista School, one of the boys mentioned his homework and an interesting discussion developed:

> *Jien ma nħobbux il-ħowmwerk, ma nħobbx nagħmlu.*
> *I don't like homework, and I don't like to do it. (Paul)*

> *Jien ma jogħġobnix il-ħowmwerk; Nixtieq li ma kellix ħowmwerk. Ma niħux gost nagħmlu u ġieli ma nagħmlux.*
> *I don't like homework; I wish I did not have any homework. I don't enjoy doing it and sometimes I don'tt do it. (Matthew)*

> *Jien ma jogħġobnix. Nixtieq qatt ma kelli ħowmwerk. Kieku minflok noqgħod inpinġi, jew nilgħab jew nilgħab X box.*
> *I don't like it. I wish I never had homework. If so I would draw or play or play X box instead. (Isaac)*

> *Kieku nilgħab 'PlayStation'.*
> *I would play PlayStation. (Matthew)*

> *Jien inħobbu l-ħowmwerk għax il-'mummy' tgħidli li jekk inlesti malajr nilgħab bil-'PlayStation'!*
> *I like homework, because my mum tells me that if I finish my homework quickly I get to play on my PlayStation! (Tim)*

Boys in Awwista School were shown the picture of two of the boys writing in their class workbook (they all pointed at the sad face on their emotion card):

> *Jien ma nħobbx nikteb.*
> *I don't like to write. (Tim)*

> *Ngħejja nagħmilhom.*
> *I get tired doing them. (Matthew)*

> *Idejja juġgħuni ħafna.*
> *My hands hurt a lot. (Isaac)*

Findings from this study further revealed that five- to six-year-old boys did not comment positively on homework. Shumaker (2016) concluded that if the set task for homework does not add to the love for school and learning then it has no place in the education of primary school children. Moreover, it is evident from the boys' declarations that homework is not the only issue with most boys and writing in early primary but also their daily passive writing practice focused on

the use of textbooks, workbooks, worksheets and copybooks in Year 1 classrooms. This corresponds to Whitehead's (2010) claim that in early years education the dominant perspective of writing is the traditional skills-based approach that funnels down to copying, tracing, pencil grip and letter formation. Conversely, as Cigman (2014) witnessed, young Finnish six-year-old boys were all engaged at a writing table as they daily experienced a play-based pedagogy (from three to seven years) where they could freely choose to write how and when they liked. Boys' involvement in writing in the Finnish school scenario and the attitude of most boys towards writing in the three Maltese state schools seemed to depend on the extent to which play was valued in young children's literacy learning. Indeed, play was one of the emerging and debated concepts in this study as evident in the next theme.

4.5.13 Theme 5: Play, work, boys and early literacy learning.

"Play is related to reading readiness… Such readiness isn't created with the use of workbooks." (Weldon, 2012). Play was not the most popular word in the data collected from my study even though it involved young children. The concept of play in Year 1 classrooms was often referred to as 'hands-on' and 'multisensory' activities to teach reading and writing. This was not surprising considering that the word 'play' is hardly mentioned in Maltese policy documents related to literacy and ECEC (MEDE, 2012, 2014b). Most often teachers in Year 1 also used the word 'work' with their children through the schooled reading and writing practices observed. The following is an example of a comment to the play and work divide underpinning observed pedagogies in the three Year 1 classrooms:

> *My sessions are all with visuals, group work and then end up always with*
> *writing in copybooks and workbooks, that's their work; they know it's not*
> *time to play.*
> *(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)*

Albeit evidence from my study revealed that work was more prominent than play in Year 1 classrooms, it did not mean that teachers devalued the importance of play in children's learning. Indeed, during the interviews the three Year 1 teachers were asked what they would describe as the best reading and

writing strategy that engages and motivates young boys and girls in their learning and this is what they said:

> *On a Friday I like to clean the tables and give them the blocks, they build communicate and share. I think this is a crucial factor. There were boys who were so excited and engaged, using the rolling pin, who knows, maybe this year I can use the play dough to form letters.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*
>
> *At least they have a few minutes to play at the beginning of the lesson and then we focus on the pencil and copybook tasks, but at least they experience an enjoyable introduction to the letters. I think that play is very important for the children to learn.*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

Though 'play' was identified as an effective strategy, teachers' accounts showed that they were referring to a connection between restricted play and lesson time to avoid uncontrolled play that might not conform with the purpose or structure of the lesson. The value of play in literacy learning was maintained in the teachers' accounts, however, the tension between the value of 'play' and the required accountability requirements in relation to centralised syllabi and literacy checklists grounded in a cognitive psychological approach (Ehri, 1987, 1995) was evident in the way play was constrained to the short letter structured activities. Berstein (2000) explained similar teachers' accounts of play as the impact of external and internal agendas within classrooms where the emphasis tends to be placed within interests of accountability rather than learning. Likewise, the struggle to fit play within timetabled reading and writing work was also evident in other studies (Rogers & Evans, 2008; Waite, Evans & Rogers, 2011). Rogers and Lapping (2012) argue that discourses on play pedagogy within policies, practice, teachers' accounts and young children's structured activities tolerate a misconception of instruction and control. In Solsken's (1993) study similar tensions were also evident between invisible pedagogies (play-centred approach) in the classroom and the home visible pedagogies (literacy instruction) in relation to early literacy learning.

Year 1 teachers also pointed out the sharp transition between the play-based pedagogy in the Kindergarten stage (three to five years) and the formalised education system (five to seven years) present in Year 1 in Maltese state schools

and how this is impacting on young boys' literacy learning and permission to play:

> *Let me tell you, I think there is a huge leap between Kindergarten and Year 1. In Year 1, the children ask: "What time are we going to play?"… because in Year 1, it is like from one thing to the other, so there is lack of play. At this stage not everyone is the same, some children you tell them once and they learn it and others the process becomes a frustration.*
> *(Ms Rita, Year 1 teacher, Sawrella School)*

Parents also confirmed that their sons preferred to learn through play at this age by explaining the way they strived to transform formal Year 1 homework tasks into play activities at home to make it enjoyable for their young boys:

> *All the homework tasks that I try to do with him, I try to do them through play so it is enjoyable, even though it is challenging.*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*

> *Then I do flash cards for him with three letters or with two and I do it as a game. Play is more exciting for him. If I tell him you have to read this, it doesn't work.*
> *(Ms Claire, parent, Rużetta School)*

However, not all parents valued play as the medium to learning in the early years:

> *In our early childhood education system back home, they never taught us how to write the letters, the work pages of the letters or how to copy letters like they did in kindergarten with the teacher here. The "asilo" for us it's all about play. They are three years of play, so that you don't keep your kids at home. But here the kindergarten it's a preparation for Year 1.*
> *(Ms Sarah, parent, Rużetta School)*

One Head of School pointed out the need for more hands-on play in young children's learning and her wish to change existing cultural beliefs and assumptions about the role of play in schools:

> *Learning, although we do a lot of activities hands-on, but I have a dream, I don't want that these activities as one offs, these should be a daily thing… but unfortunately it takes a lot of money, it take a lot of culture change, you have to change minds.*
> *(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)*

The following is what educators who work with children in the early primary years and responded to the open comments in the online questionnaire had to say about the best ways to promote reading and writing for boys and girls between the ages of five to seven. Most of the comments included playful and hands-on strategies:

> *Tackling a topic that is interesting to children and that is age and level appropriate; Topic based learning + child-centred activities + parental involvement + learning through play above all!*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

> *Several boys are more energetic than other boys and girls. They need to be physically involved therefore they need action. School rigidity does not motivate such young boys.*
> *(Teacher, respondent to online questionnaire)*

Young boys in this study reacted differently to other pictures when they were shown pictures of themselves participating in hands-on reading and writing experiences. In most of these few minute activities boys had to wait for their turn.

Boys' voices from Awwista School (five- to six-year-olds).

This group of boys was shown a picture of one of them forming a letter with his finger in the sand (a basin with sand was passed around in the classroom for all children to write the letter of the day in the sand). All boys got excited and pointed to a happy face:

> *Nieħu pjaċir għax jagħraxni!*
> *I enjoy it because it tickles me! (Matthew, laughing)*

> *Lili jagħraxni wkoll!*
> *It tickles me too! (all boys laughing) (Isaac)*

Boys' voices from Rużetta School (five- to six-year-olds)

A similar picture was shown to this group of boys who were writing one letter in the four trays available on a side table in the classroom. One of the trays had rice and the rest salt, sand and sugar. Excitement was evident straight away:

> *I like that it's messy! (Luca, English first language)*

Perché è divertente!
Because it is fun! (Beppe, Italian first language, English second language)

Mi piace, perché dobbiamo lavarci le mani!
I like it because we have to wash our hands! (Carlo, Italian first language, English second language)

All boys were enthusiastic and agreed that writing the letters in the sand was fun. Then they were exposed to a picture of when they put their finger in paint to do the formation of a letter on an A4 paper:

I like this! (Sam, Maltese first language, answered in English - second language)

Mi piace perché ci dobbiamo sporcare le mani!
I like it because our hands get dirty! (excited) (Carlo, Italian first language, English second language)

All boys claimed they liked it very much and this could be seen clearly from their excitement and giggles.

Overall the findings revealed that boys in the early primary years of Maltese state schools seemed to be more motivated when literacy learning was more playful and hands-on. This is line with the view of several scholars who also claimed that play is crucial to young children's learning, health and well-being (Elias & Berk, 2002; Cigman, 2014; Hornbeck et al., 2006; Nutbrown, 2014; Piaget, 1962; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Siegler, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Vygotsky, 1966). Regrettably, my study shows that the existing formalised and compartmentalised system in three Maltese state schools did not allow early primary teachers to let their children experience the joyful literacy learning that can be accessed through the medium of play. This was undoubtedly evident in comments like: "one thing to the other", "we do it on a Friday", "a few minutes before a lesson", "when we have time" and boys asking "what time are we going to play?". Some teachers also indicated how some boys did not fit in the existing formalised approach to teaching and learning. It could be argued that the existing system might be putting girls and boys in different boxes and promoting further biological determinism particularly when it comes to literacy learning.

This has implications for the present national and international strive to support an equitable and lifelong literacy learning approach for all as from the earliest years of education.

4.5.14 Theme 6: Young boys, school readiness, transitions and literacy.

4.5.14.1 Do they have to be 'ready'?

The concern for "readiness" or "preparation" to formalised education in the first years of Maltese primary schools seemed to make some parents anxious about whether or not their son was 'ready'. The following discussion during the focus group at Awwista School revealed that parents seemed to try and make their boys 'ready' by providing different opportunities for reading and writing 'extra work' with their five- to six-year-old boys:

> *I give him extra work to write letters. He worries when the teacher tells him that the letter he wrote is not correct.*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*
>
> *I do the same too.*
> *(Ms Lorna, parent, Awwista School)*
>
> *Private lessons might do for your son.*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*
>
> *Yes, that's what I was thinking of.*
> *(Ms Lorna, parent, Awwista School)*
>
> *I will take mine too.*
> *(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)*
>
> *That's what I told the teacher, instead of sending him to a summer school I will take him to private literacy lessons. I need to prepare him for Year 2.*
> *(Ms May, parent, Awwista School)*

Year 1 teachers in all three schools seemed to agree that not all boys were 'ready' and so struggled with the existing formal schooled reading and writing practices:

So far yes, last year I had more boys who struggle, but this year I have two of the boys who cope quite well.
(Ms Miriam, Year 1 teacher, Rużetta School)

I note that boys struggle with memory. I'm not saying that some girls don't but it is more likely to have boys at this stage to experience this.
(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)

Some Heads of School put forward their assumptions and concerns on why young children were 'unready' and needed to be 'prepared' to cope with the school's literacy requirements in Year 1:

They need to prepare well for Year 1, so there are no stumbling blocks. The Year 1 teachers are disheartened when they see children who struggle at this stage. Those children who don't manage to catch up by January, won't make it at all, and will keep struggling towards the end of the scholastic year.
(Ms Lina, Head of School, Awwista School)

It was interesting to note how some parents' concerns for the well-being and motivation of their sons emerged albeit their common assumption that their sons were 'unready' and needed to be prepared to learn:

I see the system very positive but I think that they make the children go too fast. For example, dictation every Monday.
(Ms Lara, parent, Awwista School)

I believe that schooling is all too rushed at this stage. Even in kindergarten they had homework!
(Ms May, parent, Awwista School)

It's a preparation.
(Ms Katia, parent, Awwista School)

During the focus groups parents also complained about the way the present formal system and approach to reading and writing readiness skills are being tackled in Year 1. They feel that a one-size-fits-all system limits the possibility for their sons to develop their full potential in literacy attainment:

My son can take more at this stage, so it does not make sense for him to keep repeating the same letters all year round!
(Ms Mary, parent, Sawrella School)

And not all children are fast to catch up with the current system. When they have classes up to 20, it's difficult to do.
(Ms Nina, parent, Sawrella School)

More stakeholders shared their assumptions of school readiness based on the notion of 'unready' children that had to be prepared for the formal schooling in early primary:

We have the best teachers in the early years. They do the workbooks themselves of Years 1 and 2. No complaints from parents, business as usual, children are prepared well.
(Mr Mario, Head of School, Sawrella School)

I'm scared when children enter Year 1 with no know-how on how to blend letters. It would be a nightmare for me if one of the children leaves Year 1 without knowing how to blend letters.
(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)

On the other hand, all three Heads of Department (Literacy) viewed school readiness from a different perspective:

Considering their age, being passive and always listening, it's not ideal for anyone. We have to shift our thinking about structures to let teachers focus on children's needs.
(Ms Jessica, Head of Department, Literacy, Awwista School)

I think that the system in early primary years is affecting everyone… It is very important that during the first year of primary school we present activities in a less formal way as I'm feeling that all of a sudden, even in kindergarten, the kindergarten has become a race against time, even though I cannot understand the reason why! In Year 1 they enter the formal routine so these children, particularly some boys and those who are at risk of being low achievers, they start to lose the race before they start it; because there is the fear of reading and writing and this is being felt in the first year of our primary school system, surely, no doubt.
(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)

Literature shows that 'school readiness' can be interpreted in various ways (Allen, 2001; Diamond et al., 2000; Graue, 1993, 2006; Kagan, 1992; Meisels, 1999). Research also shows that there is a strong link between the way school

readiness is perceived and future academic and non-academic success of each child (Arnold, 2004; Jaramillo & Tietjen, 2001; Kagicibasi et al., 2001; Reynolds, 2000). This study revealed that most of the comments related to school readiness were largely grounded in an empiricist view where young children were seen as 'unready' for compulsory schooling, and the need to be prepared to succeed and cope with the existing literacy requirements in early primary. Indeed, findings from this study show that 'school readiness' was mostly interpreted by what children know at this stage and this directed most of the stakeholders' focus on the children's literacy knowledge and skills in Maltese and English, and behaviour to sit still so as to be able to cope with the current formalised education system in early primary.

The pressure to cope with the existing literacy pedagogy in early primary was clearly evident in participants' comments that referred to the need for boys to 'catch up', be 'withdrawn' from class to benefit from 'complementary sessions', and go to 'private literacy lessons' after school. Consequently, a formal approach and the assumption of an 'earlier is better' approach to reading and writing skills acquisition seemed to be mostly favoured within the three state schools concerned. On the other hand, the three Heads of Department (Literacy) interviewed acknowledged that the early primary years in Maltese state schools and views of school readiness and literacy should not be looked at as a 'race against time' for reading and writing readiness, as this would never make all children achieve their full potential as readers and writers. Instead, their views were more holistic and called for the urgent need to move away from narrow views of school readiness and literacy where some boys and also girls might risk to "start to lose the race before they start it".

4.5.14.2 *"From babies to adults": Transitions, literacy and young boys.*

In light of the previous argument, High (2008) contends that it is the responsibility of all schools to work with families, be flexible and provide an environment ready for all children in their varying stages of school readiness to ensure seamless transitions in the early years. According to several stakeholders in this study, the way some five-year-old boys experienced the transition to

formal schooling and literacy learning in Year 1, following their two years of Kindergarten, influenced their attitudes towards schooling:

> *From Kindergarten to Year 1, they were treated as babies to now you're an adult! My son tells me I am bored the whole day sitting down!*
> *(Ms Grace, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *Teachers are taught in different ways I presume. No consistency and continuation at all. My son experienced like a 'shock' the fact that there is no playtime at all in Year 1. They have to sit down for six hours and not make a move.*
> *(Ms Maria, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *So true. They used to go out in the yard, and read more books with the teacher in Kindergarten 2 last year.*
> *(Ms Grace, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *Storytelling, why all of this had to stop? Boys look forward to that.*
> *(Ms Maria, parent, Sawrella School)*

> *Children have to sit down and focus on the lesson in Year 1; boys definitely take much longer to settle than girls. When I give them a task you find them everywhere!*
> *(Ms Connie, Year 1 teacher, Awwista School)*

> *I think that boys are already giving up in Year 1, not to mention earlier years. There needs to be a better transition from Kindergarten to Year 1 so that Year 1 does not remain as formal as it currently is.*
> *(Ms Joanne, Head of Department, Literacy, Rużetta School)*

The longstanding call for seamless transitions between the ages of 0-7 in policy documents, the white paper on early years, and local research in Malta is evident (DQSE, 2015; MEDE, 2006, 2013a; NCF, 2012; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). Nonetheless, my study revealed that the existing formal education system and subsequently the rather decontextualised approach to schooled reading and writing practices in the first year of compulsory schooling is experienced by some five-year-old boys as a 'shock' or 'emotional turbulence'; a parent compared the 'shock' her son experienced from Kindergarten to Year 1 as a hasty change; from being treated as a 'baby' to an 'adult'. Several other stakeholders pointed out the unexpected absence of play in the early primary years, the reading of books, the freedom of choice in learning, the structured reading and writing practices, the rigidness to sit still, less talk and movement leading to some boys' constructing a

negative perception towards schooling and subsequently towards reading and writing from the age of five. This unconstructive academically driven educational and early literacy learning experience aligns with recent evidence (Margetts, 2007) and as some scholars agreed (Palmer, 2016; Sayers et al., 2012) it affects the well-being of children and the learning and development in long and short-term academic achievements. It is evident from the findings of this study that not all boys at the age of five were experiencing a successful start to formal schooling and literacy in the early years within the three Maltese state schools. Consequently, it is apt to question: Do findings from my study ring a bell within the boys and literacy agenda?

4.5.15 Response to question 3: Part 2.

What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

As explained earlier in this section interviews and focus groups material and analyses generated from the three Maltese state schools produced multi-layered data about the views of several stakeholders on existing reading and writing schooled practices to fully answer subsidiary question 3. Overall, the data collected from the different stakeholders including young boys provided another platform that suggested a negative trend in the existing perceptions on how five-to six-year-old boys were experiencing the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Similar to the perceptions on the concept of 'boys' underachievement', views on existing reading and writing practices in early primary were underpinned by conflicting understandings and assumptions linked to diverse theories and philosophical paradigms related to literacy and school readiness. In the main, it was clear that stakeholders' narrow views of the concepts of literacy and school readiness in Maltese state schools influenced the way young boys experienced reading and writing in the three Year 1 classrooms and also at home.

Stakeholders' interviews and reflections were iterated with claims about some boys' symptoms linked to lack of focus, concentration, confusion, stress, involvement, motivation and commitment to existing reading and writing practices, creating a vicious negative circle in the developed themes. This

disapproval was also evident and reconfirmed by most of the young boys that participated in the three focus groups, particularly when they were exposed to pictures related to the passive reading and writing practices they experienced. In sharp contrast, most five- to six-year-olds old boys were motivated and thrilled when their reading and writing practices were more contextualised, purposeful, technology related, playful and hands-on.

4.6 Discussion of Key Findings: Merging the Results

In this chapter I presented the independent analysis, findings and discussion of the different methods used for this research (online questionnaire, observations, focus groups and interviews) to answer the three subsidiary research questions. While interesting findings and discussions emanated from each tool, the strength of this study emerged through a discussion grounded in the mixing of all four methods to answer the main research question:

> Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

The MMPR grounded in the adopted principles of the convergent parallel design in mixed methods research for this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) created more comprehensive understandings on the highly disputed concepts scrutinised in this enquiry. Indeed, in the following discussion I will present the answer to the main research question through the key findings of my study based in the triad conceptual ground developed within my literature review: 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning', and 'school readiness'. This is what was learned by unpacking the global concern of boys and literacy through an investigation in the reading and writing experiences of boys in early primary state schools in Malta.

4.6.1 Key finding 1: Rethinking 'boys' underachievement'.

Firstly, the triangulation of findings supported my study with a richer picture on the complex phenomenon of 'underachieving boys' in literacy and how several stakeholders conceptualised this catchphrase in the local context. Active debates on explanations for differences between boys' and girls' literacy

achievement take place on an international level in search for a solution to minimise or possibly eradicate illiteracy for boys (Zuze & Reddy, 2013). Similar to the findings in the study by Alloway et al. (2002), the merged findings from my study were mostly grounded in several explanations that resulted in clear opposing interpretations and frequent hesitations, however, a tendency to provide explanations related to biological and role-model theory was an interesting find in a Maltese context.

Alloway et al. (2002) claimed that if schools draw upon biological or role model 'deficit' theories to comprehend boys' underachievement in literacy they would never be able to profit from a broader vision that will eventually support them in improving literacy learning for boys (p. 56). In the same vein, Hammot and Sanford (2008) argued that if constructed assumptions are unexamined it may influence educators' expectations, the way learners are treated, and the learning opportunities offered. My study showed that the daily exposure to structured and decontextualised reading and writing practices in a bilingual educational context discouraged and confused most of the five- to six-year-old boys and consequently they fidgeted, moved from their chairs, asked to be excused and know when it would be the time for break or a physical education lesson. Subsequently, some boys at the age of five were more often told off and pointed out during lesson time. Within the observed performative pedagogy (Bernstein, 2000) in the three Year 1 classrooms, this study showed that some young boys were recurrently positioned in relation to a construct of the dominant 'ideal pupil' (Becker, 1952) as essentially female (quiet, compliant and more 'able' Year 1 learner). This was also evident in several participants' claims where boys were most often stereotypically positioned as a homogenous group in relation to girls' performance in reading and writing, for example, 'boys cannot write neatly as much as girls do'. Similarly, seven- to nine-year-old working-class girls were positioned as inferior to middle-class boys and girls in a classroom where teaching and learning was underpinned by a CCP (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c).

It can be argued that dominant gendered and classed discoures on pupil positioning (Holland et al., 1998; Reay, 2012) within diverse social and cultural contexts produce educational inequalities if these are not identified, examined and challenged. Hammott and Sanford (2008) argued that society takes for granted the fact that boys and girls are treated equally at school. Unequal attention paid to

boys and girls in schools has been documented in several studies (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW] Report, 1992; Fine 2010; Francis, 2000; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c; Millard, 1997; Spedding et al., 2007). Through a posthumanist and emancipatory lens, findings from this study showed how some five- to six-year-old boys were often conceptualised in relation to literacy and schooling and consequently pointed out the way this could influence the self-perceptions of some boys and their ability to succeed as readers and writers.

In light of this argument, amalgamated findings from my study on explanations for the 'underachieving boys' debate posit that there is the need for a reconceptualisation of the phenomenon in a Maltese context. This rethinking cannot certainly take place if the existing evidence and popular discourses on 'boys underachievement' is opportunely looked at through a constricted view that offers explanations such as those related to biological and role model theory or by looking back at traditional socially constructed masculinities that reinforce gender binarism in the literacy agenda.

4.6.2 Key finding 2: The case for a rollback in formalised education in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Secondly, merged findings shed further light on the conceptualisation of early literacy learning in the local context and how this impacted young boys' reading and writing experiences. The combination of findings resulted into some conflicting messages between the views of 195 early primary teachers that responded to the online questionnaire and also when some statistical data was compared to the observed practice and perceptions of several stakeholders within the three Year 1 classrooms in Maltese state schools.

The low level of boys' involvement in learning recorded during reading and writing practices did not match the majority of teachers' responses (online questionnaire) who claimed that existing early primary literacy practices in Maltese state schools motivated young boys. Furthermore, triangulated data from the three schools identified a pattern in unenthusiastic comments on existing practices from several stakeholders and most young boys that included words and phrases like: 'bored' 'anxious', 'rush', 'fear', 'stress', 'my finger hurts', 'my eyes start hurting', 'I feel sleepy'. Many scholars attest that effective early literacy for

children aged 0-7 should be underpinned by a more play-based, contextualised and hands-on approach that engages all young children to learn literacy in a way that makes sense to their realities and diverse backgrounds (Elias & Berk, 2002; Cigman, 2014; Roskos & Christie, 2009; Piaget, 1962; Siegler, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Vygotsky, 1966; Whitehead, 2010). This evidence questions the present formalised education system and prescriptive syllabus for the early primary years that might be limiting educators to provide effective and meaningful reading and writing approaches where the unique needs of all children could be met.

Moreover, the majority of teachers working in early primary and who responded to the online questionnaire concurred that a hands-on approach combined with the use of components of a balanced literacy approach to literacy instruction and technology are the most effective literacy strategies with young boys and girls. Most stakeholders agreed that a more playful, hands-on, child-directed approach that maintain a balanced between the teachers' guidance and child's control in learning was favoured as the most effective pedagogy for reading and writing strategies in co-educational state schools. Nonetheless, this was not the case during the three weeks of observations in three state schools as boys experienced a more structured and teacher-led approach to schooled reading and writing practices. It was also interesting to note that the word 'play' was hardly mentioned in the early primary teachers' accounts in the interviews, and the boys observed were most of the time involved in reading and writing 'work'. As the Italian saying goes: "Tra il dire e il fare, c'è di mezzo il mare". The literal meaning of this saying is "An ocean lies between what you say and what you actually do".

In the same vein, the use of phonics programmes, workbooks, flashcards, and other decontextualised schooled reading and writing practices were considered as effective strategies by the minority of early primary educator participants in the online questionnaire. Nevertheless, these commercial or self-created resources and a phonics instructional approach were the main medium through which schooled reading and writing practices were presented. Findings also showed that the excessive use of direct instruction through synthetic phonics programmes was adding to the passivity of boys' reading experiences that impacted negatively on their level of involvement in learning. This was evident in

most boys' comments on the daily phonics instruction in both English and Maltese lessons, most of which involved sedentary activity and looking at the interactive whiteboard: 'we have to say /s/ /o/ /d, I get bored', 'I sleep there and then I wake up again' and 'my neck/eyes hurt'.

Unquestionably, findings from this study might be challenging to other research studies and policies that repeatedly claim the effectiveness of synthetic phonics strategies (Campbell, 2015; Herold, 2011; Johnston et al., 2011; Jolly, 2008; Moodie-Reid, 2016; NICHD, 2000; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2005) promoted through teacher-led, drilling and rote learning in early years education to teach reading. Scully and Roberts (2002) study showed that the free play and phonics used through a variety of playful approaches resulted in a substantial improvement in the literacy achievements of the children involved. In line with the findings from this study, a case study investigation in Finland by (Korkeamaki & Dreher, 1996) with seven-year-olds concluded that students learned to read by constructing meaning in a purposeful environment through a meaning-based approach to reading instead of the former typically used drilling of synthetic phonic strategies. Merged findings from my study also showed that though through daily phonics teaching some boys might have been gaining the 'skill' to blend or decode letter sounds as claimed by some Year 1 educators at the age of five, but the 'will' to read and write was not evident during classroom observations and as confirmed by the majority of the boys themselves. These findings are supported by the view of Whitehead (2010) who suggested that it is important for educators not to focus on structured reading at the expense of lessening other language and literature rich experiences that motivate young children.

Likewise, findings from the three schools showed that within the existing formalised education in Year 1 an overemphasis on sedentary transcriptional skills undermined boys' motivation and inhibited their learning as most were disengaged during existing writing practices. This was supported by educators' comments in the online questionnaire, as it did not rate as one of the most effective strategies for writing for both boys and girls. Scholarly evidence revealed that such misunderstanding and confusion is often evident when formal schooling is introduced early, leading to detrimental effects on early literacy learning (Brooker, 2002; Drury, 2007; Gregory, 2008). Recent research also

showed that early childhood practice must determine the understanding that writing is an act of communication and conveys meaningful and enjoyable messages in different ways (Browne, 2008; Teale, 1986). Cigman (2014) claimed that if transcriptional skills are the main focus in early years, the likelihood that the development of the young writer's voice would be hindered and writing practice would turn into a task done for the teacher would increase. On a similar note, the latter argument was evident in one of the boys' comments during phonics instruction in my study: "I feel happy if I say them all because then the teacher will be proud of me" (Sam, five- to six-year-old year old boy, Rużetta School).

Together, merged findings showed that the focus on transcriptional skills in writing and skills-based reading negatively impacted most five- to six-year-old boys' motivation and engagement in the three Maltese state schools concerned. During the observations the majority of boys were fidgety and in contrast they were highly engaged when they were allowed to participate in more guided and child-centred reading and writing practices that were grounded within a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). This brings us back to the longstanding and contemporary debate on teacher-led and child-centred approaches in early years education particularly between the ages of five to seven since there are other countries like Malta where children start school at the age of five (Bradbury, 2013; Scully & Roberts, 2002; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). It can be argued that the primary concern in Maltese state schools should not be about the extent to which the teaching of reading and writing is teacher-centred or child-centred. Instead, boys' voices from my study revealed the urgent need to listen to young children and reflect on the extent to which playful and purposeful early literacy learning is being replaced by formalised education leading to an overemphasis on phonics programmes, workbooks, copybooks and worksheet-centred approaches, and how this is impacting on young children. Merged findings also showed that that the early start to formal schooling is currently promoting the schooling of decontextualised reading and writing practices in Maltese state schools, barring the children's right to play (Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity [MFCS], 2017; UNCRC, 1989) and to engage in playful reading and writing experiences that trigger the crucial key to lifelong learning, the 'exploratory drive' (Laevers, 1994). The national

policy document for ECEC (MEDE, 2006) highlighted that, "if a programme is over-focussed on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in them negative perceptions of their own competences" (p. 49).

Additionally, the majority of teachers who responded to the online questionnaire agreed that in the 21st century world boys prefer technological forms of literacy. This conforms to recent literature where it is claimed that young children's literate worlds are not just about pen and paper but include the ability to understand screens and make use of different media, such as mobile phones and computers (Carrington, 2005; Kress, 2003; Labbo & Reinking, 2003; Marsh, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005). Nonetheless, as stated earlier in this chapter new literacies did not form part of the three classrooms observed as the focus was more on acquiring print-based transcriptional skills rather than opening up to the textual landscapes most boys and girls encounter at home today. Computers in the classrooms were never used during the three weeks of observations. Research shows that reading theories that assume that knowledge and skills are acquired independent of context and exist in the mind of the individual (Commeyras, 2007; Pearson, 2004) promote reading as isolated instruction and decoding print prevails as the definition of literacy.

Merged findings in my study showed that perceptions of literacy within a formalised education system in early primary schools were rather narrow. Indeed, existing reading and writing practices were more about copybooks and pencils and rejected the literate knowledge boys coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds had already acquired outside school. A limited view of literacy in today's educational arena does not embrace an array of complex, multi-faceted processes that take into consideration multi-modal, multilingual texts and literacies (Kress, 2010; Bearne, 2004). On the other hand, language and literacy practices embedded in a broad view of constructivist scenarios encourage learners to draw on their own cultural experiences and increase the likelihood of challenging boy-girl binaries of interest and success (Hammett & Sanford, 2008).

Several stakeholders agreed that there was lack of books that matched boys' interests in early primary. This converged with the educators' responses from the online questionnaire data. The majority of young boys interviewed in the three schools pointed out that the books they have at home are more interesting to

them, (most of which were related to their popular culture) and that the books they get from school are too 'difficult' or 'boring'. Research showed that if popular culture is recognized in literacy learning it would acknowledge young children's constructed literate identities, enhance their self-esteem and motivate them to learn (Dyson, 1997, 2002; Marsh, 2003, 2010a; Marsh & Millard, 2000, 2005).

Some parents declared that their boys were finding the schoolbooks difficult to read independently at home so most of the parents read with their child. Several scholars pointed out that constraining young children to read levels of texts that do not reflect their abilities arouses feelings of loss and confusion (Beers, 1996; Calkins, 2000; Gunzelmann & Connell, 2004; Newkirk, 2006). This has implications for school literacy learning and the psychological aspect of reading and boys. Similar to the findings in the Australian study of Alloway et al. (2002), it seems that particular boys' interests are not being taken into account sufficiently as from the earliest years of the Maltese education system especially when it comes to literacy learning. Existing early literacy learning pedagogy in Maltese states schools focuses more on preparing 'unready' five- to six-year-old children to decode words to be able to read earlier for future years rather than following their development and value their efforts as emergent readers.

It can be argued that more meaningful approaches to reading and writing were not often experienced in early primary years not necessarily because all Year 1 teachers were not aware of their effectiveness. As merged findings revealed, this could be due to the overwhelming existing mandated compartmentalised teaching, syllabus, timetables and schemes of work in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. The muddled messages in policy documents, mandated circulars and prescriptive syllabus might not be helping the existing formal early years education system in Maltese state schools to promote equitable and quality early literacy practices. Perhaps, these merged findings and young boys' voices from Malta might be surfacing the case for a rollback in the existing formalised education in the early years of primary state schools.

4.6.3 Key finding 3: School 'unreadiness' and early literacy learning.

Merged findings also created richer conceptualisations on how several stakeholders perceived the concept of school readiness in the context of this study

and how this is influencing boys' experiences with reading and writing. Research has shown that young children are born ready to learn (Kagan, 1999, May & Campbell, 1981). My study has revealed that several stakeholders within this research context viewed young boys as 'unready to learn'. For example, this was particularly evident in the anxiousness of parents to have their children 'ready' for formalised reading and writing instruction and some teachers' concerns for not having all children prepared for the literacy requirements in a Year 1 classroom, as well as the urge for 'private literacy lessons' at age five to be prepared for Year 2. These perceptions further promoted traditional schooled reading and writing practices that invaded the homes and lives of some parents and young boys in a Maltese context. This 'one-way traffic' is also evident in other research studies (Dyson, 2001; Marsh, 2003) resulting in schools that support the notion of invading today's home literate experiences with old-school literacy experiences (Lambirth, 2003).

The majority of educators who responded to the online questionnaire disagreed with the homogeneous popular claim that 'boys are not ready for formal schooling at the compulsory entry age (five years)'. The response was dependent on the way educators might have interpreted this popular claim related to school readiness. Further insights were gained from the merged findings of the three state schools in the local context. These findings revealed that most stakeholders' based their interpretation of 'school readiness' on what the young children knew. Indeed, most young boys were viewed as 'unready' and were prepared for primary schooling through early instruction to enhance their reading and writing readiness. Therefore, in the online questionnaire claim above, respondents might have interpreted 'readiness' based on what the child knows and that would result in having the majority of teachers concurring that boys are well prepared for the curriculum-centred approach in Year 1. According to literature, this perception resulted in a narrow view of school readiness (Carlston & Winsler, 1999).

Moreover, the transition to formalised schooling on five- to six-year-old boys seemed to leave a negative impact on how most handled and perceived schooled reading and writing practices, and the way they identified themselves as readers and writers. Evidence revealed a significant number of claims from stakeholders that were concerned about sharp transition most young boys and

other children experienced from Kindergarten to Year 1 in Maltese state schools. In light of this finding, McNaughton (2002) claimed that most children experienced difficult transitions from home to school due to the kind of learning they encountered. In conjunction, in-depth observations, interviews and focus groups further revealed that formalised schooling prepared young boys from the age of five with skills-based instruction in two languages, Maltese and English, in Year 1 classrooms. It was observed and claimed by some stakeholders that the lack of play and opportunity to practice and communicate in both languages, and the increased focus on the teaching of letter sounds in both languages, confused and stressed most young male learners in Maltese state schools following their Kindergarten years. This evidence further confirmed that not all boys enjoyed the demands of formal reading and writing practices in Year 1 of Maltese state schools, and this gave rise to common concerns amongst some stakeholders:

> *My three boys started to attend school with great enthusiasm but as the weeks go by I'm noting that the motivation to read and write is less, less, less… that's why at home I try to make it fun, games, I see that it boosts him, and that way he participates eagerly, after all they are just five! (Ms Grace, parent, Sawrella School)*

4.6.4 Overall key finding: A paradigm paralysis?

This section aimed to present a summary of the merged findings of my study supported by relevant literature. In sum, the merged findings identified three common threads that funnel down to the overarching key finding of this study and concludes the answer to the main research question:

> Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?

Boys and early literacy learning in three Maltese state schools
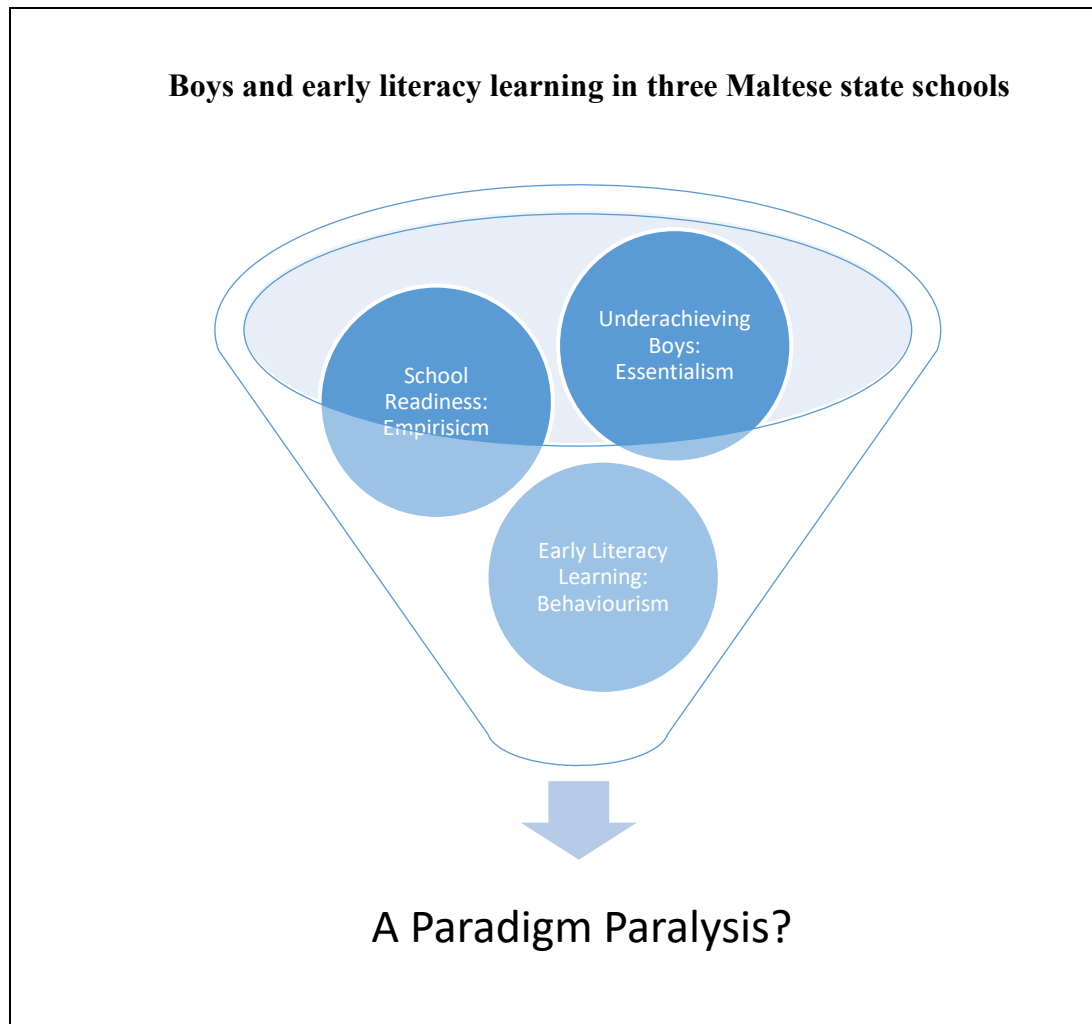
Figure 4.17. Paradigms that underpin the merged findings in relation to the conceptual ground of my study

Figure 4.17 shows how the paradigms that underpin the merged findings of my enquiry relate to each of the three concepts that framed this study, and how these are currently influencing some boys and literacy learning in Maltese early primary schools.

Firstly, merged findings showed that the way the global concern and local existing evidence of 'boys' underachievement' in literacy is perceived through a variety of conflicting interpretations within the context of the study. Nonetheless, these perceptions were more likely to be grounded in the worldview of essentialism. This means that the majority of participants in this study were more inclined to view differences between girls and boys linked to their biological

differences. Consequently, such a narrow view increases the risk of treating children unfairly, failing to examine personal constructed assumptions (e.g., boys struggle more than girls), finding solutions that further promote the binary construction of gender and inequity, and limits the opportunities offered to cater for the diverse early literate needs of both boys and girls (Alloway et al., 2002; Hammot & Sanford, 2008; Rowan et al., 2002).

Secondly, merged findings conclude that in conceptualising existing reading and writing practices in Maltese state schools the image of the young boy turns out to be essentially passive or a blank slate. This theoretical image of children and childhood is grounded in the worldview of behaviourism (Bandura, 1992; Pavlov, 2003; Skinner, 1974; Watson, 2013). Indeed, irrespective of gender and diverse linguistic, cultural and socio-economic background, the three groups of young boys within each state school entered a one-size-fits-all formalised education system to experience prescriptive and mostly decontextualised schooled reading and writing tasks in Maltese and English. This practice limited the opportunity for all boys to be co-constructors of their learning with adults who scaffold their learning through their funds of knowledge (Gonzàles et al., 2005; Malaguzzi, 1993; Vygotsky 1978). It was also evident that this narrow view of reading and writing in the early years invaded the boys' home literate experiences with the skills-based practice of reading and writing. Behaviourist learning promoted a popular 'reading readiness' theory that is grounded in the skills-based teaching of pre-requisite skills, and that failed to look at the child's ability to learn those skills during the 1970s (Downing & Thackray, 1971). Merged findings from my study conclude that after almost half a century this theory prevails within the existing formalised education system at age five and heavily impacts on the teaching of reading and writing in Maltese early primary state schools and young boys' literacy learning. Findings also showed that a minor number of participants viewed the teaching of reading and writing through the worldview of constructivism, and expressed their concern for the existing early literacy pedagogies largely underpinned by a behaviourist approach.

The final thread related to the other two as findings revealed that within the context of this study, the concept of school readiness was mainly grounded in empiricism; another positivist discipline same as behaviourism and essentialism. This was evident in how the anxiousness and panic for young boys to be 'ready'

transformed in a narrow focus on how some boys' performed in their reading and writing of Maltese and English, behaviour to sit still and phonics programmes, workbooks, textbooks, copybooks and spelling tests to prepare "unready boys" to succeed in upper primary years (Carlton & Winsler, 1999, p. 338). Particularly, most young boys' voices clearly affirmed that the lack of playful literacy learning created a negative circle that undoubtedly exerted an influence on the way some boys perceived and experienced schooled reading and writing at the age of five.

The creation of these new understandings on young boys and literacy in Maltese early years education showed that the concepts explored tend to hang on to one-sided and narrow perceptions in 'boys' underachievement', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' that result in some boys experiencing undesirable old-school formal teaching of reading and writing, and consequently I ask: Is this the effect of a 'paradigm paralysis' in the early literacy learning of Maltese state schools? A 'paradigm paralysis' is defined as the inability or rejection of a way of thinking or perceiving and a barrier to creativity, change, flexibility and resilience (Gelatt, 1993; Maag, 1999). It can be argued that if this is the case, the effect of a paradigm paralysis might be so strong that it is currently preventing several stakeholders in the Maltese ECEC system to see the existing reality from different angles and embrace new ways of thinking. Through a posthumanist lens, Osgood et al. (2015) argue that:

> We are urged to question and challenge and to think differently, to consider what 'figuring' gender differently might afford us when seeking to reconfigure playing with gender in childhood. Reconfigure is central to a posthuman politics of resistance and central to the work of Haraway (2004, 2008) who prompts investigations into assemblages of relational entanglements to reimagine - not in search of utopia - but so that we might become immersed in the politics of difference and multiplicities. (p. 349)

4.7 Chapter Conclusion

This section presented the analysis, findings and discussions of my study that answered all three subsidiary research questions and the main research question through a merged discussion of findings. This final discussion presented the key findings on how young boys experienced reading and writing practices in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Underpinned by the theoretical foundations of posthumanist, emancipatory, pragmatist, socio-cultural, experiential education and childhood theory the key findings presented in this chapter posit that perhaps it is time to focus on the image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1993), listen to young boys' voices in this study in an attempt to rethink, reconfigure (Osgood et al., 2015) and maybe reposition our worldviews and ensure that the actions taken are grounded in broader views that provide equitable and quality foundations to literacy learning for all. This rethinking, reconfiguring and repositioning might serve as the turning point where the quality of teaching reading and writing to all children in the early years would begin. Out with the old and in with the new, as:

> Children have a right to a good school - a good building, good teachers, right time, good activities. This is the right of all children.
> (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 5)

The next chapter will conclude this study through a presentation of: the major findings that contributed to the existing knowledge; the recommendations for all stakeholders in early years education in Malta and for future research; and the identified limitations of this enquiry.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Chapter Introduction

Local and international literacy tests have brought about some degree of concern about the literacy performance of boys in Malta (Borg et al., 1995; MEDE, 2013b, 2013c, 2015b, 2016; Mifsud et al., 2000a). This study set out to inspire a fresh understanding of boys and literacy in its local context by digging deep into young boys' reading and writing experiences in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. The previous chapter reported in detail the analysis, findings and an overall discussion that resulted from my study. This chapter aims to outline the key findings of my research, substantiated with relevant literature within each of the three subsidiary questions and the main research question. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss the limitations of this study, implications for policy and practice, considerations for future research, the significance of the study and a final conclusion.

5.2 Research Question 1

> What is the relationship between the rhetoric on boys' underachievement (in media and educational research) and Maltese state school teachers' beliefs in, and practices of, boys and literacy in the early primary years?

My quest to understand the existing gender gap in literacy achievement directed me to immerse myself in literature on boys and literacy. The contentious debates and the tensions that mark the literature in this field influenced the choice of my questions and, consequently, led me to explore how Maltese practitioners position their views and their existing practices within the boys and literacy agenda. This research question was also influenced by an Australian study on boys and literacy (Alloway et al., 2002) and this is the reason why I decided to adapt their questionnaire to the context of this study to answer my first subsidiary research question in the best way possible. Therefore, an online questionnaire was sent to all educators who work with children in early primary Maltese state schools as class teachers, literacy support teachers (supporting schools and educators), and also as complementary teachers (supporting young children who struggle with the school's literacy requirements).

Almost half of the selected cohort of educators in all state schools responded to the questionnaire. Findings revealed that the same tensions and

conflicting interpretations found in literature were also evident in the local context. This was also evident in the study on boys, literacy and schooling by Alloway et al. (2002) and popular international claims and research studies on boys and literacy (Connolly, 2004; Fletcher, 2006; Francis, 2000; Hammet & Stanford, 2008; ILA, 2018; Palmer, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Whitmire, 2010). An interesting find was that educators tended to favour biological and role-model theory as explanations for 'underachieving boys'. This revealed that, as evident in popular discourses in media and educational research, neuroscientific and role-model explanations were also gaining popularity in the context of this study: they easily influenced the majority of educators concerned (Alloway et al., 2002; Fine, 2010).

Another key finding from the questionnaire was the educators' claims on existing effective reading and writing practices. Most participants indicated that a hands-on, balanced literacy approach and the use of technology were the most effective strategies with boys (and also with boys and girls together) during their first two years of compulsory schooling. In the same vein, literature and popular discourses on boys and literacy claim that a playful, active and balanced approach to the teaching of reading and writing is more effective to meet the diverse literacy needs of boys, as well as girls, in early years education (Cigman, 2014; Davis, 2013; Siaulys, 2013; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Tompkins, 2013; Mermelstein, 2006; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Findings from this research question provided for the general terrain of my study, while additionally serving as a tool for triangulation purposes to answer the main research question.

5.3 Research Question 2

> How are existing reading and writing practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting five- to six-year-old boys' involvement in literacy learning, and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?

The first research question provided me with an overall view of what educators viewed as effective reading and writing strategies in Years 1 and 2 in Maltese state schools. As explained in further detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the review of the literature and personal experiences guided me to question and delve more deeply into the reading and writing experiences of boys during their

first year of compulsory schooling. This is how the second subsidiary question to my study developed: three Maltese state schools were chosen to conduct one week of observation in each of the three Year 1 classrooms.

As established throughout this thesis, most five- to six-year-old boys coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds showed low levels of involvement in learning during most of the Maltese and English schooled reading and writing practices they experienced. Since formal education starts at the age of five in Maltese state schools, it was no surprise that the pedagogical approach of most of the teaching of reading and writing observed in the three state schools was teacher-led, passive, mostly phonics-based in terms of reading and transcriptional oriented in terms of writing. Margetts (2003) stated that young children "bring more to school than their backpacks" (p. 5). Conversely, as the case scenarios in the previous chapter showed, during the few instances where the teaching of reading and writing was underpinned by a balanced literacy pedagogy and a more playful approach, the five- to six-year-old boys' motivation to participate and learn amplified intensely. These findings are supported by recent literature that advocates for a more socially just pedagogy within education systems to reach every child, irrespective of their gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c; Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2017; Munns, 2007).

On the other hand, these findings challenge existing research that support phonics-based teaching of reading (Campbell, 2015; Campbell et al., 2012; Herold, 2011; Johnston et al., 2011; Ramsingh-Mahabir, 2012; Jolly, 2008) in ECEC, based on the assumption that 'earlier is better'. This study showed that the overemphasis on repetitive blending and segmenting letter sounds in both Maltese and English lessons in three Year 1 classrooms further promoted such old-school teaching methods as drilling, rote learning and sedentary lessons as from the earliest years. The focus on transcriptional skills in writing was also related to the implemented commercial or self-created letter and sound programmes in Maltese and English, books, workbooks, lined copybooks, spelling/revision testing, rubbers, rulers and pencils. Indeed, during my observations, computers were never used in the three Year 1 classrooms; and the interactive whiteboard was mainly used for copying, rote learning and drilling. This confirmed that boys were missing out on the opportunity to develop their reading and writing

competences with new technologies; a crucial skill that is much required in today's competitive global workforce (Kress, 2003; Labbo & Reinking, 2003; Marsh, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005).

These key findings support an argument put forward by Siaulys (2013) who claimed that several phonics programmes and related textbooks tend to form part of early years education as a stand-alone programme for literacy development that lack differentiation and dominates daily teaching of literacy skills from teacher to student in some classrooms. Moreover, Giles and Tunks (2015) contended that a disservice to young children is under way when meaningful literacy learning opportunities are eradicated from early childhood classrooms due to advocates for direct instruction in early reading. Classroom observation findings also showed that, while some boys seemed to cope and others struggled with the existing literacy requirements in Year 1, the low level of involvement in learning during the teacher-led and long sedentary passive tasks resulted in most boys asking to be excused, playing with their pockets, standing up, staring or fidgeting. The EXE theory highlights that high quality, deep level learning and developmental changes happen when young children are involved in learning and their 'exploratory drive' - their intrinsic motivation to explore - is triggered (Laevers, 1994, p. 163).

In answering research question 2, it was concluded that some minimal effort and desire from Year 1 teachers to integrate a more balanced approach to reading and writing within the existing formalised system were evident. However, existing practices still appeared far removed from the philosophical integrity of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) for early years education and the promoted balanced literacy approach in the policy document *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2014b). Several scholars attested that boys and girls are unable to acquire reading and writing skills if they are not given the right opportunities to do so from their earliest years (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Harste, et al., 1984; Leslie, 2012; Rog, 2011). These findings have implications for both boys and girls in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

5.4 Research Question 3

> What are the views of teachers, Heads of School, Heads of Department (Literacy) and parents on 'boys' underachievement', and how do these stakeholders and young boys perceive existing reading and writing practices in the early primary years of a Maltese state school?

Subsidiary question 3 of my study was answered through interviews and focus groups conducted with three Year 1 teachers (teaching five- to six-year-olds), three Heads of School, three Heads of Department (Literacy), three groups of parents of five- to six-year-olds, teachers who responded to the open-ended comments in the online questionnaire, and three groups of five- to six-year-old boys. Some of the questions in the interviews and focus groups are similar to those in the questionnaire, permitting triangulation for corroborative purposes. Additionally, to answer this question in the best possible way, data from interviews and focus groups was analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, and key findings were separated into two categories and subsequent themes (explained in further detail in Chapter 4):

- Category 1: Explanations on 'boys' underachievement' in literacy and the early primary years from different stakeholders in Maltese state schools.

- Category 2: Stakeholders' and five- to six-year-old boys' perceptions on existing reading and writing practices in Maltese state schools.

The major finding from the five developed themes of the first category was that most explanations for the popular term 'boys' underachievement' drew from the tensions underpinned by several theoretical positions within popular discourses grounded in existing media, research and existing literature on boys and literacy. As evident in the questionnaire responses, a significant number of stakeholders strongly believed that innate biological differences, biologically fixed traits, different physical development, school starting age and role-model theory were crucial aspects in determining the reasons why some boys underachieve. Alloway and Gilbert (2002) and Hoptman and Davidson (1994) argued on the narrow philosophies underpinning biological difference claims by

highlighting that these could never account for those groups of boys that outperform girls. Moreover, there is no specific research asserting that male educators increase learners' academic achievement (Brownhill, 2016). Alloway et al. (2002) defined both biological and role-model explanations for boys' underachievement as follows:

> Each of these explanations is essentially a deficit theory about boys. In each case, boys are considered to have too much (for example, testosterone), too little (for example, physical maturity) or too few (for example, fathers or male role-models) of what it takes to become a literate person. Regardless of the questionable empirical status of these assertions, their utility for educators is dubious.
> (p. 58)

Some stakeholders in my study grounded their explanations for 'boys' underachievement' in pedagogical concerns, boys' disengagement and the social construction of masculinity in a Maltese culture. Several explanations included claims such as the 'rough boys'' and the 'prim and proper girls'' stereotypical behaviours in early literacy tasks. With regard to the latter claim, Collins, et al. (2000) attested that being raised in a society with a traditional and limited vision of gender identity results in an educational weakness. This gave rise to implications on how boys were being conceptualised as literacy learners and the reinforcement of gender binarism within the local context. Several scholars declared that such claims could influence boys' literate identities and how they view themselves as readers and writers in future years (Fine 2010; Francis, 2000, 2006; Millard, 1997; Spedding et al., 2007). More explanations offered drew on the families' socio-economic status, and the notion that families are not practising enough schooled literacy at home that added to the sense of constriction in how literacy was being defined amongst some of the participants' claims (Bartlett, 2008).

All in all, stakeholders' conceptualisations of 'boys' underachievement' in literacy within the context of my study seemed to be grounded in the narrow perceptions tied to this phenomenon by relying on one cause or the other. This limited vision also seemed to be influenced by the way stakeholders defined literacy per se. Nonetheless, 'boys' underachievement' was also viewed in broader terms by a minority of stakeholders who challenged the existing

'underachieving boys' discourses as they based their claims on more than one explanation and firmly acknowledged boys' culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and that not all boys underachieve. Alloway et al. (2002) claimed that focusing on the one cause or factor for boys' underachievement may result in educational responses that are ineffective for both boys and girls and a restricted vision of what can be done to advance literacy learning. Hempel-Jorgensen et al. (2017) found that when the teacher did not draw on deficit discourses about struggling boy readers in terms of their gender, ethnicity and social class, the pedagogical practice allowed children to practice agency as readers and engage positively in meaningful reading experiences for pleasure.

The developed themes in the second category showed how two of the concepts that are grounded in this work - 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness' - were conceptualised amongst participants from the three Maltese state schools concerned to fully answer question 3. Young boys' voices provided surprising findings and thus were the climax that contributed to a richer answer to subsidiary question 3.

In terms of reading, some parents and Heads of School favoured the structured, teacher-led and drilling approach to the teaching and learning of reading grounded in phonics instruction. Conversely, most parents complained that storybook reading time is not happening in Year 1 and that phonics instruction confused their five- to six-year-old sons since they were learning literacy skills in two languages simultaneously (some boys experienced Maltese and English as their second and third language due to the recent influx of foreign learners). Saracho (2017) claimed that children could become confused when they attend their first years of school and experience a radical difference between two languages and cultures. In this regard, the International Reading Association [IRA] & National Association of the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], (2009) claimed that DLLs become literate if they have strong basics in their first language. In addition, Saracho (2017) affirms that outdated methods in the teaching of language and literacy increase the possibility of having children at-risk of experiencing school failure in future years.

Several stakeholders attested that a balanced literacy approach provided positive reading experiences with young boys and girls at this age; but this was minimally observed in early primary. Heads of Department (Literacy) agreed that

phonics instruction promoted old-school teaching and took over existing reading practices in early primary, leaving no room for reading for pleasure and increasing the amount of passive classroom reading tasks. Similarly, Hempel-Jorgensen, et al. (2017) found that a focus on children's technical language skills in reading side-lined reading for pleasure from the literacy curriculum. Some parents and teachers complained about the lack of books that matched young boys' interest at school. On the other hand, they claimed that the introduction of eBooks increased their enthusiasm towards print.

An interesting find was that most common comments from the majority of five- to six-year-old boys on their daily reading experiences (mainly based in the use of an interactive whiteboard to blend letter sounds) included phrases like: 'I do not like it', 'I wanted to sleep' and 'my eyes hurt'. This evidence could be depicted as approvingly unjust in terms of restraining the possibility of a positive and joyful experience to schooling (Griffiths, 2012). Moreover, the majority of boys claimed that they preferred the books they have at home. Children are less motivated to read texts that they are not choosing (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004) and that the easier the access the more they read (McQuillan & Au 2001). The multiple views on reading appear locked in a vicious cycle impacting the schooled literacy practices of most five- to six-year-olds boys within the three Year 1 classrooms concerned. McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth, (1995) found that, very often attitudes towards reading at an older age drop both at home and school. These findings echo the popular claims and evidence of some boys who struggle in upper years.

As to writing practices, interviewed stakeholders shared similar claims about young boys and writing; such as 'boys are messier', 'boys like to write less than girls do'; and also highlighted the need to 'move on' during writing. Nonetheless, one educator from the online questionnaire declared that the boys in her class love writing. Such a contrasting view questioned the value given to transcriptional skills (handwriting, letter formation, etc.) that most stakeholders viewed as having a negative impact on some boys' motivation towards writing. Indeed, Year 1 teachers also showed their concerns and sounded exhausted when speaking about the overwhelming use of workbooks, textbooks, copybooks and prescriptive syllabi they have to cover within each scholastic year in early

primary due to the existing formalised education. Popular concerns among Year 1 teachers, parents and Heads of Department (Literacy) were:

- Emphasis on neat handwriting;
- The dichotomy between invented spelling and writing in lined copybooks;
- The use of workbooks, worksheets, textbooks and copybooks;
- The old-school teaching of writing; and
- Homework and weekly spelling tests as added stress to families and young boys.

Most of the comments of the boys' parents and their teachers often included the words 'rubbing off'; this affirmed the existing focus on transcriptional skills resulting in most young boys experiencing writing that focuses on the pressure to write neatly and with correct formation and spelling. Nevertheless, some stakeholders agreed with the overemphasis on transcriptional skills in the earliest years; and it seemed that, when teachers opposed this, their plea fell on deaf ears. The Heads of Department (Literacy) expressed their thoughtful concerns from their vast experience in Maltese state schools. They claimed that it seemed to be a common trend amongst teachers to 'speak with pride' about promoting writing through workbooks and worksheets, and sending it home for homework. Findings from my study revealed that most young boys thought differently. Cremin and Oliver's (2017) systematic review that ties several studies related to teachers and writing (from 1990-2015) indicated that teachers have narrow conceptions of what it means to be a writer and what counts as writing stemming from varied complex anxieties such as past negative writing experiences.

Boys' voices were the highpoint in light of this argument as most viewed their experiences of passive transcriptional-focused writing as follows: 'I feel sad', 'I get tired/bored', and 'my hands hurt'. In sharp contrast, the few instances they were observed to experience emergent writing on a mini whiteboard (no lines) using chalk or markers instead of pencils all boys excitedly expressed their views in a different tone: 'I am happy!' and 'I like it!'. Whitehead (2010) claimed that, "initially the young writer must be released from the demands of

conventional transcription and spelling and freed to concentrate on the cognitive and creative processes of composition" (p. 181). The author further argued that specific attention to spelling is most successful when children feel able, confident and committed to read and write. Literature also shows that emergent writing permits children to find their voice in their writing; experience ownership, control and power; therefore boosting their positive learning dispositions towards writing (Cigman, 2014; Graves 1984; Nutbrown, 2006b; Smith, 1988). It can be argued that the vicious cycle of reading experienced by most young boys in the three Maltese state schools also applied to their experiences of writing.

Most stakeholders valued play as the best way boys (and also girls) learn and could experience emergent reading and writing; however, they also expressed their concerns about the existing formalised system that left more room for 'work' rather than 'play' in early primary classrooms. They also pointed out the 'shocking' sharp transition young five- to six-year-old boys experienced from a more play-based Kindergarten to the formal system in Year 1. Most parents shared the same concerns; while some others did not value the role of play in learning at all. It was also noted that several stakeholders reduced the word 'play' to terms like 'hands-on' and 'multisensory' learning which was mostly related to writing letters in different salt trays or gel, etc. Similarly, other researchers have also reported the marginalisation of play in early years education (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004).

Young boys in this study expressed their enthusiasm when they commented on these short multisensory writing activities during lesson time as they declared that it is 'messy' and 'fun!'. The philosophical thought behind the UNCRC (1989) is that every single child is not a human of a lesser kind and that regardless of their gender, language or any other status, every child has a right to a happy and fulfilling childhood. Malta's adoption of this United Nations Convention in 1990 (Article 31- the right to play) and the recently published Maltese national children's policy (MFSC, 2017, p. 76), should be taken seriously so that all children in early years education (0-7 years) would be benefitting from a school environment that provides appropriate conditions for all children to play. This is also supported by the child-centred philosophical integrity underpinning the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and the LOF for the Early Years (DQSE, 2015). However, the overall findings from my study reveal that this pedagogic framework is not yet in

place; meanwhile, the current abolition and low regard for play is impacting undesirably on the motivation and attitudes of five- to six-year-old boys towards reading and writing.

Finally, another concern surfacing amongst several stakeholders' views was the road to preparation of 'unready' boys to read and write conventionally as early as possible to cope with the existing formal literacy learning system in Year 1. This revealed a limited vision in the way most stakeholders within the Maltese state schools in my study conceptualised 'school readiness'. Nonetheless, it was clearly evident that, while most parents tried to side with the assumption that 'earlier is better', their common anxieties of a 'shocking transition', 'rushed', 'too much time sitting down' and 'one-size-fits-all system' at the age of five prevailed. The IRA & NAEYC (1998) put forward a position statement that supported that literacy should be taught according to a progression of the children's literacy development irrespective of age. In light of this argument, all Heads of Department (Literacy) and some teachers called for the urgent need of a 'less is more' approach in the early primary years, where all children could reach their full potential through a more play-based and less formal approach to early literacy learning. It is well documented that positive transitions in the early years promote long-term academic success (Dockett et al., 2010; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Peters, 2010).

5.5 Overarching Research Question: A Paradigm Paralysis?

The core findings of my study lie in the combination of the several methods used to respond to the three subsidiary research questions. The mixed methods phenomenological approach based on the adoption of a 'convergent parallel design' (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) in mixed methods research supported me in answering the overarching research question of this study in the most accurate way possible:

> Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools?

Firstly, the study revealed new understandings of the concept of boys' underachievement, and the need for the rethinking of the concept rather than

trying to find the one solution to eradicate the problem. This does not mean that my study found the solution to the problem of gender gap in literacy. Instead, it helped in creating new dimensions in ways we could reposition the boys and literacy agenda from an ECEC perspective. Evidence from my study provided further insight into how internalized assumptions based on socio-historical constructions of gender and social class and the way literacy is perceived by different stakeholders have shaped, and plausibly continue to shape, the experiences of young boys' early literacy learning in three Maltese state schools, and their identity position as un/successful readers and writers. Merged findings from my study revealed conflicting interpretations and a significant degree of essentialist worldviews in the way the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is conceptualised. This may have implications on the existing and future literacy learning of young boys, if these are adopted as acceptable explanations to educators and other professionals in our education system (Alloway et al., 2002; Fine, 2010; Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2017; Langford, 2010; Youdell, 2004). The key finding here was that, as a reaction to the hegemonic intellectual discourse on 'boys' underachievement', participants often produced essentialist accounts; i.e., all boys or boys only. As a pragmatist researcher, I argue that such popular hegemonic accounts, limited explanations of 'boys' underachievement', and the exposed tensions and never-ending debates, may serve as the driving force needed for more nuanced understandings, inquiry and change in the way boys are presently being conceptualised within the field of early literacy learning in a Maltese context.

Secondly, by tracing back to boys and literacy learning in the early primary years, this study revealed that literacy tends to be narrowly defined in early years educational practice within Maltese state schools (Anning 2003; Marsh, 2003; Pahl, 2002; Luke & Luke, 2001). While several stakeholders showed that they are aware of broader definitions that embrace the importance of play, emergent literacy, multimodal literacies, and a balanced literacy approach in ECEC, such practice was minimally observed. This was replaced by teacher-led, implementation of phonics programmes that promoted drilling and formal instruction to teach conventional reading and writing underpinned by behaviourist theory where young children are viewed as passive learners. Most of the five- to six-year-old boys in my study spoke of how the existing, formal approach

impacted negatively on their involvement in learning and attitudes toward schooled reading and writing practices. Similarly, Hempel-Jorgensen et al. (2017) found that children's desire to read was also affected by teachers' perceptions of reading as a technical skill which influenced their practices and dismissed the significance of reading as a meaning-making experience. In a study of three high school boys and their encounters with literacy, Sarroub and Pernicek (2016) concluded that narrow definitions of literacy, the meaning of being literate, frustration with school academic structures, relationships at home, and undesirable experiences with teachers, functioned together and resulted in struggles with reading. Consequently, the overall evidence from my study suggests that a strong case may and should be made for a rollback in formalised education in the early years of Maltese primary state schools. This claim is supported by Bodrova and Leong (2007) in reminding us that the Vygotskian approach helps us to view literacy in a broader context:

> … this approach shows us why the dropping down of the first-grade curriculum into kindergarten and preschool will be doomed to failure, if all we do is make sure that children memorise their letters or practice their phonemic awareness.
> (p. 199).

Thirdly, merged findings revealed a common 'rush' to prepare 'unready' five- to six-year-old boys to the 'race' of formal schooling from Kindergarten to Year 1 and by memorising letter sounds and names, blending and decoding text, writing letters in the correct formation, and spelling correctly both in the Maltese and English languages. Several stakeholders claimed that this created sharp transitions particularly for most young boys' early literacy learning between Kindergarten and Year 1. Literature shows that it is important to maintain smooth transitions and continuity in the curriculum between the different early years setting (Lombardi, 1992). Consequently, merged findings concluded that most conceptualisations of school readiness within Maltese state schools were grounded in an empiricist view, where young boys were seen to be ready for school based on what they *know* (letters sounds, decoding, use of literacy checklists, etc.) rather than being viewed as young male citizens who are all ready to learn. In contrast, the "interactionist" perspectives that are in line with the

developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1952) portray the child as being ready to learn; thus, the focus shifts to the child and the interaction between the child and the environment, with the aim of nurturing all children's positive learning dispositions. Young children do not need to be measured against any school readiness standard at the same time as they all develop at a different pace (Woodhead & Oates, 2007).

Finally, in concluding the answer to the overarching question, the merged findings of my study funneled down to questioning whether a 'paradigm paralysis' effect is restraining stakeholders and policymakers within the Maltese early years education system. It might be that the effect is strong enough to impede actions to be taken, rethink and reposition existing conceptualisations on 'underachieving boys', 'early literacy learning' and 'school readiness'. Findings in my study show that a limited vision, mainly grounded in three positivist disciplines, is currently impacting negatively on most of the boys' attitudes and involvement with reading and writing in this enquiry, cheating them from developing their full potential as readers and writers in the most crucial years of literacy development (Bradbury, 2013; Early Years Matters, 2016; Roskos & Christie, 2007; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). Research has proven that attitudes and beliefs of self-efficacy, self-concept and self-esteem in relation to the ability to learn are formed in the early years (Bandura 1992; Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoreson, 2002; Tickell, 2011). Facing this challenge might be key to introduce a new virtuous circle; one that embraces diversity and equity, and views young boys and girls as ready to learn and be nurtured into lifelong readers and writers.

I would argue that my study is one example of what I am trying to convey within the argument of broadening views and shifting from a 'paradigm paralysis', if this is the case. It is sheer proof of what could be gained and learned when contentious concepts in education that might seem impossible to overcome are viewed in broader dimensions, and explored in an attempt to address old and new challenges for the benefit of our youngest citizens.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

In this section, I explain the limitations of my study. Although my study is important in providing contextual information regarding young boys' literate

experiences in Maltese early primary state schools, it does present several limitations.

First, this study is constrained in its empirical investigation of boys' reading and writing experiences in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Restricting this sample to several stakeholders in early primary (Years 1 and 2) and young boys in three Year 1 classrooms of three state schools in Malta does not allow an appraisal of how similar experiences might impact girls. This study might have been more interesting if it had also provided evidence of the involvement and experiences of five- to six-year-old girls in early literacy learning. However, that was not the objective of this study. Yet, it is important to point out that implications originating from the findings of this research revealed that these may also be important for girls' early literacy learning.

The limited time of one week spent in each of the three state schools for classroom observations, due to my full-time job at the time of data collection, restricted me from observing boys during their reading and writing practices over a longer period of time. Future research could build on this study by collecting more longitudinal data. Another limitation concerning classroom observations, is the fact that no calibration activities were employed following the use of the Leuven scale tool to identify the level of boys' involvement in learning. However, being the only researcher conducting this research, I made sure that the level of involvement in learning was known following the observation of each reading and writing experience and the level rating was checked again after reading the notes taken for every observation. Moreover, this study included three Maltese state schools and even though these were suggestive of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, the results may not be representative. Future research might look at the phenomenon in this study within the contexts of the other two educational service providers in Malta; church and independent schools. These might yield similar, different or comparable results.

Moreover, limitations of this work revolve around researcher bias. Researcher biases included my (current and previous) experiences as Vice President of the voluntary association Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM), teacher at a boys' school, a former literacy teacher, Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency, as well as an Education Officer within the Quality Assurance Department. In all, these experiences are likely to have

influenced my personal perspective toward the existing educational situation in Malta. The created observational framework during my classroom observations, the prepared questions for the interviews and focus groups, and the verbatim transcriptions of all the data and the MMPR scientific approach used have helped to maintain my responsibility as a researcher within the schools concerned. Lastly, I acknowledge the effect of my person as researcher, and recognise that complete objectivity within research is not possible (Wellington, 2015).

Furthermore, considering that five- to six-year-old boys' ability to be honest and accurate might be doubted, the validity of this data might be cautioned. Yet, the recorded young voices, transformed into verbatim-transcribed without any filter data, may provide a more authentic insight into five- to six-year-old boys' reading and writing experiences in a Maltese context. Moreover, most of the adult participants were female, and this may also have had some bias on the results. However, this could not have been avoided since most stakeholders within schools in Malta are female.

Keeping all the limitations in mind, the overall findings of this enquiry offer valued and valuable insights into young boys and literacy, and the teaching and learning of reading and writing in Maltese early years education.

5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

Key findings from my study have important implications for policy related to ECEC and language and literacy learning of young children in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

The thought-provoking findings stemming from five- to six-year-old boys' voices and classroom observations in my study provided an insight into how young children develop perceptions on reading and writing as they start their formal schooling system in Malta. Findings also revealed that these constructed identities could have a significant impact on some boys' attitudes and involvement in early literacy learning. Rudd, Colligan and Naik, (2006) emphasized that allowing young children's voices to be heard in relation to their learning experiences increases the likelihood of meeting their learning needs if listened to and acted upon.

The work in my study recommends that existing 'hegemonic essentialism' and 'resistant essentialism' (Ferrando, 2012) that prevailed amongst stakeholders'

claims on the group of 'boys' and literacy should be seen through a posthumanist and emancipatory lens to promote a dynamic literate world for all children in a Maltese context. Brooker (2005) suggested that "rethinking the characteristics we value in children would require us to rethink the entrenched cultural bias shown in our provision of learning" (p. 127). Similarly, Hempel-Jorgensen (2015c) suggested that in order to generate more socially just learning opportunities and outcomes for all learners, pedagogies and practices should be free from dominant gendered and classed discourses. Thus, it is critical for teachers to examine and retain consciousness of the impact such discourses have on the way the 'ideal pupil' is constructed within classrooms characterised by extreme hierarchical positioning (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015c). Within the context of this thesis, stakeholders' examination and attempt to put off such discourses could produce learning environments that provide more meaningful and equitable possibilities for all children to grow into lifelong readers and writers. Perhaps, it is time to unsettle ourselves from comfortable hegemonic or change-resistant discourses and simply continue to pay lip service to what is fair and just. Instead, should we not move to a position where we try to actually provide a literate educational journey that is receptive and inclusive in its everyday practices? The theoretical foundations of this study reaffirm:

> A posthumanist methodology should not be sustained by exclusive traditions of thought, nor indulge in hegemonic or resistant essentialist narratives. It should be dynamic and shifting, engaging in pluralistic epistemological accounts, not in order to comply with external requirements of political correctness, but to pursue less partial and more extensive perspectives, in tune with a posthuman future which will radically challenge human comprehension.
> (Ferrando, 2012, p. 17)

Similarly, sustained by restricted traditions of thought, the inner image of the child in my study was mostly viewed as that of a 'passive' learner and this influenced the environment constructed around the child (Malaguzzi, 1993). Particularly, this was reflected in the way the Year 1 classrooms within three Maltese state schools were set up for five-year-olds who were expected to sit at their desks most of the time. In light of this argument, Suarez-Orosco (2017) contended that, "we are educated under the prevailing narrative of the curriculum

of the era during which we attend school… and as such largely do not challenge our internalized assumptions and ways of thinking" (pp. 527-528). Failure to do so, might result in teachers enacting the "traditional images of the teacher as someone who stands in front of the class with a pointer in hand." (Langford, 2010, p. 123). It can be argued that we are often products of our environment. Osgood et al., (2015, p. 349) emphasize that:

> In order to think differently about gender and childhood, it is imperative that we (adults, teachers, researchers, parents) take account of our personal philosophies, political motivations, subjectivities, identities and relationships… In doing this, we might realize possibilities to unsettle dominant ideas around gender that either reinforce stereotypical or biological deterministic ways of thinking; and/or obscure/deny the significance of gender in early childhood (Osgood 2014).

Early learning is a highly integrated process that goes against a compartmentalised curricula where learning is subject-based (Bruner, 1986; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1962). The NCF (2012) for zero- to seven-year-olds in Malta promotes a curriculum that is based on CCP and an integrated approach that scaffolds young children's learning into higher levels of competence. Yet, as this study shows, this is not yet in place due to the present downward pressure of academics and literacy testing leading to an excessive focus on conventional reading and writing practices. I acknowledge that it might appear daunting for educators to take up the challenge and transform existing practices, influenced as they are by dominant gendered discourses, an excessive emphasis on high-stakes assessment and a formalised system based on prescriptive syllabi in the early primary years of Maltese state schools.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is always the possibility for capacity building through regular co-participative approaches within school contexts. Providing such opportunities may increase the space for teachers' 'creative learning conversations' (Chappell & Craft, 2011), reflexiveness and criticality to recognise the construction of their identities, pedagogical opportunities to think differently (Barbules & Berk, 1999) and to develop a better understanding in relation to gender and schooling (Pennycook, 2011). The deconstruction and critique (Surtees, 2008) of hegemonic discourses, the re-envisioning of the image of the early childhood teacher and teaching (Ryan &

Grieshaber 2005; Moss, 2006) and the examination of the "effects of power" through reflective assignments (Sumsion, 2005, p. 196) may be further supported in pre-service ECEC programmes in Malta.

Findings from this study suggest that such projected training opportunities may serve as an attempt to understand better how to promote more socially just pedagogies (Gale, 2011; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015a, 2015c; Lingard, 2005; Lingard & Mills, 2007; Reay, 2012) within the present formalised Maltese education system for the early primary years and the global context of concern on boys' literacy, heavily informed by media constructed explanations and populist texts (Alloway et al., 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Langford (2010) claimed that an approach that strives to build teachers' professional identity through social negotiation with several theories and practices "is consistent with the concept of democratic pedagogy in which human agency and the capacity to actively interpret, choose, reject and change a professional identity are at the forefront" (p. 123).

Moreover, the provision for capacity building within schools and reflective assignments within pre-service teacher training might empower qualified and student teachers to explore gender (Weaver-Hightower, 2003) and re-envision, resist and transfigure (Tan, 2009) existing unjust practices and policies also through the understanding of well-defined theoretical frameworks that foster the future development of literacy pedagogy, including 'creative pedagogy' (Jeffrey & Woods, 2009) and 'productive pedagogy' (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard, 2005; Lingard et al., 2001). Such meaningful, collaborative, creative and playful pedagogies do not just aspire to raise attainment but also prioritise the quality of learning through imaginative and immersive play (Boden, 2004; Craft, 2001a) that contribute to socially just outcomes and support both teacher and learner agency through a continuum of pedagogical strategies (Craft, 2010; Griffiths, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015a; Jeffrey & Woods, 2009; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Marsh & Vasquez, 2012). In facing this challenge within established formal instruction in literacy learning, Hannon (2007) concluded that:

> Play is an integral dimension of children's learning, including their literacy learning, and it should therefore be facilitated, in literacy as in other areas of development. It is particularly important in settings where opportunities are limited for meaningful engagement in genuine literacy

practices and engagement has to be contrived. Our main goal in literacy education, however, should be to facilitate meaningful literacy learning. If we strive for meaningful literacy learning we will inevitably at some point be led also to value and support children's play.
(p. 213)

Within an increasingly centralised English education system (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998), some teachers have taken the 'risk' (Davies et al., 2013), employed the 'power to innovate' (Lance, 2006) and 'expanded the repertoire of pedagogical practices' (Alloway et al., 2002; Cremin, 2015) to develop creativity in their classroom pedagogy (Cremin et al., 2006; Grainger, Gooch & Lambirth, 2005; Larson & Marsh, 2015; QCA, 2005). These creative teachers did not choose to place their focus on the need to rush to cover prescribed syllabi; but, rather, on the engagement of the imposed content in response to observed interests and questions captured during an infusion of play and imagination in learning (Cremin et al., 2006). Cremin (2015) argues that:

For creative pedagogues, a sense of adventure and autonomy attends the experimentation involved in making curricular changes. Whilst this is not without tension, recognising their responsibilities to the young, they (the teachers) seek (often in partnership with others) to effect a balance between structure and improvisation and, in Anna Craft's words, possibility think their ways forward.
(p. 357)

Consequently, this study calls for an urgent need to shift the existing narrow focus on decontextualised teacher-led literacy instruction in the early years of primary schooling to a broader conceptualisation of meaningful literacy pedagogy. This paradigm shift might be key to address the literacy needs of all children irrespective of their gender, race, culture, etc. through socially just pedagogies that enable teacher and learner agency and challenge dominant gendered and classed discourses and constructed hierarchies within educational contexts (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015a). For example, 'radical child-centred pedagogies' (Bernstein, 2000) are underpinned by a philosophy that provides for all learners to achieve more equitable learning outcomes and places its main focus on challenging dominant discourses that may disadvantage some learners more than others. Similarly, in reconceptualising CCP, Wood (2007) suggested the concept of a 'mixed pedagogy' where varied teacher-child interactions promote

the notion of moving forward from the tensions created between CCP and traditional pedagogies. Through such democratic-centred pedagogy (Langford, 2010), teachers could be able to step in situations where "female and male teachers and boys and girls enact gender regimes without opportunities to reflect and learn ways to promote gender equity" (Langford, 2010, pp. 122-123).

Correspondingly, schools must value children's literate identities (Marsh, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) and their home literacy practices where reading and writing experiences have shifted as a consequence of young digital 'natives'' (Prensky, 2001) engagement with popular culture and digital texts (Dyson, 1997, 2002; Marsh, 2003, 2007, 2010a; Marsh & Millard, 2005; Marsh et al., 2005). Marsh (2007) argues that educational institutions need to respond to broader socio-cultural changes through new pedagogical approaches and a literacy curriculum that provides all children with meaningful opportunities "to develop the range of skills, knowledge and understanding that will become increasingly important to both employment and leisure in future years" (p. 279).

Schools and stakeholders that embrace literacy as social practice (Street, 1984) rather than as pencil-and-paper tasks will help all children build the confidence in themselves as readers and writers. In light of this recommendation, Roskos and Christie (2007) claimed that, "the point is that if we are concerned to promote children's literacy development, we must consider all the settings in which they can learn" (p. 205). This study discovered that some efforts to do so were evident in stakeholders' claims and one-offs reading or writing activities in three Year 1 classrooms where a higher level of boys' involvement in learning was also observed. Despite such efforts it was also clear that not everyone is pulling the same rope and the quality of reading and writing experiences in the first year of compulsory schooling of Maltese state schools seems to remain problematic for most five- to six-year-old boys that participated in this study. The role of pedagogy is crucial in challenging persistent educational inequalities (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Hempel-Jorgensen, et al., 2017). Therefore, as Marsh (2007) argues, there is the need for policy development to address new literacies outside the 'old' timed and compartmentalized pedagogical practices because:

> Unless this happens, the ORF may continue to appropriate selectively
> aspects of the PRF and thus dissipate its potential to transform literacy
> pedagogies for a multimodal, multiliterate world and an emergent
> knowledge economy.
> (p. 279)

In addition, my study also recognised that, within its local context, a change at policy level is urgently required. As noted in previous chapters of this thesis, the existing NCF (MEDE, 2012), recent policy documents (MEDE, 2014b; DQSE, 2009) and other mandated circulars (DCM, 2007) which early primary educators receive are not based on the same philosophical integrity for quality ECEC in Malta. There remains the need to standardise existing early childhood education policies (MEDE, 2006) and specifically ensure that new literacies and the word 'play' are given their due significance in all areas of learning and development, including literacy. Research findings confirming that the majority of learners are not enjoying education at the end of their compulsory schooling (Gorard & See, 2011) might not be surprising after all, since the value of enjoyment in learning is most often eliminated in current policy documents: "social justice will be better served when joy and justice *in*, as well as *from* education are better established" (Griffiths, 2012, p. 669).

Policymakers must recognise research, as this study disclosed, that indicate that five- to six-year olds seem to be developing negative views on reading and writing, and experiencing a lack of involvement in learning as a direct result of the existing start to formal education at the age of five. Consequently, it is vital that those responsible for any mandated circulars and policy documents related to ECEC, early literacy learning and transitions across the early years cycle in a Maltese context base their claims on evidence-based research (Bradbury et al., 2018) that preferably includes the voices of young children (Levy, 2011; Nutbrown, 2018). Careful thought should be placed on the increasing performative pressures influenced by international comparison test results, policies dominated by assessment-driven paradigms and pedagogic discourse created by ORF (Bernstein, 2000) that may over-emphasize the regulation of achievement through imposed specific literacy goals within the Maltese education system.

For example, the mandated use of developmental models such as the literacy checklists used in early primary schools in Maltese state schools (DQSE,

2009) might be giving more prominence to a short term change of external measurable outcomes rather than the needed shift in pedagogical process. Such scripted instruction materials grounded in a cognitive psychological approach (Ehri, 1987, 1995) may further support the evident emphasis on decontextualised literacy practices, rigid curriculum content and the way literacy learning is being valued and taking place within the three Maltese early primary classrooms involved in this study. Prominence given to measurable outcomes and pedagogic discourse created by the state (ORF) reduces educators' autonomy, weakens the pedagogic recontextualising fields (PRF) (Bernstein, 2000) and positions professional educators as passive recipients of prescribed content: such restrictive centralised measures might narrow children's learning and development due to an excess focus on grades and ages and decrease their motivation towards literacy learning as they are regularly assessed against lists of specific descriptors as a homogenous group of learners (Mottram & Hall, 2009; Nutbrown, 1998). Early literacy learning should be more about building connections between teachers and learners and developing language and literacy skills through an active and playful approach that allows all children to increase their level of participation, and develop at their own pace within an environment where educators support and scaffold their learning in meaningful ways (Levy, 2011; Marsh, 2005a; Marsh & Vasques, 2012; Roskos & Christie, 2007).

Moving away from the ticking of boxes does not suggest that reading and writing should not be assessed; on the other hand it underlines that more authentic narrative ways of assessing young children's competences in reading and writing which also value multimodal literacy experiences should be considered. Authentic assessment in early years education is a tool used to provide a more genuine, and holistic representation of young children's learning through the educators' careful listening and observation to inform future planning, which scaffolds the learning of each child and maintains communication with families (Bradbury et al., 2018; Zessoules & Gardner, 1991). Bradbury et al. (2018) argue that, "children are more than a score. They will learn successfully when we stop measuring their every step, and develop more rounded ways to ensure they receive the quality education they deserve" (p. 14). This study infers that a shift in assessment practice might help in lessening the evident pressure on teachers and most young boys observed through the promotion of skills-based teaching of

reading and writing to strive towards becoming the constructed biliterate 'ideal pupil' (Becker, 1952). Findings from this study show that the focus on the acquisition of set English and Maltese literacy skills in the early primary curriculum might be a great deal to ask of some five-year old or six-year-old boys.

Parents in this study disclosed their fears and anxieties in relation to the existing focus on conventional reading and writing in the early primary years. Despite such concerns, some parents' expectations about quality in the early primary years seemed to be largely related to ensuring children are ready for upper primary years. Such cultural expectations and beliefs are resulting in pressure that is put on teachers and school management teams. Professional development in quality early literacy learning and early childhood education is required for school management and teachers to respond in an "educative good sense" (Whitehead, 2010, p. 152) to related persistent pressures and to embrace a more inclusive approach within early primary classrooms. Indeed, several stakeholders' views revealed a need for a common shared understanding of what meaningful reading and writing practices for young children entail in Maltese early primary state schools. Heads of Department (Literacy) claimed that different stakeholders are working in a counter-productive manner and consequently the existing literacy support was not being as effective as it should be within all schools.

Therefore, findings from this study suggest that the quality of ECEC service provision (European Union, 2014) can and should be improved and consequently support the proposed implementation strategy for the early years in Malta that aims to address issues of monitoring and supporting quality provision, initial and on-going training (giving importance to: the implementation of the early years LOF 0-7 years; planning; and appropriate assessment and documentation of children's achievement), dissemination of information, transitions, governance, administration and organisation (Sollars, 2014). The successful implementation of such a strategy could be key to develop and strengthen the reassurance needed for a wider range of stakeholders, including administrators, policymakers, educators and parents to have one common shared vision and understanding about what constitutes quality ECEC, particularly within the fields of gender and literacy (MEDE, 2012). Subsequently, all stakeholders would then have had the

opportunity to: possess the necessary unified fundamental knowledge and skills of how young children learn best; deal with new ways of literacy learning amidst arising pressures in Maltese early primary classrooms; and understand the learning outcomes of the early years cycle (DQSE, 2015). It might be the first step to changing mind-sets and debunking constructed claims and assumptions on boys' underachievement, early literacy learning and school readiness. UNESCO (2015) identified the need for more active and inclusive approaches to embrace diversity within classrooms and supported the recommendations put forward in this thesis by acknowledging the challenge most schools have to face to go through a paradigm shift:

> Changing from a traditional school or classroom to one that is inclusive and learning-friendly is a process, not an event. It does not happen overnight. It takes time and teamwork. Yet, it can yield many benefits for us professionally and most importantly for our children, their families, and their communities.
> (p. 11)

Findings from this study corroborate recommendations based on the need to think differently and collectively to allow for a unified openness to reimagine and overcome (Osgood et al., 2015). There is a need for policymakers and educators to re-evaluate their perceptions on the existing evidence and long, traditionally held assumptions on boys and literacy. Likewise, it is important to keep advocating and defending the early years (0-7 years) from rigid, passive schooled literacy practices and formalised curricula by creating research that extols the value of play in literacy learning to keep its significance alive in early years pedagogy for all our youngest citizens to learn in the best way they possibly could. This is where equity and quality for all young 'active learners' to flourish into lifelong readers and writers would begin.

5.8 Considerations for Future Research

My research study has shed light on new insights regarding young children's reading and writing experiences from several stakeholders and young boys' point of view in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. This does not imply that the newly created understandings filled all the gaps in knowledge

related to this area of study or solved the gender gap in literacy attainment issue. Instead, this section puts forward considerations for future research.

Reading the title of this thesis might raise the question: "and what about girls?". As previously explained, girls' early literacy learning was not within the scope of this research; however, further study would be necessary to identify how the created understandings might be useful for co-educational classroom practice. Further studies can explore how existing reading and writing practices are impacting girls, and both boys and girls simultaneously, to create deeper understanding and challenge existing hegemonic discourses in the field of gender and literacy within a Maltese context. Similar studies might also consider research in other school sectors in Malta such as church and independent schools. Moreover, in an attempt to further understand boys and their attitudes, particularly their involvement in reading and writing in a Maltese context, a longitudinal study to see the sustained effect of the impact of schooled reading and writing practices of the same group of young boys in future upper primary years is also suggested.

Young boys' voices and classroom observations in my study showed the lack of enthusiasm and low involvement in learning when they were experiencing daily taught synthetic phonics in both Maltese and English lessons. It is important to reiterate that this teacher-led and drilling reading practice is not in line with the philosophical integrity of the existing NCF (2012) for the early years in the Maltese islands. Having discovered how a more playful, balanced literacy approach, popular culture and technology positively impacted young boys' perceptions of reading and writing in the early primary years of Maltese state schools, further research must now look more closely at the role broader conceptualisations of literacy and more creative and socially just pedagogies play in young children's literacy learning. This information would provide policymakers, school management teams, teachers and parents with further understanding on how reading and writing could be promoted to sustain the motivation and engagement of all young boys and girls in the early primary years that is key to learning. Moreover, the collected evidence would also be useful for the local context if focused on the role such pedagogies play on young children in a bilingual and multilingual context. This is a challenge for teachers in Malta considering the recent influx of foreign learners in Maltese state schools.

In the same vein, Maltese and foreign parents of young boys in my study were keen to understand more about language and literacy for young dual language or multilingual learners in Maltese state schools. Action research that implements family literacy programmes within early years education might be key to keep parents abreast of meaningful and purposeful bilingual, biliterate and multilingual practices, and motivate them to become active advocates for their young children (International Reading Association, 2007; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003).

Finally, it is hoped that this thesis inspires future research in ECEC that aims to access the voices of young children as a reminder to all that they also have the right to be heard in educational research.

5.9 Significance of the Study

My study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on boys and literacy by providing refined analyses that developed new understandings about young boys and early literacy in Malta. Particularly, findings from this study offer a deeper insight into the persisiting local and international statistics highlighting 'boys' underachievement' in literacy attainment based on the uniqueness of its approach and evidence emanating from a mixed-method phenomenological research study. The contextual information which includes young boys' voices from three Maltese co-educational state schools, added a fresh perspective to the existing knowledge in the area of study. Moreover, the overall findings provided evidence on what could be learned and gained when contentious topics in education that might seem impossible to overcome are viewed in broader dimensions and shifting from a 'paradigm paralysis', if this is the case. The overall contribution to knowledge from this study may form the basis for practical action and productive policy in literacy and ECEC in Malta as it holds implications for social change by calling for an educational response. The work in this study may also serve as a resource for academic audiences, policymakers and all stakeholders involved with the education of young children. Finally, my study is significant for anyone who has the interest to help young children become literate, and including lifelong readers and writers on the ways how they can learn best.

My work was also significant for my personal and professional interests, and will hopefully prove to be so for others in several ways. The professional growth gained throughout this enquiry encouraged me and a colleague, both of us half way through our PhD studies, to launch the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta (ECDAM), the first voluntary association in Malta that provides professional training to educators, parents of children (aged 0-7 years), and advocates for quality in the early years. Furthermore, personal experiences and the theoretical foundations discovered through the review of the literature intersected and structured my identity and professional background in the fields of gender, literacy and early years education. One practical example is the way posthumanist theory broadened my perceptions on several traditional dichotomies I struggled with personally since my childhood, and thus I completely agree with Ferrando's (2012) concluding claim that: "Posthumanism ultimately exceeded academic theory and turns into a way of life." (p. 13). In addition, I feel that my research study gave me the opportunity to enhance expertise in the identified areas by gaining a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of boys and literacy in the early years.

5.10 Chapter Conclusion

 Loris Malaguzzi stated that, "things about children and for children are only learnt from children" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 30). Committed to accessing the voices of young children, my study focused on young boys and their reading and writing experiences in the early primary years of Maltese state schools. Merged findings in this study provided implications for redefining our image of boys, children and childhood and re-thinking of pedagogies, practices and an early years' formal school system to produce more meaningful literacy learning opportunities and socially just outcomes for all children, regardless of gender, in their early years.

We need to remember that children become readers and writers not simply to master the skills involved: reading and writing need to include the social, emotional, linguistic, physical and personal development of all children. Moreover, such literacy needs to address the real life of young children outside school; only through this assembly can we improve boys' and girls' literacy, and to generate equitable opportunities that support them in becoming lifelong readers

and writers. We need to foster exciting reading and writing experiences to avoid existing slumps in culturally and linguistically diverse boys' and girls' educational journeys.

Having said that, my study avoided suggesting a single solution to eradicating the existing gender gap in literacy. Instead, it is hoped that these new understandings may contribute to the existing knowledge in the fields of gender, early literacy learning and ECEC. Through an emancipatory lens, it is also anticipated that my work motivates stakeholders in education in Malta to consider a paradigm shift that might be key to overcoming longstanding barriers and take action towards an overdue educational response in the early primary years.

My study has shown that schools can be responsible for demotivating some young boys from becoming passionate about reading and writing. The suggested rethinking and repositioning of worldviews might be key to moving forward within the existing formal schooling system at the age of five, traditional schooled reading and writing practices, and several stakeholders' hegemonic discourses on boys before it is too late. Through a posthumanist, emancipatory and pragmatist lens, my study strengthened its theoretical foundations as it gave rise to "inconceivable ontological possibilities, which stretch our universe-centric perspective" that could be key to blurring "the boundaries" in the hope of bringing about the paradigm shift critical to the success of all children (Ferrando, 2012, p. 10). Education reformer and one of the initial philosophers of pragmatism, John Dewey (1916), succinctly captures the essential message of this thesis: "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow." The voices of most young boys in this study confirmed that after a century Dewey's (1916) words remain credible:

> *Jien ma nieħux gost (nikkopja minn fuq l-interactive whiteboard għal fuq il-pitazz bir-rigi) għax inkella ngħejja nikteb ħafna, idejja tibda tuġgħani ħafna (jipponta lejn il-minkeb u l-pala ta' jdejh).*

> *I do not like it (copying from the interactive whiteboard to my lined copybook) because I get tired of writing too much, my hand hurts very much (pointing at elbow and palm of hand).*

> (Mark, five- to six-year-old boy, Sawrella School)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical approval

Ethical approval from the University of Sheffield

Downloaded: 02/07/2016
Approved: 30/06/2016

Charmaine Bonello
Registration number: 140220801
School of Education
Programme: NO

Dear Charmaine

PROJECT TITLE: Gender and Literacy in Early Years Education: Investigating boys' reading and writing experiences in Maltese state schools
APPLICATION: Reference Number 009124

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 30/06/2016 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 009124 (dated 27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020446 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020445 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020444 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020443 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020442 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant information sheet 1020440 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant consent form 1020452 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant consent form 1020451 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant consent form 1020450 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant consent form 1020448 version 1 (27/06/2016).
- Participant consent form 1020447 version 1 (27/06/2016).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

Professor Daniel Goodley
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Approval from the Research and Policy Development Directorate within the MEDE in Malta

DIRETTORAT GHAL
KWALITA' U STANDARDS FL-EDUKAZZJONI
FURJANA VLT 2000
MALTA

DIRECTORATE FOR
QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN EDUCATION
FLORIANA VLT 2000
MALTA

Request for Research in State Schools

A. (Please use BLOCK LETTERS)

Surname: BONELLO   Name: CHARMAINE

I.D. Card Number: 423279 (M)

Telephone No: ▮▮▮▮   Mobile No: ▮▮▮▮

Address: ▮▮▮▮

Locality: ▮▮▮▮   Post Code: ▮▮▮▮

E-mail Address: ▮▮▮▮

Faculty: UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD   Course: PhD (EDUCATION)   Year Ending: 2014-2018

Title of Research: GENDER AND LITERACY IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

Aims of research: □ Long Essay   □ Dissertation   ☑ Thesis   □ Publication

Time Frame: OCT 2016 - JUNE 2017   Language Used: ENGLISH / MALTESE

* of research in state schools i.e. fieldwork

Description of methodology: MIXED METHODS ▮▮▮▮

School/s where research is to be carried out: ▮▮▮▮

* if permission is granted.

FIELDWORK: ▮▮▮▮

Years / Forms: YEAR 1   Age range of students: 5-6-year-olds.

* Telephone and mobile numbers will only be used in strict confidence and will not be divulged to third parties.
I accept to abide by the rules and regulations re Research in State Schools and to comply with the Data Protection Act 2001.
<u>Warning to applicants</u> - Any false statement, misrepresentation of concealment of material fact on this form or any document presented in support of this application may be grounds for criminal prosecution.
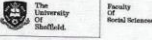
Signature of applicant: _____   Date: 14/6/16

RECEIVED
EU Affairs, International Relations
1 7 JUN 2016
Research and Policy Development Directorate
Ministry for Education and Employment

B. Tutor's Approval (where applicable)

The above research work is being carried out under my supervision.

Tutor's Name: _____   Signature: _____

Faculty: *Cathy Nutbrown*   Faculty Stamp: _____

C. Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education - Official Approval

The above request for permission to carry out research in State Schools is hereby approved according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the University of Malta Ethics Committee.

Raymond Camilleri
Director
EU Affairs, International Relations
Research and Policy Development Directorate

Date: 20 / 06 / 2016   Official Stamp

Director
(Research and Development Department)

<u>**Conditions for the approval of a request by a student to carry out research work in State Schools**</u>

Permission for research in State Schools is subject to the following conditions:

1.   The official request form is to be accompanied by a copy of the questionnaire and / or any relevant material intended for use in schools during research work.

2.   The original request form, showing the relevant signatures and approval, must be presented to the Head of School.

3.   All research work is carried out at the discretion of the relative Head of School and subject to their conditions.

4.   Researchers are to observe strict confidentiality at all times.

5.   The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education reserves the right to withdraw permission to carry out research in State Schools at any time and without prior notice.

6.   Students are expected to restrict their research to a minimum of students / teachers / administrators / schools, and to avoid any waste of time during their visits to schools.

7.   As soon as the research in question is completed, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education assumes the right to a full copy (in print/on C.D.) of the research work carried out in State Schools. **Researchers are to forward the copies to the Assistant Director, International Research, Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.**

8.   Researchers are to hand a copy of their Research in print or on C.D. to the relative School/s.

9.   In the case of video recordings, researchers have to obtain prior permission from the Head of School and the teacher of the class concerned. Any adults recognisable in the video are to give their explicit consent. Parents of students recognisable in the video are also to be requested to aprove that their siblings may be video-recorded. Two copies of the consent forms are necessary, one copy is to be deposited with the Head of School, and the other copy is to accompany the Request Form for Research in State Schools. Once the video recording is completed, one copy of the videotape is to be forwarded to the Head of School. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education reserves the right to request another copy.

10. The video recording's use is to be limited to this sole research and may not be used for other research without the full consent of interested parties including the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

2

Statement of Consent

I hereby give my consent to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education to process and record personal and sensitive data being given herewith in order to be able to render me with the service I am applying for.
I fully understand that:
a)   by opting out my application cannot be processed;
b)   authorised personnel who are processing this information may have access to this data in order to supply me with the service being applied for;
c)   edited information, that would not identify me, may be included in statistical reports.

I know that I am entitled to see the information related to me, should I ask for it in writing.
I am aware that for the purpose of the Data Protection Act, the Data Controller for this Directorate is:
        The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
        Floriana, VLT 2000

I have read and understood this statement of consent myself _____

This statement of consent was read and explained to me _____

Signature: _____ ID number: _4232 79(M)_ (Data subject)

Signature: _____ ID number: _____ (Reader if applicable)

Date: _14/6/16._

Data Protection Policy

The Data Protection Act, 2001 regulated the processing of personal data held electronically and in manual form. The Directorate for Quality and Standard in Education is set to fully comply with the Data Protection Principles as set out in the Act.

a)   The Directorate will hold information you supply in accordance to your request to carry out research in State Schools and / or Directorates' documents.
b)   The information you give may be disclosed to other Departments of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, who may also have access to your data.

Your rights:
You are entitled to know what information the Directorate holds and processes about you and why; who has access to it; how it is kept up to date; what the Directorate is doing to comply with its obligations under the Data Protection Act, 2001.

The Data Protection Act, 2001 sets down a formal procedure for dealing with data subject access requests which the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport follows.

All data subjects have the right to access any personal information kept about them by the Directorate either on computer or in manual files. Requests to access to personal information by data subjects must be made in writing and addressed to the Data Controller of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. An identification document such as a photocopy of the Identity Card, photocopy of passport etc. of the data subject making the request must be submitted with the request. Such identification material will be returned to the data subject.

The Directorate aims to comply as quickly as possible with requests for access to personal information and will ensure that it is provided within reasonable time, the reason will be explained in writing to the data subject making the request.

All data subjects have the right to request that their information be amended, erased or not used in the event the data is incorrect.

Appendix B: Information Letters

Information letter sent to Head of School: Pilot study (anonymous)

My name is Charmaine Bonello. I am a Literacy Teacher and a PhD student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My research topic deals with Early Years Education, Literacy and Gender with particular focus on boys.

In recent literature about gender and literacy in educational research there is considerable evidence for the claim that a performance gap in literacy attainment between the sexes exists. International and local statistics revealed that in the Maltese education system, boys lag behind girls in literacy achievement. The phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is highly disputed and researched by many scholars worldwide, leaving the literacy experiences of Maltese students unexplored. Upon identification of this gap in research, I felt the pressing need to tap into the roots of the literacy gender gap in a Maltese context. Consequently, in my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system. My over-arching research question is:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

I would very much like to conduct the Pilot Study for my fieldwork at your school. I will be conducting my main fieldwork in three other state schools. I am planning to conduct the pilot study in one Year 1 classroom in October 2016. All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality and will be rendered anonymous when writing the report. There are no known risks if you participate in this pilot study. The research would include:

- observations of daily practices in one Year 1 classroom over a period of one week with a particular focus on boys;
- interviews with you or any other member from the school management team, and the educator of the Year 1 classroom I will be conducting my observations in;
- focus group with four or five boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom; and
- focus group with a sample of parents from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

My research will contribute to build a better understanding of this phenomenon in Maltese Early Years Education and will also make a fair contribution to the existing knowledge in this field of study. In my geo-political and personal contexts, it may also support professionals and policymakers and facilitate effective literacy teaching and learning for both boys and girls in Maltese early primary schools. Once the project is completed, I would be willing to share my findings with you and the participants of this research.

Thank you for your collaboration.
Charmaine Bonello
(bonellocharm@gmail.com)

Information letter sent to Heads of School (main fieldwork) (anonymous)

My name is Charmaine Bonello. I am an Early Literacy Teacher and a PhD student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My research topic deals with Early Years Education, Literacy and Gender with particular focus on boys.

In recent literature about gender and literacy in educational research there is considerable evidence for the claim that a performance gender gap in literacy attainment exists. International and local statistics revealed that in the Maltese education system, boys lag behind girls in literacy achievement. The phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is highly disputed and researched by many scholars worldwide, leaving the literacy experiences of Maltese students unexplored. Upon identification of this gap in research, I felt the pressing need to tap into the roots of the literacy gender gap in a Maltese context. Consequently, in my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system. My over-arching research question is:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

I would very much like to conduct part of my main fieldwork at your school. I will be conducting my pilot study in another state school and the rest of my main fieldwork in two other state schools. I am planning to conduct the main fieldwork of my study between January and March 2017. All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality and will be rendered anonymous when writing the report. There are no known risks if you participate in this study. The research would include:

- observations of daily practices in one Year 1 classroom over a period of one week with a particular focus on boys;
- interviews with you or any other member from the school management team, and the educator of the Year 1 classroom I will be conducting my observations in;
- focus group with four or five boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom; and
- focus group with a sample of parents from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

My research will contribute to build a better understanding of this phenomenon in Maltese Early Years Education and will also make a fair contribution to the existing knowledge in this field of study. In my geo-political and personal contexts, it may also support professionals and policymakers and facilitate effective literacy teaching and learning for both boys and girls in Maltese early primary schools. Once the project is completed, I would be willing to share my findings with you and the participants of this research.

Thank you for your collaboration.
Charmaine Bonello
(bonellocharm@gmail.com)

Information Sheet (Three Year 1 Teachers in Maltese State Schools)

Dear Year 1 teacher,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

My name is Charmaine Bonello. I am a Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency in Malta and a PhD student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My research topic deals with Early Years Education, Literacy and Gender with particular focus on boys. In recent literature about gender and literacy in educational research there is considerable evidence for the claim that a performance gender gap in literacy attainment exists. International and local statistics revealed that in the Maltese education system, boys lag behind girls in literacy achievement. The phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is highly disputed and researched by many scholars worldwide, leaving the literacy experiences of Maltese students unexplored. Upon identification of this gap in research, I felt the pressing need to tap into the roots of the literacy gender gap in a Maltese context. Consequently, in my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system. My over-arching research question is:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

I would very much like to conduct part of my fieldwork for this enquiry at your school. I will be conducting my main fieldwork in two other state schools. I am planning to collect my data between January and March 2017. The research would include:

- observations in one Year 1 classroom over a period of one week with a particular focus on literacy pedagogy and its impact on boys (pictures of the boys maybe taken);
- interview with the head of school or any other member from the school management team, and the educator of the Year 1 classroom I will be conducting my observations in;
- focus group with four or five boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom; and
- focus group with a sample of parents of boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

My research will contribute to build a better understanding of this phenomenon in Maltese Early Years Education and will also make a fair contribution to the existing knowledge in this field of study. In my geo-political and personal contexts, it may also support professionals and policymakers and facilitate effective literacy teaching and learning for both boys and girls in Maltese early

primary schools. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in this project, it is hoped that the findings from this work will be shared within your school and the participants of this research. At no point in the presentation of the findings of this study will you be identified. All practitioners and other participants taking part will be rendered anonymous by using pseudonyms or numbers.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this project. If so, I will visit your class for one week to observe the reading and writing practices taking place in a Year 1 class and how these impact on young boys. During the one week of observation a one to one interview will also be held with you if you volunteer to take part. The semi-structured interview will be approximately fifteen minutes long and audio recorded.

The audio recording will be used for the purpose of this study only. If required for additional research they will not be used unless your specific permission is granted, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The audio recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. Rest assured that these transcriptions will be rendered anonymous. Recordings will be filed away in a safe storage accessible only to the researcher and discarded appropriately when they are no longer needed. Yet, if you have any objection towards being recorded, do not hesitate to bring your concern forward. If you volunteer to be part of this study, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality and will be rendered anonymous when writing the report. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. There are no known risks if you participate in this study. This research study has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield Ethic's Review Procedure.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way and if you agree, we will ensure that the data collected about you is untraceable back to you before allowing others to use it.

Information Sheet (Heads of Department, Literacy)

Dear Head of Department (Literacy),

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

My name is Charmaine Bonello. I am a Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency in Malta and a PhD student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My research topic deals with Early Years Education, Literacy and Gender with particular focus on boys. In recent literature about gender and literacy in educational research there is considerable evidence for the claim that a performance gender gap in literacy attainment exists.

International and local statistics revealed that in the Maltese education system, boys lag behind girls in literacy achievement. The phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is highly disputed and researched by many scholars worldwide, leaving the literacy experiences of Maltese students unexplored. Upon identification of this gap in research, I felt the pressing need to tap into the roots of the literacy gender gap in a Maltese context. Consequently, in my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system. My over-arching research question is:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

I would very much like to conduct an interview with you as the Head of Department (Literacy) of one of the schools within your college which will also be part of my fieldwork for this enquiry. I will be conducting my main fieldwork in two other state schools within other colleges. I am planning to collect my data between January and March 2017. The research would include:

- observations in one Year 1 classroom over a period of one week with a particular focus on literacy pedagogy and its impact on boys;
- interviews with the Head of School or any other member from the school management team, Head of Deparment (Literacy) and the educator of the Year one classroom I will be conducting my observations in;
- focus group with four or five boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom; and
- focus group with a sample of parents of boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

My research will contribute to build a better understanding of this phenomenon in Maltese Early Years Education and will also make a fair contribution to the existing knowledge in this field of study. In my geo-political and personal contexts, it may also support professionals and policymakers and facilitate

effective literacy teaching and learning for both boys and girls in Maltese early primary schools. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in this project, it is hoped that the findings from this work will be shared within the schools I'll be conducting my research, future training for literacy teams and the participants of this research. At no point in the presentation of the findings of this study will you be identified. All participants taking part will be rendered anonymous by using pseudonyms or numbers.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this project. If so, you can contact or email me so we can set the date, place and time most viable for you to meet (email address and contact number provided below). I find no problem with providing a quiet space were to meet if you may find it difficult to do so. The semi-structured interview will be approximately fifteen minutes long and audio recorded.

The audio recording will be used for the purpose of this study only. If required for additional research they will not be used unless your specific permission is granted, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The audio recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. Rest assured that these transcriptions would be rendered anonymous. Recordings will be filed away in a safe storage accessible only to the researcher and discarded appropriately when they are no longer needed. Yet, if you have any objection towards being recorded, do not hesitate to bring your concern forward. If you volunteer to be part of this study, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality when writing the report. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. There are no known risks if you participate in this study. This research study has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield Ethic's Review Procedure.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way and if you agree, we will ensure that the data collected about you is untraceable back to you before allowing others to use it.

If during further participation you will have any complaints or further queries around the study you can contact me as the lead researcher of this project by email (Charmaine Bonello):
charmaine.bonello@sheffield.ac.uk or telephone number ▮▮▮▮▮▮
or
My Supervisor and also the Head of the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield by email (Prof. Cathy Nutbrown):
c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk or telephone number 00356 +44(0)1142228139

Any complaints which have not been dealt with through this procedure, can also be controlled via the University's 'Registrar and Secretary' email address: http://www.shef.ac.uk/registrar/index.html

Thank you for your collaboration.
Charmaine Bonello
This research project is partly funded by the Malta Government Scolarship Scheme (MGSS).

Information Sheet (Boys' parents)

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

My name is Charmaine Bonello. I am a Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency in Malta and a PhD student at the University of Sheffield in the UK. My research topic deals with Early Years Education, Literacy and Gender with particular focus on boys. In recent literature about gender and literacy in educational research there is considerable evidence for the claim that a performance gender gap in literacy attainment exists. International and local statistics revealed that in the Maltese education system, boys lag behind girls in literacy achievement. The phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' is highly disputed and researched by many scholars worldwide, leaving the literacy experiences of Maltese students unexplored. Upon identification of this gap in research, I felt the pressing need to tap into the roots of the literacy gender gap in a Maltese context. Consequently, in my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system. My over-arching research question is:

Within the global context of concern on 'boys' underachievement', how are boys experiencing reading and writing in Maltese state schools?

I am conducting part of my fieldwork for this enquiry at the school your son currently attends. I will be conducting my main fieldwork in two other state schools. I am planning to collect my data between January and March 2017. The research would include:

- observations in one Year 1 classroom over a period of one week with a particular focus on literacy pedagogy and its impact on boys;
- interview with the head of school or any other member from the school management team, and the educator of the Year 1 classroom I will be conducting my observations in; and
- focus group with four or five boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom
- focus group with a sample of parents of boys from the chosen Year 1 classroom.

My research will contribute to build a better understanding of this phenomenon in Maltese Early Years Education and will also make a fair contribution to the existing knowledge in this field of study. In my geo-political and personal contexts, it may also support professionals and policymakers and facilitate effective literacy teaching and learning for both boys and girls in Maltese early primary schools. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people

participating in this project, it is hoped that the findings from this work will be shared within the school your son attends and the participants of this research. At no point in the presentation of the findings of this study will you be identified. All participants taking part will be rendered anonymous by using pseudonyms or numbers.

It is entirely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this project. If you decide to volunteer and take part in this study kindly send back to school this information sheet together with the attached consent forms in an envelope labelled with your name and your son's name. You will then receive a copy of this information sheet and the signed consent forms for you to keep. Kindly write your contact number in the space provided before you send this form at school so I will be able to contact you if need be. You can find the date and time of the focus group with parents of boys in Year 1 on the consent form attached.

Enter your contact number here please: _____

During the focus group session you will be asked some questions and you can feel free to express your opinion on the topic in discussion. The focus group will be approximately fifteen minutes long and audio recorded.
The audio recording will be used for the purpose of this study only. If required for additional research they will not be used unless your specific permission is granted, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The audio recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. Recordings will be filed away in a safe storage accessible only to the researcher and discarded appropriately when they are no longer needed. Yet, if you have any objection towards being recorded, do not hesitate to bring your concern forward. If you volunteer to be part of the focus group, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality and will be rendered anonymous when writing the report. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. There are no known risks if you participate in this study. This research study has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield Ethic's Review Procedure.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way and if you agree, we will ensure that the data collected about you is untraceable back to you before allowing others to use it.

If during further participation you will have any complaints or further queries around the study you can contact me as the lead researcher of this project by email (Charmaine Bonello):
charmaine.bonello@sheffield.ac.uk or telephone number ███████
or

My Supervisor and also the Head of the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield by email (Prof. Cathy Nutbrown): c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk or telephone number 00356 +44(0)1142228139

Any complaints which have not been dealt with through this procedure, can also be controlled via the University's 'Registrar and Secretary' email address: http://www.shef.ac.uk/registrar/index.html

Your son may also be part of this research study, only if he has your consent. Some pictures will be taken during their reading and writing activities in class and these pictures will be used only while a group of boys will be participating in a focus group. This means that the pictures of the activities taken will be discussed with the boys. After the interviews with the boys the pictures will be destroyed to protect the privacy of the participants involved. If your son has your consent, he will also be asked orally whether he wants to take part or not in the focus group at school. Another adult apart from myself will witness your son's assent and we will both sign a form as an acknowledgement of your son's positive reaction to be part of the interview.

Kindly fill in the parental consent form attached if you find no objection in having your son be part of this research project. Please do not forget to fill in the focus group consent form if you are willing to be part of this research project too.

Thank you for your collaboration.
Charmaine Bonello
This research project is partly funded by the Malta Government Scolarship Scheme (MGSS).

Ittra ta' informazzjoni għall-ġenitur/kustodju
(Information sheet for boys' parents in Maltese)

Għażiż ġenitur/kustodju,

Inti qed tiġi mistieden biex tieħu sehem fi proġett ta' riċerka. Qabel tiddeċiedi tridx tieħu sehem, huwa importanti li wieħed jifhem l-iskop ta' din ir-riċerka u x'tinvolvi. Jekk jogħġbok, ħu l-ħin li għandek bżonn biex taqra din l-informazzjoni sew u jekk tixtieq tista' tiddiskutiha ma' ħaddieħor. Jekk xi ħaġa mhix ċara jew tixtieq iktar informazzjoni tista' tikkuntatjani fin-numru provdut fit-tmiem ta' din l-ittra. Ħu l-ħin tiegħek biex tiddeċiedi jekk tridx li tieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Grazzi tal-ħin tiegħek biex taqra din l-ittra.

Jien jisimni Charmaine Bonello. Naħdem bħala Senior Manager mal-Aġenzija Nazzjonali tal-Litteriżmu ġo Malta u studenta tal-PhD fl-Università ta' Sheffield, l-Ingilterra. Is-suġġett tar-riċerka tiegħi huwa l-edukazzjoni fis-snin bikrin u l-litteriżmu, partikolarment iffukat fuq is-subien. F'letteratura riċenti li tikkonċerna l-bniet u s-subien u l-litteriżmu hemm evidenza konsiderevoli li tiġġustifika l-fatt li hemm distakk bejn il-livell tal-litteriżmu tas-subien u tal-bniet. F'riċerki lokali u internazzjonali skoprew li fl-edukazzjoni Maltija, is-subien inġenerali ma jmorrux tajjeb daqs il-bniet fejn jidħol qasam tal-litteriżmu. Il-fenomenu ta' 'boys underachievement' huwa ferm diskuss globalment u riċerkat minn ħafna studjużi madwar id-dinja; iżda dan kollu jħalli nuqqas ta' eżaminazzjoni fl-esperjenzi tal-litteriżmu tas-subien Maltin. B'hekk jien ħassejt il-bżonn li nidħol fl-għeruq ta' dan id-distakk fil-litteriżmu f'kuntest Malti u nibda din ir-riċerka ġo l-iskejjel tal-istat. F'dan il-proġett ta' riċerka nixtieq ninvestiga u noħloq fehmiet ġodda ta' dawn il-kwistjonijiet identifikati u li għandhom x'jaqsmu mas-sess maskili u l-litteriżmu mill-bidu nett tas-sistema tal-edukazzjoni f'Malta; is-snin bikrin. Il-mistoqsija li ħejjiet it-triq għal dan il-proġett hija:

X'nistgħu nitgħallmu mill-evidenza eżistenti fuq is-subien u l-litteriżmu jekk dan il-fenomenu jiġi ntraċċat fl-ewwel snin tal-primarja fl-iskejjel tal-istat?

Parti minn dan il-proġett ser iseħħ fl-iskola li jattendi t-tifel tiegħek. Il-parti l-oħra ta' dan il-proġett ser issir f'żewġt iskejjel oħra. S'issa il-pjan huwa li r-riċerka fl-iskola tat-tifel tiegħek isseħħ bejn Jannar u Marzu 2017. Ir-riċerka ser tinvolvi:

Osservazzjonijiet ġo klassi tal-ewwel sena fuq perjodu ta' ġimgħa - din ser tiffoka partikolarment fuq il-pedagoġija tal-litteriżmu u kif din qiegħda timpatta fuq subien ta' ħames u sitt snin.

Intervisti mal-kap tal-iskola jew membru ieħor tal-maniġjar tal-iskola, kif ukoll l-edukatur/a tal-klassi tal-ewwel sena li ser iseħħu l-osservazzjonijiet fiha.

Intervisti ma' gruppi ta' erba' jew ħames subien magħżula mill-istess klassi tal-ewwel sena.

Intervista fi gruppi ta' sitt ġenituri ta' subien mill-istess klassi tal-ewwel sena li qed tieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka.

Din ir-riċerka tista' tikkontribwixxi biex tinbena fehma aħjar fuq dan il-fenomenu f'Malta u wkoll fl-għarfien eżistenti f'dan il-qasam tal-edukazzjoni. Fil-kuntest Malti, dan il-proġett jista' jservi ta' għajnuna għal nies professjonali li jfasslu l-politika, għalliema professjonali u jista' wkoll jiffaċilita t-tagħlim effettiv fil-litteriżmu, kemm għas-subien kif ukoll għall-bniet mis-snin bikrin tal-edukazzjoni Maltija. Waqt li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju immedjat għal dawk in-nies kollha li ser jipparteċipaw f'dan il-proġett, huwa ttamat li s-sejbiet minn dan ix-xogħol jiġu maqsumin mal-parteċipanti kollha ta' din ir-riċerka u man-nies professjonali fl-iskola tat-tifel tiegħek. Fl-ebda punt fil-preżentazzjoni ta' dawn is-sejbiet mhu ser tiġi identifikata l-iskola jew il-parteċipanti involuti. Kull participant li jieħu sehem ser ikun anonimu billi jintużaw numri jew psewdonomi.

Id-deċiżjoni jekk tkunux parti minn dan il-proġett intom stess jew it-tifel/l-ulied tagħkom hija totalment f'idejkom. Jekk tiddeċiedu li tivvolontarjaw biex tieħdu sehem f'dan l-istudju nitlobkom tibagħtu lura din l-ittra tal-informazzjoni flimkien mal-formuli ta' kunsens mehmuża ma' din l-ittra, f'envelopp b'ismek u b'isem it-tifel tiegħek fuqu. Fl-aħħar tirċievu kopja tal-ittra tal-informazzjoni u l-formula ta' kunsens biex iżżommuhom għandkom. Jekk jogħġbok niżżel in-numru tal-mowbajl tiegħek fl-spazju provdut biex nkun nista' nikkuntatjak jekk tiġi magħżul biex tieħu sehem fl-intervista ma' ġenituri oħrajn:

Numru tal-mowbajl tal-kustodju /ġenitur: _____

Waqt l-mistoqsijiet tal-intervista inti ser tkun ħieles li tesprimi l-opinjoni tiegħek fuq is-suġġett li ser ikun diskuss (imsemmi hawn fuq). Din l-intervista mhux ser tkun itwal minn ħmistax il-minuta u ser jintuża l-*audio recording*.

L-*audio recording* ser jintuża biss għall-iskop ta' din ir-riċerka. ekk ikun hemm il-bżonn li jintuża f'riċerki oħrajn mhux ser jiġi użat mingħajr il-permess tiegħek, u ħadd minbarra dan il-proġett mhu ser ikollu access għar-rekordings oriġinali. Ir-rekordings ser jintużaw biss biex jiġu analizzati u biex jiġu illustrati f'konferenzi, preżentazzjonijiet u lectures. Dawn ir-rekordings ser ikunu merfugħin f'post sikur, ser ikunu aċċessibbli għar-riċerkatur biss u ser jiġu mormija meta l-użu tagħhom ma jkunx iktar ta' bżonn. Jekk għandek xi oġġezzjoni li tiġi rrekordjat, toqgħodx tiddejjaq li tressaq dak li qed jikkonċernak. Jekk tiddeċiedi li tieħu sehem, inti liberu/a wkoll li tista' tieqaf meta trid mingħajr ma jitneħħielek l-ebda benefiċċju li ġie mwiegħed hawnhekk. M'għandekx għalfejn tagħti l-ebda raġuni jekk inti tiddeċiedi li tieqaf.

L-informazzjoni kollha li ser tiġi miġbura f'dan il-proġett ser tkun miżmuma konfidenzjalment u ser tkun anonima fil-kitba li ser tiġi preżentata wara li jtemm dan l-istudju. M'intix ser tkun identifikata fl-ebda rapport u pubblikazzjoni. M'hemm l-ebda riskju jekk inti tieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Din ir-riċerka ġiet approvata etikalment mill-'University of Sheffield Ethic's Review Procedure'. Jekk waqt il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek inti tħoss li għandek xi ilment jew trid tistaqsi xi mistoqsijiet oħrajn fuq dan l-istudju, inti tista' tikkuntatjani bħala r-riċerkatur ta' dan il-proġett fuq l-*email* tiegħi:

charmaine.bonello@sheffield.ac.uk jew fuq in-numru tal-mowbajl: ▮▮▮▮▮
jew
tikkuntatja lis-'supervisor' u l-kap tal-iskola tad-Dipartiment tal-Edukazzjoni tal-Università ta' Sheffield fuq l-*email*:
c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk jew fuq in-numru tat-telfon: 00356
+44(0)1142228139
Jekk ikun hemm xi ilmenti li ma ġewx trattati waqt il-proċedura, dawn jistgħu jiġu kkontrollati wkoll mill-email tal-'University's Registrar and Secretary':
http://www.shef.ac.uk/registrar/index.html

Kif diġà spjegajt f'din l-ittra, it-tifel tiegħek jista' jkun parti minn dan l-istudju wkoll bil-kunsens tiegħek. Ser jittieħdu xi ritratti tas-subien waqt li jkunu qed jesperjenzaw attivitajiet ta' kitba u qari fil-klassi bil-kunsens tagħkom. Dawn ser jintużaw biss biex meta jsiru l-intervisti mas-subien, ikunu jistgħu jgħaddu l-kummenti tagħhom fuq dak li huma stess jagħmlu fil-klassi. L-iskop li nsemmgħu leħen is-subien tagħkom hija meqjusa bħala l-aktar ħaga importanti f'dan il-proġett. Wara li jsiru dawn l-intervisti mas-subien, ir-ritratti jiġu meqruda biex nipproteġu l-privatezza tal-parteċipanti. Jekk it-tifel ikollu l-kunsens tiegħek, jiġi wkoll mistoqsi jekk hu jridx jieħu sehem. Ser ikun hemm adult ieħor xhud tal-kunsens ta' ibnek u jien u dan l-adult ser niffirmaw karta bħala rikonoxximent tar-reazzjoni pożittiva ta' ibnek biex ikun parti minn din ir-riċerka.

Jekk jogħġbok iffirma l-formoli ta' kunsens mehmuża ma' din l-ittra jekk ma ssib l-ebda oġġezzjoni li inti u ibnek tkunu parti minn din ir-riċerka li ser tipprova tkun ta' kontribut għall-futur tas-soċjetà Maltija.

Grazzi tal-kollaborazzjoni tiegħek,

_____
Charmaine Bonello
Numru tal-mowbajl: ▮▮▮▮▮
Din ir-riċerka hija parzjalment iffinanzjata mill-'Malta Government Scholarship Scheme (MGSS)'.

Email Information Sheet for Years 1 & 2 Teachers (online questionnaire)

Subject in email: Year 1 and 2 teachers, Complementary teachers and Literacy support teachers in state schools: Invitation to take part in a 2 minute online questionnaire

Thank you for showing interest in participating in this study. Please take time to read the following information before answering the short **2-MINUTE** online questionnaire that is attached to this email.

I am a Senior Manager at the National Literacy Agency in Malta. In my ongoing PhD research, I would like to investigate and create new understandings of the identified issue of gender and literacy through the early years of the Maltese education system.

The main purposes of this survey are: (1) to set the grounds for this research study and understand better the bigger picture on the phenomenon of the gender gap and literacy attainment in the Maltese islands (2) to understand the relationship between the popular rhetoric (in media and educational research) on boys and literacy and Maltese early years educators' beliefs and practices.

It is entirely up to you whether you want to fill in this online questionnaire or not. All the information collected will be kept in strict confidentiality and anonymity. You will not be identified from this questionnaire. Consequently, the data collected will be deleted after no further use will be sought.

There are no known risks if you participate in this study. This research study has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield Ethic's Review Procedure. Furthermore, to carry out this research study official permission was gained from the Research and Development Directorate in Malta.

Click the following link to go the questionnaire:
If you will have any complaints or further queries around the study you can contact me as the lead researcher of this project by email (Charmaine Bonello): charmaine.bonello@sheffield.ac.uk
or
My Supervisor and also the Head of the School of Education Department at the University of Sheffield by email (Prof. Cathy Nutbrown): c.e.nutbrown@sheffield.ac.uk

Any complaints which have not been dealt with through this procedure, can also be controlled via the University's'Registrar and Secretary' email address: http://www.shef.ac.uk/registrar/index.html

Thank you for your collaboration.
Charmaine Bonello
This research project is partly funded by the Malta Government Scolarship Scheme (MGSS).

Appendix C: Consent Forms

Consent Form (focus group – parents)

Title of Project:

Boys and Early Literacy Learning:
Investigating boys' reading and writing experiences in Maltese state schools

Date of focus group (parents of boys in Year 1): _____

Place where focus group will be conducted: _____

Name of Parent/Guardian: _____

Name of boy in Year 1: _____

Name of Researcher: Charmaine Bonello
Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [11/1/17] for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason (Lead researcher name and contact number: Charmaine Bonello, ▇▇▇▇▇).
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Lead Researcher   Date   Signature

Parents' consent form: Focus groups (Maltese version)

Formula ta' Kunsens tal-Ġenitur/Kustodju (intervista fi grupp)

Isem tar-riċerkatur: Charmaine Bonello

Data, post u ħin ta' meta ser issir l-intervista fi grupp ta' ġenituri:

Numru li jidentifika l-parteċipant konċernat f' dan il-proġett

1. Jiena nikkonferma li qrajt u fhimt l-ittra tal-informazzjoni ta' dan il-proġett fid-data _____ . Jiena nikkonferma li kelli l-opportunità naghti l-kunsens tieghi qabel niffirma.

2. Jiena nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tieghi hija volontarja u li jien ghandi l-libertà li nwaqqaf is-sehem tieghi f'din ir-riċerka xhin irrid minghajr ma naghti ebda raġuni. (Isem u numru tal-mowbajl tar-riċerkatur: Charmaine Bonello, ██████████)

3. Jien nifhem li r-rispons tieghi ser ikun anonimu qabel ma jiġi analizzat. Jien naghti permess lil-membri ta' din ir-riċerka biex jaċċessaw ir-rispons anonimu tieghi.

4. Jiena naqbel li nieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka u ser inkun preżenti fid-data, post u ħin imsemmi hawn fuq.

.

Isem il-ġenitur/kustodju	Data	Firma

Isem ir-riċerkatur	Data	Firma

Parental consent form

Parental Consent Form

Title of Project:

Boys and Early Literacy Learning:
Investigating boys' reading and writing experiences in Maltese state schools

Name of Researcher: Charmaine Bonello
Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [11/1/17] for the above project in which my son will be involved and that he will also have the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my son's participation is voluntary and that he is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason (Lead researcher name and contact number: Charmaine Bonello, ▮▮▮▮▮▮).

3. I understand that my son's responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my son's anonymised responses, to use audio recording and any pictures taken for interview purposes only. The pictures will be destroyed after the interview.

4. I give my parental consent for my son to participate in this research study

Name of Parent	Date	Signature

Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

Parental consent form (Maltese version)

Formula ta' kunsens tal-ġenituri għal riċerka li tikkonċerna l-minuri.
(Se jkun hemm użu ta' ritratti, *audio recording* u osservazzjonijiet ta' minuri.)

Isem tal-ġenitur/kustodju: _____

Isem/Ismijiet tal-minuri: _____

Fejn ser isiru l-*audio recording*/osservazzjonijiet/ritratti: _____

Data tar-recording: _____

Lill-ġenitur / kustodju

1. Jiena nikkonferma li qrajt u fhimt l-ittra tal-informazzjoni miktuba fid-data
(_____) dwar ir-riċerka li fiha ibni/uliedi ser jiġi/u involut/i u li fiha ser ikollu
opportunità li jistaqsi mistoqsijiet.

   LE [ ]   IVA [ ]

2. Jiena nifhem li ibni/uliedi ser jipparteċipa/w volontarjament u li għandu/hom l-libertà
li jieqaf/jieqfu mill-parteċipazzjoni tiegħu/tagħhom fi xħin irid/u mingħajr ma
jagħti/u l-ebda raġuni. (Isem ir-riċerkatur Charmaine Bonello u numru tal-mowbajl,
████████)

   LE [ ]   IVA [ ]

3. Jiena nifhem li r-ritratti ta' ibni/uliedi mhux ser jintużaw f'pubblikazzjoni jew fil-
media. Ser jintwerew lil ibni/uliedi stess waqt li qed isiru l-intervisti u mhux ser
jintużaw għal ebda raġuni oħra. Jiena nikkonferma li l-informazzjoni dwar l-
osservazzjonijiet fil-klassi u l-kliem li jintqal fl-*audio* mhux ser jinkludi l-isem ta'
ibni/uliedi meta jiġu ppubblikati bil-kunsens speċifiku. Nistgħu nużaw l-*audio* u
osservazzjonijiet ta' ibnek/uliedek f'pubblikazzjoni?

   LE [ ]   IVA [ ]

   Jiena qrajt il-kundizzjonijiet murija hawn fuq u nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi bħala
ġenitur/kustodju biex ibni/uliedi jieħu/jieħdu sehem f'din ir-riċerka.

   Firma tal-ġenitur/kustodju: _____ Data: _____

   Isem tal-ġenitur kustodju: (ittri kbar) _____

Lid-Direttorat għall- Kwalità u Standards fl-Edukazzjoni

Nikkonferma li l-ġenitur/kustodju ta l-kunsens biex ibnu/uliedu jieħu/du sehem f'din
ir-riċerka u biex l-*audio*, l-osservazzjonijiet ta' ibnu/uliedu jistgħu jiġi ppubblikati.
Nikkonferma wkoll li l-ġenitur/kustodju ta l-kunsens biex jittieħdu ritratti li mhux ser
jiġu ppubblikati iżda ser jintużaw biss waqt li jsiru l-intervisti mat-tifel/mal-ulied
involut/i.

Firma tar-riċerkatur: _____ Data: _____

Isem ir-riċerkatur (ittri kbar): _____

Witnessed consent form

Witnessed Consent Form

Title of Project:

Boys and Early Literacy Learning:
Investigating boys' reading and writing experiences in Maltese state schools

Name of Researcher: Charmaine Bonello
Participant Identification Number for this project:

I have witnessed the explanation of the research purpose and the procedure of the group interview given to the potential vulnerable participant, and the child has had the opportunity to ask questions.

I hereby confirm that the child's assent to the above is positive.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Witness	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

Consent form (Heads of School, Teachers, Heads of Department - Literacy)

Consent Form

Title of Project:

Boys and Early Literacy Learning:
Investigating boys' reading and writing experiences in Maltese state schools

Name of Researcher: Charmaine Bonello
Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [11/1/17] for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason (Lead researcher name and contact number: Charmaine Bonello, ▮▮▮▮).
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant   **Date**   **Signature**

Lead Researcher   **Date**   **Signature**

Appendix D: Questions - Interviews and Focus Groups

Interview questions: Year 1 Teachers

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase 'boys' underachievement'?

Could you comment on whether particular boys and girls appear to struggle with the literacy requirements of schools?

Do some boys and girls have particular literacy difficulties that make it hard for them to meet school literacy requirements?

If there were more men as role models do you think they would improve boys' literacy learning?

What do you think about the role of technology in boys' literacy learning?

What particular teaching-learning strategies have you found to be successful in improving literacy outcomes for both boys and girls?

Have you found particular teaching-learning strategies that appear to work better for boys? Please specify.

Do you feel you have enough support/professional development as regards to literacy instruction to reach all boys and girls in your class?

Any other concerns or positive comments related to this topic you'd like to point out?

Interview questions: Heads of School

From your experience as a Head of school:

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase 'boys' underachievement'?

What are your views on reading and writing practices/literacy instruction in the early primary years of a Maltese school?

Could you comment on whether particular boys and girls appear to struggle with the literacy requirements of schools?

Do some boys and girls have particular literacy difficulties that make it hard for them to meet school literacy requirements and consequently attend complementary sessions at this stage?

Did the school staff experience any kind of professional development related to gender and the teaching and learning of literacy? If so, any actions or plans that took place or are in future plans?

Any other concerns or comments you would like to add?

Interview questions: Heads of Department (Literacy)

From your experience as the Head of Department (Literacy):

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase 'boys' underachievement'?

What are your views on reading and writing practices/literacy instruction in the early primary years of a Maltese school?

Could you comment on whether particular boys and girls appear to struggle with the literacy requirements of schools in the early primary?

What particular teaching-learning strategies have you found to be successful in improving literacy outcomes for both boys and girls?

Have you experienced particular teaching-learning strategies that appear to work better for boys? Please specify.

Do you think that at present classroom literacy instruction in the early primary years is of high quality and is reaching all boys and girls in the classroom?

Did you or the literacy teams or the school staff experience any kind of professional development related to gender and the teaching and learning of literacy? If so, any actions or plans that took place or are in future plans? If not what kind of professional development related to literacy?

Any other concerns or comments you would like to add?

Focus group conversation: Five- to six-year-old boys

Pictures of the same boys chosen for the interviews will be taken during their reading and writing practices in the classroom. I will then show the boys these pictures for them to comment on during the focus groups. As a researcher, I will take the role of a 'discussion facilitator'.

The following are some tentative questions that will be used to elicit discussion during the focus groups with the boys:

Do you remember when you did this activity?

How did you feel?

Can you explain what you were doing?

Which of the following activities you liked best? Why did you like it? …

Focus group questions for boys' parents (Maltese version)
Mistoqsijiet għall-intervista ta' grupp ta' ġenituri/kustodji

Kif qed jesperjenza l-kitba u l-qari l-iskola it-tifel tiegħek?

X'inhuma xi ftit mill-affarijiet li tagħmel int id-dar, biex tgħin it-tifel tiegħek jiżviluppa l-ħiliet tiegħu fil-kitba u l-qari?

Taħseb li xi subien jsibu iktar diffikultà fil-kitba u fil-qari mill-bniet? Jekk iva, tista' tgħidilna għala taħseb hekk?

X'inhi l-viżjoni tiegħek fuq kif jiġu mgħallmin il-kitba u l-qari fil-livelli ta' snin bikrin fl-iskola primarja tat-tifel tiegħek?

X'taħseb li jistgħu jagħmlu l-għalliema biex jgħinu lis-subien fil-kitba u fil-qari?

Tħossok li qed tieħu s-sapport meħtieġ biex tippromwovi l-qari u l-kitba mat-tifel tiegħek id-dar?

Jekk jogħġbokom, ħossukom liberi li tesprimu l-opinjoni jew tgħaddu xi kummenti validi oħra fuq is-subien u l-litteriżmu f'Malta.

Ghandkom xi kummenti posittivi jew xi haga li qieghda tinkwetakom dwar dan is-suġġett?

Focus group questions: Boys' parents

How does your son experience reading and writing experiences at school?

What are some things you do to help your son's reading and writing at home?

Do you think that some boys have more difficulty with reading and writing than girls? If so, why?

What is your perception of the reading and writing practices your son experiences at school?

What do you think teachers could do that would help boys with their reading and writing?

Do you feel that you are getting the support you need to promote reading and writing with your son at home?

Please feel free to make any other comments about boys and literacy

Appendix E: Observational Framework

**The BELL Project:
Boys and Early Literacy Learning**

Observational framework

DATE: _____

TEACHER: _____

YEAR 1 – Age range of boys 5-6 years

STATE SCHOOL: _____

Research question to be answered by this tool:
How are existing literacy practices within Maltese primary state schools impacting on five to six-year-old boys' reading and writing experiences and how are these consistent with current research on effective early literacy practices?

Pedagogic style used during reading and writing practices boys are exposed to in the early primary years:

The classroom **environment**:

Impact on boys' reading and writing experiences

Time allocated for reading and/or writing activity/activities: _____

Focus on:
- **Description** of reading and/or writing activity going on

- **Reaction: How are these practices impacting on boys' attitudes towards reading and writing?**

- **Observing boys' level involvement in the activity**: Based on Leuven's scale for involvement using the 5 level descriptors:

Charmaine Bonello

Appendix F: Online Questionnaire

Boys and Early Literacy Learning (BELL) A 2-Minute Questionnaire

The following is a list of popular explanations for the phenomenon of 'boys' underachievement' in literacy attainment related to school-based issues (particularly in the early primary years). These are commonly expressed in the popular media and in educational research. From your teaching experience in the Maltese islands, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following nine statements by clicking on the appropriate circle. Please click only one circle for each statement. Questions 10, 11 and 12 are related to early literacy instruction and boys within your context. Feel free to comment or choose not to respond to questions 10, 11 and 12. I greatly appreciate your valuable time and efforts to fill in this questionnaire!

Charmaine Bonello

(adapted from Alloway, N. et al., 2002)

1. **Select one of the following to indicate your current role in education.**
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Year 1 teacher

   ◯ Year 2 teacher

   ◯ Complementary Teacher

   ◯ Literacy Support Teacher

2. **Gender**
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Female

   ◯ Male

3. **Age**
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ 20-30

   ◯ 30-40

   ◯ 40-50

   ◯ 50-60+

4. **Number of years of teaching experience**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-5
- ◯ 5-10
- ◯ 10-15
- ◯ 15-20
- ◯ More than 20

5. **Please indicate the number of professional development courses or programmes relevant to literacy education that you have undertaken in the past ten years.**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-5
- ◯ 5-10
- ◯ 10-15
- ◯ 15-20
- ◯ More than 20

6. **1. The difference between the ways girls' and boys' brains develop account for boys' early literacy learning.**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Strongly agree

7. **2. Boys are not ready for formal schooling at the compulsory entry age (i.e. Year 1; five-year olds in a Maltese context).**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Strongly agree

8. **3. There are not enough books of high-interest value to boys available in schools.**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Strongly disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Strongly agree

9. **4. Boys prefer technological forms of literacy to print-based forms of literacy.**
   Mark only one oval.

   ○ Strongly disagree

   ○ Disagree

   ○ Neutral

   ○ Agree

   ○ Strongly agree

10. **5. If more adult men were involved with teaching/volunteering to role model and support boys in reading and writing activities, boys' literacy learning would improve.**
    Mark only one oval.

    ○ Strongly disagree

    ○ Disagree

    ○ Neutral

    ○ Agree

    ○ Strongly agree

11. **6. Some boys have more difficulty with reading and writing than girls do.**
    Mark only one oval.

    ○ Strongly disagree

    ○ Disagree

    ○ Neutral

    ○ Agree

    ○ Strongly Agree

12. **7. Boys often think that reading and writing activities are more appropriate for girls and women.**
    Mark only one oval.

    ○ Strongly disagree

    ○ Disagree

    ○ Neutral

    ○ Agree

    ○ Strongly disagree

13. **8. Educators need to understand more about gender and literacy instruction in the early years to improve boys' literacy learning.**
    Mark only one oval.

    ○ Strongly disagree

    ○ Disagree

    ○ Neutral

    ○ Agree

    ○ Strongly agree

14. 9. **Many current literacy practices in early primary classrooms do not motivate boys to engage in literacy learning.**

Mark only one oval.

- ( ) Strongly disagree
- ( ) Disagree
- ( ) Neutral
- ( ) Strongly agree
- ( ) Agree

15. 10. **What particular teaching-learning strategies have you found to be successful in improving reading and writing outcomes for both boys and girls in the early primary years (i.e. Years 1 and 2)?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

16. 11. **Have you found particular teaching-learning strategies that appear to work better for boys' reading and writing practices in the early primary years (i.e. Years 1 and 2)?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

17. 12. **Do you have general comments about boys' learning which makes their approach to literacy in school different from girls in general?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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