



**Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in
State Middle Schools in Malta**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.



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Abstract

Significant research has been focused on *policy implementation* which is mostly concerned with how well policies are realised in practice. However, this study maintains that, in the Maltese context, not enough attention has been paid to *policy enactment*, where issues of power need to be investigated and where the creative ways of policy interpretation and recontextualisation, in specific settings, are explored.

Drawing on the Foucauldian concepts of discipline and governmentality, this study attempts to explore the enactment of a learner-centred curriculum policy reform in three state middle schools in Malta. It employs a critical-interpretative methodology, based on qualitative research methods. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), combined with multimodal elements, it investigates the ways in which learner-centred education is discursively constructed within two policy documents: *National Curriculum Framework (NCF)* and *English Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)*, as one of the NCF supporting policy documents.

The enactment of these policy texts is examined through individual semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers. Focus group interviews were also carried out to examine critically students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, whilst obtaining a deeper understanding of teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

The CDA findings reveal that the dominant learner-centred discourses contained within the NCF and ELOF revolve around *cognition*, *emancipation* and *preparation*. These texts were found to be largely influenced by neo-liberal ideologies. Similarly, findings from individual and focus group interviews demonstrate that enactments of learner-centred policies not only gave rise to disciplinary technologies, but were also driven by neo-liberal modes of government, resulting in self-governance of school leaders, teachers and students.

This study is significant since it makes a number of contributions to the field of learner-centred policy and practice by shedding further light on the complex ways in which policy becomes enacted. It also makes several recommendations to improve current learner-centred policy and practice within the local and global context.

To all my loved ones

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Acronyms

AfL	Assessment for learning
ALP	Alternative learning programme
CCE	Child-centred education
CCTs	Cross-curricular themes
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CL	Critical linguistics
DA	Discourse analysis
DOI	Department of Information
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
EC	European Commission
ELOF	English Learning Outcomes Framework
EOs	Education officers
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FDA	Foucauldian discourse analysis
FTS	Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDP	Gross domestic product
HCN	Head of college network
HOD	Head of department
HOS	Head of school
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
IEP	Individualised educational programme
LCE	Learner-centred education
LLL	Lifelong learning
LOF	Learning Outcomes Framework
LOs	Learning outcomes

LSC	Learning support centre
LSE	Learning support educator
LSZ	Learning support zone
MATSEC	Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate
MED	Ministry for Education
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MEEF	Ministry for Education, Employment and the Family
MEYE	Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment
MEYS	Ministry for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports
MFE	Ministry for Finance and Employment
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
MUT	Malta Union of Teachers
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
NCHE	National Commission for Higher Education
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
NQT	Newly qualified teacher
NSC	National Skills Council
NSO	National Statistics Office
OBE	Outcomes-based education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Professional development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSCD	Personal, social and career development
RP_s	Represented participants
RQ_s	Research questions
S	Student
SDP	School development plan
SEBD	Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
SEC	Secondary Education Certificate
SFL	Systemic functional linguistics

SLO/s	Subject learning outcome/s
SMT	Senior management team
SSC&P	Secondary School Certificate and Profile
SurveyLang	Survey on Language Competences
T	Teacher
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TNA	Training needs analysis
TODA	Textually-oriented discourse analysis
UN	United Nations
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter I present a general overview of my research study. I firstly explain the research background by highlighting, in particular, the local and European Union (EU) policy context. Here, I focus on supranational and global influences that have shaped the current learner-centred curriculum policy reform in Malta. I then introduce the research focus, moving on to present the rationale for this study which concerns issues of policy implementation, school leaders' and teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies as well as students' perspectives of learner-centred practices. This is followed by the research aims and objectives. A discussion ensues regarding the research questions, their justification and the methods used for data collection. The significance of my research study is then explained. I conclude this chapter by outlining the structure and organisation of the thesis.

1.1 Background to the study

Education policy is no longer developed exclusively through national systems of education but is increasingly being influenced by globalisation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Globalisation may be defined as “the various ways in which the world is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 25). Global trends and convergences have contributed to the emergence of a *global education policy*, involving the borrowing and exporting of policies by different nation-states, which Ball (2013a) describes as *global policyspeak*. Supranational organisations such as the World Bank, the EU and the Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have also been instrumental in shaping education policy at the level of national systems (Ball, 2013a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In the contemporary policy landscape, learner-centred education (LCE) has gained recognition as a *travelling policy* due to its widespread adoption across different contexts around the globe (Ozga & Jones, 2006). It has even been advocated as a *policy panacea* (solution) for multiple problems (Sriprakash, 2010). Given the exceptional influence of LCE, at the discursive level, it is hard to find an education system that has not been influenced by it (Schweisfurth, 2013b). In various national government policy documents, there are different adaptations of LCE as, for example, the policy statements advocated in the Foundation Phase Framework of Wales regarding the importance of exploratory and problem-based learning (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008), New Zealand's curricular direction towards enquiry-based approaches to learning (Ministry of Education, 2007), or the priorities set in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence relating to personalisation and active learning (Scottish Executive, 2004). The commonalities between the emerging trends in curriculum policy and practice reveal a policy-borrowing tradition, a "rebirth of progressive education, including child-centred approaches" (Priestly & Biesta, 2013, p. 3).

At the global level, the prevailing notion of 'best practice' revolves around learner-centred approaches which give due prominence to constructivist and emancipatory principles whilst seeking to equip individuals with the skills required for the future economy (Britton et al., 2019; Schweisfurth, 2013b; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Indeed, education policy has become largely dominated by economic rationalism through the notion of the knowledge economy, where the knowledge worker is perceived as a key factor in economic development and crucial to the competitive advantage of a nation (Ball, 2013a; Brown & Lauder, 2006; Winter, 2012). The prevailing view of globalisation is embedded within a neo-liberal ideology which privileges competition, economic

efficiency and choice, whilst promoting the deregulation and privatisation of state functions (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Within such context, LCE has become a prominent feature of 21st century neo-liberal schooling policy (Starkey, 2019). Under neo-liberalism, schooling has become the central means by which human capital can be produced (Connell, 2013; Rodgers Gibson, 2019). As Windschitl (2002) has observed, “the business community ... is now placing a premium on employees who can think creatively, adapt flexibly to new work demands, identify as well as solve problems, and create complex products in collaboration with others ...” (p. 135). In keeping with this neo-liberal view of human capital, individuals are expected to take responsibility for themselves, to strive for autonomy and to become entrepreneurs of their own lives (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Rodríguez, 2013). I concur with Patrick (2013) in arguing that such neo-liberal conception of schooling can be harmful to the wellbeing of students and impede their individual development.

1.1.1 Local and EU policy context

Malta has witnessed significant developments in relation to education policy, as I elaborate further in Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2. Here it will suffice to say that Malta has gone through the processes of policy borrowing, similar to that which has been described above, not only in response to the increased influence of the European dimension, after Malta became a full member of the EU in 2004, but also due to other influential pressures exerted by different supranational bodies, as manifested, for instance, in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for which national targets have been set to be achieved, as indicated in Table 6.1.

In Malta, the process of updating the national curriculum policy, in the wake of new competitive challenges of the 21st century, was initiated in 2008 and

resulted in the publication of *The National Curriculum Framework for All*, henceforth referred to as NCF (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2012). The final document took into account the feedback obtained from curriculum experts in New Zealand and Learning and Teaching Scotland, whilst drawing on the experiences of similar frameworks in countries like Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore (MEDE, 2012). As a policy document, the NCF caters for the pre-school and compulsory education in Malta and Gozo, namely: the early¹, junior², middle³ and secondary⁴ years cycle, and is projected to cover the period between 2013 and 2026. Its implementation demands that all stakeholders in both state and non-state schools assume responsibility to achieve meaningful change.

In principle, the NCF aims at ensuring the provision of high quality education for all students, the reduction of early school leavers, and the increased enrolment of learners in further and higher education. It claims to be “a response to the changing demands of individuals and society, rapid changes in our education system driven by globalisation, ICT development, competition, shift of traditional values and new paradigms” (MEDE, 2012, p. iii). As the first curriculum framework to be adopted since Malta joined the EU, the NCF, whilst drawing upon previous national curricula and policy documentation, has embraced the objectives related to education and training, emanating from the proposals of the European Commission, as conveyed in key policy-related documents.

One of these documents, *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: A European Reference Framework* (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006), highlights, as one of its goals, the need for all EU citizens to be equipped with the necessary competences for “personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge society” (p. 13). For EU citizens,

¹ Kindergarten 1–2 (i.e., 3–5 years old) and Years 1–2 (i.e., 5–7 years old).

² Years 3–6 (i.e., 7–11 years old).

³ Years 7–8 (i.e., 11–13 years old).

⁴ Years 9–11 (i.e., 13–16 years old).

to be able to adapt flexibly in a rapidly changing world, the *European Reference Framework* has proposed the following (equally important) eight key competences: (1) Communication in the mother tongue; (2) Communication in foreign languages; (3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; (4) Digital competence; (5) Learning to learn; (6) Social and civic competences; (7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and (8) Cultural awareness and expression. These competences occupy a central role in the NCF. Moreover, the *European Reference Framework* has introduced a number of themes which can be applied to each of the eight key competences: critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision-taking, and constructive management of feelings.

Another important document which the NCF has drawn upon, *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ('ET 2020')* (Council of the European Union, 2009), is centred on four strategic objectives: (1) the adoption of a lifelong approach to learning in order to address economic and social change, coupled with the need for learner/teacher mobility; (2) the provision of high quality education and training; (3) the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and (4) the enhancement of creativity and innovation to stimulate enterprise development.

The NCF has also taken into consideration the priorities accentuated in *Europe 2020: A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth* (European Commission, 2010), relating to: (1) smart growth, in support of a knowledge/innovation-based economy; (2) sustainable growth, aimed at promoting a more competitive and resource efficient economy; and (3) inclusive growth, with a view to achieving a high-employment economy. These three driving forces have been identified to assist Europe overcome the financial and economic crisis, thereby creating new jobs and better lives. To fulfil such aim, the European Commission has proposed a number of EU targets, to be converted

into national targets, including one which relates to education, aimed at addressing the problem of early school leavers, as reflected in Table 6.1.

In seeking to develop those competences and practices that are conducive to lifelong learning, employability and active citizenship, the NCF advocates a learner-centred approach to learning and teaching. The arguments being made are that the implementation of LCE will enable students to become lifelong learners, active citizens and increase their employment opportunities. This concept of learner centricity, as one of the six general principles of the NCF, is envisioned to promote active and personalised learning, meaningful learner engagement, teacher-learner negotiation, as well as self-directed learning. At policy level, there is thus a commitment to move away from traditional teaching strategies since greater importance is attached to the process of learning and students' co-construction of knowledge, rather than merely its transmission. It is hoped that in such collaborative learning environment students will develop essential skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving.

The NCF also gives due importance to diverse learning pathways, including vocational subjects, whilst underlining the significance of learning areas and cross-curricular themes, as a substitute for stand-alone subjects. Eight learning areas have been identified for the junior, middle and secondary years' cycle: (1) Languages; (2) Mathematics; (3) Science and technology; (4) Health and physical education; (5) Religious and ethics education; (6) Education for democracy; (7) Humanities; and (8) Visual and performing arts. It is noted, in the NCF policy document, that by grouping various subjects into learning areas (e.g., social studies, environmental studies ... into the 'Education for democracy' learning area), students' learning will be more integrated and reinforced. Such learning areas are interwoven with six cross-curricular themes: (1) Literacy; (2) Digital literacy; (3) Learning to learn and co-operative learning; (4) Education for sustainable development; (5) Education for entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation; and (6) Education for diversity. The inclusion of cross-curricular

themes is meant to create links between the identified learning areas, prompting teachers to focus on common learning objectives and pedagogies. The NCF claims that the combination of learning areas and cross-curricular themes, as shown in Figure 1.1, is intended to avoid “fragmentation and compartmentalisation of knowledge”, thereby promoting an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning, whilst encouraging the “transfer of skills from one learning area to another” (MEDE, 2012, p. xiii).

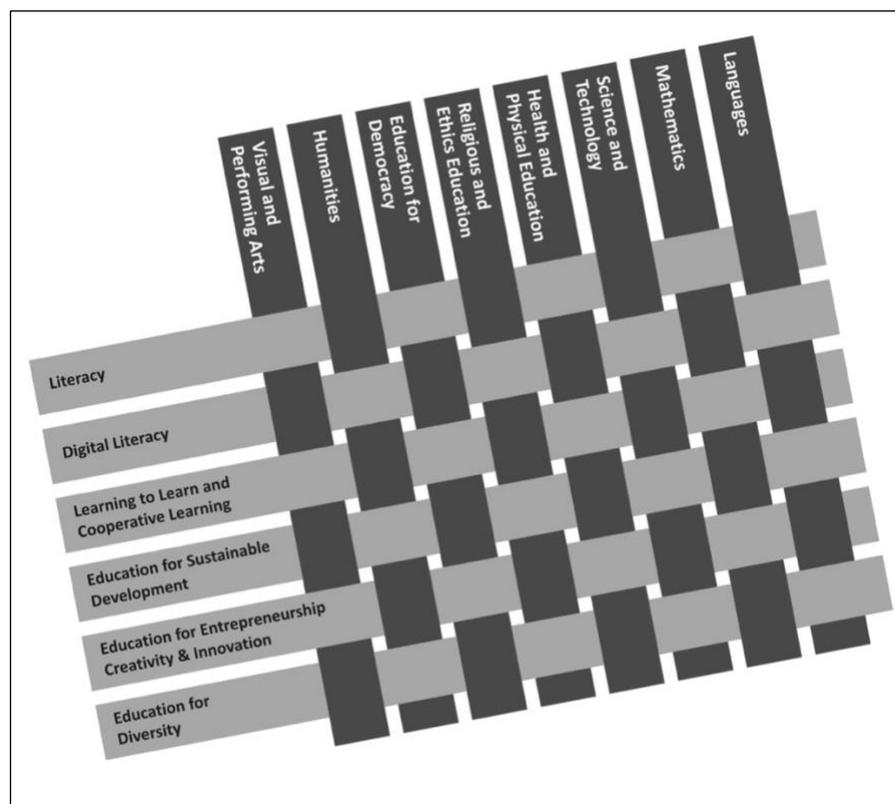


Figure 1.1 *The learning areas and the cross-curricular themes (MEDE, 2012, p. 39)*

These learning areas and cross-curricular themes, as well as the individual subjects that form part of the compulsory schooling system are supported by a framework that is based on learning outcomes (LOs), commonly referred to as the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [DQSE], 2015b). It originated between 2014 and 2015, as part of a €3.6 million project, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). The LOF has been developed with the intention of providing a

flexible, non-prescriptive approach to teaching and learning, in an effort to enhance curricular autonomy amongst colleges and schools. It is believed that a pedagogy based on “the learning outcomes approach allows educators to lean towards learner-centric teaching and learning strategies” (DQSE, 2015a, p. 31).

The LOs of the different subjects were developed in a series of policy documents entitled *Educators’ Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment: Using a Learning Outcomes Approach*. As the title implies, apart from the respective subject learning outcomes (SLOs), which explain what students are expected to learn, these LOF policy documents provide guidelines on the recommended pedagogy and assessment methodologies of each individual subject, with a separate document for each subject. Subsequently, the LOs statements contained in these LOF policy documents continued to be unpacked and made more specific, in preparation for the initial implementation of the LOF in schools, which started being phased in as from scholastic year 2018–2019.

As Table 1.1 demonstrates, the LOs presented in the LOF are classified according to ten levels of attainment. This table is provided for indicative purposes only since, although each attainment level appears to correspond to a particular age group, the LOF (DQSE, 2015b) emphasises that the attainment of levels is more reliant on the learner’s development rather than his/her biological age.

Level of Attainment	Year	Diverse Needs		School Cycle	Educational Institution		Age
1–3	Childcare Kinder 1 Kinder 2	Gifted and talented learners	Learners with Special Education Needs	Early Childhood Education	Childcare Centres		0–7
					Kindergarten School		
Primary School							
4	1, 2			Junior Years	Primary School		7, 8, 9
5	3, 4				Primary School		9, 10, 11
6	5, 6			Middle Years	Primary School		11, 12, 13
7	7, 8 (Form 1, 2)				Middle School	Secondary School	13, 14
8	9, 10 (Form 3, 4)			Secondary Years	Senior Secondary School		15, 16
9	11 (Form 5)				Senior Secondary School		Lifelong
10					Senior Secondary School		

Table 1.1 Levels of attainment (DQSE, 2015b)

To help students attain such levels, teachers are expected to make provision for appropriate classroom assessment processes through a mixture of formative and summative modes of assessment, whilst ensuring the continuous recording and reporting of information on learner progress (MEDE, 2012).

1.2 Research focus

The focus of my study is three-fold: (1) curriculum policy reform; (2) curriculum policy enactment; and (3) LCE. Hence, in my study I investigate the constitution of the Maltese national curriculum policy and the processes involved in policy enactment, that is to say, school leaders' and teachers' engagement with learner-centred policy texts. The study also provides insights into middle-school learners' perspectives of learner-centred practices, in response to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies. Since this study aims to analyse critically the notion of LCE in both policy and practice, the two frameworks under debate, the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and its supporting policy document, the LOF, serve as a backdrop against which I explore the way policy unfolds.

As far as the LOF is concerned, the study focuses on the English Learning Outcomes Framework, hereafter referred to as the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a). My decision to focus on the ELOF resulted not only from the fact that English was one of the first subjects to be piloted in middle schools, in line with the recommended learner-centred pedagogies and outcomes-oriented assessment, but also due to my past teaching experience in the subject. Furthermore, my analysis of the ELOF policy text is not concerned with the English LOs statements *per se*, which specify what learners need to accomplish, but rather with the accompanying pedagogical and assessment guidelines that teachers of English are encouraged to comply with, as contained in the same policy document. In addition, I chose to focus on middle schools since their curricula were the first to be addressed in compliance with the NCF policy imperatives. Indeed, between 2011 and 2012, the middle years' curricula were the first to be redesigned and

piloted in schools, in line with the underlying learner-centred and LOs approaches.

1.3 Rationale for the study

The first key research problem that this study seeks to investigate is related to conceptions of policy implementation which are generally viewed as a “‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’ process of making policy work” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6). Priestley et al. (2015) argue that “curriculum making has been dominated by simplistic metaphors, which underplay and misrepresent its complexity as social practice” (p. 6). This study seeks to depart from this simplistic view of implementation by exploring how learner-centred policies are being understood and worked out by school leaders and teachers, in different school settings in Malta. In this regard, Ball et al. (2012) present a useful approach to how policy work can be understood in schools, which necessitates a move from conceptions of *policy implementation* towards a theory of *policy enactment*. Moving beyond the conventional notions of policy implementation in which policy is often viewed in terms of a linear, homogeneous, centrally-determined and de-contextualised process (Hardy, 2015; Viczko & Riveros, 2015), studies concerning policy enactment reveal the importance of understanding the complexity of policy work (Braun et al., 2011; Sullivan & Morrison, 2014), whereby much of the attention is centred on what people do in the name of policy (Wedel et al., 2005). In this respect, enactments of policies are neither straightforward nor rational.

Since policy implementation studies are concerned with how well policies are realised in practice, they fail to recognise the complexity in policy research (Ball et al., 2012). Consequently, a different approach to evaluating how policy work is actually done in schools is by exploring the creative ways in which policies are ‘interpreted’ and ‘translated’ by diverse policy actors (Braun et al., 2010), in “a more context-responsive disposition” (Hardy, 2015, p. 76), in other words, how they are enacted. Although research relating to policy enactment seeks to

provide insights into the complexity, including the micro-politics of policy processes, there are relatively fewer empirical studies in this area when compared to policy implementation research (Ball et al., 2012; Branigan, 2021; Dorner et al., 2022; Maguire et al., 2013; Tan, 2017). This study, therefore, aims to address this gap in research within the local context by analysing the manner in which the learner-centred curriculum reform policies become interpreted, translated and reconstructed in different contexts of schooling (Ball et al., 2012).

In addition to the complex issues involved in processes of policy enactment, as will be demonstrated through school leaders' and teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies, this study also acknowledges that student voice has remained insufficiently investigated, in that there are still several aspects of schooling where students' viewpoints are not considered (Ahmadi, 2022; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Karlsen & Ohna, 2021; Moore, 2022; Warwick et al., 2019). It is therefore my intention to elicit students' views on issues concerning their own learning, thereby enabling their voices, as research participants, to be heard (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012), while at the same time obtaining further insights into teachers' pedagogy. In this way, this research seeks to narrow the gap that exists within the local context in relation to middle school students' experiences of learner-centred pedagogical practices.

1.4 Research aims and objectives

Braun and Clarke (2013) distinguish between research aims and research objectives. Whereas research aims define the purpose of the research, that is what the research is trying to achieve, the research objectives are more specific and measurable, and provide a basis for the formulation of research questions. The overall aim of this qualitative research study is to investigate the inclusion of LCE in national curricula and how the learner-centred curriculum policy reform is being enacted in three state middle schools in Malta, as the sample schools of my research. As noted in Section 1.3, in the Maltese context, not enough

attention has been paid to learner-centred policy enactment. In view of this, the study intends to critically evaluate the notion of LCE, as embedded in the NCF and ELOF policy texts. It also aims to delve into school leaders' and teachers' enactment of the learner-centred curriculum reform policies. Furthermore, the study seeks to expose students' personal experiences of learner-centred practices so as to gain a more informed understanding of the kind of learning that is actually taking place, both within and outside the classroom. These research objectives can be summarised as follows:

- (1) to analyse critically how the learner-centred policy discourse has been constructed and debated within the NCF and ELOF;
- (2) to critically explore how school leaders and teachers, within the sample schools, respond to the demands of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform; and
- (3) to examine critically students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

In keeping with these objectives, in the following section I state the research questions that will guide my study.

1.5 Research questions

Clough and Nutbrown (2012) argue that "the careful formulation of 'research questions' – which form the main stage of any research study – is key to the realisation of a successful research study, however large or small" (p. 29). Research questions are important since they guide both the design of the research project as well as its implementation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls (2014) maintain that research questions, as with research objectives, comprise particular features, in that they should be clear, focused, feasible and suitable for data collection purposes. They further highlight the need for research questions to appear useful and relevant to either policy or practice, or even the development of a social theory. They conclude by emphasising that research questions ought to be rooted in current research,

theory and need, whilst being capable of making an original contribution or addressing a gap.

In line with the above guiding principles, I have developed a central research question relating to the central concept of my study: *How are learner-centred practices envisioned and enacted within the context of the curriculum policy reform in Malta?* The purpose of this broad research question is to guide my entire research project. It aims to act as the unifying theme, followed by three subsidiary questions, the objective of which is to narrow the focus of the study (Creswell, 2009):

- (1) What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?
- (2) How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?
- (3) What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?

Research question 1 aims at reviewing key policy discourses of LCE, as embedded in the NCF and ELOF, using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. In so doing, it seeks to analyse critically the way LCE is discursively constructed within these two policy documents by focusing specifically on key policy extracts which are directly related to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, alongside neo-liberal hegemonies which have dominated policy discourse globally (Ward et al., 2016). Indeed, my primary objective in taking a CDA approach to policy analysis is to provide, as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) assert, "an account of how political ideologies are authorized through policies by locating them in the dominant popular imaginaries so that they are interpreted as emerging from a commonly agreed set of values" (p. 63).

My policy analysis incorporates multimodal elements, in that it rests not only on Ball's (1994) notion of policy, as both 'text' and 'discourse', but also on visual semiotics. Such visual means of communication help to establish what policy-makers project as 'truth' and 'reality', thus indicating the presence of hegemonic power (Hyatt, 2006). In speaking about the role of visual devices in texts, van

Leeuwen (2006) explains how CDA has moved beyond language to embody multimodal features. In this way, rather than focusing exclusively on text and discourse, CDA also draws attention to other modes of communication, including images. Within a multimodal frame of reference, therefore, CDA can be viewed as encompassing an enriched contextualisation, a clearer link between social theory and social practices and also an enhanced interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse. Nevertheless, my analysis of the visual, non-linguistic semiotic properties is somewhat restricted and subordinate to my linguistic analysis due to the limited number of visual images in the two policy documents under examination.

Research question 2 provides the basis for understanding schools' responses to the learner-centred curriculum policy reform. It draws on Ball et al.'s (2012) study on policy enactments in English secondary schools, in which the school-specific contextual factors play a pivotal role. In formulating this research question, I am particularly interested in how the NCF and ELOF policy texts are being understood, interpreted and translated into practice by school leaders and English language teachers, in the specific contexts in which they work. It is worth pointing out that, as policy sociology suggests, due to the complex nature of the policy process, "... policy is not simply received and implemented ... rather it is subject to interpretation and then 'recreated'" (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 22, emphasis in original). This process of enactment is significant since it sheds light on how policies produce and shape change (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Given that studies on policy enactment are often concerned with the policy roles of the school leader (Golding, 2017), this research question is intended to obtain data, primarily by means of semi-structured interviews, relating not only to institutional, but also to departmental as well as in-class and out-of-class enactments of learner-centred policy. Moreover, since policies are also represented and translated through a combination of different visual artefacts (Ball et al., 2012), research question 2 also acknowledges the importance of

visual data and thus gives due attention to the sample schools' websites, lesson observation checklists, classroom charts, diaries, as well as the school development plans (SDPs).

In formulating research question 3, I provide an opportunity for student voice to be heard, through their participation in focus group interviews, in order to highlight their perspectives of learner-centred practices, whilst at the same time obtaining further insights into teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies. Drawing on the literature of the research participants' voices, Clough and Nutbrown (2012) argue in favour of obtaining children's views on matters which affect them. They maintain that "children's voices are central to any study of their perspectives and studies must find ways to 'listen' to their voices" (p. 72, emphasis in original). Ignoring students' voices inevitably leads them to feel as if they are left out of the system.

1.6 Significance of the study

I consider my research to be significant for four key reasons that are directly linked to the current learner-centred curriculum policy reform in Malta. Firstly, the study is significant since it sheds light on the ways in which LCE and neo-liberal hegemonies are discursively constructed within the NCF and ELOF policy documents. The critical analysis of these policy texts explains how political ideologies become authorised, which leads to an in-depth understanding of the processes involved in policy legitimisation. Such analysis encourages education practitioners to adopt a critical stance and question the naturalisation of dominant policy discourses.

Secondly, the study is significant because it exposes the complex ways in which policy becomes enacted. It explores the ways in which policy texts are interpreted and translated into practice by education practitioners, in different school contexts, thereby highlighting the processes through which policy

becomes recontextualised. Although there exists some overlap with other studies on specific characteristics of LCE, such as motivation (e.g., Mifsud, 2011), enquiry-based learning (e.g., Grech, 2010), group work (e.g., Bonello & Camilleri, 2006), and problem-solving strategies (e.g., Abela & Borg, 1996; Demarco, 2010), learner-centred approaches, in general, as well as processes of education policy enactment, in particular, have not yet been sufficiently explored in the Maltese education system. For this reason, the study is of particular relevance to policy-makers and other scholars in the field of education.

The third reason why this study is significant is due to the importance it attaches to student voice, which is often undervalued in many educational contexts (Deasyanti, 2015; Osler, 2010; Partovi & Wyness, 2022; Smith, 2007). This research into students' perspectives of learner-centred practices permits a greater understanding of classroom pedagogical techniques, which can assist in shaping future policies. McCombs and Miller (2007) argue that when student voice is listened to, researchers can identify more effective ways for engaging students in the learning process.

Lastly, this study is significant due to the emphasis being placed on issues concerning power relations. Owing to current debates on international competitiveness, individual responsibility and accountability, performativity and measurable outcomes, the investigation of relations of power is critical since it serves to narrow the gap that exists within the local context by illuminating the ways in which individuals are constituted as subjects. The way power is exercised by policy-makers, school leaders, teachers and students provides deeper insights into how policies are formulated, enacted and, in some instances, resisted (Ball et al., 2012; Bradbury et al., 2023).

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into nine chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Maltese education system, including its key features and information related to teaching, learning and assessment. Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual framework that guides this study, which draws on the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity. In Chapter 4, I review critically the scholarly literature pertaining to my research questions, which has been organised into three main themes: (1) curriculum policy reform; (2) curriculum policy implementation and enactment; and (3) LCE. Chapter 5 provides a detailed overview of the research design and the methodological approaches used for data collection and analysis, including CDA, visual semiotics, individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. The strengths and limitations of these approaches are also outlined.

Next, in Chapter 6, I conduct a critical analysis of learner-centred policy discourses, employing the CDA methodological approach. In this chapter, I also explore the policy messages conveyed through visual modes of communication. In Chapter 7, I present and discuss the research findings, as resulting from the individual interviews with school leaders and teachers, relating to learner-centred policy enactment within the three sample schools. Then, in Chapter 8, I analyse and discuss students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, as emanating from the focus group interview data. In the concluding chapter, I review my research questions, followed by recommendations for policy and practice. Next, I justify my work's original contribution to knowledge, whilst reflecting on the limitations of this study and making proposals for future research. Finally, I reflect on my research journey.

2

The Education System in Malta

2.0 Introduction

This chapter builds upon the information contained in Section 1.1 regarding the background to the study. It aims at providing additional information about the research context, which is further elaborated upon in Section 6.1. I begin by providing some background information on Malta, followed by an overview of the key features of the local education system. I conclude by outlining the pedagogical approaches and assessment strategies advocated by the NCF and LOF.

2.1 Background information

As a micro-state archipelago, Malta is geographically situated in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea. It is approximately 80 kilometres south of Sicily, 333 kilometres north of Libya and 284 kilometres east of Tunisia, and is spread over an area of 316 square kilometres. As of 2022, there were 542,051 inhabitants, of which 25% were foreigners, whilst the population density was 1,721 persons per square kilometre (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2022), amongst the highest in Europe and the rest of the world.

Malta gained its Independence in 1964, after a long history of colonisation. Ten years later, in 1974, Malta became a Republic and eventually, as previously mentioned, joined the EU in 2004. In Maltese society, the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church remains the prevailing religion, although less dominant than in the past. Malta's economic growth is largely dependent on its workforce due to

the country's dearth of natural resources (European Agency, 2014). Indeed, as envisaged in the Constitution, Malta is described as "a democratic republic founded on work ..." (Constitution of Malta, 1964). The importance attached to the human resource is reflected in the Government's spending on education, as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP), which is consistently higher than the EU average. In 2021, for instance, the rate was 5.6% compared to the EU average of 5.0% (World Bank, 2023).

2.2 Key features of the education system

In the Maltese context, education is provided by the State, Church and Independent Private schools. As of 2017 (NSO, 2018), State education catered for 56.8% of the student population; the Secretariat for Catholic Education (the Church school sector) catered for 27.5%; whilst the student population of Independent Private schools stood at 15.7%. In state schools, education provision from early childhood to tertiary level is free of charge, except in the case of non-EU nationals. Church schools are subsidised by the state and therefore do not charge tuition fees, although annual voluntary donations from parents are encouraged. Independent Private schools charge a tuition fee, but parents whose children attend these schools are entitled to a tax rebate (Eurydice, 2023a).

In 2005, the State College system came into force, whereby primary and secondary schools were clustered into different network organisations, each led by a Head of College Network (HCN) and the Council of Heads of Schools. As I explain further in Section 6.1.1, the creation of school networks was aimed at introducing a degree of decentralisation to schools. Currently, there are ten College network organisations in Malta which cater for compulsory education. Primary school students are admitted to state middle schools within the same College of which they form part. Colleges are designed to accommodate students from within a centrally-defined geographical area. The main objective is to ease

accessibility since these geographical areas generally comprise a number of neighbouring towns and villages (Eurydice, 2023b).

The HCN, as the Chief Executive Officer of the College, is expected to fulfil, amongst other duties, the following functions and responsibilities: (1) support the schools within the College to grow together as effective providers of quality education; (2) empower schools towards school improvement, effectiveness and growth; (3) promote a holistic approach to the education of students from early childhood to the completion of secondary education; (4) monitor the effective implementation of the National Curriculum by means of innovative methodologies and approaches, including the extensive adoption of information and communication technologies as pedagogical tools; (5) co-ordinate research, including action research across schools in the College and across Colleges; and (6) develop a common policy and approach to the development of the schools into lifelong learning centres (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment [MEYE], 2005, pp. 73–74).

Education in Malta is compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen. The first six years cover primary schooling, followed by an additional two years in middle schools and a further three years of secondary schooling. Students in Years 5 and 6 are streamed and at the end of primary schooling, students sit for the National End of Primary Benchmark Assessment, which is diagnostic in nature rather than selective. It serves to gauge the level of education attained in the core subjects of Maltese, English and Mathematics. It is obligatory for students attending state schools to sit for the End of Primary Benchmark Assessment, but it is optional for students in non-state schools. In state middle and secondary schools, students are grouped according to the foreign language chosen to be studied. However, in the case of Maltese, English and Mathematics lessons, students are grouped by academic ability in order to provide instruction that is appropriate for their level of ability. In the case of other subjects, students are grouped in mixed-ability classes (Eurydice, 2023b).

In 2014, co-educational middle schools within the state sector started being phased in, the objective of which was to create smaller school communities, resulting in a more personalised, caring environment and an improved student-teacher relationship (Eurydice, 2023a). At this level, parental involvement is encouraged so that students can be better supported. Whereas the majority of students in state schools attend mainstream education, a small percentage attend Resource Centres.⁵ In mainstream education, various education programmes are provided, such as the Individual Learning Programme (IEP) for students with special needs; the Alternative Learning Programme (ALP) for middle and secondary school students who require remedial support; the Linguistic Induction Programme in Maltese and English language, catering for foreign and third country nationals; as well as the Ethics Programme for primary, middle and secondary school students of different religious backgrounds (Eurydice, 2023a).

Classes in middle and secondary state schools have a maximum of 26 students, but class sizes will be smaller for low-performing students. For Personal, Social, and Career Development (PSCD) lessons, as well as for subjects which involve practical sessions, such as biology and physics, students are divided into groups of 16 or less. The Form Teachers, apart from their teaching duties, are also responsible for the pastoral care of students. Students with special educational needs are supported by Learning Support Educators (LSEs), in mainstream education (Eurydice, 2023b).

As shown in Table 6.1, at the end of compulsory schooling, a Secondary School Certificate & Profile (SSC&P), which includes a record of formal, non-formal, and informal education, as well as attendance, and personal qualities, is awarded to students. Depending on the level attained by students, a Level 1, 2 or 3 certificate will be issued, in line with the regulations set out by the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). A Level 3 certificate denotes the highest level attained. At this

⁵ Resource Centres cater for children with severe disabilities.

stage, students may proceed to sit for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) exams, passes in which are required for enrolment in upper- and post-secondary institutions (Eurydice, 2023a).

2.3 Teaching, learning and assessment

As discussed in detail in Section 1.1.1, teaching and learning are guided by the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and LOF (DQSE, 2015b). The key perspective advocated by these policy documents combines cognitive and social constructivist approaches for effective learning and teaching. A detailed critical analysis of key policy excerpts that are closely linked to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, as projected in the NCF and ELOF, can be found in Chapter 6. In emphasising learner centricity, the NCF and LOF give precedence to pedagogical approaches that promote autonomous learning. As noted in Section 1.1.1, the NCF curricular initiatives are in line with other EU policies and strategies, which are ultimately aimed at enabling individuals to become lifelong learners (Eurydice, 2023c).

In conformity with the LOF principles, greater importance is being given to formal continuous assessment of students and assessment for learning strategies, throughout compulsory schooling. Students in state middle and secondary schools are also assessed through coursework, carried out either in or outside the classroom. At the end of each scholastic year, students in state schools sit for their annual exams. Exam papers are prepared by the central education authority so as to ensure consistency and standards among schools. State school students are promoted from one year to another, based on a minimum level of performance in the respective subjects. Only in rare cases, and after consultation with parents/legal guardians, will students be asked to repeat a year, if it is in their best interest (Eurydice, 2023d).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided a brief snapshot of the education system in Malta. It aimed at contextualising further this research study, following the background information produced in Section 1.1. In the next chapter, I discuss the conceptual framework that guides this study by drawing on Foucault's theories, through which the mechanisms of power can be analysed and critiqued.

3

Conceptual Framework

3.0 Introduction

This chapter draws on Foucault's concepts of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity. This conceptual framework helps to develop a critical approach to data analysis. Not only does it help to make sense of the data in this study, but it also provides the means through which I can examine the mechanisms of power, as exercised through discourses, including the various techniques by which the subject is constituted.

I begin by focusing on Foucault's archaeological project and then move on to discuss his genealogical approach. Next, I elaborate on Foucault's procedures of exclusion, as a means of controlling what can and cannot be said. The chapter then moves on to investigate the concept of governmentality and disciplinary power. It also draws attention to neo-liberal forms of governmentality, as new technologies of government. I then briefly outline the limitations of the governmentality concept and conclude this chapter by explaining its relevance to my research study.

3.1 Foucault's concept of discourse

Foucault uses the term *discourse* to denote a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. I discuss this concept of discourse in detail in Section 4.1.1.3. Here, I focus on the two methods of discourse analysis introduced by Foucault, which he coined as *archaeology* and *genealogy*. A Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis dictates that texts are analysed not

only in relation to the specific language but also to discourse, in its entirety, as attached to texts. In the sections which follow, I discuss both approaches in order to highlight these two distinct phases of Foucault's work.

3.1.1 Archaeology

In Foucault's work, discourse is defined in various ways, as can be testified, for instance, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). At first, Foucault's notion of discourse was meant to signify utterances or statements. His concept was subsequently elaborated in order to embrace unwritten rules and structures. These unwritten rules and structures which Foucault (1972) described as *regulated practices* (p. 80), refer to the manner in which particular utterances and statements are produced for which no written rules or structures exist. In this regard, Mills (2003) provides a good example to illustrate that although there are no written rules on essay writing, nonetheless the majority of university students succeed in writing essays. Foucault was mostly interested in such rules and structures which he considered as comprising a discourse.

In his approach to discourse analysis, Foucault (1972) introduced the concept of *discursive formation* (p. 31) to refer to a group of statements (e.g., 'learner autonomy', 'metacognitive skills', 'self-assessment') which support a common theme (e.g., LCE). More importantly, Foucault (1972) underlined the rules of formation – the rules which govern or regulate discursive formations, rather than highlighting the textual features. These rules of discursive formation determine what can and cannot be said: "How is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another" (Foucault, 1972, p. 27).

The rules which determine the appearance of certain statements exert control over what gives meaning (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). These rules are not conceived by people but are infused in institutional systems and practices (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). Archaeological discourse analysis is therefore intended to

expose the anonymous rules by which discourse is constituted. It focuses attention on the *archive*, that is to say, the way discourses are organised as a body of statements (Olssen, 2014). According to Foucault (1972), “the archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (p. 129).

Archaeology, as “the systematic description of a discourse-object” (Foucault, 1972, p. 140), does not aim to interpret discursive formations or to search for alternative meanings beyond them. Rather, it seeks to analyse discourse in order to describe discursive formations. The archaeologist’s role is to describe the relations that exist between the statements which compose the discursive formation. Such statements, Foucault (1972) argues, must have a material existence, for instance by being articulated or written. Apart from rejecting the idea of the speaking subject, as the author of the text, the archaeological approach analyses statements from a historical perspective, as they appear to be in a particular historical epoch, without delving into any interpretation.

One major drawback of archaeological analysis, as Garrity (2010) points out, is precisely the scarcity of such interpretation whereby statements are taken at face value. She stresses that the choice of certain statements, in preference to others, necessitates some kind of interpretation which, I believe, is essential in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the discursive formation. Analysing discourse from an archaeological perspective thus demonstrates the incontestable nature of statements.

As Foucault (1972) argues, since discourse itself is characterised as a practice, archaeology strives to disclose the complexity of discursive practices. It aims to reveal that speaking implies doing something rather than being regarded as an expression of what one thinks. From a Foucauldian standpoint, discursive practices are not to be confused with the actual use of language. These practices of discourses, as Bacchi and Bonham (2014) affirm, pertain to practices of knowledge formation or knowledge production. They explain that discursive

practices are concerned with 'things said' as well as the rules relating to how things are said (i.e., the rules which govern a knowledge). In other words, the 'things said' refer to the possible statements produced 'within the true', that is that which is accepted as knowledge: "... there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms" (Foucault, 1972, p. 183).

3.1.2 Genealogy

Foucault (1977b) emphasised most his approach to genealogy. Genealogy is construed not as a replacement but as an extension of archaeological analysis. (Olssen et al., 2004). The change from archaeology to genealogy in Foucauldian discourse analysis represents a "change of emphasis" and not an "abrupt reversal" of his previous work (Olssen, 2014, p. 32). Mills (2003) describes the shift from archaeology to genealogy as a move from analysing impersonal and independent discourse to an analysis which is more concerned with the exercise of power.

Howarth (2002) highlights three characteristics which distinguish archaeological from genealogical approaches. Firstly, whilst archaeological analysis merely offers a description of discourses, genealogy focuses on the problems of modern societies by investigating how they have materialised in history. Genealogy aims at providing possible solutions to these problems by suggesting alternatives. Secondly, whereas in archaeology truth and meaning are directly related, genealogy holds that truth is interlinked with systems of power. Thirdly, while archaeology examines discourses simultaneously, as constituted by the independent rules of formation, genealogy seeks to produce a kind of history which explains the formation of knowledge and discourses that emerge from the interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic practices.

Foucault's genealogical analysis attempts to analyse discourse by giving greater consideration to practices, power relations and institutions. It emphasises the connection between power and knowledge. Power is perceived as the means through which culture normalises individuals. It is through power that individuals become "meaningful subjects and docile objects" (Olssen, 2014, p. 31). The association that Foucault makes between power and knowledge is understood in terms of the relationship between power relations and the construction of social scientific knowledges (Ball, 2013b). Sembou (2015) claims that even though power and knowledge are not identical, in Foucault's vision, his composite term *power-knowledge* underscores the implication of power (relations) in knowledge (or 'truth') and vice versa. Both power and knowledge are viewed as an abstract force which influences what will be known, rather than presupposing the development of one's own ideas and knowledge (Mills, 2003).

Genealogy, as Olssen (2014) reiterates, draws particular attention to the relationship between discursive and non-discursive practices. Non-discursive practices, as opposed to discursive practices, allude to those conditions which are not clearly connected with knowledge formations (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). These non-discursive practices are exemplified by Foucault (1972) as "institutions, political events, economic practices and processes" (p.162). Genealogical discourse analysis, however, reaffirms the materiality of both discursive and non-discursive practices (Olssen, 2014).

I consider the archaeological and genealogical approaches as being both appropriate to my research study. My archaeological approach to policy analysis seeks to unearth the rules of the formation of the learner-centred policy texts. These rules pertain to the formation of the 'best' teaching and learning practices, as advocated by the NCF and ELOF. Hence, whilst archaeology is concerned with how discourse is constructed, my genealogical approach focuses more on "its interrelations with power, its emergence and the systems of limits and exclusions

it imposes” (Gillies, 2013, p. 13). These systems of exclusions merit some further discussion.

3.1.3 Procedures of exclusion

Foucault (1981) explains how societies produce discourses which are “controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures ...” (p. 52). These procedures, rules, principles or systems of exclusion, as they have been termed by Foucault (1981), are intended to control what can be said. They operate within discursive practices which, in turn, situate the speaker in a way where it becomes almost impossible to think outside of them (Foucault, 1981). As a result, some statements are disseminated extensively whilst others are not given prominence due to power relations.

The first set of procedures concerns external exclusions, procedures which operate from the exterior, of which there are three. Firstly, *prohibition* alludes to the fact that there are limitations as to who can speak, what can be said and when it can be said. For instance, there are constraints when certain people speak about particular subjects, such as sexuality and politics which, as Foucault (1981) observes, carry a taboo. *The opposition between reason and madness* is the second form of external exclusion which denotes the division between what society considers the speech of the sane and that of the mad. It is only the discourse of those who are in authority which is judged as reasonable and trustworthy. The unauthorized discourse is totally disregarded. The third exclusionary system is *the opposition between true and false*, where ‘truth’ pertains to the discourse of those who are considered as ‘experts’. In this sense, as Mills (2003) explains, truths are supported by social practices and institutions, such as universities and government departments. These institutions, in turn, strive to exclude false statements and at the same time exert effort to circulate the statements which they perceive as true.

Besides these external exclusions, Foucault (1981) also speaks of internal procedures of exclusion. These include the *commentary*, the *author* and the *discipline*. Such internal procedures demonstrate how discourse itself is capable to exercise control over its own production. They work to exclude the discourses of those who are unauthorised to speak. The *commentary* can be considered as taking place when someone's text or statements are commented upon, owing to their richness. Those discourses which are believed to be more valuable than others are given due importance and held in high esteem. In Foucault's (1981) words, they "are said indefinitely, remain said, and are to be said again" (p 57). This contrasts with the discourse which is said in the normal, ordinary course of events, which fades away.

The *author* also plays a pivotal role in such internal procedures of exclusion. Foucault (1984) himself contends that writing is not an activity in which the author expresses his or her own thoughts. Since the author forms part of the same text structure, the critic's role is therefore "to analyse the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships" (p. 103). Drawing on the Foucauldian notion of discourse, Dunne et al. (2005) assert that the text is not produced by the author, neither does the text produce discourse. Rather, "discourse produces both the text and the subject position of the author" (p. 103). The idea generated from such an assertion is that texts are viewed as a free-standing work which, in turn, is shaped by discourse.

Whilst Barthes (1977) advocated the *death of the author* in order to give precedence to readers' multiple interpretations of the author's text, Foucault (1981, 1984) developed the notion of the *author-function* to refer to the author as a function of discourse. The concept of the author-function is to be understood as the manner by which texts are organised (Ball, 2013b). Hook (2001) describes such a concept as a discursive function pertaining to particular categories of discourse, all of which belong to the same author, and assert their

status in society. Within this concept, what matters is not the author *per se* but rather how his or her texts are produced, circulated, classified and consumed (Ball, 2013b). Basgier (2011) argues that the author-function serves to classify the author's texts in relation to one another while disconnecting them from other texts. In this respect, the classified texts are given due importance, in recognition of their privileged discourses.

Discipline is the third internal principle of exclusion on discourse. For Foucault (1981), this principle concerns the discursive limitation imposed on subject areas. If we take education as an example, a number of subjects may be approached by employing particular methods and theories. Other disciplines, such as sociology, might adopt different approaches and consequently they constrain what can actually be discussed in relation to the said subjects. Disciplines exercise a prescriptive role by rejecting that discourse (or knowledge) which does not fit in with the subject area from a particular discipline's perspective (Mills, 2003).

3.2 Governmentality

In the late seventies and thereafter, Foucault started to concentrate on the macro-processes of power, rather than focusing exclusively on its micro-processes, as he did before the 1970s. The macro-processes denote the power exercised by governments on populations, as opposed to the micro-dimensions which relate to disciplinary systems of power, as found in several modern institutions, such as prisons, hospitals and schools (Olssen et al., 2004; Simons & Masschelein, 2006). The association between macro- and micro-processes of power became the central focus of Foucault's analysis due to his interest in bio-power, better described as power over bodies, and governmentality (Olssen et al., 2004).

From a historical perspective, governmentality started as a process in Western European societies, as early as the sixteenth century (Fimyar, 2008b). It is

conceptualised as *the art of government*, an approach for thinking about the practices of governing which is primarily concerned with “who can govern, what governing is, what or who is governed” (Gordon, 1991, p. 3). This way of thinking was seen as a departure from the notion of the prince or ruler of the state, as displayed for instance in Machiavelli’s (2003) writings, which were concerned with how to retain sovereignty.

Initially, Foucault (1991) developed the term governmentality to signify the manner by which populations were administered within the concept of the state, in the history of modern Europe. This view of governmentality was eventually redefined in order to embrace the strategies which were predestined to govern not simply the behaviour of populations but also the conduct of individuals, from all aspects and not limited to the administrative and political levels (O’Farrell, 2005). In this respect, the government is administered at every level of society, incorporating also the idea of self-governing individuals, rather than being something exclusive to the state (O’Malley, 1998/9).

Governmentality can be simply defined as *the conduct of conduct*, implying a kind of activity whose aim is to mould and direct the conduct of individuals (Gordon, 1991). As Zepke et al. (2009) maintain, the shaping of the conduct of people materialises through human encounters rather than being dependent on single powerful entities, including governments and educational institutions. They explain how governmentality is interested in the interplay of technologies, techniques and processes which establish the manner by which things get done. These technologies, techniques and processes supply physical spaces and other arrangements in order to become ingrained and perceived as normal. More importantly, they turn out to be the acknowledged means for educating people.

As a concept, the term governmentality combines *mentalities of government* and *rationalities of government* (Kendall & Wickham, 2004). It embodies the rationalities which drive governmental practices. Foucault (1991) explains how centralised systems of state power underwent a major shift over the course of

history. In this sense, the repressive power exercised by the sovereign state concerning the control of territory and population was developed and reinstalled into disciplinary organisations, comprising schools, universities, hospitals and prisons, amongst others. Within such organisations, people's conduct became regulated through the newly established rationalities and 'professional' practices (Webb, 2011).

Nowadays, the changes occurring in governmental rationalities and governing practices are mirrored in several educational policy reforms, in different countries, as illustrated in a number of studies. Fimyar (2008b), for instance, in her study on educational policy-making in post-communist Ukraine, employs the notion of *emerging governmentality* or *governmentality-in-the-making* to portray the evolving political rationalities of educational reforms in post-communist Ukraine, as opposed to the practices of the previous government. Earlier on, in 2003, Tikly provided an account of educational policies in South Africa, in the post-apartheid period, to elucidate the developing policy discourses, as compared to governmental practices during the apartheid era. He argued that governmentality-in-the-making is understood in terms of "complex and sometimes contradictory elements that provide both continuity and discontinuity on what went before" (p. 166).

In the Maltese policy-making context, the policy discourses revolving around educational reforms, following Malta's entry into the EU in 2004, implanted a governmental rationality in conformity with EU policies and other global education policy trends. The NCF policy document (MEDE, 2012), in particular, highlights a number of curricular strategies which are, in a way, a continuity of previous policy discourses, but within a broader global perspective. Such strategies are predominantly shaped by global discourses of learner-centredness, lifelong learning and learning outcomes approaches.

3.2.1 Disciplinary power

The new disciplinary technologies which started to emerge during the eighteenth century, led to the growth of the *disciplinary society*. These disciplinary forms of power are exemplified in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977a) as well as in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978) where power is conceived as a microphysics since it seeks to explore the effect of power on the body and the actions of individuals (Olssen et al., 2004). Disciplinary power does not manifest itself in conspicuous forms of control. In contrast, the control is exercised in a hidden manner, as part of the individuals' aspirations to regulate and improve their selves, thus aiming at producing docile bodies (Watson, 2010). Unlike sovereign power which focused on detention, prohibition and punishment, disciplinary power was perceived as positive since it sought to make the best use of individuals' capacity and productivity (Martin et al., 2013). In this regard, power can also be exercised in a productive mode rather than being perceived merely as oppressive:

Power is not merely prohibitive, it is productive, a lot of the time it 'makes us up' [emphasis in original] rather than grinds us down. Power is sometimes an opportunity to be successful, fulfilled or loved. It is not always harmful. We are active within relations of power. (Ball, 2013b, p. 30)

Foucault (1977a) describes the disciplines as "techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities" (p. 218). These techniques developed into innovative manifestations of power-knowledge which are a distinguishing feature of the human sciences (Olssen et al., 2004). Disciplinary practices revolve around surveillance which Foucault (1977a) explains by referring to Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, a disciplinary institutional building of the eighteenth century. The Panopticon's architectural design was intended to provide a complete observation of the inmates. The knowledge that they were being watched, even though they did not see the observer, led them to control their own behaviour.

Foucault's (1977a) notion of modern disciplinary society is reliant upon three techniques of control. The *hierarchical observation*, as the first tool of control, applies the principle of the Panopticon in that it establishes a system of inspection by supervising the process of production (e.g., the actions of learners). The second instrument of control which Foucault labels as *normalising judgement*, works by judging the performance of individuals according to the established norms and standards, with the aim of correcting deviant behaviour. Foucault (1977a) explains how the first and second techniques of control culminate in the third mechanism of discipline, *the examination*. The examination serves as an apparatus through which individual's knowledge is judged and compared with others. It establishes the 'truth' about the subject whilst controlling his/her behaviour by emphasising the need to become normalised.

In the wake of the Maltese curriculum policy reform, a disciplinary strategy, in the Foucauldian sense, is being employed since learners' performance is judged in terms of processes of normalisation. Students are disciplined through the imposition of specific norms, including the PISA global testing and other international policy imperatives related to the employability of LCE. In this respect, the Foucauldian view of the prison results in the school being conceived as "an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind ..." (Foucault, 1977a, p. 235).

Foucault has introduced the concept of bio-power to highlight the "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 140). In exercising bio-power, governments strive to produce subjects who are capable of regulating themselves in order to meet certain expectations. More specifically, Foucault's concept of bio-power is understood in terms of discipline and control by emphasising both disciplinary power and governmentality. Whilst disciplinary power is in itself connected with

discipline, in that it controls the human body via state discipline; governmentality is tied to controls of regulation, implying a bio-politics for the administration of the entire population (Govender & Sookrajh, 2014).

3.2.2 (Neo-)liberal governmentality

Whereas disciplinary power depended on surveillance and normalisation, other new technologies of government started to appear simultaneously during the eighteenth century in certain European societies. These came to be known as *liberal governmentality* or which Pongratz (2006) calls “the governmental form of modern states” (p. 474). Liberalism projected itself as an opposition to governing in compliance with the state’s reasoning (Simons & Masschelein, 2006). Under liberalism, the new governmental rationality was essentially concerned with the security of the population’s economic and social development. The state’s prosperity is reliant upon such security which is achieved through a combination of apparatuses, including the police, the army and intelligence services, as well as education, welfare and health (Fimyar, 2008a; Tikly, 2003). Simons and Masschelein (2006) remark that modern liberal governmentality corresponds to a particular individual freedom which brings about a form of self-government through which individuals understand themselves. Nonetheless, liberalism has been criticised for providing a prescription for rule rather than allowing individual freedom to be exercised as a natural condition (Olssen et al., 2004).

The move from liberal to neo-liberal governmentality signifies the emergence of new governmental rationalities, technologies and self-government which took place after the Second World War (Simons & Masschelein, 2006). Neo-liberalism adopts a particular rationality of individualised responsibility (Joseph, 2010). Within the context of neo-liberal governmentality, people are encouraged to be morally responsible for their own welfare, to take rational decisions as a means to distance themselves from social problems like unemployment and to develop

into entrepreneurial citizens. Whilst rights and obligations of people are significant, the economic aspect, through the notion of *laissez-faire* or limited government interference, remains crucial. Neo-liberalism is therefore conceived as “governing individuals from a distance” (Joseph, 2010, p. 228).

Some researchers have challenged the claims put forward by neo-liberalism. Apple’s (2001) criticism is targeted towards the neo-liberal rationalities which he claims led to increased inequalities in education. Ball (1994) is also critical of the neo-liberal trend in education policies by emphasising the need to focus on and examine the presence of dominant discourses, as *regimes of truth* which affect our possibilities for thinking otherwise and consequently restrict our responses to change (pp. 23–24). I share Dean’s (1999) belief that the neo-liberal view of the ‘ideal’ learner, as a responsible and accountable citizen, requires support before being able to practise self-governance: “In order to act freely, the subject must first be shaped, guided and moulded into one capable of responsibly exercising that freedom” (p. 165).

The freedom possessed by human beings allows them to behave in some way or another (Gordon, 1991). Foucault (1978) asserts that “where there is power there is resistance” (pp. 95–96). This premise is also buttressed by Zepke et al. (2009) who observe that freedom generates certain resistance to what is deemed to be the norm. Resistance, in turn, brings about certain costs which are incurred by individuals and society at large due to the potential reconstruction of the power-related techniques, technologies and processes. A recurring process of further resistance influences both the educational institution as well as the governable subjects.

Olssen et al. (2004) argue that Foucault’s departure from Marxist and liberal theories of power was intended to bring about a different conception of power, based on three distinctive features. Firstly, Foucault conceptualized power as something which can be exerted rather than owned, for instance, by individuals and the state. Secondly, Foucault believed that power is not under the control of

a central authority, as a top-down exercise. Power is instead distributed and operates from the bottom-up. Finally, power was regarded by Foucault as positive and empowering, though at the same time as negative and restraining, emancipating yet coercive.

3.2.3 Limitations of governmentality

Kerr (1999) has highlighted the pitfalls inherent in Foucault's notion of governmentality. His criticism is directed towards the idea that governmentality disregards individual's personal experiences and preferences. He criticises the Foucauldian concept for its excessive emphasis on institutionalised power through which the conduct of people is shaped. According to Kerr (1999), Foucault's theory of government is also problematic since it implies that people cannot avoid systems of power and governmentality. In addition, Kerr's (1999) criticism is attributed to the governmentality's failure to provide an explanation relating to the possible changes in the form and practices of government.

Kendall and Wickham (2006) observe that the use of the governmentality approach allows the researcher to follow a circular line of reasoning. In this sense, governmentality as a concept is assumed *a priori* and the collection of empirical data serves merely to support the theory. I believe that Kendall and Wickham's (2006) observation is too simplistic since the data collected regarding power relations may provide new insights which will not necessarily be supported by theory. Another limitation is addressed by Garland (1999) who criticises Foucault's use of terminologies in governmentality studies which, in his view, may lead to certain misconceptions. This applies mostly to the way Foucault theorises issues concerning liberalism and the state.

On a different note, Mills (2003) argues that the agency of those who resist repressive power might be at risk since Foucault has positioned resistance within power itself. Rose et al. (2006) contend that governmentality research has failed

to develop “a coherent methodology” (p. 94), with many scholars accentuating different aspects and displaying different modes of criticism. Among the many scenarios, the governmentality approach is sometimes used to produce a descriptive account. At other times, its application is targeted towards political criticism.

3.3 Conclusion

As Kendall and Wickham (2004) argue, instead of providing tools for conducting qualitative research, governmentality focuses on the *how* questions for the scope of analysis. It accentuates the *how* of governing – how we govern, how we are governed, and takes into account the relation between the government of ourselves, of others, and of the state (Dean, 1999, p. 2). Governmentality offers the possibility to perceive education as part of a process through which rationalities of government change. It might also be a valuable approach in conducting a genealogical analysis of policy discourses, as governmental rationalities (Tikly, 2003). In this respect, my main concern with policy analysis, as articulated in my first research question, is not to explore the similarities between the rationalities expressed in policy texts and practices but, as Foucault suggests, to establish the sort of rationality being adopted by policy (Lemke, 2002).

A closer look at the way power is exercised within different relationships, especially through the affiliation between institutions, teachers and students, is a key feature of my research study. Following Foucault’s (1991) advice that regimes of power should be understood in terms of a triangle constituted of “sovereignty-discipline-government” (p. 102), the link between different models and rationalities of power can be explored and made visible. I concur with Joseph’s (2012) assertion that since “governmentality is defined by its historical context ... contemporary forms of governmentality have to be seen in relation to the emergence of neo-liberalism and the response to the unravelling of the post-

war institutional settlement” (p. 74). This explains the neo-liberal drive towards the formation of ‘free’ subjects.

Within the context of this study, governmentality is particularly relevant insofar as it aids to accomplish a thorough examination of how the behaviour of subjects, (i.e., school leaders, teachers and students) at the micro-level of practice, is shaped through the macro-level policy discourses contained within the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a). As a conceptual tool, therefore, Foucault’s notion of governmentality underlines my research objective, as articulated in the research questions, of exploring the impact of governmental rationalities on everyday practices, as experienced by school leaders, teachers and students, in specific contexts of schooling.

4

A Review of the Literature

4.0 Introduction

The literature review, as Ridley (2012) suggests, may encompass several purposes, including: (1) the inclusion of a historical background for research; (2) an exposure to the contemporary context; (3) an interpretation of theories and concepts; (4) definitions and discussion of terminology used in research; (5) the identification of a gap in previous research in order to justify [one's] own research; and (6) an emphasis on the significance of a problem for research (p. 24). Ridley (2012) stresses that the essential objective of the literature review is to reveal the influences of the relevant literature available in a particular field of study on the research to be carried out: "The aim is to use the literature selectively and creatively to provide a stimulus for [one's] own work" (p. 23). In so doing, the reader partakes in a written dialogue with researchers in a related area, an activity which assists the reader to grasp the literature currently available and to respond to its body of knowledge.

Thus, this chapter comprises a critical analysis of research studies which are of direct relevance to my central research question: *How are learner-centred practices envisioned and enacted within the context of the curriculum policy reform in Malta?* and, more specifically, to my subsidiary research questions:

- (1) What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?
- (2) How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?
- (3) What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?

The literature selected to address my research questions is organised into three main themes, which constitute the focus of my study, namely: (1) curriculum policy reform; (2) curriculum policy implementation and enactment; and (3) LCE. While the first theme provides a basis for conceptualising education policy, theme two is linked to research question two, and theme three is embedded in all three research questions. Indeed, the first part of this chapter, which deals with the content of the first theme, provides an overview of public policy conceptions, including rational models of policy-making, whilst underlining policy as process, policy as text, policy as discourse and policy as value-laden.

The second part of this chapter concerns issues of policy implementation and enactment. First, I produce a synopsis of the key developments in the history of policy implementation. Afterwards, I explore the different approaches to curriculum implementation by reflecting on three key perspectives: the fidelity perspective, the mutual adaptation perspective, and the enactment perspective. The section then moves on to investigate the processes involved in the enactment of policies by focusing, in particular, on the contextual and the people dimensions of policy enactment. I conclude this section by explaining the role of policy enactment in my research study.

The third part of this chapter focuses on LCE. It begins by providing a historical background to the notion of LCE, highlighting its philosophical concepts and theoretical traditions, in which a distinction is made between the views of child-centred and learner-centred approaches. A brief description of learner-centred psychological concepts follows. Next, I focus on the contemporary debates of LCE by drawing primarily on three justificatory claims for LCE: cognition, emancipation and preparation. I then provide an overview of the notion of learner autonomy, followed by a discussion on outcomes-based education. Students' perspectives of learner-centred practices are also explored. I conclude by outlining the main critiques of LCE.

Part 1

4.1 Curriculum policy reform

In the context of the current curriculum policy reform in Malta, I focus firstly on policy issues, by drawing on research relating to public policy. Since curriculum policy influences directly what is taught in schools, it is conceived as public policy (Levin, 2008). It is within this public policy domain that curriculum policy or, more specifically, education policy, is better understood. Taylor et al. (1997) argue that “... public policies in education exist in order to ensure that education occurs in the public interest” (p. 2). They take place in particular contexts and, in Haines’ (2013) words, they mirror the cultural beliefs and moral commitments of the society from which they originated.

4.1.1 Conceptualising education policy

Policy is very difficult to define and an overview of key definitions may serve to highlight the most pertinent issues in this area. Thomas Dye (1992), for instance, in his classic book *Understanding Public Policy* (now in its fifteenth edition), defines policy as “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (p. 2). Dye’s (1992) definition, albeit simplistic, reveals the author’s emphasis on public policy which is primarily a government’s concern.

As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) observe, such definition implies that whenever governments choose *not* to legislate or remain silent on a particular issue, whether intentional or not, this in itself constitutes, indirectly, an expression of policy. A similar stance is taken by Birkland (2011) when he declares that “the lack of a definite statement of policy may be evidence of an implicit policy” (p. 9). Lingard and Ozga (2007) speak of the politics of non-decision making to refer to those instances when governments refrain from taking decisions in a particular area.

Dye's definition also seems inadequate because it ignores the contribution of the private sector in public policy-making. Nowadays, the distinction between the public and the private sector is less clear-cut since the participation of private organisations in the public/policy sector is intensifying (Ball, 2013a; Mahony et al., 2004). Mahony et al., for instance, refer to the participation of the private sector in government policies as "the privatisation of policy" (p. 277).

Other researchers, as Browne (1997) notes, propose a pragmatic descriptive approach in defining policy, emphasising *what policy is* rather than *what it should be* (pp. 268–269). Guba (1984), for example, offers eight definitions of policy which are clustered into three categories: (1) *policy-in-intention*, comprising declarations about policy; (2) *policy-in-implementation*, relating to behaviours or activities that take place during the implementation process; and (3) *policy-in-experience*, implying what the customers (i.e., the people for whom policy has been designed) actually experience as a result of the intended policy (pp. 64–65).

Hogwood and Gunn (1984), propose several definitions to emphasise the extensive use of policy. They define policy as a label for a field of activity (e.g., social policy); as an expression of general purpose or desired state of affairs; as specific proposals (e.g., the EU's Copyright Directive); as decisions of government; as formal authorisation; as a programme; as output (i.e., what the policy actually delivers); as outcome (i.e., what is actually achieved through policy); as theory or model; and as a process (pp. 13–19).

Many of these descriptive meanings bear a resemblance to the meaning of policy given by Wedel et al. (2005). They suggest that policy can be interpreted in terms of different social functions. As such, it can be described as a field of activity (e.g., financial policy); a specific proposal (e.g., the EU's Data Protection Directive); a part of government legislation; a general programme or desired conditions; and the actual governments' achievements (p. 35). However, from an anthropological standpoint, as Wedel et al. (2005) point out, it is of crucial importance to grasp how policy functions in the configuration of society rather

than focusing on how policy is defined: “The key question is not *What is policy?* but rather *What do people do in the name of policy?*” (p. 35), implying that policy is always subject to human meaning-making.

Policies can also be understood in terms of a process. In the next section, such policy processes are examined in the light of the policy cycle perspective. Theories of policy processes are particularly relevant to my research study since they shed light on the developmental stages or contexts of policy.

4.1.1.1 Policy as process

Traditionally, the approach adopted in policy studies was reliant on rational models, as can be testified by Harman (1984). Harman views policy as:

... the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed or to be followed in dealing with a recognised problem or matter of concern, and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals. Policy also can be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict, and directed towards a particular objective. (p. 13)

Harman’s (1984) definition of policy does not take into account the politics of policy. On the contrary, it assumes that policies are created and implemented in a simplistic, chronological manner, without acknowledging the fact that opposing values and disagreements among people (i.e., government officials and private citizens) are likely to take place during the course of policy formulation and implementation (Taylor et al., 1997). Thus, Harman’s (1984) conception of policy, as demonstrated above, consists of a series of separate and linear steps which exclude the complexities involved in policy processes. Such definition constitutes a positivist view since it implies that policy problems can be solved in a rational, scientific manner.

Rational models usually follow a series of well-defined steps, consisting of a fixed sequence. These include: (1) defining the problem; (2) clarifying the values, goals

and objectives; (3) identifying the options to reach out the goals and objectives, in conformity with values; (4) performing a cost-benefit analysis of options; (5) choosing a course of action; (6) developing a plan for implementation; (7) evaluating the implemented policy; and (8) modifying the programme on the basis of the evaluation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, pp. 9–10). In practice, however, this systematic sequence seldom occurs.

Contrary to the positivist beliefs, Wedel and Feldman (2005) emphasise the unpredictable nature of policy processes, by stating that: “policy processes often encounter unforeseen variables, which are frequently combined in unforeseen ways and with unforeseen consequences” (p. 2). I concur with this post-positivist line of reasoning which reiterates that policy processes are highly complicated and, as a result, cannot be deemed as a sequential development. This is further corroborated by McLaughlin (2006) who points out that policy processes do not follow a rigid and linear pattern, owing to various intricate circumstances. This occurs especially when new parties engage in the policy process or when the requirements or resources change, or even when divergent views switch to other directions.

From a rational perspective, the emphasis is placed on policy content, where the ultimate purpose is measured in terms of finding a solution to a real problem or a cluster of problems. At this juncture, the ‘problem’ is understood as controllable and can be dealt with through a synchronized intervention (Malen & Knapp, 1997). Thus, rational perspectives presuppose that as long as policy actors operate in ideal conditions, the desired results of the intended policy can be achieved (Taylor et al., 1997). O’Connor and Netting (2011) argue that “the rational approach works well for policies that are theory driven, and where the problem is well defined and well accepted as defined” (p. 32).

Wedel et al. (2005) question the taken-for-granted assumptions of policy as both neutral and rational, stating further that this positivist, legal-rational approach to policy formulation and implementation has brought about serious criticism.

This is because the positivist paradigm regards policy as something which is straightforward and does not acknowledge its socio-cultural aspect. Although policy may be masked in neutral language and even purports a neutral scientific reasoning, oblivious to politics, it remains, in essence, as Scribner et al. (1994) assert, a 'political game'.

A serious weakness with the rational approaches is that they portray policy as prescriptive in terms of the successive stages that policy actors ought to follow and therefore do not manifest a faithful image of reality. Opposing this prescriptive and rational approach is the claim made by policy sociologists that policy evolves through continuous and ever changing processes. Indeed, policy sociology's distinguishing feature is its emphasis on policy as process, where education policy is situated in a context of political conflicts and divergent ideas (Byrne & Ozga, 2008). When viewed in such a context, "policy [...] is not taken to be an object, a product or an outcome, but rather a process, something on-going, interactional and unstable" (Ball, 2013a, p. 8).

Policy as process may well be understood in relationship to the policy cycle perspective. The concept of a *continuous policy cycle*, as introduced by Bowe et al. (1992), conceptualises policy in terms of a number of sophisticated processes. In principle, the policy cycle should not be conceived as a series of distinct, chronological stages, but rather as an often disputed, disorderly and non-linear process (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The policy cycle comprises three interconnected policy contexts, as demonstrated in Figure 4.1, each of which involves conflicting ideas. It is through these contexts that policy recontextualisation takes place at the school level.

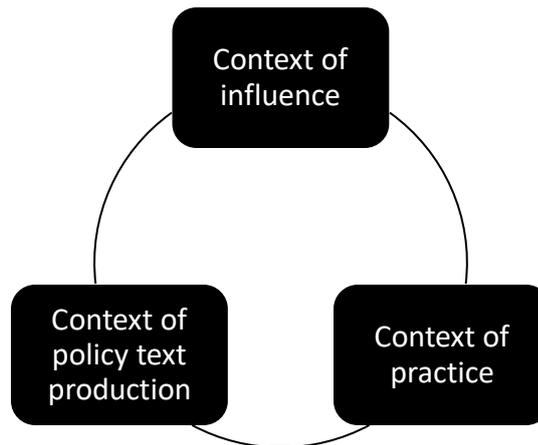


Figure 4.1 *Contexts of policy-making*
(Bowe et al., 1992, p. 20)

The first context, the *context of influence*, denotes the circumstances in which policy is originated, and in which policy discourse is constructed as a result of influential stakeholders (e.g., select committees, professional organisations, civil servants, and the like). Secondly, the *context of policy text production* signifies the manner in which policy is represented through texts. The third context, the *context of practice*, explains how policy is subject to interpretation and recreation. Within this context, policy is understood in different ways by different people, which explains why it is usually contested. Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) claim that policy cannot be forced upon citizens but it is often met with resistance and in some cases amended as a consequence.

Two further contexts were added by Ball in 1994 in order to give the policy cycle a broader dimension. The first context added, the *context of outcomes*, is concerned with the effects of policy on the prevailing social inequalities. The second context added, the *context of political strategy*, constitutes the identification of different strategies, aimed at addressing the inequalities.

There are a number of limitations associated with the notion of a policy cycle. To start with, I agree with Hatcher and Troyna (1994) who criticise the policy cycle for underestimating the centralised state power since policy outcomes are

typically controlled by the state. Bowe et al.'s (1992) policy cycle approach has also been criticised for not taking into account the processes of globalisation (Lingard, 1996) and for giving excessive importance to the power exercised by individuals or agencies in transforming (recontextualising) state education policy at school level (Hill, 2001). As seen from the latter critical perspective, the policy cycle approach gave centre stage to the micro-political context within schools. The policy cycle concept (Bowe et al., 1992) can be better understood in view of Ball's (1994) dual conceptualisation of policy, as both *text* and *discourse*.

4.1.1.2 Policy as text

Policy texts, as policies themselves, are construed as representations, consisting of varying modes of human communication. For instance, official policy statements, commentaries, political speeches, official performances and videos are all treated as representations of policy. This collection of related texts/policies is commonly referred to as a *policy ensemble* (Bowe et al., 1992). Lingard and Ozga (2007) regard policy texts as any "vehicle or medium for carrying and transmitting a policy message" (p. 2).

Policy texts are crafted in a way so as to conceal the conflicts surrounding educational change in the making of policy (Taylor et al., 1997). Typically, policies attempt to portray their imagined future for the so-called public interest. In truth, the interests they actually represent are usually hidden (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Codd (1988) points out that: "Fundamentally, policy is about the exercise of political power and the language that is used to legitimate that process" (p. 235). He maintains that policy documents constitute the state's official discourse:

Policies produced by and for the state are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of a universal public interest. In this way, policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. (p. 237)

Indeed, at the initial or *encoding* stage of policy-making, policy texts emerge via a complicated process of contestations, compromises and official interpretations which suggest that usually policy texts are heteroglossic in nature, implying the coexistence of multiple voices within a single text to bring about 'apparent' consensus (Lingard & Ozga, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Equally intricate is the *decoding* stage, that is the manner in which policy actors make sense of policy texts, according to their interpretations, based on their history, resources, expertise and contextual circumstances. Although policy authors try to retain power over the meanings of their texts, such texts are nonetheless subject to varied interpretations (Ball, 1993, 1994).

Ball (1993, 1994) reaffirms that within the state, the policy-making process is portrayed in terms of spontaneous events, bargaining and instances of fortunate discoveries. Since different authors are usually engaged in the process of policy text production, the texts themselves, either the individual texts or the policy ensembles, do not necessarily transmit a clear message and may at times fall short of coherence (Bowe et al., 1992). Sometimes the disagreement between policy authors obscures the meaning of such texts and gives rise to public confusion. Policy texts, therefore, may reveal a lack of consistency and compatibility due to the various compromises made during different stages of the policy-making process (Ball, 1993, 1994).

Bowe et al. (1992) stress that texts should be understood not only in regard to the specific context and time of origin but also in relation to other texts (i.e., intertextuality). Another consideration is the power exerted over the timing of the text publication since a political advantage may be taken, for instance, when introducing a specific policy. Additionally, policies do not remain fixed but are usually modified over time, in conformity with the changing needs of the state, the reallocation of policy purposes and intentions or due to the different policy representations by different actors (Ball, 1993, 1994).

When the policy text becomes a law, it develops into an official document to be enacted. However, as noted already, policy does not get implemented straightaway, via a simplistic course of action. Neither does it get implemented as originally intended, as I discuss in more detail in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.3. Policy, as text, requires to be analysed in order to be understood in relation to the specific context of practice (Bowe et al., 1992). From a literary theory perspective, policy as text brings about the realisation of agency in the policy process by enabling readers of policy to interpret the text from different viewpoints (Ball, 1994). At this point, it would suffice to accentuate that policy texts generate different interpretations which, in turn, influence and restrain the way policies are implemented: “At all stages in the policy process we are confronted both with different interpretations of policy” (Ball, 1994, p. 17) and with “interpretations of interpretations” (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987, p. 14).

According to the idealist theory of language, policy documents are construed as a plan of action whose political objective is to achieve its intended goals and values. From this technical-empirical viewpoint, the scope of analysing policy is to interpret the text ‘correctly’. Linguistic idealism does not acknowledge textual interpretations which depart from the author’s intentions. Any disputes revolving around the meaning of a text are reckoned as a misinterpretation of policy (Olssen et al., 2004). The main issue concerning the idealist view of language is that it relies too heavily on the author’s intentions which are believed to be embedded in the text, the reason for which they have been referred to, in literary theory, as the *intentional fallacy*. This fallacy is based on the premise that the meaning of a literary text is consistent with the author’s intentions. For the purpose of policy analysis, such premise appears to be superficial since policy texts are multi-authored (Olssen et al., 2004).

Other literary critics have resisted the empiricist-idealist view of language. For instance, Olssen et al. (2004), drawing on Northrop Frye’s literary criticism, reiterate that authors cannot pledge that texts are capable of producing a

solitary meaning: “for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings” (p. 62). Another critic, Roland Barthes (1974), in his seminal essay *S/Z*, makes a useful contribution in relation to literary interpretation. He introduces the concepts of *readerly* and *writerly* texts. Readerly texts are prescriptive as they provide clear directives which are not open to discussion (Hall, 2001). Such texts signify the passive reader, as a consumer of a given text: “... instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (Barthes, 1974, p. 4). The key problem with *readerly* texts is that they do not promote critical reading and this is why, I believe, policy texts are sometimes read uncritically, that is taken as given.

Conversely, *writerly* texts provoke the reader since “the goal of literary work ... is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes, 1974, pp. 3–4). This implies that readers, to be able to interpret a text in different ways, that is to produce a plurality of meanings, must enquire into the practice of writing. Bettaney (2010) argues that the power of the text is reliant on the capacity of the reader to connect with it. Hence, *writerly* texts, as opposed to *readerly* texts, situate the reader in the role of co-writer (Gray & Dwight, 2011). Ball (2013b) treats Foucault’s texts as *writerly* texts since they invite the reader to play a part in the co-production of ideas. Hall, (2001) argues that it is the positioning of the reader which determines whether a text is perceived as *readerly* or *writerly*.

In another notable essay, *The Death of the Author*, Barthes (1977) rejects the notion of the author as the sole creator of his/her own text since the reader of any given text is the only one who can attribute multiple meanings to the text. This explains why “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (p. 148). It follows that to provide leeway to policy analysts-implementers, as readers who seek to make sense of policy texts, the birth of the analyst/implementer must be at the cost of the death of the policy-maker. Thus,

the notion of the analyst-implementer-reader suggests that: “policies are made and remade at different levels of interpretation and through differing practices” (Meadmore, 1995, p. 11).

In complying with a Foucauldian approach to critical policy analysis, policy documents are treated in terms of a materialist theory of language which opposes the idealist conceptions regarding the interpretation of policy texts. Foucault’s materialism suggests that signifiers alone (i.e., the forms of expression used in language) are incapable of producing meaning. He also criticises the precedence given to the signifier, in preference to the signified (i.e., the mental concepts associated with the use of signs in language) (Olssen et al., 2004). Since materialism views policy as being made of language, policy is essentially a social practice and comprises divergent meanings (Nudzor, 2009). It is through language, perceived in terms of social practices, that meanings are constructed. Seen through a materialist lens, language is therefore not understood merely as a fixed set of signs for transmitting messages. Policy texts are also located within broader discourses which represent “both the formal system of signs and the social practices which govern their use” (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 65). This supports Ball’s dual conceptualisation of policy as both text and discourse.

4.1.1.3 Policy as discourse

Defined in simple words, policy as discourse is understood in terms of the meaning and the way ideas are expressed in policy texts (Nudzor, 2009). Parker (1992) describes policy discourses as a “set of statements which constructs an object” (p. 5). Since policy texts are not usually written by a single author, policy discourse can be conceptualised as “the outcome of joint production of meanings among various policy actors” (Mottier, 2005, p. 256).

I acknowledge a materialist theory of language that draws attention to the socially-constructed realities. In this respect, discourse goes beyond the meaning

of language. It is also concerned with the actual impact of the use of language, hence the quest for a material turn in discourse analysis (Olssen et al., 2004). Bacchi (2000), drawing on various theories of discourse, contends that policy-as-discourse analysts tend to emphasise the social processes implicated in the production of the text rather than prioritising literary deconstruction which views everything from a textual perspective. Theorists who perceive policy as discourse are committed to an agenda for change. They are inclined to establish the causes of power and to question them.

As Garratt and Forrester (2012) note, although policy discourse, articulated in the form of statements, knowledge and ideas, is conceived as authoritative, in justifying the problem being addressed and the action proposed, at the same time such official discourses prohibit other potential options. This explains the power relations involved in the production of knowledge. The authors endorse Legge's (1995) definition of discourse to expose our ways of talking and thinking about the world which give rise to specific dominant discourses:

'Discourse' refers to the way in which things are discussed and the argumentation and rhetoric used to support what is said. It also refers to 'reading between the lines' – what remains unspoken or taken-for-granted, such as assumptions or evasions. Crucially, discourse analysis deals with issues of representation. That is, it starts with the premise that words do not merely reflect what is being talked about, but they actually construct and even constitute what is being talked about. (p. 326)

Foucault's concept of discourse has had a major impact on the way researchers approached policy in which due consideration was given to the relationship between *power* and *knowledge*. Within this frame of reference, analysing policy as discourse unmasks the political struggles surrounding the policy text production (Gale, 2006). As Foucault (cited in Ball, 1994) argues: "Discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (p. 49). This implies that the language in which policies are framed restricts the manner in which the

essence of education is conceptualised. Although discourses embody a social reality, they also conceal the process through which they were created (Trowler, 1998). By the same token, Fimyar (2014) emphasises that policy as text alone does not take into account what Ozga (2000) refers to as the 'bigger picture', that is what policy-makers either do not think about or intentionally omit. This explains why policy is necessarily viewed as both text and discourse. Besides representing meaning and social relationships, discourses constitute subjectivity and power relations (Ball, 1990).

Ball's (1994) notion of discourse, provoked by a Foucauldian approach, reveals the discursive features of policy in relation to policy texts. Ball (1994) argues that "discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (p. 21). Garratt and Forrester (2012) emphasise that since discourses are not essentially the objective truth, they are perceived as such since the discursive practices tend to be overlooked. It is for this reason that the way people think can potentially exhibit and intensify specific regimes of power and coercion. The discourses of people whose position in society is of marginal importance are less valued, as opposed to the discourses of the more powerful groups who have better prospects in exerting their influence. Thus, the dominant discourses of the powerful groups have an impact on the way things are understood. They often determine the parameters within which the discussion unfolds, and even influence the conduct of individuals and the involvement of the state in dealing with specific issues.

Given that "educational values are embedded in policies in a range of complicated ways within a social imaginary" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 75), policy-making is inevitably a political process where certain values are privileged, to the exclusion of others.

4.1.1.4 Policy as value-laden

There is a large body of literature which points to policies' instrumentalism, persuasiveness and political expedience in constructing an 'obedient population'. While policies may be perceived as a means to boost efficiency and effectiveness, they are, in reality, politically inclined (Wedel et al., 2005). Levin (2008) observes that several educators tend to misinterpret the real function of politics in policy since they regard education as a specialised field in which politics should not interfere. He maintains that this does not represent a faithful view of reality, given that politics is the principal process by which decisions on public policy are taken. Drawing on Harold Lasswell's (1958) influential notion of politics as "who gets what, when, how", Levin (2008) further states that this conceptualisation can be applied in any context and implies that politics is about the distribution of power in society since not all individuals can have what they wish.

David Easton's (1953) widely accepted definition of politics as "the authoritative allocation of values for a society" (p. 129), suggests that policies are indeed value-laden. From an educational perspective, values should be considered since it needs to be seen whose values are to be favoured, how such values are to be justified, what might be the content of such values and where can such values be found (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 71). It is to be acknowledged, however, that in practice, political decisions are not always taken in the public interest. There is the inevitable risk of placing personal interests before the public good (Keech, 1991). Usually, as Sorzano (1977) contends, political conflicts are centred on those values which need to be given preference rather than on the allocation of "a commonly desired value" (p. 29). Since policies are inherently political, because of the rival values infused in the policy process, a more appropriate understanding of policy is one which, according to Taylor et al. (1997), incorporates the politics involved at all stages. In such political processes, values play a significant role and, as Taylor et al. (1997) observe, more often than not,

policies reflect the values of the elite, the most politically dominant groups in society. In a nutshell, political perspectives hinge on the premise that controversy and trade-offs amongst policy actors are part and parcel of the policy process.

These conceptualisations of policy, understood in terms of policy as process, policy as text, policy as discourse and policy as value-laden, as discussed above, shed light on the complex nature of policy-making. In my study, I aim to engage with this combination of theoretical perspectives when analysing learner-centred policy and practice. In Part 2, I delve deeper into the notions of policy implementation and policy enactment.

Part 2

4.2 Curriculum policy implementation and enactment

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, this section focuses on the second theme of my research study, that is curriculum policy implementation and enactment. In this section, I critically review the key concepts which relate to the context of practice, as articulated in my second research question: *How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?* Here, I draw on issues relating to policy implementation and policy enactment in order to highlight their distinguishing features, particularly the contrasting views between rational policy models of implementation and the more complex ways in which policy becomes enacted.

4.2.1 Key dimensions of policy implementation

There is a substantial body of literature which acknowledges that the way policies are implemented is somewhat different from their original intention, owing to several critical factors. In this regard, I argue that Haines' (2013) claim

that “policies should ... eventually accomplish what they were intended to accomplish” (p. 79), poses some concern. The main weakness with this positivist view is precisely the failure to acknowledge the complexity of policy implementation. As Fullan and Pomfret (1977) assert, “implementation is not simply an extension of planning and adoption processes. It is a phenomenon in its own right” (p. 336).

During the past two decades, research on education policy implementation (Radin, 2000) is increasingly focusing its attention on the interaction amongst three key dimensions: (1) the specific *policy* to be implemented; (2) the *people* involved in implementation; and (3) the *places* in which the policy is to be implemented. The way policies, people, and places interact gives an insight into how policy implementation evolves, whilst providing justifications for the differences in implementation results.

As far as the policy dimension is concerned, Honig (2006) explains how changes in policy designs have shifted emphasis to three important features: goals, targets and tools. The policy goals are emphasising more the high standards that students ought to achieve through systemic, deep and large-scale change initiatives. In implementing such goals, however, a number of challenges arise, depending on their nature and scope. For instance, policy goals that correspond to the core of the education system, such as equity goals, are predisposed to be more challenging to implement than other goals that are viewed as peripheral, as, for example, classroom set-up.

The policy targets signify the key people who are targeted to implement a particular policy. As Honig (2006) affirms, in order to promote change in education systems, policy designs targeted not only schools and their staff, such as teachers and school leaders, but also other collaborators and partners who do not form part of the formal schooling system, such as parents, businesses/industries and local councils. The interaction of these partners is considered crucial for students’ successful educational development. One major

drawback of previous policy designs is that members of school staff, as the main policy targets, were looked upon as the sole actors responsible for implementation.

The policy tools, as levers of change, encompass a wide range of instruments, aimed at supporting the implementation of education reforms. Honig (2006) notes that conventional policy designs focused, amongst others, on incentives and sanctions, along with a top-down approach to effect implementation. Subsequently, policy tools have begun to develop into capacity building, the formation of communities and community partnership. Other notable tools include changes to systems, referred to as systems change tools, such as shifts in authority from one party to another. These shifts are exemplified, for example, in the allocation of further autonomy to school communities that arguably helps to facilitate the implementation of change (Sultana, 2008).

As noted in the policy targets above, the implementation of policies is also reliant on a broad spectrum of people. Thus, the people dimension in policy implementation explores how individuals, including those who are formally identified as targets in policy designs, as well as those who are not formally viewed as targets, but who may still contribute in one way or another to implementation, respond to policy requirements (Honig, 2006). The same holds true in respect of the place dimension. Certainly, the political, cultural and historical diversity of places, to which specific geographic locations and jurisdictions pertain, accounts for the different responses to implementation. This applies also to other institutional contexts and organisational bodies, such as the non-state schools (Honig, 2006; Sultana, 2008). In the next section, I elaborate upon three key approaches which have been widely debated in the literature on curriculum implementation.

4.2.2 Different approaches to curriculum implementation

Most research on curriculum implementation is centred around well-established approaches. These ‘dominant approaches’, described by Snyder et al. (1992, p. 402), refer to the two traditional perspectives in educational policy research, that is to say, the *fidelity* perspective and the *mutual adaptation* perspective. Curriculum implementation can also be viewed from the *enactment* perspective, which is based on a somewhat different conception from the traditional models. The perspective adopted can have a different impact on the way the curriculum is implemented, as explained in the following sections.

4.2.2.1 The fidelity perspective

Research concerning the fidelity perspective (Snyder et al., 1992) draws attention to the degree of adherence or strictness to curriculum prescriptions, that is to say, fidelity to the original policy design. This perspective adopts a technical-rational approach and, consequently, does not accept variation in implementation in response to contextual demands (Datnow et al., 2002). From a fidelity standpoint, “the nature of the innovation itself is rarely viewed as problematic because to argue against it is to reject its self-evident worthwhileness” (Morris & Marsh, 1991, p. 268). Cho (1998) links the fidelity model to behaviourism and positivism due to its linear approach to implementation. In practice, as pointed out above, it is unlikely that implementation unfolds as originally intended, which explains why “technically-driven reforms have not been as successful as planners envisioned” (Datnow, 2006, p. 106).

Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of the fidelity approach is that since it is conceived as a prescribed phenomenon, no space is left for practitioners to interpret the curriculum policy. This limitation suggests that teachers are merely curriculum transmitters (Shawer, 2010) or passive recipients (Marsh, 2009), a

scenario which many researchers, including Marsh (2009) and Cho (1998), refer to as a *teacher-proof curriculum*. In my view, the fidelity conception is not a suitable approach to implementation since the vital role of teachers, as agents of change, ought to be acknowledged. The fidelity perspective also overlooks the politics of implementation. As Malen (2006) demonstrates, processes of policy implementation are characterised by clusters of actors, with their value-laden issues, who exert their power to influence implementation. Hence, a better approach to implementation is considered to be reliant on mutual adaptation models which give a certain amount of flexibility.

4.2.2.2 The mutual adaptation perspective

Mutual adaptation is construed as the process through which on-site adaptations to the curriculum are made, according to the specific context, in agreement both with the experts on curriculum development and the practitioners in schools (Snyder et al., 1992). This requires negotiation between both parties who need to be flexible in their approach. Although mutual adaptation is perceived as a more feasible approach than fidelity of implementation, it is nonetheless the fidelity perspective which traditionally prevails in most processes of implementation (Marsh, 1991).

The data generated by *The Rand Change Agent Study* between 1973 and 1978 (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975), which is deemed to be one of the most comprehensive inquiries on implementation in the USA, suggests that curriculum innovations demand particular adaptations by policy users which cannot be planned ahead (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). Rather than emphasising a uniform implementation, the Rand Study revealed that policy outcomes depended largely on local factors which, in turn, determined the nature, quantity and rate of change (McLaughlin, 1990). Whereas the fidelity model views innovations as technologies (Snyder et al., 1992), the mutual adaptation provides practitioners with more leeway in interpreting the changes that they are expected to put into

practice. Indeed, mutual adaptation adopts a post-positivist approach which takes into account the complexity of the context and therefore allows policy to be revised (Cho, 1998). I consider the adjustments made to curriculum policies as inevitable and a necessary requirement of the implementation process. Another alternative to the fidelity and mutual adaptation approaches, which Snyder et al. (1992) describe as the enactment perspective, draws attention to the pivotal role of teachers and students in the meaning-making process in the classroom.

4.2.2.3 The enactment perspective

The enacted curriculum has been associated with constructivism since it is targeted towards the construction of meaning within the classroom context (Cho, 1998). Curriculum enactment is concerned with the ongoing process whereby teachers and students jointly shape and experience the curriculum, regardless of the policy motives. The externally-produced curricula may serve as a point of reference for teachers and students in developing positive educational experiences. In essence, the enactment approach suggests that the curriculum is wholly dependent on teachers and students (Snyder et al., 1992). Teachers who embrace the enactment approach are seen as curriculum makers (Shawer, 2010).

One question that needs to be asked, I believe, is whether policy-makers are keen to provide further autonomy to teachers in exploring, together with their students, meaningful experiences within the specifications of the school context, rather than dictating predesigned curricula. Research has revealed that teachers' interpretation of the curriculum policy enhances their professional development. The enactment perspective thus views teachers as members of a classroom learning community which promotes further educational growth, both in terms of the teaching and the learning process (Cho, 1998).

I construe the enactment perspective, with its emphasis on active learning, as most closely aligned with LCE and this research study. Remillard and Heck (2014) note that, in spite of its educational value, the key problem with curriculum enactment pertains to the complexities of classroom activities which can pose a challenge when evaluating the enacted curriculum. One of the challenges concerns the *teacher's pedagogical moves*, that is to say, the actions taken by the teacher (intentionally or unintentionally) during the enactment process, relating to the organisation and the nature of classroom interactions, the pedagogical resources being used, as well as the organisation and management of students' engagement with classroom tasks. Another understanding of the enactment concept is explicated by Ball et al. (2012). While the enacted curriculum is depicted by Snyder et al. (1992) as a joint endeavour between teachers and students, the line of investigation undertaken by Ball et al. (2012) brings into view how schools make sense of and translate policy into practice, that is policy enactment (Căpiță, 2015).

4.2.3 Towards a conception of policy enactment

In contrast to traditional, rational policy models which construe policy-making and policy implementation in terms of separate, linear and unsophisticated processes, research concerning policy enactment adopts a more critical stance that takes into consideration the myriad of responses to policy, in particular complex settings (Hardy, 2015). Rational policy models do not account for the actual, disorderly realities in which 'implementation' occurs (Taylor et al., 1997). Such models envisage a centrally-determined, mechanical process (Banner et al., 2012). They tend to focus on policy goals and pre-determined outcomes (Yanow, 2000).

Policy is usually taken for granted and is perceived as a means to solve problems. This conception fails to recognize the complexity of policy processes and enactments (Maguire et al., 2015). It is an artificial conception which undervalues

what Taylor et al. (1997) call “the politics in action” (p. 2). Processes of enactments pose a challenge to linear, rationalist conceptions of policy by giving due attention to issues of power relations and policy actors’ agency and positionality. Policy enactment therefore recognises the heterogeneous nature of policy processes (Viczo & Riveros, 2015). It acknowledges the changing, complex and recurrent features of policy-in-practice (Hardy, 2015).

Notwithstanding the claims made by Honig (2006) concerning the new direction that policy implementation has taken, where more emphasis is now being placed on how implementation unfolds through the interaction between policy, people and places, as described in Section 4.2.1, theories of implementation remain somewhat different from notions of policy enactment (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021). Maguire et al. (2015) argue that policy enactment is “a theoretically richer concept which better captures the multifaceted ways in which policies are read alongside/against contextual factors, by different sets of policy interpreters, translators and critics” (p. 487).

Most of the work relating to policy enactments was carried out by Ball et al. (2012). They conducted an ethnographic case study on four secondary schools in London, over a two-and-a-half-year period, between October 2008 and April 2011, to explore how each school had responded to policy demands, as revealed, in particular, in three policy documents. Hence, rather than attempting to evaluate how policies were realised in practice or implemented, the authors’ concern was focused primarily on how schools enacted policy. They define policy enactment as the process through which diverse policy actors interpret and translate policy texts, in specific school settings. Seen from the authors’ vantage point, “policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation – that is, the translation of texts into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices” (p. 3).

4.2.3.1 Contextual dimensions of policy enactment

In educational policy research, the context within which policy is enacted has a tendency to be overlooked. This is not always the case when it comes to other fields of research. For instance, research concerning school improvement and effectiveness acknowledges, to some extent, the importance of context, although its main emphasis remains on outcomes. Failing to consider the contextual dimensions of policy enactment suggests that educational policy analysis can do away with school-specific factors. These factors play a key role since they exert their influence on processes of enactment (Ball et al., 2012). As Ramanathan and Morgan (2007) argue, the context embodies the everyday practices in which the micro-strategies of governmental power, that is to say governmentality, are practised and at times opposed.

No matter how similar it may seem, the context is essentially a distinctive feature of each school. It is invariably specific, multi-dimensional and subject to change (Ball et al., 2012). In their study, Ball et al. (2012) present a framework that seeks to integrate contextual features into educational policy analysis in order to illuminate the ways in which context shapes policy enactment. As they argue, this framework, which is based on their research findings, rather than being exhaustive, is heuristic in nature. It seeks to consider the material conditions of real schools by investigating four dimensions of context. These contextual dimensions of policy enactment are not independent of each other but may overlap, in that they can influence one another.

The first dimension, which has been termed as *situated contexts*, alludes to the school history, its location and intake characteristics. As has been explained in Section 2.2, since state schools in Malta are clustered into a College network organisation, the intake of students is not restricted only to those who reside within the middle and secondary school catchment area but includes also students hailing from the College primary feeder school localities. It is through such contexts that policy processes are set in motion. Another contextual

dimension is referred to as *professional cultures*. This aspect of context embodies the school ethos, values, commitments and experiences, as well as the management of policies in schools. In this respect, schools adopt a particular professional outlook which would have been developed along the years and which affects the way schools respond to policy.

The third dimension which the authors consider as critical in exploring the dynamics of context relates to the material aspect. *Material contexts* encompass physical buildings, staffing, budgets, information technologies and infrastructure. Since schools may differ considerably from one another in terms of their material conditions, their capacities to enact policies vary accordingly. This implies that the way schools function in general is also dependent on their physical assets. The final dimension deals with *external contexts*, signifying the pressures exerted by and expectations of external structures, such as league tables and Ofsted rankings, and other legal obligations, including those incorporated in national curriculum frameworks. These external aspects also comprise the level and quality of support provided by local authorities.

As a conceptual tool, policy enactment, with its focus on the analytic use of context, is considered to have emerged from earlier analytic concepts, especially those relating to performativity, aimed at gauging the effectiveness of the schooling system. Ball et al.'s (2012) analytic toolkit, which strives to analyse policy technologies, has been adopted in several studies to account for processes of enactment in different contextual settings (Singh et al., 2014). Performativity, an invisible mode of regulation, is a key policy technology of the Maltese curriculum policy reform (MEDE, 2012). In the local context, performativity pays particular attention to the delivery of LOs across the three cycles of education so as to achieve the desired policy outputs, including those linked with students' performance in international benchmarks. As research suggests (e.g., Singh et al., 2014; Ball et al., 2012), the burden placed on schools by multiple policy technologies produces negative effects.

In a particular study on students' engagement in learning, Gillies et al. (2010) have reported how the school which they investigated, situated in a deprived Scottish community, had experienced acute problems in dealing with classroom and community engagement. These problems were attributed to the contextual characteristics, as reflected in the cultural discrepancies that existed between the local community and the school. To this effect, the school sought to bridge the gap between the home and schooling culture by placing emphasis on students' cultural capital. The authors reiterate that schools with challenging conditions, although being at a disadvantage, are still expected, at least from the policy-makers point of view, to adhere to substantial policy demands and to perform in the same way as other schools with fewer contextual problems. Thrupp and Lupton (2006) argue that contextual factors ought to be given greater recognition due to issues related to social justice which can have a significant impact on the appraisal of school performance, the allocation of resources and the provision of support in disadvantaged school contexts. In the next section, I elaborate upon the meaning-making process of policy texts, that is the hermeneutics of policy.

4.2.3.2 The people dimension in policy enactment

Before discussing the problem of meaning or the hermeneutics of policy and its relevance to policy enactment, theories concerning cognitive approaches to policy implementation, as advocated by Spillane and his colleagues, deserve some attention. Spillane et al. (2006) maintain that policy is implemented by way of complex cognitive processes. They observe that policy implementation failure is not to be deemed entirely as a consequence of a deficiency in policy designs or an intentional attempt by those responsible for implementation not to abide fully with the policy, as was believed to be the case in the past, but rather a result of the complexities in processes of human sense-making. These sense-making processes relate to human cognition, that is to say, how the implementers'

understanding of policy texts might influence the way practices are supported or transformed and, if so, in what ways.

Cognitive frames hinge on individuals' prior knowledge, beliefs and experience which allow them to interpret and make sense of policy. Indeed, individuals' mental concepts or schemas shed light on how information is processed and interpreted. For instance, Spillane et al. (2006), drawing on the role of cognition in policy implementation studies, explain how cognitive frames may give rise to different understandings of the same policy message. At times, new ideas expressed in policy are perceived as being similar to teachers' existing practices and beliefs, thereby posing an obstacle to the envisaged policy change. There are also instances where teachers' understanding of policy appear to be on the surface, lacking an in-depth understanding of the principles which lie beneath the text.

Individual sense-making, however, is not to be conceived as an isolated event in processes of policy implementation. As already noted above, the manner through which human cognition shapes implementation is also reliant on the social context, that is, social cognition. Within the social context, social interactions which occur in teachers' professional communities serve to socially mediate teachers' sense-making of policy, resulting in potential shared understandings (Coburn & Stein, 2006). These social interactions provide a space for teachers to learn from one another, making visible their implicit beliefs, whilst being exposed to alternative interpretations (Spillane et al., 2002).

Apart from the human and social cognition perspectives, Spillane et al. (2006) argue for a distributed perspective on cognition in which the practice of sense-making is stretched over various policy actors, including teachers, school leaders and students, together with other material produced by the school in facilitating the sense-making process. Spillane et al.'s (2002, 2006) cognitive approaches to policy implementation have been criticised by Ball et al. (2012), arguing that such approaches, although they are useful, do not give due recognition to the

“cultures, histories, traditions and communities of practice that co-exist in schools ... neither [do they consider] the buildings and resources available ... The emphasis on sense-making ... de-materialises policy” (p. 5). For this reason, Ball et al. (2012) draw upon three essential aspects of school life: (1) the materiality of policy (i.e., the context that shapes policy enactments); (2) the hermeneutics of policy (i.e., the problem of meaning); and (3) the discursivity of policy (i.e., discursive formations). These three aspects, they argue, are all necessary in capturing enactments of policy.

As far as the hermeneutics of policy is concerned, Ball et al. (2012) treat the meaning of policy texts from two different perspectives – *interpretation* and *translation*. Interpretation involves getting acquainted with the policy language, a meaning-making process of policy texts. The school’s authoritative interpretations tend to be communicated to staff members during various scholastic events. In doing so, the school communicates its course of action in order to achieve the desired policy change. It is through such institutional and political process that other staff members, teachers in particular, are encouraged to engage in discussion. Indeed, the standing of the school, the extent of policy demands and other contextual constraints do play a role when interpreting policy (Ball et al., 2012).

On the other hand, since translation focuses on how policy texts are put into action, it relates to the language of practice. Processes of policy interpretation and translation work together and sometimes overlap. The work of policy translation contributes to policy discourses and is manifested through a myriad of events, meetings, dialogues, teaching strategies, in-service training, professional development, assignment of responsibilities, lesson observations (i.e., learning walks) and artefacts. Other processes of policy translation include learning from other schools’ experiences and official websites, and the support provided by the education authorities (Ball et al., 2012).

It needs to be recognised that within educational institutions such as schools, processes of policy enactment revolve around what Fairclough (1995) describes as “discursive practices, events and texts” (p. 132). For Foucault (1972), discursive practices correspond to “the set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised, in accordance with which that practice gives rise to partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified” (pp. 208–209). As noted earlier, since discursive formations “form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), policy embodies power and knowledge. Policy is conceptualised in terms of discourses through which the subject matter is constructed (Maguire et al., 2011).

Education policies, viewed in terms of discursive practices, can be represented and translated in different modes, such as the production of artefacts, as previously mentioned, which Ball (2015a) describes as “instruments and effects of discourse” (p. 307). Maguire et al. (2011) note that these discursive artefacts or visual resources, such as school websites, posters, student diaries and handbooks, are intended to address a large number of policy matters. They embrace the key policy discourses and, in essence, they draw attention to the policy requirements, creating a sense of normalisation of students, teachers and schools. In so doing, these artefacts function as ‘codes of behaviour’, resonating Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Ball et al., 2012). However, policy analysis, they argue, often neglects the role of artefacts in policy enactment. These discourses, events, and texts become essential components of the schooling system (Maguire et al., 2011).

Processes of interpretation and translation suggest that policy actors are positioned in different ways and, in turn, they can also adopt different positions in relation to policy. Ball et al. (2012) offer a typology of policy actors’ positions by virtue of which they can respond and make sense of policy. The eight positions that they identified are not fixed, in the sense that policy actors can shift between roles or otherwise assume different roles at the same time.

The first role which actors can adopt is that of *narrators*, whereby members of the senior management team (SMT) interpret policy, select their focus of attention, provide explanations to their co-workers and decide on what needs to be done. Secondly, *entrepreneurs* are those who advocate policy in schools in an attempt to bring about change. The role of *outsiders* such as education consultants, although not based in schools, is to provide advice and support during processes of policy enactment. The work carried out by policy *transactors* involves monitoring of policies and their enforcement by staff members in senior roles, making teachers accountable for their actions. However, at times, these transactors, who may include other support staff, act as supporters and facilitators in the enactment of policy in schools.

Another two positions are those of *enthusiasts* and *translators*. These teachers engage with particular policies with a sense of enthusiasm, resulting in active and creative involvement in policy work. They organise policy-related events as part of a collective translation process and serve as role models to their colleagues. The *critics*, such as union representatives, also play a role in interpreting and translating policy. Their role is to monitor the policy process with regard to the working conditions of their members and to maintain counter-discourses. The last role of *receivers* refers to newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and sometimes also to more experienced teachers who seem to depend on other senior staff members and other sources of guidance in dealing with policy work. Whilst some manage to cope, others do not. The enactment concept allows policy actors to employ their creativity when interpreting and translating policy, given that “policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (Braun et al., 2010, p. 19). The parameters within which teachers exercise their freedom to interpret policy vary according to the mechanisms of power contained therein and the contextual characteristics (Ball et al., 2012).

Enactments are collective in nature, as revealed, for instance, in the relations and interdependence between various policy actors and policy texts. Alongside the above discussion on *policy actors*, school leaders and teachers can also be conceived as *policy subjects*. As Ball et al. (2012) assert, “Policy is written onto bodies and produces particular subject positions” (p. 3). These positions are conceptualised in terms of *passive policy subjects*, whose practice is dictated by delivery and performance standards; and *active policy subjects* who must apply their judgement and creativity to the policy-making process. Throughout the process of enactment, schools constantly mediate, contest or even disregard education policies. Teacher agency, however, is very often constrained by the formal machinery of institutional/national policies which generates top-down pressures on schools. Students remain the central target, as productive policy subjects.

As Ball et al. (2012) observe, although policies are not always written in a coherent manner, schools remain accountable and are expected “to ‘make’ sense of policy where (sometimes) none is self-evident” (p. 8, emphasis in original). Biesta (2004) maintains that since accountability is generally associated with responsibility, it assumes that individuals are held liable for their actions and, in consequence, resisting accountability becomes even harder. I now move on to the next section in which I explain the role of policy enactment in my research study.

4.2.3.3 The role of policy enactment in my research study

In my analysis of learner-centred policy enactment, I explore school leaders’ and teachers’ interpretations and translations of the NCF and ELOF policy texts, as specified in my second research question. I also examine policy actors’ positions, thereby demonstrating the various ways in which policy becomes enacted. My analysis of visual artefacts is targeted to obtain additional information on how schools respond to policy.

Moreover, I draw on a range of theoretical perspectives. In particular, I seek to explore how the Foucauldian notions of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity, as discussed in Chapter 3, impact on processes of policy interpretation and translation. Research has shown that individuals' interpretation of policies is deeply reliant on their own experiences and knowledge which reveal their identities and subjectivities. Thus, human sense-making processes of policy texts which feature prominently in the work of Spillane et al. (2006, 2002) are also crucial in exploring the role of cognition in policy enactment and are therefore taken into consideration in analysing and interpreting data from school leaders' and teachers' interviews. In addition, my application of Barthes' (1974) literary theory about *readerly* and *writerly* texts, as discussed in detail in Section 4.1.1.2, is intended to demonstrate how policy actors engage with texts and hence provides a useful supplementary tool in evaluating the enactment of learner-centred policies. In Part 3, I focus on the origins and contemporary debates of LCE.

Part 3

4.3 Learner-centred education

The literature which I examine in Part 3, relating to the third theme of my research study, has been organised into two principal sections: the origins of LCE and contemporary debates on LCE. These two sections aim at addressing my first research question: *What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?* In essence, both sections aim to contribute towards a critical understanding of the Western-originated learner-centred concept. Within the contemporary debates section, I also provide a snapshot of students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, in support of my third research question: *What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?*

4.3.1 The origins of LCE

The theoretical foundations of LCE revolve around philosophical and psychological concepts (Henson, 2003). From a philosophical standpoint, the development of LCE can be stretched to include the initial ideas about the learner, as unveiled by ancient Chinese and Greek philosophers. The work of the 18th century philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, together with the subsequent developments that took place through the philosophical understandings of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey, in particular, have helped to establish a philosophical knowledge base that is linked to LCE. In a similar vein, the psychological knowledge base of LCE can be said to have originated from the works of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky. I start by discussing the philosophical concepts.

4.3.1.1 Philosophical concepts of LCE

The historical roots of LCE can be traced back to Confucius and Socrates, between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. These early philosophers drew attention to the learner. While Confucius stressed character and good citizenship, Socrates focused on the individual (Henson, 2003). Our knowledge of Socrates comes predominantly from the writings of his student, Plato. Plato's Socratic dialogues reveal the Socratic method of enquiry through strategic questioning, in which the teacher elicits the ideas of the student (Brodie et al., 2002). Davey Chesters (2012) postulates that the method of enquiry employed by Socrates draws attention to the need to encourage citizens to develop independent thinking by engaging in dialogues about different aspects of human existence, by delving into arguments and by questioning knowledge claims.

Plato's (2015) *Meno* can be regarded as the most influential dialogue in accentuating the importance of enquiry. In the following quotation, as Reinsmith (1992) observes, Socrates himself is portrayed as a facilitator who asks

fundamental questions about the nature of learning and whose engagement in the dialogue assists in bringing out the individual's hidden knowledge: "I will only ask him, and not teach him, and he will share the enquiry with me: and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion ...?" (Socrates as quoted in Plato, 2015, p. 39). This method of questioning explains how Socrates was mostly concerned with scaffolding a person's thinking.

Two millennia later, in the 17th century, the English philosopher John Locke, in his publication: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), developed a new concept, known as *experiential education*, to imply that individuals are born without ideas (i.e., tabula rasa or a blank slate) and thus the only way to acquire knowledge is through experience (Henson, 2003). Locke's experience-based educational theory influenced many philosophers of the enlightenment era who developed further his ideas in their LCE theories. It was not until the 18th century, however, when particular attention to the learner and the process of learning led to a significant impact on thinking about education. With the publication of the seminal text *Emile* in 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979) provided a comprehensive presentation of his political and philosophical ideologies concerning the relationship between human beings and society. The focus here was on child-centred education (CCE).

In *Emile*, Rousseau (1979) creates a romantic vision of childhood (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Romanticism adopts a positive stance towards the human condition and thus appeals to one's emotions. It presupposes the goodness of nature and the natural, automatic processes of human development (Horn, 2009). These romantic beliefs lie at the heart of CCE or progressive education, as it is often referred to, which developed as a consequence of the general dissatisfaction with behaviourist pedagogies of traditional, content-based, teacher-centred education theories (Darling, 1994; Tisdall, 2017; Zimiles, 2008). An important

feature of progressive education, as discussed below, is a consideration of the child's needs and interests.

In his book, Rousseau (1979) describes the development of a fictional child, Emile, who learns under the guidance of a tutor. The description of childhood rests on Rousseau's conviction that humans, by nature, are born good. Whilst acknowledging that children have different abilities, he argues that they all have an innate desire to learn about the things around them. In his belief, however, the corrupt society impedes children from learning about their natural interests, which explains why it was believed that the child needed to be raised in a protected, rural environment, detached from the bad influences of the urban life. Hence, rather than transmitting knowledge, the role of the tutor was to safeguard and facilitate the child's self-directed, experiential learning process (Darling, 1994; Ross, 2000).

The central idea behind *Emile's* treatise is that "childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 90) and so adults should not interfere to teach children in the way they think they should learn. From this viewpoint, children should be educated, as much as possible, in line with the development of their own natural aptitudes and therefore teachers should create learning conditions that motivate them to discover things for themselves (Bertram, 2010; Horn, 2009). Indeed, unlike the traditional view of education which acknowledges formal teaching as a means of developing intellectual powers (Hirsch, 1996), the progressive view of education, which has been linked to developmentalism (Stone, 1996), assumes that the child's intellectual capacities should be allowed to develop as part of a process of natural growth. Darling (1994) provides a useful definition that encapsulates the tenets of CCE:

In child-centred education ... children's educational development is not understood in terms of things that should be known, rules that must be followed, or adult characteristics that ought to be adopted. Children's development is seen as a gradual and 'natural' progression which is best aided by adults who have an appreciation of and a respect for the ways of children. (p. 3, emphasis in original).

Moreover, Rousseau's understandings of childhood are based on the belief that "children are naturally active, both physically and mentally, and the role of education was to build on this activity" (Mtika & Gates, 2010, p. 397). Following Rousseau's conceptions of child development, Bulle (2008) argues that education which supports children's proper activity, that is to say, activities which are appropriate to the child's natural stage of development, are thought to foster children's full potential. In supporting these arguments, education had to revisit its programmes to provide space for children's exploration, play and free movement. Therefore, in fulfilling these characteristics of progressive education, in order to respond to children's natural development, the curriculum had to take into account the child's needs, welfare and the pace at which the learning process progresses (Darling, 1994; Ross, 2000).

The 'needs' concept has provoked criticism (e.g., Dearden, 1968; Peters, 1969). This criticism arose because of the difficulties surrounding the identification of the child's educational needs. In order to address such needs, the then Scottish Education Department (1965), through the publication of *Primary Education in Scotland*, better known as the *Primary Memorandum*, which was greatly influenced by the work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (Farquharson, 1985), recommended educators to take account of the various stages of human development. Consequently, as Darling (1994) asserts, the process of identifying the child's needs was assumed to entail a scientific procedure, by relying on the theoretical understandings of developmental psychology, which I discuss briefly in the subsequent section. I concur with Darling's judgement when he stated, "a need ... is not a property that can be observed or established simply by empirical methods" (p. 70).

Rousseau's ideas about the education of children have had a strong impact on other scholars, as can be testified in the philosophical doctrines of Pestalozzi (1894), Froebel (1908, 1909) and Dewey (1900, 1902, 1916, 1997), among others. Although still committed to Rousseau's views on children's natural education,

these philosophers modified significantly his conceptions of childhood (Darling, 1994). Unlike Rousseau, who believed that the child could only develop away from society by way of individual tutoring, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey acknowledged children as social beings, thus recognising childhood as a social construct (Barley, 2014).

Ross's (2000) criticism of Rousseau's failure to acknowledge the social dimension is warranted since, as he argues, "... all human activity is socially conditioned, all knowledge socially constructed" (p. 136). I consider this critique as echoing Langford's (2010) concerns about the lack of meaningful relationships that can potentially occur between children themselves and their adult educators, even in today's child-centred learning environments. Although such relationships are considered as an integral part of the contemporary child-centred ideologies, she observes that their absence in current classroom practices may be the result of two key factors. Firstly, by giving attention to each individual child, the teacher might diminish the possibility for students to socialise. Secondly, by intervening minimally, in exercising their role as facilitators of learning, teachers may limit their relationship with students.

Drawing on the social aspect of learning, the learner-centred school that Pestalozzi established at Yverdon, in Switzerland, was intended to provide a social setting, a healthy homelike learning environment that is conducive to the child's development. His school was designed to match the teaching content to children's potential to learn, by investigating the ways through which learning occurs (Ross, 2000). Pestalozzi's philosophy was based on the premise that education should cater for the 'whole' child by concentrating on the individual's mental, emotional and physical capacities (Henson, 2003).

To assist the child's development, Pestalozzi's and Froebel's educational methods placed emphasis on practical activities, such as teaching mathematical concepts by, say, counting physical objects (Ross, 2000). For Froebel, the hand of God and nature was seen in the execution of such practical work through which

knowledge was believed to be achieved. Like practical activities, Froebel's conception of play was also critical for developing the child's awareness of the world (Darling, 1994). Indeed, he was the founder of the kindergarten concept (Henson, 2003), aimed at providing a positive learning environment for children's natural growth. According to Chung and Walsh (2001), Froebel was the person who coined the term *child-centred*.

In the 20th century, CCE took a different turn as a result of Dewey's writings in relation to human development. Dewey, a firm believer of child-centred education, is viewed by many as the one who exerted the greatest influence on philosophy of education in America. What is interesting to note is the manner in which Dewey (1900) spoke about the emergent shift in education, from curriculum-centred to child-centred: "... the child becomes the sun around which the appliances of education revolve; he is the centre about which they are organised" (p. 51). Although Dewey was on Rousseau's side in opting to depart from the traditional style of passive learning, he opposed both the idea behind the isolated learning environment in which Emile was brought up and also the belief that the child's natural capacities could be left on their own to develop spontaneously. On this last point, as Darling (1994) contends, in contradiction to Rousseau's views, the child could not develop freely, owing to the subtle intervention of Emile's tutor.

Dewey claimed that children's potential to develop depends on their participation in community life and, since he considered education as fulfilling a social purpose, in his view schools should always remain interconnected with society (Darling, 1994; Henson, 2003). Dewey's emphasis on human interaction explains his keen interest in promoting group and shared activities, such as garden cultivation and stage performances, through which children's learning, apart from being facilitated by the teacher, is reinforced by experience (Ross, 2000). In his understanding, education revolves around enjoyable and problem-solving activities that stimulate thinking skills (Henson, 2003). His plea, however,

seems to contradict today's goals of education which strive relentlessly to prepare students to conform to the demands of a globalised, knowledge-based economy.

So far, the above discussion focused mainly on the philosophical concepts of an important foundation of LCE, which is CCE. CCE and LCE embrace similar principles, insofar as learner's freedom, initiative and discovery methods of learning are concerned. Nonetheless, the distinguishing feature between the two is that, whilst CCE has a longer history and is concerned exclusively with the education of children, LCE encompasses learners of all ages, thus acknowledging a broader spectrum of learners, including those in the post-compulsory sector, as well as the out-of-school and adult learners (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Although the philosophers mentioned placed emphasis on the learner and at times considered the conditions necessary to support learning, one has to acknowledge that, as Henson (2003) observes, the role of philosophy is to influence thinking rather than to prescribe or dictate one's behaviour. It is therefore essential to provide also a snapshot of the psychological understandings of LCE and to trace the developments that continued to emerge during the 20th century.

4.3.1.2 Psychological concepts of LCE

Many developments that took place in the 20th century in the field of psychology had a profound impact on the development of LCE. Among these psychological developments, constructivism emerged as the most influential theory in transforming the way in which educators believed students learn (Mayer, 2004). It is worth noting that, rather than being thought of as a theory of pedagogy, constructivism is conceived as a theory of knowledge. That said, constructivism appears to have an effect on teaching and learning (Scott & Sullivan Palincsar, 2009).

Since constructivism embodies multiple theories, among which are the critical, radical, cognitive and social constructivism, it is conceptualised differently, depending on the perspective being accentuated. Despite the different views across paradigms, the unifying principle underlying constructivism is that learning is an active process, involving what Mayer (2004) describes as hands-on activities, group discussions and interactive games, amongst others. In the process, learners construct meaning on the basis of their previous knowledge and experiences.

Indeed, for constructivists, 'ready-made knowledge' does not exist (Scott & Sullivan Palincsar, 2009), and therefore, rather than imparting knowledge to learners, learners themselves construct and make sense of new knowledge (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). In other words, as de la Sablonnière et al. (2009) argue, constructivism holds that learners do not have "veridical access to objective reality", they are instead "constructing their own version of reality while at the same time transforming it, and themselves in the process" (p. 629). It is for this reason that learners are perceived as constructors of knowledge (Park, 2001).

Constructivism has a long history of development. However, the pioneering work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, in particular, has contributed significantly to shaping the existing constructivist view of learning (Henson, 2003). Dewey, besides being a philosopher was also a psychologist, and his emphasis on human interaction, as discussed in the previous section, has helped to shed light on how children construct knowledge from real experiences. Later, the works of Piaget (1971) and Vygotsky (1978) were instrumental in developing theories that addressed cognitive development. Thus, from a constructivist perspective, learners construct knowledge either individually, as illustrated by Piaget, or collectively, as exemplified by Vygotsky (Horn, 2009).

Piaget has shown interest in advancing the claims made by some of his predecessors, such as Rousseau and Froebel, concerning children's natural

development. His central idea was that of cognitive constructivism whereby learners, by virtue of their existing knowledge and new experiences, construct an individual reality. Piaget claimed that children acquire knowledge by exploring and manipulating the world in which they live. From a Piagetian perspective, peer interaction is helpful for children's intellectual growth since it assists learners to construct mental representations, of a more complex nature, from the information available and the input of others (Altinyelken, 2011). However, according to Piaget, this peer interactive dimension plays a limited role in the acquisition of knowledge because it is thought to be linked to the particular stage of cognitive development that the child has reached (Wood, 1998).

Based on his observation of children, Piaget (1971) formulated a theory of cognitive development that identified four universal stages through which children develop and learn on their own, in a sequential manner, though not necessarily at the same rate, with each stage corresponding to the age of the child. The way children think was measured according to how their capacity to solve problems develops qualitatively. Although Piaget's theory was highly influential, as demonstrated, for instance, in England's *Plowden Report* (Plowden, 1967), it was criticised for viewing learning as reliant predominantly on children's successive stages of intellectual development, without giving much attention to their individual differences that may result from their social and cultural backgrounds or to the extent to which children learn through interaction with others (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005).

Vygotsky, on the other hand, emphasised the critical importance of social context in the cognitive development of children. Unlike Piaget, who believed that biological maturation was an essential condition for learning, Vygotsky largely advocated social interaction in fostering children's learning and development (Scott & Sullivan Palincsar, 2009). Learning is therefore viewed as a process in which learners co-construct knowledge as they interact with others (Wilson, 1996). In this sense, social constructivism treats knowledge as a cultural

product (Windschitl, 2002). In overemphasising social processes, one of the limitations with Vygotsky's theory, as opposed to that of Piaget, was his lack of attention to children's natural stages of development (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005).

Vygotsky's (1978) belief in the collaborative nature of learning provided a rationale for his key concept, the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, a tool which analyses the child's potential for development on the basis of his/her ability to solve problems. As illustrated in Figure 4.2, his definition of ZPD refers to the gap between what a child is capable of doing independently and what s/he can do under the guidance of a more knowledgeable person (i.e., an adult or peer). The gap between the actual and the potential levels of development can be bridged through *scaffolding*, a process which was first described by Bruner (1966), aimed at supporting the learner to eventually acquire the necessary skills to perform his/her tasks independently.

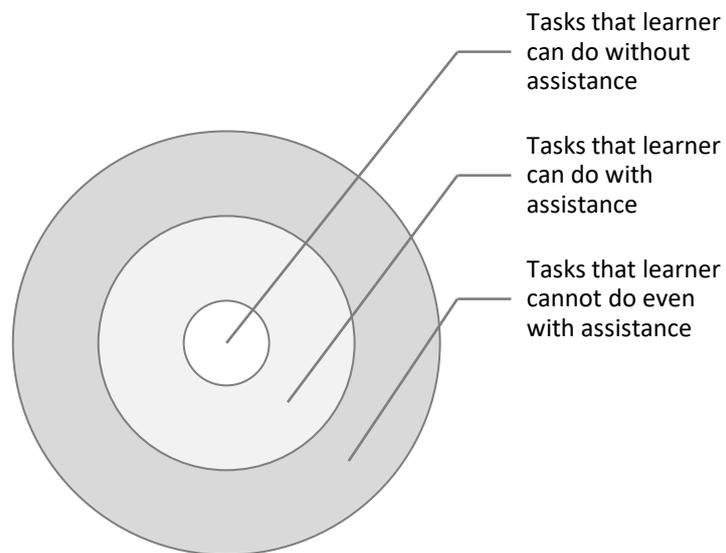


Figure 4.2 *Zone of proximal development*

As can be seen from the above discussion, constructivism differs from the behaviourist tradition. One major criticism of behaviourism is directed towards the way knowledge is acquired and its one-size-fits-all approach, which ignores students' individual differences (Westbrook et al., 2013). In conventional

teaching, knowledge is conceived as unchangeable, prescribed and, although it is taught systematically, there can still be instances when students construct knowledge due to the fact that all mental activity involves an element of knowledge construction. However, in the traditional model of teaching, knowledge is weakly and randomly constructed by students and their construction of new information is vaguely connected with their prior experiences (Altinyelken, 2011). The converse applies in the case of constructivist teaching, as echoed in LCE theory, where students' engagement in learning and their construction of knowledge is deemed to be deeper and their acquired knowledge can be applied across different subjects since students' acts of construction are considered to be strong (Windschitl, 2002).

Constructivism, however, is not without its critics. As Fox (2001) argues, "constructivism seems to offer learning without tears" (p. 33). It is based on the assumption that learning should not pose any difficulties, insofar as teachers are equipped to acknowledge the natural learning abilities of their students; are well informed about the manner by which knowledge is mediated (by means of mental representations) and how previous knowledge influences existing learning. In this sense, problems resulting from innate abilities or talents are ignored. He concludes by stating that whilst students need to interact and engage in problem-solving and sense-making activities, there are many instances when learners encounter difficulties, such as when they do not understand new ideas or are unable to relate new knowledge to new contexts. Hence, learners' progress depends, to a large extent, on teacher's expertise, practice, demonstration and instruction.

Having discussed the origins of LCE by tracing the philosophical and psychological concepts, I now turn to concentrate on the contemporary debates surrounding LCE. In modern times, LCE has come to represent so many things to so many people. It has gained popularity in many countries, as testified in several national education policies, claiming that it can be a highly effective strategy in bringing

about significant educational changes. Yet, LCE has also been criticised for failing to fulfil its promises. It is therefore imperative to critically examine the contemporary debates on LCE.

4.3.2 Contemporary debates on LCE

Within the context of a modern learning society, more reference is being made to LCE rather than CCE since, as noted earlier, LCE embraces all learners, regardless of their age (Lambert & McCombs, 1997). It is essential to point out that LCE emphasises the skills and practices that promote lifelong learning (LLL). A common feature of LCE and LLL is that they both strive to shift the responsibility for learning on the individual learner. In the case of LCE, given that the learner is situated at the heart of all learning, s/he is required to assume greater responsibility for the success of the learning activity. Similarly, in LLL the responsibility rests upon the learner to engage in continuing education that, primarily, would enhance his/her work-related skills (Luzecy, 2009).

By drawing attention to the OECD (1996, 2004) publications on LLL, Reeves (2013) notes how the term LLL, from simply referring to adult education (OECD, 1996), has come to signify all learning activities that take place during the learner's lifespan in all formal and informal education sectors (OECD, 2004). She argues that "the term 'learner' travels, as an integral part of the lifelong learning discourse and the meanings attached to it in non-compulsory adult education, into schools and other educational settings" (p. 60). In the next section, I highlight some of the problems encountered in conceptualising LCE in order to shed light on its distinctive characteristics, thereby providing a deeper understanding of LCE discourses, as specified in the first research question.

4.3.2.1 Conceptual understandings of LCE

One major drawback in attempting to conceptualise LCE is the fact that there is a plethora of terms associated with its meaning, which are used interchangeably. Nonetheless, as Schweisfurth (2013b) observes, they all presuppose a slight difference in meaning, emphasise particular aspects of learning or direct attention towards specific learners. She contends, for example, that LCE is sometimes substituted with 'constructivism', 'progressive education' 'child-centred', 'problem-based' and 'enquiry-based' learning.

At other times, LCE is understood in terms of 'active', 'self-directed' and 'autonomous' learning (Sparkes, 1999). There are also instances when LCE is correlated with 'democratic', 'discovery' and 'participatory' methods (Tabulawa, 2003). Other pedagogical approaches which fall under the umbrella of LCE include 'critical skills pedagogies', 'formative assessment', 'cooperative' (Priestly & Biesta, 2013), as well as 'technology-based' (Keengwe et al., 2009), 'experiential', 'flexible' (Gyamtsso & Maxwell, 2012), 'personalised' (Deakin Crick, 2009) and 'situated' learning (Lave & Wenger, 1990). The endless list of associated terminologies demonstrates that LCE is a contested concept.

Drawing upon Tabulawa's (2003) study, all the above approaches seem to correspond to different strands of progressive teaching methods, whilst accentuating varying degrees of learner autonomy. These strands also share a common goal in that they depart from traditional methods of teaching, promote activity-based learning, highlight the centrality of the learner and embrace social constructivist principles. Touching on social constructivism, Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008) claim that current understandings of LCE are grounded largely in Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development.

Given that LCE has generated manifold interpretations over the course of history, a clear-cut definition of what LCE actually entails remains a challenging endeavour. This is why Schweisfurth (2013a) recommends that LCE is preferably

examined in a phenomenological manner, as perceived by people in different contextual settings. In supporting these arguments, Ng et al. (2002) argue that LCE is a term that is shadowed by ambiguity. They question whether learner-centredness refers “to content that the student wants to learn and to learner control of instruction and assessment strategies” or “to something more holistic which engages the learners’ whole academic and personal development” (p. 463). Cuban (1993), on the other hand, maintains that the common feature manifested in different conceptions of LCE is “the conviction that schools can transform children’s lives, and ultimately the larger society” (p. 39).

Notwithstanding these conceptual problems/ambiguities, many attempts were made to define LCE. Brandes and Ginnis (1986) describe the learner-centred approach in terms of personal development, a process which, in their belief, encompasses a number of core principles: (1) the learner has full responsibility for her/his own learning; (2) the subject matter has relevance and meaning for the learner; (3) involvement and participation are necessary for learning; (4) the relationship between learners is more equal, promoting growth and development; (5) the teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person; (6) the learner sees himself/herself differently as a result of the learning experience; (7) the learner experiences confluence in his/her education (i.e., the affective and cognitive domains flow together) (pp. 12–17).

Another broad definition is provided by McCombs and Whisler (1997) who place emphasis on two key pillars – the individual learner and the learning process:

[Learner-centred is] the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement of all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. The learner-centred perspective is a reflection of the ... learner-centred psychological principles in the programmes, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all. (p. 9)

As the definition implies, the learner-centred perspective mirrors the learner-centred psychological principles developed by the American Psychological Association in 1993 (APA Task Force on Psychology in Education) and which were subsequently revised in 1997 (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs) (McCombs, 2003). The fourteen principles are viewed as the psychological factors that affect human learning and, as Phungphol (2005) explains, are considered as universal since their application is appropriate to all learners in different cultures. It should suffice to point out that the APA classifies the psychological factors into four domains of learner-centred principles: (1) *cognitive and metacognitive*, which focus on the intellectual capacities of learners; (2) *motivational and affective*, relating to how motivation and emotions affect learning; (3) *developmental and social*, to signify the influence of learner development and social interactions on learning; and (4) *individual differences*, to highlight the fact that differences among learners influence learning, resulting in the need for schools to make allowance for learning diversity, including the support required through standards and assessment (McCombs et al., 2008, p. 17; McCombs and Miller, 2007, pp. 30–31).

To develop the concept further, Schweisfurth (2015) insists that LCE, as an educational practice, should not be conceptualised simply as a solitary continuum, from less learner-centred to more learner-centred. On the contrary, LCE can be better defined in terms of several continua that are related to different aspects of learner-centredness, for example, from less prescription and transmission of knowledge by the teacher to more knowledge construction by the student through increased teaching and learning, either individually or collaboratively. From what seems to be a simple definition of LCE, Schweisfurth (2013b) contends that a more learner-centred approach “gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners’ needs, capacities and interests” (p. 20). This learner-centred line of reasoning is supported by three central arguments or *justificatory narratives*, as she refers to

them. Such narratives, in turn, form the basis of the claims made by LCE advocates and are envisioned to provide a justification for the adoption and dissemination of LCE in varied contexts.

4.3.2.2 The cognitive narrative

The cognitive narrative, being the first justification, aims at improving learning outcomes and is therefore more oriented towards student achievement. It claims that students' learning processes and outcomes can be enhanced by employing the principles of cognitive psychology, as highlighted in Section 4.3.1.2. From this viewpoint, there seems to be no scope for learning to be based on a fixed body of knowledge or prescribed curriculum since, specific learning needs cannot be addressed. At the same time, a less prescriptive curriculum, as one expects to see in LCE, does not suggest that certain ideological principles are not embodied. The cognitive perspective maintains that learners learn better if they can exercise more control, both over content and over the way they are taught. In this sense, the control results through the interaction between students themselves and also with the teacher since students' personal interests, individual needs and learning preferences direct the learning process (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

A great deal of what goes on in learner-centred classrooms is closely linked to learners' motivation to learn. As a continuum, learner motivation ranges from the extrinsic to the more intrinsic forms of motivation. Being extrinsically motivated suggests that the goal of students' engagement in learning is reliant upon the attainment of rewards or the avoidance of punishments. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, embodies the goals that arise from within the individual, signifying the self-motivated learner (Fraser Bates, 2015). For this reason, intrinsic motivation appears to be the key driver for students in conforming to LCE principles. By being intrinsically motivated, students tend to act in a democratic way and to work on their own or in groups, without the teacher's

continuous support (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Lamb (2011) affirms that “for intrinsic motivation to develop, people need to have control over what they do, be sufficiently able to do it, and have the opportunity to relate it to other aspects of their lives” (p. 71).

4.3.2.3 The emancipatory narrative

The second narrative, emancipation, pledges that LCE allows learners to exercise their freedom by not being manipulated by knowledge and pedagogies, so that neither is their thinking restricted nor are students conditioned by those in positions of power. This is done by means of a critical pedagogical approach that helps learners develop critical consciousness. Underpinning the emancipatory narrative is the belief that LCE can potentially develop democratic citizens and societies by departing from conventional systems of power relations between teachers and students. Inglis (1997) argues that empowerment “involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power” (p. 4).

In LCE, teachers constantly face the challenge of finding the right balance between the control they exert over students and the extent to which students are to be allowed to exercise their freedom, in compliance with learner-centred ideologies. Hence, according to Schweisfurth (2013b), the relationships that can potentially occur between teachers and students may range from authoritarian to democratic. The idea behind ‘democratic classrooms’ brings with it the adoption of certain rules, including disciplinary protocols and shared objectives which, instead of being imposed, are agreed upon, and to which students are expected to abide, thus shouldering responsibilities for their own learning. As LCE envisages, the teacher-student relationship should enable dialogue, an essential vehicle for learning (Tabulawa, 2003). Research has shown that “building [the school] community through respectful and inclusive dialogue is a

major tool of learning, development and growth” (Deakin Crick et al., 2007, p. 304).

4.3.2.4 The preparatory narrative

Finally, preparation appears to be another key perspective that Schweisfurth (2013b) highlights in the chain of justificatory narratives that aim to promote LCE. This preparatory perspective assists in producing well-trained individuals, in preparation for the future knowledge economy and therefore has an impact on the way policies are articulated. It is argued that, for a knowledge economy to function, today’s learners, who will become tomorrow’s workers, need to be flexible, innovative and critical thinkers.

These three justificatory narratives are not exclusive but may overlap with each other. For example, when students are engaged in open dialogue, there is an opportunity for deeper learning which therefore relates to both the cognitive and emancipatory perspectives (Bremner et al., 2022). Criticism has been directed towards each of these narratives. The cognitive narrative has been criticised since it is questioned whether constructivist approaches are actually effective in achieving desired results. From an emancipatory perspective, teachers find it challenging to find the right balance between the control they exert over students and the control students are allowed to exercise over their learning. The most common criticism of the preparatory perspective is that since no one can predict the future, it is difficult to prepare students for it. This LCE advocacy, as reflected in the three narratives under debate, also generated criticism on the grounds that learner-centredness may not be appropriate in all situations and that there are issues of implementation involved, as elaborated upon in Section 4.3.2.8. These narratives form the basis of my discussion and analysis of LCE. In the next section, I briefly discuss the main tenets that underpin the philosophical assumptions of autonomous learning, as one of the key components of LCE.

4.3.2.5 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy, as a concept, was originated by Henri Holec (1980) to denote the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Such ability, Holec argues, is not something that individuals are born with but it is rather developed, either naturally or more commonly through formal learning, in an organised and purposeful manner. The ability to take charge of one’s learning is understood in terms of a potential capacity to function in a given learning situation. However, to be able to take charge of his/her own learning, the learner needs to be responsible for any decisions taken regarding all aspects of learning, that is to say, in “determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.) and evaluating what has been acquired” (p. 4).

Little (2004) contends that Holec’s notion of learner autonomy has emerged in response to theories of adult education that placed emphasis on learner self-management. Holec’s understanding of the autonomous learner also seems to conform to constructivist beliefs in that, in determining the goals and content of learning, learners construct their own knowledge (Little, 2012). Trebbi (2008) provides a somewhat different interpretation of learner autonomy by stating that learning cannot take place unless the learner takes charge of his/her own learning. Therefore, “to take charge of one’s own learning”, as Holec (1980, p. 3) proposes, is conceived by Trebbi as a precondition of learning.

The problem of defining learner autonomy lies in the fact that such a term is usually associated with self-instruction (Little, 1996, 2003). Benson (2006) makes an important clarification here by stating that autonomy and autonomous learning should not be confused, for instance, with ‘self-instruction’, ‘self-access’, ‘self-study’, ‘self-education’, ‘out-of-class learning’ or ‘distance learning’ (p. 1). While these concepts refer to different approaches, in which case the learners learn on their own, his view of autonomy entails the idea of

abilities/capacities and attitudes that can be developed over time, by virtue of which learners control, rather than be responsible for, their own learning. This distinction is further explained by Benson in arguing that “learning by yourself is not the same thing as having the capacity to learn by yourself” (p. 1).

Indeed, Little (1991) describes learner autonomy as “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action” (p. 4). Dam et al. (1990) accentuate the social aspect of learning, which results in learner autonomy being viewed as “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a social, responsible person” (p. 102). Autonomous learning and independent learning are usually used interchangeably since learner independence encompasses much of the literature on learner autonomy, including the view of learners who are compelled to assume responsibility for their own learning (Benson & Voller, 1997). In other words, learners “need to be autonomous in order to be able to learn independently” (Lamb & Reinders, 2005, p. 226).

It is believed that by increasing learner responsibility, the level of learner control and learner self-determination, learners will increase their overall motivation in learning (Dickinson, 1995). However, irrespective of the degree of autonomy that learners may already possess, one can reasonably argue that without adequate teacher support, the assertions made by the exponents of learner autonomy would be rendered irrelevant. Pennycook (1997), for example, criticises those forms of autonomy that advocate the removal of teacher support. In learner-centred approaches, the changing roles of teachers and learners should be understood in relation to how power is distributed during the learning process.

In the case of language learning, the ultimate purpose of learner autonomy is to assist learners to develop into autonomous language users (Little, 1995). Little (2012) holds that, in seeking to develop language learner autonomy, we aspire to develop learners’ agency. Autonomy in language learning is characterised by three basic principles: (1) *learner involvement*, which focuses on learners’ shared

responsibility during the learning process; (2) *learner reflection*, aimed at stimulating learners' critical thinking during the planning, monitoring and evaluation phases of learning; and (3) *appropriate target language use*, whereby learners are required to accomplish the linguistic and communicative goals of the target language (Little, 2007).

Reeves (2013) makes an interesting observation about the evolution of the notion of 'the learner'. She states that over the years, due to the influence of constructivist and pragmatic approaches to learning, the 'successful learner', being one of the four capacities of the Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004), has come to be perceived: (1) as someone who does rather than as someone who is done unto, the learner is an active agent who becomes increasingly autonomous as s/he learns; (2) as a person who is continuously motivated by the goal of 'self-actualization' in a reflective and inventive process of continuous self-improvement; and (3) as someone who can use and apply the skills of learning how to learn in a variety of contexts and respond flexibly to the requirement for change (p. 57).

Opposing such views of learner autonomy, Boughey (2012) argues that attention needs to be drawn to the fact that learners come from different socio-cultural backgrounds that mirror the characteristics inherent in them. Such argument is supported by McKenna (2013) who maintains that these individual characteristics provide an explanation for the broad range of learners' abilities. Some learners, for instance, may be gifted or have the potential to succeed, whilst others lack motivation and ability. She argues that, within the prevailing autonomous discourse, success or failure in learning results from the learner's inherent characteristics. In the next section, I enquire into the nature of LOs.

4.3.2.6 Outcomes-based education

In the international policy arena, there is a growing trend towards outcomes-based education (OBE). Both OBE and LCE now form part of a far-reaching discourse that promotes universal rights and quality education. Among the promoters of these underlying principles are The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the EU.

Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008) differentiate between LCE and OBE, arguing that LCE, on the one hand, is input-related and thus directs its attention to the quality of teaching and the nature of learning, including the idea of lifelong learning. On the other hand, OBE places emphasis on the output of education, which suggests that its major concern is the quality of assessment. OBE is concerned to a lesser extent with curriculum knowledge, pedagogical approaches and learning resources. Alternatively, it enables the provision of a learning outcomes framework and seeks to consolidate knowledge. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning domains has been widely influential in the formulation of LOs, across an array of academic disciplines. Spady (1993), a prominent advocate of OBE, asserts that the adoption of such an approach necessitates an entire school programme that revolves around the established LOs.

Hartel and Foegeding (2004) distinguish between 'competencies', 'objectives' and 'outcomes'. They define competencies in terms of general statements that spell out the desired knowledge and skills. Conversely, objectives represent the general statements that are concerned with the broad goals of learning, whereas outcomes embody the overly specific statements that describe what learners will be able to accomplish and, consequently, should be capable of being measured. Several LOs, they argue, may be drawn from a particular competency, which implies that usually a learning programme is comprised of few competencies and a greater number of outcomes. Although they are often used interchangeably (McKimm & Swanwick, 2009), the main distinguishing feature between

competencies, objectives and outcomes rests on the premise that LOs can be used for assessment purposes.

The views of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2008) are worth mentioning:

Learning outcomes form part of an innovative approach to teaching and learning, which some have identified as part of a new learning paradigm. Learning outcomes are the focus, and provide a key role in organising systemic aims, curricula, pedagogy, assessment and quality assurance. Increasing use of learning outcomes is expected to have profound implications for making systems more learner-centred, organising institutions, curricula and for the roles and training of teachers and trainers (p. 9).

The CEDEFOP (2008) report highlights the advantages of LOs by claiming that, apart from facilitating the comparison of qualifications of different countries, such outcomes can provide a better means through which prior learning is recognised whilst, at the same time, enhancing the quality of education. The report also describes LOs as an approach that leads to more transparency of qualifications and competences. These outcomes are projected as the central reference point in support of good practice in schools and form part of the school ethos. They are assumed to contribute substantially to how students learn, acknowledging also the informal and non-formal aspects of learning, whilst having an impact on the way students are assessed.

In being conceptualised as an inclusive approach to lifelong learning, LOs are perceived as the main drivers for change and thus are embedded in lifelong learning policies. It is precisely the belief in the efficacy of LOs that prompted many European countries to devise their own outcomes-based National Qualifications Framework (NQF), aimed primarily to enable comparisons and transfer of qualifications between EU countries, thus facilitating learner mobility. Outcomes-based approaches also furnish employers with details about learners' capacities (CEDEFOP, 2008).

Proponents of OBE argue that LOs comprise several additional advantages, which Marsh (2009, p. 50) classifies as follows: (1) providing clear statements about what students should be capable of doing; (2) permitting more flexibility to teachers when preparing their lessons; (3) giving more importance to the acquisition of competencies rather than to content *per se*; (4) making it easier for parents to measure their children's performance; (5) enabling teachers and school leaders to be more accountable for standards reached by students; (6) promoting higher-order thinking skills; and (7) allowing for the possibility of different learning styles and aptitudes. These claims, however, have not been proved by research (Marsh, 2009).

Drawing on the work of several scholars, Marsh (2009, p. 50) grouped the limitations of LOs in the following ways: (1) an increase in teachers' workload; (2) more intensified teacher training on the outcomes-based approach (Griffin, 1998); (3) the possibility that teachers interpret LOs differently (Willis & Kissane, 1997); (4) the establishment of a monitoring system to gauge the achievement or otherwise of LOs (Brady, 1996); and (5) the need to prove that the outcomes-based approach results in improved learning (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

According to Eisner (1979), LOs, in contrast to objectives, which represent predetermined goals, "are essentially what one ends up with, intended or not, after some form of engagement" (p. 103). He further states that "roads taken do not always lead to the destination one intends, and even when they do, much can be learnt '*en route*'" (p. 180). He stresses that there is scope for 'expressive' types of outcomes, whereby the outcome of a learning activity, rather than being determined by the prefixed learning intentions, is generated largely by what is actually being achieved by the learner during the process of learning itself. In this sense, learning happens to be more personalised and, as it progresses, the outcomes become more visible, owing to the input of both the teacher and the learner. What is important to highlight is that these expressive, unintended LOs,

as opposed to the more prescriptive, intended LOs, are much broader, less specific and less rigid (Allan, 1996; Buss, 2008).

To substantiate Eisner's views, Buss (2008) argues that although learning, in its entirety, gives rise to some kind of outcomes, regardless of whether they are intended or not, greater emphasis is being placed on the intended outcomes, owing to the belief that learning cannot be assessed unless the outcomes are predefined. The key problem with the 'intended' outcomes is that, prior to learning, they stipulate what students ought to achieve and, therefore, leave less scope for students to come up with 'original' outcomes. Ecclestone (1999) warns of the risk associated with prescriptive, standardised outcomes, which can demotivate both teachers and learners if they are accepted without questioning.

Biesta and Priestly (2013) argue that by placing emphasis on four personal capacities: (1) the successful learner; (2) the confident individual; (3) the responsible citizen; and (4) the effective contributor; the Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004) views the student as a learning outcome. Here, what matters is not what the student learns but what s/he should become. Although the focus on what the student should become requires attention, the authors caution that such an approach can potentially transform itself into "a 'technology' that is focused on adaptation, adjustment and survival" (p. 47, emphasis in original).

By drawing on insights from the South African curriculum policy reform, Allais (2012) argues that LOs, unless they are embedded in a specific curriculum, cannot be adequately transparent. But even so, their presence within a curriculum does not help in facilitating judgements about the quality of education or learning programmes. Hence, the belief that LO statements are sufficiently transparent, as is often claimed, has not been proved to be realistic in practice. Furthermore, the South African experience has shown that these outcomes, although they could have been implemented unsatisfactorily, caused learning programmes to be misinterpreted and further complicated matters due

to their lack of transparency. The criticism directed both towards the outcomes-based school curriculum and the outcomes-based national qualifications framework in South Africa has led to the official relinquishment of the said curriculum in 2009, and to major adjustments being made to the NQF at the same time. Allais (2012) concludes that, in developed countries, these outcome-based approaches pose similar problems, even though they may not be apparent because of the presence of stronger institutions, traditions and professionals.

In the USA, the interest in OBE deteriorated during the 1990s since the outcomes of learning, in claiming to be 'observable' and 'measurable', did not bring about the desired system-wide change in education and, therefore, could not deliver what was promised. As a result, they were criticised due to a series of shortcomings, for instance, in underestimating the learning process, in preference to outcomes; in view of the sophisticated and expensive assessment procedures; as well as the fear that the learning content might be influenced by such outcomes (Marsh, 2009). A similar situation arose in Australia in the late 1980's and early 1990s, when attempts to introduce an outcomes-based curriculum policy, through the 1994 *National Curriculum Statements and Profiles*, were criticised for being considered "too complex and unworkable in the classroom" (Yates & Collins, 2010, p. 93). In the next section, I provide an overview of students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, as emanating from six empirical studies.

4.3.2.7 Students' perspectives of learner-centred practices

This section draws attention to the views of students on learner-centred practices, in response to my third research question: *What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?* The first study by Beach and Dovemark (2009) concerns two secondary schools in Sweden. It reveals how learners' understanding of education, within the context of the new personalised learning policies, also

corresponds to teachers' views about performativity. In exploiting spaces for creativity to their own advantage, successful students tended to conform to what teachers considered to be 'the right choices' when choosing, for instance, optional subjects. Indeed, these formally successful students were willing to adhere to teachers' guidance when 'consuming' education.

These same students maintained that, in order to succeed and obtain good grades, they needed to perform well by responding to performance-related demands. Similar to teachers' beliefs, the 'good' students perceived competitive behaviour as indispensable since they believed that, by being competitive, they can have access to high quality education. In students' own words, teachers were keener to help those who showed most initiative. According to students' responses, these school contexts in which personalised learning was investigated suggest that students' agency and creativity, whilst appealing mostly to successful students, were hindered by values of performativity that were, in turn, determined by externally fixed procedures.

In a different study, Bibby (2009) draws on data generated from two research projects that focused specifically on students' experiences of learning in both the primary and secondary school sectors in England. In the case of the primary school project, the feedback of the 10-year-old children involved provided a glimpse of what actually happens during Maths lessons. The secondary school project, which included students aged between 11 and 13 years old, was more concerned with eliciting their views about the different kinds of learning that take place across several departments. However, when asked about their experiences of learning, the secondary students simply mentioned that the way they were thought was more or less the same for all subjects, except Maths. A common feature that emanated from the primary and secondary school data is the importance of pedagogic relationships within the classroom and their influence on learning and knowledge creation.

On the basis of the primary and secondary school students' responses during interviews, it emerged that the majority of Maths teachers failed to provide a social and emotional space for students through which they could interact and express their thoughts and feelings. In exerting a restrictive form of class control, these teachers, unconsciously, could not provide a positive learning experience for their children, let alone manage their relationships. In such circumstances, due to the power imbalance between teachers and students, abiding by the principles of a learner-centred pedagogy becomes challenging. Only one secondary school teacher was perceived to have a good relationship with students by being connected emotionally with them, that is treating children with respect and empathy. This study reveals that learning, rather than being conceived as rational, can only become meaningful within an engaged relationship.

In a study conducted by Kiefer et al. (2014) relating to how teachers motivate middle school students academically, some students stated that not all teachers engaged in responsive teaching practices. From this investigation, it emerged that student motivation depended largely on teacher-student relationships, teacher expectations, and instructional practices which are supportive of students' basic and developmental needs. Almost all students admitted that they felt most motivated when their class teachers adjusted their teaching methods according to their individual needs, thereby "[breaking] down what they need to know and understand" (p. 12).

Similar findings were manifested in previous studies (Meece, 2003; Simpson & Ure, 1993). In Meece's study, the use of learner-centred psychological principles in the middle school sector was found to positively motivate students' academic engagement. The secondary school students in the study carried out by Simpson and Ure (1993) highlighted the need for teachers to make them more aware of their learning goals, problems and how they can solve them. They believed that

their performance depended on the quality of student-teacher relationships and the extent to which the necessary instructional adaptations are made.

In another large-scale, mixed methods study (Simmons et al., 2015), aimed at investigating how wellbeing in schools is understood and facilitated, students aged between 6 and 17 years, emphasised the importance of being provided with opportunities to “have a say” in matters relating to pedagogy, the school environment and relationships. Students aged 10–12 years old, attached importance to certain features, such as “outside learning”, “individual help on certain subjects” and “hands-on work”. These students believed that relationships with friends and teachers that were founded on equality and respect were essential to their wellbeing. The 13–14 years old cohort spoke about the need to have more skilled teachers and practical lessons to enrich their learning experience. Most of these students stressed the need of “lifelong and interactive lessons”, and “less focus on school rules”. Indeed, the findings of this study favour a shift to more democratic classroom practices and more inclusive approaches that lead to school improvement. I conclude Part 3 on LCE by highlighting some of its critiques.

4.3.2.8 Critiques of LCE

Research has shown that historically, the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies has proved to be problematic in many contexts. In her review of 72 studies on LCE implementation across different educational settings, Schweisfurth (2011) concludes that “the history of the implementation of LCE in different contexts is riddled with stories of failures grand and small” (p. 425). She (2013, 2011) highlights a number of obstacles emerging particularly from developing countries, including problems relating to the nature of educational reform and its implementation; teaching material and human resources constraints; the culture gap between teachers and learners; and the way power and agency are exercised during the implementation process. She contends that

LCE has not yet proved to achieve the ambitious aims that it strives to accomplish.

By the same token, Carter (2009) poses some generic questions relating to LCE as a global phenomenon. First, she questions whether any improvement in LOs is actually being achieved through learner-centred pedagogies. To substantiate her argument, she draws attention to the 2006 OECD's PISA triennial survey in which 15-year-old students are assessed in mathematics, reading and science. The PISA results revealed that, amongst the 57 participating countries in 2006, those which usually adopt traditional (i.e., non-learner-centred) pedagogies performed equally well or even better within the top group than those countries which promote learner-centred approaches. It transpired that the length of time spent on a task per week was the only aspect of pedagogy which led to increased performance.

It should be added that in the results of the 2012 PISA survey, countries like Shanghai in China and Singapore, which do not have a culture of employing learner-centred pedagogies, continued to perform better (OECD, 2014). However, efforts have been made in these countries, like many others, to break with tradition – from a predominantly knowledge-transmission model towards more learner-centred pedagogies. Moreover, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that the first participation of Malta in PISA was in the 2009+ project, held in 2010, in which it was placed in the 45th position among 74 countries. In the subsequent surveys, Malta did not make any significant achievements either. Although this might not necessarily be linked to the pedagogical approaches being adopted at the time by class teachers, it should be noted that, at policy level, learner-centred practices were already being advocated in the Maltese educational system.

Secondly, Carter (2009) enquires about the LOs that are sought to be improved and the rationale behind them through the adoption of LCE. Although, as she observes, LCE is usually perceived as value-free, non-political and technical in its

approach to enhance LOs, it is nonetheless political and therefore value-laden. Thirdly, Carter (2009) highlights the risk of viewing LCE as a one-size-fits-all approach which could be applied to any cultural context, notwithstanding issues of diversity. Research has shown that LCE should become more sensitive to cultural norms in response to counter globalisation discourses, which support traditional pedagogies and knowledge, such as those employed in ethnic cultures (Tabulawa, 2003). Not only was LCE criticised for being imported from the West, but criticism was also directed towards its association with neo-liberal agendas, with Tabulawa (2003) declaring that it has become the preferred pedagogy of neo-liberalism for the promotion of its doctrines.

4.4 Conclusion

The review of the literature has contributed towards achieving the aims of my research study by exploring three key themes: (1) curriculum policy reform; (2) curriculum policy implementation and enactment; and (3) LCE. The literature on the first theme revealed the complexity of policy processes and their political inclination which explains why public policies are inevitably contested. The policy process, described in terms of a continuous policy cycle, highlighted the importance of the micro-political context within schools which enables policy to become recontextualised. Policy was also conceptualised as both 'text' and 'discourse'. This dual conceptualisation of policy has helped me to critically analyse the NCF and ELOF policy texts, in Chapter 6. Whereas the notion of policy as text enabled my interpretation of these policy documents, the notion of policy as discourse assisted my analysis in establishing the causes of power and challenging truth claims.

Regarding the second theme, I critically reviewed the key dimensions of policy implementation in terms of the three Ps: (1) policy; (2) people; and (3) places. I explained how the fidelity and mutual adaptation perspectives, being considered as dominant approaches to curriculum implementation, differ from the

curriculum enactment perspective whereby teachers and students jointly shape and experience the curriculum. Alongside these theories on curriculum implementation, the discussion on policy enactment relating to policy actors' interpretation and translation of policy texts has helped me to explore school leaders' and teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies. This perspective of policy enactment, which I critically analyse in Chapter 7, was found to be a theoretically richer concept than conceptions of policy implementation.

The literature on the third theme highlighted the philosophical and psychological concepts of LCE. The contemporary debates on LCE have demonstrated that learner centricity, as a concept, is indeed contested. The literature has shown how proponents of LCE resorted to three justificatory narratives – *cognition*, *emancipation* and *preparation*, to justify its adoption and dissemination across educational contexts. These justificatory narratives explored stimulated my discussion and analysis of LCE, in Chapters 6–9. Learner autonomy and OBE have also been critically reviewed and discussed to provide further insights on LCE.

This body of literature has also identified a gap in previous literature on learner-centred policy enactment. This identified gap helped me to explore practices of policy enactment in the local context, including students' perspectives and experiences of learner-centred practices, which I critically examine in Chapter 8. Also, my literature review influenced my choice of research questions, methodology and methods. In the next chapter, I explain the choice of my research design, in line with the theoretical concepts presented in this literature review.

5

Methodology and Methods

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce, justify and critically evaluate the methodological approaches and methods used in this study. It starts with the research questions that guided this study and moves on to distinguish between methodology and methods, followed by a discussion on research paradigms and, more specifically, the critical-interpretative paradigm. By being reflexive, my positionality in critical-interpretative research is also detailed, whereby I highlight my values and beliefs in relation to ontological and epistemological assumptions. Following this, I reflect on my history and positionality in relation to LCE, and proceed to detail the sampling of context.

In this chapter I explain and justify my chosen methods for data collection. Firstly, I provide a theoretical account of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discuss its value as an approach, through which learner-centred policy discourses were analysed. Thereafter, I present Hyatt's (2013a, 2013b) CDA framework for policy analysis that guided me in contextualising and deconstructing policy discourses. A sample selection of policy texts is provided in order to exemplify my engagement with the selected CDA framework of analysis. The strengths and limitations of the CDA method are also evaluated. I then briefly describe the framework (Harrison, 2003) used for the purpose of visual semiotic analysis.

Next, I elaborate on and justify the selection of two additional research methods that were used in the investigation into policy enactment: school leader and teacher semi-structured interviews and student focus group interviews. Afterwards, I provide details concerning the process of fieldwork, including

procedures of data collection and the challenges encountered during the course of the research study and how these were dealt with. The strengths and limitations of both interview styles are also highlighted. A description of the stages involved in analysing the interview data is then presented, in compliance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for the management of thematic analysis. Ethical considerations in relation to social research follow. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on the trustworthiness and credibility of my data analysis.

5.1 Research questions

As explained in more detail in Section 1.5, this study is guided by the following overarching research question: *How are learner-centred practices envisioned and enacted within the context of the curriculum policy reform in Malta?* To narrow the focus of my study, this broad research question has been subdivided into three subordinate questions. Table 5.1 details the data collection methods used to address each of these subordinate questions, together with information relating to the analysis of the data collected and the participants involved.

Research questions		Data collection methods	Data analysis	Participants
RQ1	What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?	Critical discourse analysis	Critical analysis of learner-centred policy discourses, complemented by visual semiotics, as embedded in the NCF and ELOF policy documents.	Not applicable
RQ2	How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?	Semi-structured interviews	Schools' responses to the learner-centred curriculum policy reform, including analysis of visual artefacts (i.e., the schools' websites, lesson observation checklists, classroom charts, diaries, as well as school development plans).	3 school leaders 14 teachers, of which 3 are HODs and 2 NQTs
RQ3	What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?	Focus group interviews	Student experiences of in-class/out-of-class learner-centred practices.	35 students

Table 5.1 *Research questions, data collection methods, data analysis and participants*

In the next sections, I describe and justify my chosen methodology, research assumptions and positionality.

5.2 Methodology

In educational research, a distinction is often drawn between methodology and methods. Wellington (2000) describes methodology as the means by which the researcher selects, contemplates upon, evaluates and validates the methods to be adopted in research. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) argue that methods can be understood as the choice of 'ingredients' of research, whilst the methodology aims at justifying the use of a specific research 'recipe'. They contend that decisions relating to methodology are based on the researcher's values and assumptions which, in turn, influence the research study. Such assumptions are

located within research paradigms and expressed in researchers' positionality, as explained below.

5.2.1 Research paradigms

A paradigm, apart from encompassing methodology and methods, as described above, comprises *ontology* (i.e., assumptions concerning the nature of social reality) and *epistemology* (i.e., assumptions about knowledge and how it is produced). Paradigms differ in the way they view reality and knowledge and this explains why they hold different ontological and epistemological conjectures. My study is informed by both the critical and interpretative traditions, to which I turn in the next sections.

5.2.1.1 The critical research paradigm

From an ontological standpoint, the critical paradigm is based on historical realism which implies that reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values (Lincoln et al., 2011). Reality is constructed through social entities which are always being influenced by internal pressures (i.e., power relations) (Scotland, 2012). The view taken by the critical paradigm is that social structures are formed by the persistent conflicts of dominant and dominated groups (Crotty, 1998). The epistemological stance of the critical paradigm views knowledge as being constructed socially and determined by power relations which prevail in society (Scotland, 2012). It is the interaction of the critical researcher and the participants that leads to knowledge creation (Plack, 2005). Although critical theorists are sometimes criticised for their hidden agendas in bringing about a political change, the advantages of this paradigm, in proclaiming to change the phenomena under debate, outweigh its limitations (Ernest, 1994).

One of the reasons I have adopted the critical paradigm is to find ways of attending to school leaders', teachers' and students' voices in order to reflect on and improve existing educational practices, thereby advocating for a more equitable system. As Kincheloe et al. (2011) contend, the objective of the critical paradigm is to unveil the social inequalities of the unquestioned predominant culture. Also, in my study, the critical paradigm is crucial in disclosing the underlying ideology embedded in the construction of policy texts, thus aiming at uncovering the ways in which education can operate as a mechanism for both oppression and liberation. The interpretative research paradigm is discussed next.

5.2.1.2 The interpretative research paradigm

The interpretative paradigm embraces an ontology which implies multiple realities. In an interpretivist study, reality is regarded as subjective and individually constructed (Scotland, 2012). Reality manifests itself to each person as a world of meanings, institutions, and interpretations (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). This explains why language constructs social reality (Sandu, 2016). Thus, reality results from the intricacy of human sense-making (Pozzebon, 2003). The epistemological position is reliant on subjectivism. The social world and the people's perception of the world around them are one and the same thing (Grix, 2004). Since knowledge is socially constructed, an understanding of the individuals is necessary in order to understand the social world (Cohen et al., 2011).

A characteristic of the interpretative paradigm is that it accepts ideologies as given, unlike the critical paradigm which questions them. Although the interpretative paradigm is sometimes criticised for being subjective, interpretivism remains a suitable paradigm for social sciences due to its investigative depth and interpretive adequacy (Shank & Vilella, 2004). My application of the interpretative paradigm, in addition to the critical paradigm, is

to produce an in-depth understanding of educational practices by focusing on the subjective meanings and experiences of school leaders, teachers and students, thereby illuminating the complex ways in which learner-centred policy becomes enacted, in specific contexts of schooling. A discussion of my philosophical positioning ensues.

5.3 My positionality in relation to critical-interpretative research

The researcher's positionality on how to conduct research is crucial since, as Clough and Nutbrown (2012) state it "affects research designs and processes as well as the ethical practices which are inevitably present throughout any study involving human beings" (p. 10). Wellington (2000) distinguishes between *reflectivity* and *reflexivity*. *Reflectivity* constitutes a critical reflection on the entire research process, including the construction of the research questions, the methods to be employed and considerations about the sampling strategies. Conversely, *reflexivity*, as a constituent of *reflectivity*, is the process of engaging in self-reflection. It is a form of critical thinking about the researcher's impact on all aspects of the research project.

Reflexivity is a leading concern for social research because it "demands transparent articulation of researcher positionality and the significance of this to data collection and analysis" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 48). Rogers et al. (2005) have reported that the move from reflection to reflexivity does not always occur, which poses a problem for researchers to approach their research. In my reflexive exercise, I not only reflect upon my past experiences and prior knowledge, which I elaborate upon in the following section, but also question and explore positions and assumptions. My philosophical underpinnings are congruent with the ontological and epistemological positions of the critical-interpretivist paradigm, described above.

My ontological position is based upon the belief that reality is constructed both subjectively and socially, whilst being influenced by politics and power relations. As Walsham (1993) observes, the elements of the critical-interpretative paradigm emphasise “not only the importance of subjective meanings for the individual actor, but also the social structures which condition and enable such meanings and are constituted by them” (p. 246). My epistemological stance views knowledge as personal and unique, value-laden, whilst being co-constructed within the social context by the researcher and the participants.

My positionality, knowledge and experience have influenced the conduct of my research. My primary aim is to conduct research which seeks to understand school leaders’, teachers’ and students’ subjective meanings and experiences but, at the same time, challenges the existing social structures and cultural practices. By the same token, I view situations in terms of social interaction as well as in terms of conflict.

5.4 My history and positionality in relation to LCE

In order to better contextualise my research study, I feel it is appropriate to briefly highlight my personal and professional history which has influenced the conduct of my study. As Wellington et al. (2005) demonstrate, “we make sense of our lives and the things that happen to us through narratives which provide links, connections and coherence in ways that we find meaningful” (p. 9). Born into a working class Roman Catholic family, in the late sixties, I was the middle child out of three siblings. As a family, we lived in a relatively large village in the central region of the Maltese Islands. Unfortunately, my younger sister died when she was eight-years-old, whilst my eldest sister passed away a few months after I started my doctoral studies, when she was in her late forties. Needless to say, these events had a profound effect on us as a family and instilled in me a desire to look more deeply for meaning in my life.

Both of my parents terminated their formal education at an early age but my mother, in particular, always strived to support our educational journey. Despite this, my eldest sister started working in a factory soon after she completed her secondary education. On my part, I spent my primary schooling and the first two years of secondary education in the local government school at our locality. At age thirteen, following peer pressure and influenced by a particularly negative comment passed by one of my Maths teachers during Parents' Day regarding my progress during secondary school, which was a blow to my self-esteem, I opted to attend a trade school where I spent five years studying mechanical engineering, alongside basic academic subjects.

During this period, I fared well in languages and was even successful in winning the first prize in a national essay competition. I remember how much my English and Maltese teachers used to praise me for my creative writing. They even encouraged me to consider sitting for my Ordinary level exams, even though it was not within the trade schools' remit to prepare students for such exams. I decided to follow their advice and consequently, whilst continuing the mechanical engineering programme, I started attending private tuition. This involved a large sacrifice on the part of my parents for the financing of the private lessons of the subjects I needed to attend a post-secondary institution. From then on, I never looked back. After obtaining my Ordinary levels, I entered Stella Maris College Sixth Form where I studied English, Maltese and Philosophy as my main subjects, and subsequently pursued undergraduate and post-graduate studies at the University of Malta.

Initially, my goal was to become a lawyer. However, at the time, the law course used to be offered by the University every other year and the year I obtained my Advanced level exams coincided with the year the law course was not offered, so instead of missing a year, I decided to specialise further in English and Maltese. This was a decision which I never regretted since I realised that there were other professions which were equally challenging and rewarding, such as the teaching

profession. This is why I eventually continued to specialise in the educational field and by 2000 I had completed my master's degree in Applied Linguistics, which I passed with distinction.

During my undergraduate and post-graduate years at the University of Malta, I participated actively during lectures, although I must admit that I learnt a great deal by listening, as in traditional modes of teaching, to some of the high-profile professors who taught me. When I started my teaching career in the late eighties, as an English and Maltese secondary school teacher, in three different school localities, I was preoccupied with the lack of student involvement in the classroom, which was very similar to my own experience of primary and secondary schooling. Along the years, I began to experiment with learner-centred pedagogies, mainly by engaging students in group work, whilst assigning roles and responsibilities to each group member, though with varying levels of success. Many times, I had to intervene to provide guidance and support.

In 2007, after twenty years of teaching experience in various state secondary schools in Malta, I was chosen as Head of College Network, a new leadership position which was created due to the introduction of the College network organisation in Malta. Such position required effective networking and co-ordination of the schools within the network, as well as the monitoring and facilitation of the effective implementation of the National Curriculum within the College schools, through novel pedagogies. In 2012, whilst in this position, I embarked on my doctoral research, which was instigated by the philosophical underpinnings of learner centricity, emanating from the national curriculum policy reform (MEDE, 2012). As a result of my readings, together with the guidance provided by my supervisor, I began to realise, in hindsight, that my implementation of LCE, during my teaching years, had not touched upon certain important aspects of learner-centred pedagogy, such as learner control of content and assessment (Chung & Davies, 1995; Chung & Reigeluth, 1992; Schweisfurth, 2013b; Topping, 2009).

In my literature search, I also came across the work of Stephen Ball and his colleagues (Ball et al., 2012) in relation to policy enactment in secondary schools. It was here that I became increasingly aware of the diverse and complex ways in which schools interpret and translate policy texts into practice, in the context of their situated realities. Through my readings on policy enactment, I became even more concerned with issues of power, which prompted me to delve deeper into the philosophical work of Michel Foucault. His writings, along with studies on policy enactment, changed my way of thinking about the manner in which policies are formulated, implemented and evaluated. For the first time, I began to acknowledge the politics involved in the policy process.

This helped me to adopt a more critical stance vis-à-vis education policy when in 2014 I assumed the role of Curriculum Policy Advisor within the Directorate for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability, in which capacity I provided advice in connection with curriculum planning and development. Subsequently, in 2021, when I was appointed to my current role, as Head of the School Internal Review and Support Unit within the Directorate for Educational Services, I sought to act as a critical friend when supporting schools in the execution of an effective internal review process so as to inform school development planning. Very often, the outcome of such self-evaluation exercise compels schools to incorporate aspects of LCE in their SDP, as one of their priority development targets.

In view of the above, my positionality in relation to LCE hinges on the premise that even though it has been perceived as 'best practice', LCE should not be considered as a unique approach to teaching and learning since what usually happens in practice is that teachers employ a hybrid of teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches, which are deemed appropriate for the context in which they work (Schweisfurth, 2011, 2015, 2019; Thompson, 2012; Vavrus, 2009). For the purpose of this study, my understanding of LCE concurs with Schweisfurth's (2013b) conception of learner-centred pedagogy which emphasises that learners should be given greater control, not just over content

(what is learnt), but over the process of learning (how they learn). Such pedagogical approach requires a consideration of learners' personal interests, capacities and needs.

My view of LCE, however, is not framed within a neo-liberal ideology, which perceives students as human capital who need to be trained to compete successfully in the labour market (Apple, 2005; Connell, 2013; Hoffman, 2009). On the contrary, I construe education, in its widest sense, as a means to enable the development of human selves, "not in accordance with economic imperatives but in accordance with wellbeing and individual flourishing as core aims of education" (Patrick, 2013, p. 6). Similarly, my understanding of policy enactment is aligned with the work of Ball et al. (2012) who describe the processes involved in policy enactment in terms of the "interaction and inter-connection between diverse actors, texts, talk, technology and objects (artefacts) which constitute ongoing responses to policy, sometimes durable, sometimes fragile, within networks and chains" (p. 3).

5.5 Sampling of context

In my study, I have focused on state co-educational middle schools in Malta since, as explained in Section 1.2, their curricula were the first to be redesigned and piloted during scholastic year 2011–2012, in compliance with the then learner-centred consultative policy documents (MEEF, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e), which were produced in preparation for the final version of the NCF (MEDE, 2012). I decided to select three out the ten middle schools so that I could carry out an in-depth study with a manageable number of schools. Since my objective was to obtain information on how learner-centred policy was being enacted and given that the envisaged policy applied to all middle schools in the same way, the selection of the three middle schools was entirely based on convenience sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014; Saumure & Given, 2008).

I started by searching the Ministry for Education website for the contact details of potential middle schools. After obtaining ethical clearance, as explained in Section 5.8, contact was made with three of the schools via email, whereby all the necessary information, consisting of a letter addressed to the Head of School, a participant information sheet and a consent form (see Appendices 3, 4, 8), was attached. This procedure had to be repeated twice until three schools accepted to participate. The selected schools form part of three different state colleges in Malta, two of which are situated in the North and one in the Southern part of the island. Further details about each of the three schools are provided in Section 7.1. In Sections 5.6.3 and 5.6.4, I discuss the methods and procedures used in the collection of the data from the three schools.

5.6 Research methods

Brannen (2004) argues that the choice of method is influenced by the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, and theoretical considerations. The methods employed in this study, in accordance with my ontological and epistemological premises described above, generate qualitative data since in qualitative research the main objective is to interpret phenomena in relation to how people perceive social realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Flick (2002) maintains that the adoption of multiple methods in qualitative research provides depth to the research study. My choice of the CDA approach, individual interviews and student focus group interviews was made in line with my positionality, the research aims, my research questions, the literature review, and conceptual framework. I start with a consideration of CDA.

5.6.1 Critical discourse analysis

In reviewing the literature on CDA in education, Rogers et al. (2005) contend that critical research on discourse was first studied by language philosophers and

social theorists. Prominent among these scholars were Wittgenstein (1953), Voloshinov (1973), Bakhtin (1981) and Pêcheux (1982). Later, Fairclough's (1989) publication of *Language and Power* led to the term CDA. There were, nonetheless, several developments in linguistic theories during the 1970s that have created an awareness among linguists of the need to reflect upon issues related to society. These changes resulted in the shift from 'traditional' to 'interactional' and then to 'critical' linguistics (CL). What is known today as CDA, with its emphasis on language and discourse, has emerged from CL (van Dijk, 2001), which is interested in researching texts according to their socio-political contexts. Both CL and CDA were influenced by Halliday's (1975, 1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which viewed language as a social semiotic system. Wodak (2004) argues that, although CL and CDA are usually used interchangeably, researchers prefer to use the term CDA.

CDA is problem-oriented and interdisciplinary in nature (Wodak, 2014). It is usually referred to as both a theory, for theorizing about discourse, and a method, for analysing social practices. But the theories and the methods it draws upon are not made explicit (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). For this reason, van Dijk (2013) does not view CDA as a method, arguing that there is no systematic procedure or a specific, well-defined method for doing 'critical' analysis. CDA studies therefore should be understood as comprising multiple approaches which differ from one another in terms of their agenda, the methods of research employed and the theoretical perspectives they embrace. However, the unifying principle underlying these eclectic approaches is "a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, and political-economic, social, or cultural change in society" (Wodak, 2014, p. 302). I find helpful van Dijk's (2001) definition of CDA which he describes as:

... A type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (p. 352)

What distinguishes CDA from other approaches to discourse analysis is mirrored in: (1) the attention it gives to the relationship between language and society; as well as (2) its concern with analysing discourse critically (Fairclough et al., 2011). A close look at both the 'discursive' and 'critical' elements in CDA aims to establish a deeper understanding of how to engage with CDA. In the following sections, I outline the key concepts that are closely linked to the critical analysis of discourse.

5.6.1.1 Discourse in CDA

In Sections 4.1.1.2 and 4.1.1.3, I explained how policy is conceptualized as both 'text' and 'discourse'. Whereas policy as text has been referred to as encompassing different representations of policy, such as political speeches, aimed at transmitting a policy message, the notion of policy as discourse was taken to signify not only the language of policy as it is written and as it might be interpreted, but also the actual impact of language use. It is for this reason that, within a CDA tradition, language use (in both speech and writing), as implied in the term 'discourse', is deemed to be a form of social practice rather than an individual activity (Fairclough, 1992).

Among the various approaches to discourse analysis (DA), Fairclough (2003), for instance, draws a distinction between the 'textually-oriented discourse analysis' (TODA), whereby emphasis is laid upon the linguistic features of texts, through which social practices can be analysed and critiqued; and other approaches which, in contrast, are inspired solely by social theory, without analysing the textual (linguistic or other semiotic) properties. These latter approaches which give precedence to theorizing social processes, tend to embrace a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) since, apart from dismissing a linguistic enquiry by not focusing, for instance, on grammatical or structural features "that *make up* the text", they seek to analyse texts according to "what is *made up* by the text itself"

(Graham, 2011, p. 671). In other words, FDA requires texts to be analysed according to their historical and social context (Taylor, 2004).

Fairclough (2003) has advocated an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse, in that in his TODA framework he employs the social (Foucauldian) theory of discourse as well as the linguistic theory developed by Systemic Functional Linguistics in order to merge the (non-linguistic) social with linguistic practices (Rogers et al., 2005; Taylor, 2004). In this way, social practices become linguistically analysable. Fairclough's work had a significant impact on the development of CDA. Indeed, as a general rule, scholars working within the CDA tradition, as opposed to some other approaches used in DA (e.g., conversation analysis), attempt to link social theories with linguistic work. In so doing, the goal of the critical discourse analyst is to establish a connection between the micro-level of analysis, concerning language use, and the macro-level analysis of social and cultural structures, such as power, dominance and inequality. Hence, in its endeavour to combine social theory with DA, CDA strives "to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourse constructs, becomes constructed by, represents, and becomes represented by the social world" (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 366).

Drawing on this view of discourse, as being situated between the linguistic and the social, Gee (2015) differentiates between little 'd' and big 'D' discourse. Little 'd' discourse represents the use and usage of language, that is what is said or written, whilst the big 'D' discourse, besides the linguistic element, embodies social practices, being described as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and, often, reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities ..." (p. 4). The big 'D' discourse provides a broader scope for analysing language-in-use (discourse with a little 'd'). In principle, *discourse* is then understood as part of *Discourse*. Since discourse, denoted by both little 'd' and big 'D', is the product of social and political

histories, issues of power relations have a crucial role to play (Rogers, 2011; Rogers et al., 2005).

CDA therefore aims at exploring the dialectical relationship between language (i.e. discursive practices) and society (i.e. social practices). This dialectical approach comprises a two-way relationship, illustrating how “language influences the contexts in which it occurs and [how] contexts influence language production” (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 369). A similar observation is made by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), when stating that discourse does not only ‘constitute’ the social world but is also ‘constituted’ by social practices. In this sense, due to its social influence, discourse can potentially assist to maintain the existing social conditions, or otherwise, help to change them (Fairclough et al., 2011).

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) encapsulate the key precepts that inform the practice of CDA. They argue that researchers working in the field of CDA tend to be guided by a set of conventions, as specified in the following eight foundational principles: (1) CDA addresses social problems; (2) power relations are discursive; (3) discourse constitutes society and culture; (4) discourse does ideological work; (5) discourse is historical; (6) the link between text and society is mediated; (7) discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory; and (8) discourse is a form of social action (pp. 271–280). Given the importance attached to the term ‘critical’ in CDA, the following discussion elaborates upon the notion of the critical research paradigm, as previously mentioned in Section 5.2.1.1, by focusing specifically on the theoretical perspectives that underpin the critical approach to the study of discourse.

5.6.1.2 The critical approach in CDA

The term ‘critical’, as used in CDA, has emerged from the Frankfurt School of critical theory, which was influenced by Marxist philosophy (Fairclough et al.,

2011). In essence, critical theories seek to investigate social phenomena by challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions (Wodak, 2014). It is the belief of critical theorists that language is a key factor for both the formation of subjectivities (i.e., the manner by which individuals become the subject of power) and subjugation (i.e., the way individuals are being governed) (Rogers et al., 2005). According to Arnott and Ozga (2010), the critical element of CDA is concerned with demonstrating how discourse attempts to retain power. CDA is therefore viewed as a marriage between DA and critique (Wickham & Kendall, 2007).

Gee (2011) and Rogers et al. (2005) make a useful distinction between the non-critical and critical approaches to DA. Gee (2011) claims that the non-critical approaches, despite being concerned about social practices, are merely interested in analysing patterns of social interaction, where the emphasis is placed on the use of language in specific situations. In contrast, the critical approaches tend to go deeper by investigating the implications that arise from social interactions, including the way power and social goods are distributed in society. By the same token, Rogers et al. (2005) argue that the non-critical forms of DA, such as sociolinguistic analysis, often rests upon the *descriptive* and *interpretative* characteristics of language use, as opposed to the critical approaches whose role is to *explain* “why and how language does the work that it does” (p. 369).

Wodak (2014) observes that the term ‘critical’ conveys different interpretations. The first important aim is to challenge the ‘obvious’ and uncover what is hidden or, as she puts it, to “make the implicit explicit” (p. 304), that is to say, making visible the relationship between discourse, power and ideology. Ideologies, for instance, are very often camouflaged with analogies and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The second objective of the ‘critical’ element is linked to the critical discourse analyst’s participation in self-reflection, which requires the researcher to be self-critical, in that s/he does not only critique others but is also

critical of his/her own approach to research. Thus, “any critical approach to analysis needs to be reflexively mindful of its limitations” (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 843). Third, analysing discourse from a ‘critical’ lens may result in social change.

Rogers et al. (2005) argue that any language analysis is necessarily critical since language constitutes social practices that are not always dealt with in the same way. These social practices give rise to unequal relations of power and therefore the purpose of critical research is to “investigate and analyse power relations in society and to formulate normative perspectives from which a critique of such relations can be made with an eye on the possibilities for social change” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 2). For Fairclough (1993), being ‘critical’ necessitates an investigation into how power relations give rise to and shape ideologically discursive practices, texts and events. The ‘critical’ approach, he argues, is also envisioned to examine the extent to which the opaqueness of the relationship between discourse and society leads to the protection of power and hegemony.

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony can be said to occur “when people in a society think alike about certain matters, or even forget that there are alternatives to the status quo” (Wodak, 2014, p. 306). This brings us back to the point that has been made earlier, in Section 4.1.1.3, that the people who are in powerful positions in society can influence those with less power to act in a certain way, thereby demonstrating a perceived social consensus. In this sense, similar to Gramsci’s view of hegemony, as a form of domination that seeks to win the consent of the majority, Fairclough (1993) treats power as something that can be negotiated (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Foucault’s (1991, 1978, 1977a) emphasis on critique and power, including his notion of governmentality, rendered his work particularly suitable for CDA. This is partly because, on the one hand, the Foucauldian conceptions of power and governmentality, as Kendall and Wickham (2006) observe, are closely related to his commitment to unmask what is ideologically projected as truth. But on the

other hand, Foucault's (1981) theory of discourse, especially his keen interest in 'orders of discourse' in society and institutions (Rogers et al., 2005), has also provoked several scholars to delve deeper into the social use of language. Nonetheless, in spite of other (non-Foucauldian) theories of discourse that CDA draws attention to, Foucault's accentuation on social critique probably remains the most influential feature of his entire work (Kendall & Wickham, 2006). In order to exemplify my engagement with policy text analysis, in the next section I present the CDA framework through which I analyse the key policy discourses that revolve around the concept of LCE.

5.6.1.3 Hyatt's critical policy discourse analysis frame

Hyatt (2013a, 2013b) presents a CDA framework that can be used for policy analysis. It consists of two key elements: the *contextualisation* of policy and its *deconstruction*. Hyatt's framework was primarily intended to address the increasing need of taught doctoral students, within the different social science disciplines, to engage with policy analysis. As a doctoral student myself, I concur with Hyatt's views about his own framework when he claims that it is envisioned to provide a practical and analytical tool, in support of a critical engagement with policy texts analysis. In Hyatt's own words, his frame reverberates the idea propagated by Kamler and Thomson (2008) when they state that "it is important to offer students a practical, diagnostic toolkit that is not a set of rules but that illustrates and makes explicit what crafting a scholarly identity in and through text actually entails" (p. 513).

Apart from attempting to address students' concerns regarding the scarcity of practical approaches to analysing policy, Hyatt (2013a) places emphasis on what he refers to as "a collaborative community approach to doctoral pedagogy" (p. 842), whereby reciprocal and collegial practices are encouraged among the members of the doctoral community. The framework that Hyatt (2013a, 2013b) proposes, rather than being portrayed as an all-inclusive toolkit, is presented as

one possible approach for the critical analysis of texts. It encourages users to focus on those diagnostic criteria that are particularly relevant to their respective context. Nonetheless, since the researcher needs to reflect critically on his/her approach to policy analysis, thereby acknowledging any limitations that such an approach might have, the framework selected for analysis can be supplemented by other contextually-related elements. This explains my decision, as previously mentioned, to focus my critical analysis of LCE policy discourses on a combination of linguistic and other semiotic features, which provide a space for theorising and researching social practices.

The framework displayed in Figure 5.1 summarises the analytic criteria that Hyatt advocates for the critical analysis of policy texts.

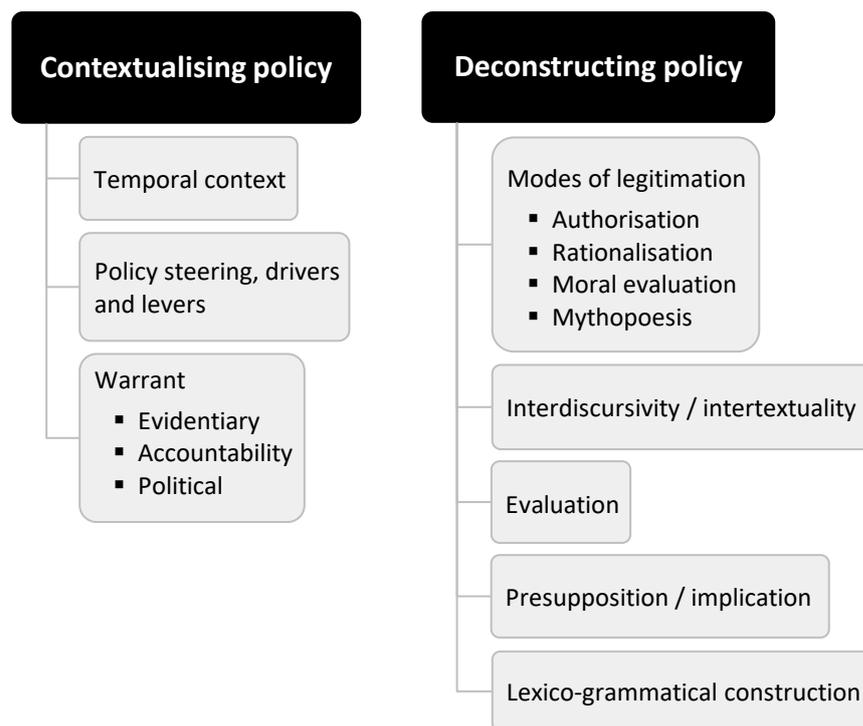


Figure 5.1 *The critical policy discourse analysis frame*
 (Hyatt, 2013a, pp. 837–843; 2013b, pp. 45–57)

Contextualising policy

In Section 4.2.3.1, I emphasised the importance of the contextual dimensions of policy enactment, which call for an investigation about the school-specific factors. These specific, context-related factors, help in achieving a better understanding of how policy becomes enacted in particular environments. In a similar vein, the context within which policy develops and becomes formulated is equally important and therefore requires a careful examination in order to shed light on the process of policy-making, as reflected in the temporal context.

Temporal context

Hyatt (2013b) insists that “all policy emerges, is constructed and is understood, within a temporal context, and, without a clear understanding of the impact and nuances of the context, any reading of a policy text can only be partial” (p. 46). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that “to fully understand the written text the policy analyst has to ‘world’ the text, situate it in its context” (p. 61, emphasis in original). It is essential to point out, however, that these historical developments are not only conceptualised as a linear sequence of events but are also construed as being influenced by culture (Hyatt, 2005b). According to Hyatt’s (2013a) framework, the contextualisation of policy texts also entails a consideration of both policy drivers and levers, as well as an exploration of what Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) describe as *warrants*. These analytic criteria require some explanation, which I now turn to discuss.

Policy drivers, levers and steering

In Section 4.2.1, reference was made to some important features of policy designs, such as *drivers* that define the overarching goals of policy, and *levers*, being referred to as ‘governing instruments’ (Kooiman, 2003) that strive to change the behaviour of individuals and groups (Hand, 2011). There are various forms of policy drivers, not merely those which are manifested in official policy documents. Sinnema and Aitken (2013) observe that the evolving international trends in national curricula are centred on a number of commonalities in

curriculum goals. Drawing on the curriculum policy developments that took place between 2004 and 2012, in seven English-speaking countries (i.e., Australia, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand and the United States), the authors identify no less than four common goals which form the bases of the national curricula in the countries under debate. Such goals view curriculum policy as a means to: (1) improve teachers' practice; (2) contribute towards equity goals; (3) respond to learners' uncertain futures, that is future-oriented curricula; and (4) enhance curriculum coherence, for example, by not being overcrowded and better connected.

These policy drivers serve as a basis for constructing and implementing policy levers. Such levers, on the other hand, in supporting policy drivers, have become the main instruments in a system which Steer et al. (2007) describe as "arms-length regulation" (p. 177). New arms-length approaches started to develop as a result of the changing forms of governance, that is to say, from Keynesian to more neo-liberal modes of governance, which paved the way to policy steering. Policy steering, a politically-driven mechanism, is conceived as the shift of direct control over the implementation of policy, from the government to a wider range of stakeholders – not solely individuals, but also agencies and public-private partnerships. This shift of direct control was due to the increased awareness that, on its own, the government could not address complex social issues (Steer et al., 2007).

Policy-makers therefore have turned to a variety of policy levers to support the implementation of policies. For example, Sinnema and Aitken (2013) note that most of the above-mentioned countries are placing emphasis on common levers for educational improvement. These levers are intended to: (1) promote student agency in curriculum, by involving students in decisions that affect their learning; (2) reinforce partnerships with parents to support teaching and learning; and (3) reduce prescription and increase schools' flexibility with respect to the application of the curriculum.

Warrant

Policy discourses can be said to revolve around the establishment of warrants, which Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) define as “the justification, authority, or ‘reasonable grounds’ [...] established for some act, course of action, statement, or belief” (p. 4). In providing a justification for policy action, warrants seek to legitimise policy texts. Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) have identified three interrelated warrants, which they labelled as *evidentiary*, *accountability* and *political*. Taken together, these warrants assist my analysis of how the learner-centred policy discourses are being constructed and debated.

The *evidentiary warrant* refers to a particular area of policy that is justified according to the evidence provided. Although the justification offered is based on empirical data and facts, usually in the form of quantitative research, such apparently convincing evidence cannot be interpreted as being impartial or value-free since it is inevitably influenced by the policy-makers’ choices and decisions (Hyatt, 2013a). The second warrant, the *accountability warrant*, represents the justifications made on the basis of the results and outcomes that the policy is envisaged to produce. As Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) assert, this notion of accountability is prevalent in policy discourses and increases teachers’ responsibility to abide by the recommended policy initiatives in order to achieve the projected policy outcomes, which brings to mind Ball’s (2003) discussion on performativity. The accountability warrant strives to highlight the policy-makers’ concerns regarding the consequences of not implementing the policy and the risks associated with the adoption of approaches other than those prescribed by the policy (Hyatt, 2013a).

The third and final warrant is concerned with justifying policy according to what is deemed to be in the national interest. Indeed, Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) explain how the *political warrant*, in emphasising the concept of the public good, interacts with the accountability warrant. It must be stressed, however, that the language used by the political warrant is more generic and highly-evocative, as

revealed in policy discourses surrounding such concepts as social justice, democracy, equality, freedom, diversity, pluralism and inclusion.

Deconstructing policy

Policy deconstruction, the second element of Hyatt's (2013a) frame, focuses on text and discourse. He does this by combining a selection of analytical tools from Critical Literacy Analysis (Hyatt, 2005a) and Fairclough's (1995) work on CDA. In deconstructing policy texts, attention is drawn to both the macro-level of analysis, with its focus on the semantic and societal characteristics, and the micro, lexico-grammatical features.

A key aspect of policy deconstruction is to challenge what Fairclough (2001) refers to as the process of *naturalisation* in which the dominant ideologies embedded in texts will become manifested as if they were 'natural' or 'common sense'. Ideologies become 'naturalised' as a result of the repetition of certain discourses (Paffey, 2010), thereby presenting reality as self-evident (González, 2000). In treating ideologies as 'common sense', "individuals perceive the world uncritically and, to an extent, unconsciously" (Wemyss, 2009, p. 10). It is therefore the intention of CDA to 'denaturalise' the dominant discourses (ideologies) that have been 'naturalised' by unmasking the process of naturalisation, that is "the denaturalisation of text" (Luke, 1995, p. 19). In order for policy to be deconstructed, Hyatt (2013a) proposes the following set of criteria, as highlighted in Figure 5.1. These are summarised below.

Modes of legitimation

There are a number of critical issues which need to be taken into consideration when dealing with policy legitimation. The process of legitimation, which bears a resemblance to the above-mentioned warrants, sheds light on how governments attempt to justify public policies by relating them to prevailing values and norms (Hyatt, 2013a). Vaara et al. (2006) describe the various strategies that can be utilised for policy justification purposes as "specific, not

always intentional or conscious, ways of employing different discourses or discursive resources to establish legitimacy” (p. 794).

Drawing on the work of Fairclough (2003, pp. 98–100) and van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999, pp. 104–111), the main strategies of legitimation can be classified into four categories. The first strategy is *authorisation*, that is to say, legitimation by reference to authority, customs and tradition, the law and persons in whom authority is vested. *Rationalisation*, as the second mode of legitimation, is realised by reference to the usefulness of a particular social action and its associated benefits (e.g., an appeal to teachers to respect students’ right to be heard). The third major form of legitimation is *moral evaluation*, which implies that policy claims are legitimated by reference to a value system that is considered to be morally correct, like when emphasis is placed, for example, on neo-liberal discourses that promote economic values. The fourth and final mode, *mythopoesis*, alludes to a kind of legitimation that is achieved through narratives. The telling of stories in legitimising policy may involve *moral tales*, which accentuate the positive outcomes of a particular course of action, as well as *cautionary tales*, signifying the negative outcomes.

Interdiscursivity and intertextuality

In order to establish the legitimacy of their claims, policy texts very often make reference to other texts, genres, discourses and even influential persons, a process which can be analysed through the notions of *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality* (Hyatt, 2013a). *Interdiscursivity* can be viewed as the combination of different genres and discourses that reside within the text. An example of interdiscursivity can be seen in the link between the discourses of education and the economy, where a particular approach to education is typically construed, at least from a neo-liberal perspective, as a precursor of economic prosperity.

Conversely, *intertextuality*, a term first coined by Kristeva (1986), can be said to occur when elements of other texts, such as words, phrases, quotations and citations are borrowed and relocated into the text (Wodak & Fairclough, 2010),

in support of the policy 'common sense' assertions. As Fairclough (2003) puts it, intertextuality is concerned with "how the 'outside' of a text is brought into the text" (p. 17, emphasis in original), implying that "any text is a link in a chain of texts, reacting to, drawing on, and transforming other texts" (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 361). Hence, by focusing on the interdiscursivity and intertextuality of the LCE policy texts, I investigate how certain elements were taken out of their original texts (i.e., de-contextualisation) and transferred into the newly-formulated LCE policy texts (i.e., recontextualisation) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak & Fairclough, 2010).

Evaluation

The concept of *evaluation* alludes to the type of statements made by speakers or writers in order to express their position in relation to texts. These evaluative statements reveal, according to Fairclough (2003), the authors' own commitment to values. Drawing on Martin's (2000) work on evaluative lexis, Hyatt (2006, 2007, 2013a,) explains how evaluation strategies are classified either as *inscribed* or *evoked*. *Inscribed evaluation* is manifested by the inclusion of specific vocabulary (e.g., 'exemplary', 'impressive', 'inadequate', 'unsatisfactory') through which the authors' stance vis-à-vis the policy content can be clearly identified. In contrast, the vocabulary used by text producers in the case of *evoked evaluation* appears to be ideationally neutral but, in reality, indirectly evokes value judgements on the part of the readers. Examples of such vocabulary include 'reform' and 'innovation' which project a positive image, whilst 'patchwork of provisions' and 'status quo' project a negative image to the reader, irrespective of how s/he will be affected by the policy.

Presupposition/implication

Presupposition refers to the use of subtle linguistic devices that impact on the way readers or listeners understand the 'facts', as presented (Zare' et al., 2012). Hyatt (2013a) argues that such linguistic devices assist in representing constructions as 'convincing realities'. Three possible ways of analysing

presuppositions are: (1) the use of negative questions, implicating particular answers (e.g., *wouldn't it be wise to...?*); (2) the inclusion of factive verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which represent as facts the presupposed processes (e.g., *we found out that...*); and (3) the use of verbs that presuppose a change from the previous position (e.g., *the literacy policy has changed...*).

Lexico-grammatical construction

Similar to the above lexico-grammatical construction of *evaluation* and *presupposition*, other aspects of textual construction, such as the use of *pronouns*, *voice* and *tense*, can also be considered since, in Hyatt's (2013a) own words, they play a key role in the construction of a 'reality'. *Pronouns* in texts serve to position the reader either as sharing the same text values or as someone who holds different beliefs (Hyatt, 2006). In this sense, pronouns may be either inclusive (e.g., 'we' and 'us') or exclusive (e.g., 'they' and 'your').

In addition, the use of *active* and *passive voice* serves to shift the emphasis of responsibility. This is because when social actors are activated, their responsibility for doing something is accentuated (e.g., *Education Officers will guide teachers to practise learner-centred strategies*). When the agent or the 'doer' is removed (e.g., *teachers will be guided to practise learner-centred strategies*), the agency becomes unclear or hidden. This suggests that when social actors are passivated, the emphasis is placed on "their subjection to processes", in other words, on how they are "being affected by the actions of others" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 150).

The *tense* and *aspect*, as used in the text, also serve to aid 'understanding' of an event (Hyatt, 2013a; Hyatt & Meraud, 2015). For instance, the present simple tense displays an event as a fact (e.g., *education is the key to a successful future*); the present perfect denotes a past situation that may or may not fit within the current circumstances (e.g., *the need for students to gain access to higher education has never been clearer*); whilst the past simple tense may indicate that a particular event is no longer appropriate (e.g., *rote learning was never*

effective). In the next section, I conduct a CDA pilot in order to demonstrate the frame's applicability to the Maltese policy context, as specified in my first research question. In so doing, I provide a sample selection of policy extracts through which I analyse aspects of both policy contextualisation and policy deconstruction.

5.6.1.4 CDA pilot study

Since my aim in this section is to give brief examples of CDA, I chose to focus my analysis on four policy extracts that are specifically related to learner autonomy, a key concept of LCE. Indeed, in the national policy context, there is a chain of policy statements which all highlight the importance of allowing space for learner autonomy and individual responsibility. For instance, a clear focus on empowering students to take more responsibility for their actions through increased autonomous learning is found in both the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a).

In the following extract, the rhetoric of neo-liberal, economic values is dominant, with policy claims being justified not only in terms of the general learning outcomes that are envisaged to be achieved (i.e., accountability warrant), but also on the basis of the 'common good' (i.e., political warrant), whereby economic stability and autonomy are viewed as being dependent on the capacity of today's learners, who will become the future workers:

Learners need to understand how to use personal, national and global resources in order to maximise their economic value, provide stability and autonomy. They need to develop a socially responsible economic ethic that prioritises measures which promote the common good. (MEDE, 2012, p. 59)

As far as learner autonomy is concerned, the LOs related to the first three Level Descriptors of the MQF for Lifelong Learning (National Commission for Further and Higher Education [NCFHE], 2016, pp. 45–47), which are being reproduced in the NCF (MEDE, 2012, pp. 74–76) (see Appendices 21–23), stipulate that,

depending on the standards reached by the end of the compulsory schooling system, learners will be able to assume different levels of autonomy and responsibility by:

(1) taking some responsibility for completing simple tasks and exercise limited autonomy; (2) taking responsibility and exercise autonomy in well-defined tasks under a quality controlled system; or (3) taking agreed responsibility for completing complex tasks, and interact with the immediate environment and in defined actions at [their] own initiative. (MEDE, 2012, pp. 74–76)

In the above extract, the varying degrees of responsibility and autonomy that learners can potentially exercise serve as ‘reasonable grounds’ for legitimating policy. The focus on learners’ accountability reveals the discursive nature of power relations and, as Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) affirm, “the power of the outcomes idea [as manifested in the accountability warrant] is its ‘common sense’” (p. 8, emphasis in original), as if the outcomes themselves were undisputable. Moreover, the borrowing of the above learning outcomes from the MQF (NCFHE, 2016) is a clear example of intertextuality, aimed to further reinforce the claims made by the NCF policy text, in favour of learner autonomy and, thereby, responsabilising individual learners.

This move towards a greater commitment to autonomous learning, coupled with the need to instil learners with increased responsibility for their own actions, is further endorsed by ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), in which both teachers and learners are encouraged to become aware of their teaching and learning styles, the objective being to bring about more ‘effective’ learning. For this purpose, teachers are required to adopt a pedagogy that complements their learners’ varied learning styles. Such pedagogy, in turn, is believed to encourage autonomous learning, as illustrated in the following examples:

Given that one of the greatest effects on learning is when learners become their own educators (Hattie, 2012 as cited in the ELOF: DQSE, 2015a, p. 30), a pedagogy that cultivates learner autonomy should be cultivated. For both language and literature, educators should promote opportunities for deep learning, which is defined as “the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying

it to new situations". (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012 as quoted in the ELOF: DQSE, 2015a, p. 30)

Learning is more effective when educators are aware of their teaching styles and learners are aware of their learning styles. Hence, educators should employ a pedagogy that caters for the different learning styles of their learners and encourages them to exploit these styles for autonomous learning. (Rosenberg, 2013 as cited in the ELOF: DQSE, 2015a, p. 30)

A common feature of both extracts is the manner in which the claims concerning learner autonomy are being justified, by way of the interrelationship between texts. This intertextuality or the inclusion of "other voices than the author's own" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 218), can be found in the citations of and the quotation taken from other texts, which contribute to the process of recontextualisation. In the second example, the use of the adjective 'effective' is making the position of the authors very clear as to what kind of learning should be in place (i.e., autonomous learning). This inscribed evaluation, otherwise known as the authors' "explicit evaluative statement" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 215), is contributing to policy 'legitimation' by acknowledging the value of autonomous learning. The same can be said about the use of the present simple tense in the sentence: "learning is more effective when educators are aware of their teaching styles and learners are aware of their learning styles" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 30), which aids to construct an apparent factual statement.

The above extracts which have been selected for the piloting exercise have helped me to organise my analysis of policy texts according to a specific theme, that is, learner autonomy. Different analytic criteria from both elements of Hyatt's (2013a) frame (i.e., policy contextualisation and policy deconstruction) were blended together under a common theme in order to reveal "how language works in policy texts" (Taylor, 2004, p. 444, emphasis in original). In reviewing the structure of my preliminary investigation, I noted that a better approach to organising my critical analysis of texts is by grouping the policy excerpts under the analytic criterion to which they correspond. So, for example, if specific extracts are utilised to demonstrate that policy is 'legitimated' by reference to

institutional authority, a better way of analysing these passages is by clustering them under *modes of legitimation*. The same procedure can be applied to other passages that seek to support policy claims according to different criteria. This organisational structure is meant to assist my analysis in achieving an overall coherence across the CDA sections. To this effect, the policy extracts that I have selected for the purpose of analysis, in Chapter 6, have been clustered and analysed according to the said organisational structure.

My initial engagement with Hyatt's (2013a) frame also proved to be helpful in interrogating and challenging policy texts. Due to my background knowledge in linguistics, I felt confident in applying his analytical tools and did not encounter major obstacles during the pilot study. The CDA piloting exercise was also instrumental in consolidating my reflexive approach to policy text analysis. Indeed, my reflexive stance, as mirrored in my claims to knowledge and reality, has influenced the manner in which texts were read and interpreted. This is because reading policy texts through a critical lens has enabled me to concentrate on the subtleness of the ideological work that is at play and the discursive constructions of power relations. The section which follows is aimed at identifying the strengths and limitations of CDA in order to deepen my discussion on the theoretical and practical aspects of this methodological approach.

5.6.1.5 CDA: strengths and limitations

Although CDA is sometimes criticised for not embracing a standard theoretical and methodological approach to the study of discourse, Weiss and Wodak (2003) affirm that the diversity of theories and methodologies that can be employed signifies a particular strength of CDA, which is reflected in its dynamic character. In this respect, I concur with Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) when stating that the combination of social and linguistic theories within which CDA operates reveals its transdisciplinary nature "where the logic of one discipline [e.g.,

sociology] can be ‘put to work’ in the development of another [e.g., linguistics]” (pp. 16–17, emphasis in original).

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) also highlight the positive contribution that CDA can make to democracy, in that it applies the principle of democratic control to certain discursive aspects of society, such as inequalities, which appear to be residing outside any form of democratic control. To this effect, CDA attempts to generate a critical awareness of how language in social life can contribute to a democratic society. Rahimi and Riasati (2011) argue that the application of CDA ensures far-sighted and open-minded mentalities which are essential to educational systems. Indeed, when used as a device to deconstruct policy texts, CDA helps to identify how language can be manipulative and biased.

On different occasions, however, the CDA approach has been criticised for a number of reasons. One major critique is centred on CDA’s lack of objectivity. For instance, it is argued that analysts start off their textual analysis with a pre-conceived idea of what is expected to be found, which they then apply to selected parts of the text, with the result that the analysis serves simply as a confirmation of their assumptions. This suggests that the social and political ideologies, instead of being discovered from within the text, are projected onto the text (Rogers, 2004; Widdowson, 1998). I believe that such criticism is not totally justified since CDA does not project itself as neutral, but rather as a critical approach that aspires to bring about social change. Wodak and Meyer (2009) sustain that the lack of objective standards is prevalent in all kinds of discourse analysis and that “rigorous ‘objectivity’ cannot be reached by means of discourse analysis, for each ‘technology’ of research must itself be examined as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts and therefore guiding the analysis towards the analysts’ preconceptions” (pp. 31–32, emphasis in original).

Another strong critique is directed towards the lack of attention to context analysis in CDA. For example, Blommaert (2001, 2005) and Widdowson (2004) postulate that some studies fail to provide a rich account of the context within

which the critical analysis of discourse is being carried out. The superficially-treated context has prompted critics to label CDA as *out of context*, implying that policy texts “are analysed outside the context of their production, consumption, distribution, and reproduction” (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 378). Given that the account of context influences the manner in which texts are interpreted and explained (Barletta Manjarrés, 2007), I feel that such criticism provides a justification for the inclusion of context analysis in CDA studies. For this reason, as already noted, the analysis of the contextual dimension which Hyatt (2013b) elaborates upon was given due consideration in my research study and has helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the social and political function of the learner-centred policy texts.

A final critique which I think is worth mentioning concerns the fact that CDA does not often deal with matters of learning, as can be testified in the work of several scholars (e.g., Rogers, 2004, 2011). The point that has been raised in support of CDA’s application to aspects of learning is that, when applied to educational contexts, including educational policy documents, CDA provides an insight into the processes of learning. I therefore consider my critical analysis of learner-centred policy texts as an appropriate means by virtue of which the naturalisation of particular ideological discourses and their envisioned contribution to learning and social change can be revealed and interpreted.

As pointed out earlier on, in order not to limit my research study to policy text analysis, other research methods were employed in combination with CDA. The selection of and justification for additional methods is discussed in the following sections. I start by elaborating on my application of Harrison’s visual semiotic framework.

5.6.2 Harrison’s visual semiotic framework

My analysis of the visual, non-linguistic semiotic properties, although restricted, complements the textual analysis of the NCF and ELOF. It illustrates how words and visuals work together to create meaning. In this regard, I find helpful Harrison’s (2003) theoretical framework, which demonstrates that the meaning of an image is not the product of a solitary activity, but rather the result of a social process, understood as “a negotiation between the producer and the viewer” that takes into consideration “their individual social/cultural/political beliefs, values, and attitudes” (p. 47). Thus, to interpret such images, I focus on elements that correspond to Harrison’s *representational* and *interpersonal* metafunctions, a simplified version of which is shown in Tables 5.2 and 5.3.

Structures	Processes
<p>Narrative: Narrative images allow viewers to create a story about the RPs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action: The narrative is created by vectors that can be bodies, limbs, tools, weapons, roads, and so forth. • Reactional: The narrative is created by eyelines between RPs.
<p>Conceptual: RPs tend to be grouped together to present viewers with the ‘concept’ of who or what they represent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classificatory: RPs as ‘kind of’ something or members of the same class. • Analytical: RPs are displayed in terms of a ‘part-whole’ structure. • Symbolic: RPs are important for what they ‘mean’.

Table 5.2 *Basic structures and processes of the representational metafunction (Harrison, 2003, p. 51)*

As illustrated in Table 5.2, a key feature of the representational metafunction is the emphasis it places on people, locations and objects that appear in a picture. These are referred to as the *represented participants* (RPs). The key question that guides the analysis of this metafunction is: “*What is the picture about?*”. In the case of an action image, when participants are connected by a vector, they are shown as doing something to or on behalf of one another, thereby creating a narration. As regards conceptual images, these do not depict participants acting or reacting in any way. Instead, they are collectively represented as members of

the same class, or as members forming part of a structure, or even as members that collectively are transmitting a meaning. The interpersonal metafunction comprises the features highlighted in Table 5.3.

Features	Feature processes
<p>Image Act and Gaze: The image act involves the eyeline of the RP(s) in relation to the viewer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand: The RP is looking directly at the viewer. A demand generally causes the viewer to feel a strong engagement with the RP. • Offer: The RP is looking outside the picture or at someone or something within the image. In this case, the RP becomes an object of contemplation for the viewer, creating less engagement than that of the demand.
<p>Social Distance and Intimacy: Social distance is determined by how close RPs in an image appear to the viewer, thereby resulting in feelings of intimacy or distance.</p>	<p>The viewer can see an RP in six different ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimate distance: The head and face only • Close personal distance: The Head and shoulders • Far personal distance: From the waist up • Close social distance: The whole figure • Far social distance: The whole figure with space around it • Public distance: Torsos of several people
<p>Perspective – The Horizontal Angle and Involvement: This angle refers to the relationship between the position of the RP(s) and the viewer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The frontal angle: When an RP is presented frontally to the viewer. This angle creates stronger involvement on the part of the viewer as it implies that the RP is ‘one of us’. • The oblique angle: When an RP is presented obliquely to the viewer. This angle creates greater detachment since it implies that the RP is ‘one of them’.
<p>Perspectives – The Vertical Angle and Powers: There are two possible vertical-angle relationships: (1) that of the RP(s) and the viewer, and (2) that between the RPs within an image.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High angle: the RP ‘looking up’ has less power. • Medium angle: the RP ‘looking horizontally’ has equal power. • Low angle: The RP ‘looking down’ has more power.

Table 5.3 *Basic features and processes of the interpersonal metafunction (Harrison, 2003, p. 53)*

The interpersonal metafunction, as represented in Table 5.3, focuses on the actions of the producers, the RPs and the viewers of an image. This metafunction helps to answer the question: “How does the picture engage the viewer?”. In

answering this question, the researcher looks at the image act that is taking place, when human RPs are involved, and determines whether it relates to a *demand* or an *offer*, as explained above. Other considerations include the relationship between the viewer and the RPs, and the power relations involved. Moving beyond my application of the textual and visual frameworks, I now turn to focus on individual interviews.

5.6.3 Individual interviews

The findings of my policy text analysis are intended to explore teachers' sense-making and enactment of learner-centred policies, as envisaged in my second research question: *How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?* In so doing, attention is drawn to how school leaders and teachers respond to policy ideas, as hegemonic neo-liberal discourses, by analysing the micro-processes of school leaders' and teachers' interpretation and translation of policy texts into contextualised practices.

Although research on policy enactment tends to employ ethnographic methods, characterised by prolonged participant observation, as Ball et al. (2012) have demonstrated in their case-study on four secondary schools in London, I felt that, given my previous and current positions within the local Education Directorates, as explained in Section 5.4, ethnographic research was not suitable for my study because an ethnographic methodology would have borne ethical concerns due to my long-term presence in schools. Therefore, owing to the unequal power relations between the school leaders and teachers involved and myself, an alternative, equally effective method which minimises my interference in school life rests upon qualitative research interviewing. Compared to ethnography, research that is centred almost entirely on interviews offers "a highly attractive alternative for the collection of qualitative data" (Bryman, 2012, p. 469).

Interviews can be distinguished according to their degree of structure. These are classified as *structured*, *unstructured* and *semi-structured*. Structured interviews are usually conducted in the form of a survey research, typical of a quantitative research study, during which the respondents are asked the same close-ended questions, in the same order. The rationale is to achieve standardisation throughout the interviewing process. Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are more informal and the open-ended questioning technique does not follow a standardised sequence. Interviewees are therefore free to respond as they wish (Bryman, 2012).

Semi-structured interviewing, although being less flexible than unstructured interviews, offers greater flexibility when compared to structured interviews, both for interviewers, in dealing with the range and order of questions, and interviewees, in the way they respond in the course of interviews (Denscombe, 2010). Due to their relative flexibility, I opted for semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured approach appealed more to my research study, for two specific reasons: firstly, to be able to adjust the direction of interviewing according to the feedback provided by interviewees; and secondly, to obtain rich and detailed responses in relation to how teachers interpret and translate policy texts in specific school settings. It should be acknowledged, however, that the data generated from interviews, rather than establishing some kind of absolute truth, aims to elicit the multiple views of the respondents (Wellington, 2000).

The semi-structured life world interview, which Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) refer to in their study on qualitative research interviewing, draws particular attention to what interviewees encounter in everyday life, to their lived experiences. Indeed, in qualitative research interviewing, they argue, what matters is the participants' understanding of the world. These participants are looked upon as subjects, rather than objects, not only due to their active engagement in meaning-making processes, but also because they are subject to

power relations, ideologies and discourses of others that may influence how they speak and what they say.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) approach interviewing from three different perspectives. Firstly, interviewing is conceptualised as a *craft* that is learned through practice and, consequently, does not employ a specific interview method to be followed, but rather depends on the interviewing skills and personal judgements of the interviewer. The effectiveness of the interview is gauged according to the quality of the knowledge produced. Secondly, interviewing is deemed to be the vehicle whereby *knowledge is socially produced* as a result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such knowledge is understood as “contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic” (p. 21). Thirdly, interviewing is viewed as a *social practice* since it emphasises the interaction in human relationships. Since interviews have become part of everyday life, has prompted Atkinson and Silverman (1997) to suggest that people live in an ‘interview society’, with the focus of interviews being on the production of the self.

Of critical importance is the researcher’s role in generating interview data, mainly due to the implications involved, both with regard to epistemological matters that concern the production of interview knowledge and ethical considerations relating to the power asymmetry of the interview context. As far as epistemological issues are concerned, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) draw a distinction between two metaphors of the interviewer, who is seen as either a *miner* or a *traveller*. These two metaphors encourage the researcher to be more aware of his/her role and how s/he affects the knowledge actually being produced during interviews. The *miner* approach to interviewing represents the interviewer’s interest to gain access to and uncover, by way of interaction, the subjects’ interior (i.e., pre-existing) knowledge. The ultimate aim is for the interviewer-miner to engage in a process of *knowledge collection*, that is to say, to search for the interviewee’s facts of the world. In this sense, the miner

metaphor perceives knowledge as given rather than constructed, signifying a positivist or post-positivist perspective (Yeo et al., 2014).

Conversely, the *traveller* metaphor alludes to the image of the interviewer who is “on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 57). From this standpoint, there is a process of *knowledge construction* since knowledge is created and negotiated as a result of the active participation of both interviewer and interviewee. This is in line with the constructivist research model whereby the interviewer-traveller and the research subjects gain new insights and new knowledge that contribute to new ways of self-understanding (Yeo et al., 2014). In conformity with my own positionality, as discussed earlier on, I share this view of knowledge, as jointly constructed by the interviewer and interviewee, in a specific situation.

In considering the ethical issues involved in interviewing, the researcher’s integrity plays a key role in that, apart from being sensitive and empathic as required, his/her moral commitment to responsible research behaviour also needs to be reflected, as emphasised above, in the quality of knowledge produced. This especially applies when taking into consideration the fact that “the research interview is ... a specific professional conversation, which typically involves a clear power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 37).

5.6.3.1 Designing and piloting the interview guide

In formulating the interview questions, the researcher prepares either an *interview guide* or an *interview schedule*, depending on the level of structure of the interview (Bryman, 2012; Wellington, 2000). Since I opted for semi-structured interviews, I employed an interview guide which guided me during the interviewing process with school leaders and teachers. A well-prepared guide helps the researcher to establish a rapport with interviewees which enables

them to be more comfortable sharing personal information (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In my interview guide, I included questions which were based on issues emanating from my critical review of the literature, as found in Chapter 4, as well as my critical analysis of the NCF and ELOF policy texts, as highlighted in Chapter 6. The interview questions were classified into three broad categories: (1) school-specific factors; (2) conceptualisations of LCE; and (3) practices of learner-centred policy enactment, all of which were aimed to illuminate the ways in which schools respond to policy imperatives. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) postulate that “a good interview question should contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting a good interview interaction” (p. 157).

In this study, I adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2013) model to develop my interview guide. In this regard, I included an introducing question at the beginning of the interview, permitting the participants to introduce themselves. The questions were organised in a logical sequence and clustered into broad sections by topic. Care was also taken when wording the questions so as not to tarnish the rapport with participants. Moreover, attention was paid to the inclusion of prompts and probes to allow participants to provide additional details. I also ensured to ask focused and specific questions, whilst reducing the possibility of obtaining solely obviously “socially-desirable responses” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 84). I ended the interview with a clean-up question (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to allow participants to mention anything important which had not been covered during the interview.

In order to encourage participants to provide detailed and personal responses, I included open and non-leading questions. I also asked short, clear questions and avoided asking many things in one question in order not to confuse participants. Finally, I avoided using complicated or too simplistic language and refrained from making assumptions about or criticising my participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Since the subjects of my interviews were school leaders and teachers, the interview guide was piloted with two friends of mine – a recently retired Head of School and an English language teacher, who did not form part of the chosen sample. The pilot interviews, which were conducted according to the same ethical review procedure employed during the actual interviews, helped me gauge the appropriateness of the questions asked so that I could make the necessary amendments. Following the pilot interviews, I needed to make a number of changes to the interview guide. These included the reordering of some of the questions, the rewording of those questions which were not so clear and the removal of repetitive questions. The final interview guide that I used during the actual interviews with school leaders and English language teachers is set out in Appendices 12 and 13.

5.6.3.2 Interview data sampling

As my second research question implies, the participants in my study who provided information on practices of learner-centred policy enactment are school leaders and teachers. Since it is not feasible to interview the entire population of school leaders and English language teachers in all state middle schools, as the context of my study, I chose a sample appropriate to my research question and objectives of the study, which provides adequate data for a comprehensive analysis of the subject under review (Morse & Field, 2002). Attention therefore has been drawn to: (1) the amount of data needed; (2) the selection of the sample; and (3) the recruitment of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 55).

Although there are no specific rules regarding the sample size in qualitative research, this sample size is generally smaller than that used in quantitative research (Patton, 2002). Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue in favour of sample sizes which are less than twenty when interviews are used for data collection purposes since they believe that such sample sizes permit the closer involvement

of the researchers with their participants, whilst generating fine-grained data. Kuzel (1999) recommends a sample size of twelve to twenty when the research attempts to maximise the variety of participants' responses. Based on this line of reasoning, I aimed to recruit a sample of eighteen teachers, six from each of the three schools that were chosen through convenience sampling, together with the respective school leaders, as explained in Section 5.5. My decision to specify the maximum number of participants required for this study was in preference to the *saturation criterion*, that is "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 59). This is because, as a concept, saturation is viewed as providing "little practical guidance for estimating sample sizes, prior to data collection, necessary for conducting quality research" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 59).

Apart from the sample size, an equally important decision concerns the sampling strategy to be employed. Here, a distinction is often made between *probability* and *non-probability sampling*. Whereas in probability sampling the sample is selected randomly from the whole population and therefore a representative sample is more likely to be chosen, in non-probability sampling the researcher selects the sample in a strategic way in order for the people sampled to be directly relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). Non-probability sampling is more suitable for small-scale qualitative research and was therefore the preferred sampling method for this study.

As a non-probability form of sampling, *purposive sampling* is the main sampling strategy employed in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Purposive sampling is criterion-based and, as its name suggests, the participants are purposively sampled (Ritchie et al., 2014). This approach to sampling "does not allow the researcher to generalise to a population ... in purposive sampling the researcher samples with his or her research goals in mind" (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). Purposive sampling also differs from the convenience sampling approach described in

Section 5.5, whereby the selection of the three middle schools was based on accessibility.

In conformity with the purposive sampling strategy, one of the criteria for selecting teacher participants was that they had been teaching English for at least eight years. This decision was based on the assumption that more experienced teachers would be well-positioned to respond to the learner-centred curriculum policy demands. The second criterion was the requirement for the sample to include one Head of Department (HOD) from each sample school. The reason behind this decision was to shed light on the role played by English language HODs during practices of policy enactment, including enactments of policy within subject departments. Similarly, the third criterion was the inclusion of one Newly Qualified (English language) Teacher (NQT) from each sample school in order to illuminate the ways in which less experienced teachers respond to policy imperatives.

The combination of these policy actors, together with the respective school leaders, was crucial in enlightening the complex ways in which policy becomes enacted in different contexts of schooling (Ball et al., 2012). Since the number of eligible teachers of English in the sample schools was fourteen, the sample of eighteen teachers that I aimed for, could not be reached. The sample therefore consisted of seventeen participants in total, identified by codes and pseudonyms: three school leaders and fourteen teachers, three of which were HODs and two NQTs, as demonstrated in Table 5.4.

ID Codes ⁶	Participant pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Education	State middle school pseudonyms	Years in service
HOS1	Evelyn	Female	51	Bachelor's degree	Wignacourt	30
HOS2	Amelia	Female	61	Bachelor's degree	Hompesch	37
HOS3	Elizabeth	Female	48	Bachelor's degree Master's degree	Lascaris	24
HOD1	Grace	Female	48	Bachelor's degree	Wignacourt	27
HOD2	Penelope	Female	53	Bachelor's degree Master's degree	Hompesch	30
HOD3	Lillian	Female	46	Bachelor's degree Master's degree	Lascaris	23
NQT1	Valentina	Female	24	Bachelor's degree	Wignacourt	1
NQT2	William	Male	27	Bachelor's degree	Hompesch	2
T1	Josephine	Female	60	Teaching certificate	Wignacourt	39
T2	Pamela	Female	45	Bachelor's degree	Wignacourt	17
T3	Jasmine	Female	43	Bachelor's degree Master's degree	Wignacourt	21
T4	Cecilia	Female	42	Bachelor's degree	Hompesch	18
T5	Rebecca	Female	46	Bachelor's degree	Hompesch	11
T6	Maggie	Female	44	Bachelor's degree	Hompesch	15
T7	Felicity	Female	32	Bachelor's degree	Lascaris	10
T8	Demi	Female	37	Bachelor's degree	Lascaris	9
T9	Scarlett	Female	34	Bachelor's degree Master's degree	Lascaris	10

Table 5.4 Interview participant profiles

5.6.3.3 Recruiting participants for individual interviews

As explained in Section 5.5, the three sample schools in this study were selected through convenience sampling, on the basis of accessibility (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). Since I needed to interview a number of English language teachers from each of these schools, in line with the criteria established in Section 5.6.3.2, the three school leaders whom I planned to interview became

⁶ Interviewees' codes: **HOS** – Head of School; **HOD** – Head of Department; **T** – Teacher; **NQT** – Newly Qualified Teacher

the primary gatekeepers of my teacher participants. As Webster et al. (2014) observe, “the gatekeeper ... play[s] an important role in the initial approach and in securing consent to participate, or consent for the researcher to make contact” (p. 90). In order to negotiate access to potential English language teachers, I held a face-to-face meeting with each school leader during which I provided additional information about my research project.

After the three school leaders reaffirmed their participation, a date was set for the actual interviews. At the outset of the interview, I collected the duly signed consent forms (see Appendix 8). As originally requested, they also provided me with a list of those English language teachers who had given their authorisation to the respective Heads of School to pass on to me information regarding their years in service, current position, and their email addresses for the purpose of the selection of the sample. I then identified the teachers who were eligible and contact was made with them via email. The fourteen eligible teachers all accepted to participate and were eventually invited to be interviewed. I then held short individual, face-to-face meetings, in each of the three sample schools, with these teachers so as to explain the study in further detail, whilst also passing on participant information sheets and consent forms (see Appendices 5 and 9). During these meetings, the teachers passed on their availabilities for the setting of the individual interviews.

5.6.3.4 Conducting the individual interviews

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2018. They were carried out face-to-face, at mutually convenient times, in school leaders’ and teachers’ own schools, as agreed with the participants (Yeo et al., 2014). The duration of individual interviews ranged from 45.1 to 58 minutes, the average time of the interviews being 50.7 minutes (see Appendix 15).

At the beginning of the interviewing sessions, I briefly explained, once again, the key objectives of the research project, assured them of my adherence to ethical procedures and reminded them that they were free to withdraw, if they so wished. I also introduced the ground-rules to be followed during the interviews, such as the switching off of mobile phones and the freedom to express alternative viewpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Additionally, the participants were given the option to speak either in Maltese or in English, depending on the medium of communication they felt most comfortable with. The duly signed consent forms were collected before the interview started. Demographic information of the participants is included in Table 5.4.

The interviews started with warm-up questions, such as questions relating to the participants' professional career, in order to put them at ease. During the interviews, I did not strictly follow the interview guide in order to offer greater flexibility to participants in the way they responded. I tried to avoid being judgemental of participants' responses since this is essential for successful interviewing (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At the end of the interviews, I thanked the participants and they were allowed to ask any questions regarding the research and to add on any further information, if they so wished.

5.6.3.5 Recording and transcribing interview data

In qualitative research, it is common practice for interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed (Bryman, 2012). I recorded my interviews with school leaders and teachers by means of two digital audio-recording devices, the second being used as a back-up (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in case of any equipment malfunction. The date and duration of the interviews were recorded automatically by the digital devices, as seen in Appendix 15. Given that the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview cannot be captured through audio-recording, I took field notes in an attempt to provide a more meaningful reality of the interview

context. The field notes were taken immediately after each individual interview so as not to get distracted during the interviewing process itself (Bryman, 2012).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language spoken and those excerpts from the transcripts, chosen for my analysis, which were originally written in Maltese, were subsequently translated into English. For accuracy purposes, these translations were double-checked by a colleague of mine. The aim of the word-for-word transcription was to “produce a thorough record of the words spoken” (Braun & Clarke’s, 2013, p. 168). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argue that, in transcribing their own interviews, researchers “will learn much about their own interviewing style; to some extent they will have the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation present or reawakened during transcription and will already have started analysing the meaning of what was said” (p. 207). The transcription of the data was a long and tedious process which took me twenty-one days to complete.

In transcribing data, I adopted a slightly amended version of Braun and Clarke’s (2013) transcription notation system (see Appendix 20). In order to protect participants’ identities, as soon as the transcriptions were completed, prior to conducting my analysis, their real names were replaced by pseudonyms and identification codes, as noted in Table 5.4. These transcripts were not sent to the interviewees for member checking, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) since not all of them were available during the summer recess.

In regard to referencing of data sources, the participants’ codes as well as participants’ and schools’ pseudonyms were used when including excerpts from school leaders’ and teachers’ interviews, as follows:

Example:

I think that I agree with it [LCE] to a certain extent. Like, in certain classes, I mean they [students] can do, they do well with it and they get to reach their outcomes pretty easily. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

When quantifying the number of interviewees, participants' codes on their own were used in the following manner:

Example:

Six teachers (HOD2/T4/T6/T8/NQT1/NQT2) claimed that ...

Information regarding the full list of codes is provided in Table 5.4.

5.6.3.6 Strengths and limitations of qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews are viewed as the most valuable because they offer a compromise between the inflexibility of structured interviews and the extreme flexibility inherent in unstructured interviews (Wellington, 2000). Braun and Clarke (2013) contend that qualitative interviews have the advantage that they provide in-depth information about the experiences and perspectives of participants. Also, since the researcher is in control over the data obtained, there is an increased possibility of generating data which is useful. They also argue that interviews have the advantage that smaller sample sizes are sufficient to generate enough data for the study.

Braun and Clarke (2013) concede that interviews also have their limitations since often the process of organising, conducting and transcribing interviews takes up a lot of time of the researcher. Furthermore, due to the small sample size, it may be argued that there is lack of breadth of the data collected, implying that the data cannot be generalised. In this respect, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) posit that "in postmodern conceptions of social sciences the goal of global generalisation is replaced by a transferability of knowledge from one situation to another, taking into account the contextuality and heterogeneity of social knowledge" (p. 199). This concept of transferability of knowledge is further explained in Section 5.9. In addition, face-to-face interviews lack anonymity and so participants may be reluctant to open up about certain issues. Another criticism directed towards interviews is that they are subjective rather than

objective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Since they are dependent on persons, they are not a scientific method of data collection and as such perceived as reflecting only common sense.

5.6.4 Focus group interviews

Similar to school leaders and teachers, middle school students were instrumental in providing additional insights about learner-centred practices, as articulated in my third research question: *What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?* I opted for focus group interviews in order to create an environment for students which is more natural than that created in the case of individual interviews. This is because the participants influence each other by what is discussed, similar to what happens in real life (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The focus group is primarily a group interview which involves several participants, under the guidance of a moderator who is generally the researcher. Usually, a distinction is drawn between the group interview, during which the participants discuss a number of topics, and the focus group interview, in which the interviewees focus exclusively on a particular theme. Also, the focused interview emphasises the interaction amongst the participants and their *collective* meaning-making (Bryman, 2012). In opting for focus group interviews, I am therefore more interested in students' joint construction of meaning, in relation to learner-centred practices, rather than seeking individual responses. In this sense, focus group interviews make it possible to obtain data which goes beyond that yielded by other methods of data collection (Wellings et al., 2000).

As research has shown (Eder & Fingerson, 2002), of crucial importance is for the moderator to refrain from acting like a teacher and from giving the impression that there is only one correct answer. Such an approach serves to mitigate the power imbalance which exists between students and adults. Moderators must

also ensure that the discussion remains focused since this is where the power of focus group actually lies (Patton, 2002). In my capacity as moderator, the steps I took to reap the maximum from the focus group interviews are detailed in Section 5.6.4.4.

5.6.4.1 Designing and piloting the focus group interview guide

Prior to conducting the focus group sessions, I prepared a focus group interview guide, consisting of a set of possible questions. This is similar to the interview guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013), as explained in Section 5.6.3.1, since the questions included were clear, concise and uncomplicated, whilst focusing on those issues which I wanted the students to discuss. However, the main difference is that the questions of the focus group serve as prompts in order to lead the discussion amongst the participants rather than simply responding to me, as the focus group moderator (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Given that the focus group participants were 11 to 13-year-old students, I was careful to include age-appropriate questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Although my questioning strategy was somewhat structured, following Bryman's (2012) recommendation, I was prepared to allow the discussion to deviate from the guide "since such debate may provide new and unexpected insights" (p. 512).

As in the case of the individual interviews, the focus group interview questions were formulated on the basis of the insights obtained from my critical review of the literature and the two official policy texts, as highlighted in Chapters 4 and 6. The focus group questions were grouped into six categories: (1) content of learning; (2) classroom activities; (3) the teacher's role; (4) the learner's role; (5) teacher-learner relationship; and (6) assessment practices. Through these topics, I sought to acquire a deeper understanding of teachers' professional practice.

The focus group interview guide was piloted with a group of six students in one of my sample schools, following the same ethical procedure of the actual focus

group interviews. These students did not form part of the sample selected for my study. The piloting exercise served a two-fold purpose: firstly, to ensure that the questions were understood by participants, and secondly, to help me gain more confidence in the use of the research instrument (Bryman, 2012). Following the piloting exercise, I reworded a few questions in order to make them easier to understand, whilst adding on more probing questions to allow participants to elaborate further. The focus group interview guide can be found in Appendix 14.

5.6.4.2 Focus group interview data sampling

As envisaged in my third research question, since I sought to obtain the views of middle school students on learner-centred practices, in addition to school leaders' and teachers' enactments of learner-centred policies, I chose a sample that is congruent with my research question and objectives. This necessitated a consideration of: (1) the extent of data required; (2) the selection of sampling strategy; and (3) the participants' recruitment (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 55).

The size of the focus group and its composition are crucial in determining the dynamics of the group, as well as the effectiveness of the group process. Of critical importance is the degree of the group's heterogeneity or homogeneity, the relationship between participants, the topic being discussed and the sample size (Finch et al., 2014). Whereas heterogeneity can be helpful in generating richer discussions and valuable insights (Barbour, 2005), homogeneity may enable participants to feel more at ease when speaking about certain topics (Liamputtong, 2011). Generally, the ideal is therefore to strike a balance between the two extremes (Finch et al., 2014).

As regards sample size, most researchers opt for a small number of participants. Morgan (1998), for instance, recommends between six to ten members, as a standard rule. He proposes larger groups in cases when it is expected that participants' involvement in the topic is low. Bryman (2012) argues that larger

groups are not necessarily the solution for the lack of participants' involvement since discussion might be more complicated in such a setting.

Barbour (2007) suggests that, in most cases, the maximum number of participants should ideally be eight, since in larger groups it will be more difficult for the moderator to cope with all the participants' feedback. She argues that, due to practical difficulties, including issues concerning voice recognition in audio-recordings, it will also be harder for the moderator to analyse the sessions. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that small groups of three to eight participants are capable of generating rich discussions as well as being more manageable. In view of the complex issues involved in the composition of focus groups, I decided to follow Braun and Clarke's (2013) recommendation by recruiting approximately three to eight members in each focus group.

Apart from the sample size of the focus group, the number of groups needed must also be considered. Bryman (2012) notes that too many groups are not necessarily required when adopting this research method. Usually, the number of focus groups that is needed for the research sample ranges from ten to fifteen. He contends that the more groups involved, the greater will be the complexity of the analysis, mainly due to the large amount of data generated. Rather than using saturation as a criterion for determining the number of groups needed, for the same reasons mentioned in Section 5.6.3.2, I decided to conduct six focus group interviews from amongst the three middle schools that had been identified for the purpose of my study – two focus groups from each sample school. Given that there are two year groups in middle schools (i.e., Years 7 and 8), I proceeded with one focus group from each year group. I decided to limit my focus groups to six in order to be able to provide a detailed analysis of students' experiences of learner-centred practices, rather than to predict any generalisations from the data. Macnaghten and Myers (2004) argue that researchers who opt for focus groups are not keen to produce a representative

sample of the population but rather to develop the views of the group participants about a particular issue.

In view of the above, purposive sampling was chosen to select the focus group members. As explained in Section 5.6.3.2, this non-probability form of sampling, which allows the researcher to select the participants in a strategic way, according to their relevance to the research questions, is more suitable for small-scale qualitative research. My participants were therefore purposively sampled, in line with five criteria.

The first criterion was that the participants, aged between 11–13, had to be chosen from middle schools. This is because, as noted in Sections 1.2 and 5.5, the middle school curricula were the first to be redesigned in compliance with learner-centred and learning outcome approaches, as envisaged in the NCF and ELOF. The second criterion was the requirement for each focus group to be mixed-gender in order to elicit the views of both boys and girls vis-à-vis learner-centred practices. Thirdly, students in each group had to be of different levels of achievement (i.e., low, average or high), based on the continuous assessment of students, so as to explore how their learning needs were being addressed through LCE. The fourth criterion was that group members should be of different nationalities, given the increased number of migrant students in Maltese schools. The final criterion was that the participants had to be students whose English language teachers formed part of the individual interview sample in order to compare and contrast the students' and teachers' claims in relation to learner-centred practices.

Although I sought to achieve a balance between the elements of heterogeneity and homogeneity of the focus group, this was not always possible since a number of eligible students did not accept to participate in my study. Moreover, for the latter reason, the maximum number of students (8) in each focus group that I aimed for (48 in total/16 from each school) could not be reached. The sample

therefore consisted of thirty-five students, identified by codes and pseudonyms, as shown in Table 5.5.

ID Code ⁷	Student pseudonyms & focus group (FG)	Gender	Age	Nationality	State middle school pseudonyms	Class	Student's English language teacher pseudonyms & codes ⁸	Academic Level
S1	Petra (FG1)	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.1	Pamela (T2)	Average
S2	Anne (FG1)	Female	13	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.1	Jasmine (T3)	High
S3	Kirsty (FG1)	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.2	Grace (HOD1)	High
S4	Christopher (FG1)	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.2	Jasmine (T3)	High
S5	Melanie (FG1)	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.3	Grace (HOD1)	High
S6	Darren (FG1)	Male	12	Italian	Wignacourt	8.3	Valentina (NQT1)	Average
S7	Nora (FG1)	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.3	Valentina (NQT1)	Average
S8	David (FG2)	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1	Josephine (T1)	High
S9	Liam (FG2)	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1	Josephine (T1)	High
S10	Alexia (FG2)	Female	11	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1	Pamela (T2)	Average
S11	Luke (FG2)	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.2	Jasmine (T3)	Average
S12	Deborah (FG2)	Female	11	Italian	Wignacourt	7.3	Jasmine (T3)	High
S13	Charlotte (FG3)	Female	12	Maltese	Hompesch	7.3	Maggie (T6)	Average
S14	Emma (FG3)	Female	11	Maltese	Hompesch	7.4	William (NQT2)	Low
S15	Sophia (FG3)	Female	12	British	Hompesch	7.4	Maggie (T6)	Average
S16	Abigail (FG3)	Female	11	Maltese	Hompesch	7.5	Maggie (T6)	Average
S17	Benjamin (FG3)	Male	12	Japanese	Hompesch	7.6	Cecilia (T4)	Average
S18	Owen (FG3)	Male	12	Philippine	Hompesch	7.6	Rebecca (T5)	Low
S19	Olivia (FG3)	Female	12	Maltese	Hompesch	7.6	Cecilia (T4)	Average
S20	James (FG4)	Male	13	Libyan	Hompesch	8.4	William (NQT2)	Low
S21	Jordan (FG4)	Male	12	Bulgarian	Hompesch	8.6	Rebecca (T5)	Low
S22	Hazel (FG4)	Female	13	Bulgarian	Hompesch	8.6	Cecilia (T4)	Average
S23	Lucas (FG4)	Male	12	Lithuanian	Hompesch	8.7	Penelope (HOD2)	High
S24	Layla (FG4)	Female	13	Libyan	Hompesch	8.7	Penelope (HOD2)	High
S25	Elena (FG4)	Female	12	Italian	Hompesch	8.8	William (NQT2)	High
S26	Noah (FG5)	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.2	Felicity (T7)	Average
S27	Jack (FG5)	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.3	Scarlett (T9)	Low
S28	Emily (FG5)	Female	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.5	Felicity (T7)	Average
S29	Veronica (FG5)	Female	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.5	Felicity (T7)	Average
S30	Harry (FG5)	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.12	Scarlett (T9)	Low
S31	Ella (FG6)	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.2	Lillian (HOD3)	High
S32	Adam (FG6)	Male	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.2	Lillian (HOD3)	High
S33	Jessica (FG6)	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.3	Scarlett (T9)	High
S34	Samantha (FG6)	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.3	Demi (T8)	High
S35	Max (FG6)	Male	11	Indonesian	Lascaris	7.11	Demi (T8)	High

Table 5.5 Focus group participant profiles

⁷ Interviewees' codes: **S** – Student

⁸ Teachers' codes: **HOD** – Head of Department; **T** – Teacher; **NQT** – Newly Qualified Teacher

5.6.4.3 Recruiting participants for focus group interviews

In order to be able to conduct the student focus group interviews in each of the three sample schools, I needed the permission of school leaders and parents, or someone in *loco parentis* (i.e., in the place of a parent) (Webster et al., 2014), in their capacity as gatekeepers (Fitzgerald, 2021). After the school leaders gave me their consent to approach the English language teachers, who had already been interviewed, I met up with them, individually, in their respective schools, this time round to identify potential students who satisfied the criteria identified in Section 5.6.4.2. This exercise inevitably had to be done in consultation with the respective teachers, given that one of the criteria was the different levels of achievement.

Since I aimed for a sample of 16 from each school, a provisional sample of 25 students per school was chosen to allow for those who do not accept to participate. Participation information sheets, together with consent forms were sent to the respective parents/legal guardians through the school administration. When the latter received the duly signed forms, I held preliminary group meetings in the three sample schools, with all the thirty-five students who showed interest in participating in my study. I felt that such meetings were essential, given the logistical constraints of focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2013). During these meetings, I provided further details of the study and students were given the opportunity to ask questions. I explained that, in order for them to participate, I required their 'assent' (agreement), which replaces consent in the case of younger children (Cocks, 2006). I then passed on the student participant information sheets, together with the assent forms (see Appendices 7, 11). Dates were then set to carry out the actual focus group interviews, in collaboration with the respective teachers. Contact with the teachers was maintained throughout via email.

5.6.4.4 Conducting the focus group interviews

The focus group interviews were held between October and November 2018. These were conducted face-to-face, in the students' own schools, in a quiet classroom, purposely chosen so as to be "free from outside distractions" (Wong, 2008, p. 258), and thus "conducive to concentration" (Yeo et al., 2014, p. 207). Inevitably, some lessons had to be lost and there were also instances when students had to give up their break. The duration of the focus group interviews ranged from 47.23 to 55.38 minutes, the average time of the interviews being 51.14 minutes.

Before I started interviewing students in focus groups, I reminded them, once again, of their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the interview at any time. At this stage, ground-rules were communicated with the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Finch et al., 2014). These included the right to express themselves freely; to respect each other's viewpoints; to ensure that all exchanged information is kept confidential (Adler et al., 2019); to refrain from passing any negative comments about their classmates or teachers; to take turns when speaking, without interrupting each other (Braun & Clarke, 2013); and to state their name before each speaking turn. The latter was essential to facilitate the transcription process, given that the sessions were not video-recorded. The students were also asked to choose the language they felt more confident in when speaking during the focus group sessions.

After the students handed in the duly signed assent forms, I asked them to provide their demographic information (see Table 5.5). The information relating to students' academic level, as detailed in the last column of Table 5.5, was provided by their class teacher. Each interviewing session began with some icebreaker activities (Griffiths et al., 2014), where the participants, including myself, as moderator, shared some information about ourselves, such as our names and interests. The participants were also asked to wear name badges and to listen to themselves speaking for a few seconds on the digital recorder. Not

only did such activities help the students feel more relaxed, but they also encouraged them to contribute to the group discussion (Adler et al., 2019). During the interviewing sessions, whilst adhering to the interview guide, I tried to be flexible enough to allow unforeseen yet relevant issues to emerge from the discussion (Wong, 2008). At the end of the interviewing sessions, I thanked the participants and they were offered the opportunity to share their final thoughts.

5.6.4.5 Recording and transcribing focus group interview data

Similar to the school leaders' and teachers' individual interviews, the student focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the use of two digital audio recorders, one of which was used as a back-up (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The details regarding the date and duration of each focus group session can be found in Appendix 16. The audio-recordings were supplemented by field notes, written immediately after each interviewing session, in an effort to capture visual and non-verbal aspects of the actual interview (Bryman, 2012).

As in the case of individual interviews, the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, in the original language used by the students. Since some of the interview extracts used in support of my analysis were in Maltese, they had to be translated into English. I asked a colleague of mine to verify my translations to ensure their accuracy. The focus group transcriptions were much more time-consuming than those of the individual interviews since they were more complicated due to the need to take into account of who is talking, whilst at the same time trying to capture what is being said (Bryman, 2012). I started transcribing these interviews immediately after the sessions took place, thereby ensuring that the details were still fresh in my mind (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It took me forty-five days to complete the transcriptions.

I made use of a slightly amended version of Braun and Clarke's (2013) transcription notation system when transcribing the data (see Appendix 20).

Before I started my analysis, students' real names were replaced by pseudonyms and identification codes, as shown in Table 5.5. These transcripts were not sent to the students for verification purposes primarily due to the complex nature of focus group transcriptions.

As regards referencing of data sources, the participants' codes as well as participants' and schools' pseudonyms were used when including excerpts from student focus group interviews, as follows:

Example:

Even I prefer group activities because we can learn new and interesting facts with more group mates. (Hazel/S22/Hompesch)

When quantifying the number of student interviewees, participants' codes on their own were used in the following manner:

Example:

Four students (S8/S13/S16/S26) reported instances of ...

Information regarding the full list of codes is provided in Table 5.5.

5.6.4.6 Strengths and limitations of focus groups

Wellington (2000) argues that in group interviewing, if the participants are in the presence of their peers, they may feel more secure. Participants will therefore be more willing to join in the discussion. Braun & Clarke (2013) contend that focus groups also offer a degree of flexibility in obtaining information about unexpected issues and are a good way of generating data on issues about which not much is known. They also state that focus groups have the advantage that the data is not influenced by the researcher since there is a shift of a certain degree of control from the researcher to the participants.

Wellington (2000) nonetheless highlights a number of disadvantages associated with the group interview set up, including the possibility of individual dominance

and individuals who feel intimidated in the presence of others, and time limitation for individuals to adequately expose their views. Such disadvantages may be overcome, depending on the moderator's expertise. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), focus groups may sometimes not be easy to manage and it may be difficult to direct the discussion back to the topic if it digresses from the intended subject matter. Webster et al. (2014) also mention that, in the case of focus groups, there is the risk that some participants will not respect confidentiality of what was discussed in the group. In such instances, reference to the ground-rules is crucial (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In addition, focus groups are more time-consuming than interviews and the transcription of the data generated is more complex.

5.7 A framework for data analysis

For the purpose of interview data analysis, texts were coded through a combination of inductive and deductive coding. A bottom-up, inductive coding approach was initially used, whereby codes were generated from the data itself. This was followed by a deductive, top-down approach, according to a set of predetermined codes.

In analysing my interview data, I adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) *Framework*. This framework is suitable for qualitative data thematic analysis, allowing for the management of themes. Themes are understood as patterns emerging from data which are linked to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). I have opted for this framework due to its dynamic (non-linear) nature which allows for changes to be made throughout the data analysis process. Another advantage is its credible nature resulting from the transparent procedure which allows data to be accessed and judged by others.

The framework is composed of six stages. In the first stage, I familiarised myself with the data, mainly by listening to my recordings, reading transcripts carefully

and jotting down notes along the way. Reading the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups, which amounted to over 132,000 words, was a very lengthy process.

During the second stage, I generated initial codes in order to organize the data by using the notes taken during the familiarization stage. In line with the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), I aimed to code for all possible themes and patterns. When coding, I made sure that the context was not lost by keeping some of the surrounding data, where appropriate. The process was carried out manually, mainly by using colour coding, and I also documented the process using Microsoft Word in order to have a soft copy available for future reference.

In the third stage, I searched for themes by analysing the codes in detail. This was done by noting down each code and its brief description on pieces of paper and shifting them around according to theme. This resulted in the drawing up of a thematic map which helped to show the relationship between the codes, main themes and sub-themes. I was careful not to exclude any codes even if these did not seem to be consistent with my main themes at this stage.

The fourth stage involved reviewing the themes identified in order to refine them so that eventually the data within each theme is meaningfully coherent and the individual themes are clearly distinct from each other. I started off by reviewing the coded data extracts with the objective of determining whether they formed a coherent pattern. After refining as considered necessary, I proceeded to the next level of checking the validity of the selected themes with regards to the entire data set. The process of fine tuning was completed once I deemed that the themes had been satisfactorily refined and could not be improved further (see Appendices 17–19).

The fifth stage involved defining and naming the themes as well as analysing the data within the themes. At this stage, I therefore identified the meaning

projected by the different themes whilst also determining the data encapsulated in each theme. I then proceeded to write a detailed analysis of the different themes keeping in mind how the themes related to my research questions. This meant considering the themes not only on their own but also in relation to the other themes. This process enabled me to refine the names of the themes so that they would be more clear, concise and easily understood by the reader.

During the sixth and final stage, I carried out the final analysis and wrote the report. The objective was to produce a report, supported by appropriate data extracts, which provided an interesting and clear account of the story told by the data within each theme as well as across themes. I was careful to ensure that the report was not only limited to a description of the data but included also arguments with regard to my research questions so that the report would be more credible and convincing to the reader. The next section summarises the ethical considerations that need to be addressed when collecting and analysing data.

5.8 Ethical considerations

Thomas (2009) defines ethics as the branch which deals with the administration of research practice and respect for others. At each stage of the research study, ethical issues must be identified and addressed. These ethical considerations place emphasis on the research design, the methods employed, the data analysis, the research presentation and its findings (Wellington, 2000). Similarly, Webster et al. (2014) assert that “ethics is at the heart of high-quality research practice and a consideration that runs through research from the early stages of design to reporting and beyond” (p. 108). Ethical principles usually highlight four key areas: informed consent, protection from participants’ harm, protection of privacy, and avoidance of researcher’s deception (Bryman, 2012).

During the design stage, a standard prerequisite is to obtain the University's ethical approval in order to ensure that the proposed research meets the required ethical standards. My research project was approved on ethics grounds by the University of Sheffield's ethical review panel (refer to Appendix 1). Permission to conduct research in schools was also sought from the local Education Directorates, as per standard procedure (refer to Appendix 2).

Prior to the collection of data, I conducted individual meetings with school leaders and class teachers, as well as a group meeting with students in each sample school in order to explain the details of the research project. The preparation of a participant information sheet for school leaders, teachers, students and parents/legal guardians, was necessary in order to explain in writing what the study is about and the procedure to be followed during interviews because they needed to have full knowledge of the study before agreeing to participate. All data was collected after receipt of signed written informed consent of school leaders, teachers, students and their parents/legal guardians. It was therefore necessary to explain to school leaders that they were not being asked to nominate or in any way express an expectation of participation by any of their staff members or students, so that consent to participate will be freely given. Prospective participants were made aware of their right to refuse to participate and/or to withdraw their participation at any stage (Ryen, 2004).

Throughout the interviewing process I was careful to address other ethical issues which arose during the field work, resulting in participants' physical or psychological distress. I was aware of the inconvenience for both teachers and students during the interviewing sessions as, for instance, if students passed negative comments about their teachers. Moreover, teachers and students sometimes had to miss a particular lesson in order to be interviewed. Also, when teachers were interviewed during their free lessons, their free time was eroded and they then had, for instance, less time for students' corrections and/or

curriculum planning. On the other hand, students taking part in the interviewing sessions had to make up for the lesson/s lost and needed to catch up on school work.

In order to ensure appropriate protection and wellbeing of the participants, I conducted a brainstorming session, prior to the actual interviewing sessions, in order to assess the potential for harm when discussing sensitive information about the Education Directorates, the school administration and students'/teachers' performance in class. In order to avoid the possibility of school leaders, teachers and students disclosing sensitive information, I set clear instructions at the beginning of the interviewing sessions so that they would provide their general feedback rather than targeting particular individuals. Prior to the interviewing sessions, I explained to my participants that although some lessons may be lost or free time taken up, there are advantages to be gained for both teachers and students since participation in the project will encourage critical reflection about learning and teaching amongst students and teachers and the data collected will shed light on the prevailing teaching and learning practices which may be improved.

Measures were also taken to secure data confidentiality. From the start of the project, all participants and institutions were treated with utmost confidentiality. Therefore, pseudonyms were used to ensure that the identities of participants and schools would remain confidential throughout the entire project and thereafter. The same applies to the storage of data. In this case, the participants were informed that the audio recordings/transcriptions of the interviewing sessions would be used only for the purpose of analysis. No other use would be made of the original recordings/transcriptions without the participants' written permission, and no one outside the project was allowed access to the original data.

Although the data collected may be used in conference presentations and lectures which might be held in the future or even published, the participants'

and institutions' identities will be withheld. The personal data generated by the project will remain confidential from transcription stage onwards and thus participants' privacy will be guaranteed. The data was analysed by myself, at my personal residence on my computer. Therefore, all data generated by the research project was controlled by myself, as the main researcher. Electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer and paper copies kept in a lockable cabinet. Above all, faithfulness in interpretation and reporting of data remained central in my study at all times.

5.9 Trustworthiness in qualitative research

In qualitative research, one of the ways in which researchers try to convince readers and themselves that their findings are important is to establish trustworthiness which, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), can be achieved through the following criteria: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. In naturalistic/qualitative enquiry, these trustworthiness criteria are used in preference to the traditional (positivist) quantitative assessment criteria of *validity* and *reliability* (Nowell et al., 2017; Shenton, 2004), as shown in Table 5.6.

Criteria used in qualitative research		Criteria used in quantitative research
Credibility	➔	In preference to internal validity
Transferability	➔	In preference to external validity/generalisability
Dependability	➔	In preference to reliability
Confirmability	➔	In preference to objectivity

Table 5.6 *Qualitative vs. quantitative assessment criteria*
(Shenton, 2004, p. 64)

Credibility refers to the value of the findings and their believability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Among the various strategies, I made use of *triangulation* and *peer*

scrutiny in order to enhance the credibility of my research. One form of triangulation involves the use of different methods for data collection (Houghton et al., 2013; Shenton, 2004) which, in the case of my study, was achieved through the combination of CDA, visual semiotic analysis, individual and focus group interviews. The use of multiple approaches is advantageous since it permits a deeper and richer understanding of the subject matter.

Peer scrutiny allows colleagues and peers to scrutinise the research project in order to provide valuable feedback to the researcher (Shenton, 2004). This was done by my supervisor who regularly reviewed my work; during the PhD confirmation review; through the student-led seminars; and discussions held with my fellow doctoral students, as part of the Malta-based Study Schools. Such feedback helped me refine my research methods and data analysis.

The *transferability* criterion demands the production of rich accounts of the research methods, raw data examples as well as the context within which the study is being carried out to allow for the possibility of research findings being applied to other contexts (Houghton et al., 2013). For this purpose, I provided detailed descriptions throughout the study, including information concerning the research design, participants, data collection and the analytic procedures employed. Furthermore, the strengths and weaknesses of my methodology and methods have been analysed, as highlighted in Sections 5.6.1.5, 5.6.3.6 and 5.6.4.6.

Dependability is achieved if the researcher ensures that “the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392). Readers can assess the reliability of the research when they have access to the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit of the procedure of the research study is one technique to show its dependability (Nowell et al., 2017). I consider my work to be reliable since I kept a record of all phases of the research process, including raw data records, transcripts and field notes, thereby creating

an audit trail (Houghton et al., 2013; Koch, 1994), which can be understood and evaluated by others.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings have been shaped by the experiences and opinions of the participants rather than those of the researcher. Here again, the audit trail is crucial so as to allow others to trace the steps involved in the research process. To address this concern, I maintained a reflective diary (Houghton et al., 2013) in order to support the reasoning behind decisions made throughout the research in an effort to reduce my individual bias. Guba and Lincoln (1989) assert that confirmability is achieved when the credibility, transferability and dependability criteria are fulfilled.

5.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the qualitative research methodologies and methods employed in my study, aimed at addressing my research questions. I also reflected on my positionality in relation to LCE and the critical-interpretative research paradigm. In relation to my first research question, the CDA approach proved to be a valuable tool for analysing policy texts, in that it combines linguistic and multimodal elements with debates within social theory. To address the second research question, the semi-structured interviews with school leaders' and English language teachers served to obtain data concerning practices of learner-centred policy enactment, thereby demonstrating how schools respond to policy demands. In response to my third research question, focus group interviews were carried out to explore students' perspectives of learner-centred practices. These also served to compare and contrast the responses of teachers and students, when the themes converged. The strengths and limitations of the methodological approaches adopted were also discussed.

This chapter also included a discussion about data collection procedures and the selected framework for the management of thematic analysis. Moreover, I

elaborated upon the ethical protocols adopted during every stage of the research project and discussed the trustworthiness criteria that is adopted in qualitative research. In the next chapter, I present my critical analysis of the NCF and ELOF policy texts, followed by my analysis and discussion of findings from school leaders' and teachers' individual interviews, in Chapter 7, as well as student focus group interviews, in Chapter 8.

6

Critical Policy Discourse Analysis

6.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical analysis of learner-centred policy discourses which have dominated the Maltese LCE policy landscape, as envisaged in my first research question: *What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?* Following Ball's (1994) recommendation, the purpose of employing a CDA approach in my research study is "to recognize and analyse the existence of 'dominant' discourses, regimes of truth ..." (p. 24, emphasis in original), as articulated in both the NCF (MEDE, 2012), as Malta's current National Curriculum, and the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), for the pedagogy and assessment of English, as one of the NCF supporting policy documents. The analysis of these two policy documents is also aimed at providing a basis upon which schools' responses to the learner-centred curriculum policy reform can be examined. Since the ELOF was designed to reinforce the aims and principles of the NCF, both texts are analysed simultaneously, side by side. In analysing the concept of learner-centredness, as discursively constructed in both the NCF and ELOF, I focus specifically on a selection of key policy excerpts that are closely linked to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment so as to underline the ideological foundations on which the existing National Curriculum is built.

The theoretical background underpinning CDA has demonstrated that by combining linguistic analysis with social analysis, CDA is seen to be a valuable tool for analysing policy texts (Taylor, 2004). It is my intention, as a critical discourse analyst, to bridge the gap between these two levels of analysis by giving due consideration not only to the micro-level processes that deal with the textual and linguistic properties, but also to the macro-level (semantic) processes

that are concerned with the socio-political context of texts, thereby accentuating “how language *works* within power relations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 436, emphasis in original). It is here that the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity come into play, contributing towards a “social-theoretical support for analytical treatments of language” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 459). These concepts allow the researcher to investigate and expose the manner in which power is exercised.

My critical engagement with policy analysis therefore necessitates an investigation into Ball’s (1994) notions of *policy as text* and *policy as discourse*. This dual conceptualisation of policy has been discussed in detail in Sections 4.1.1.2–4.1.1.3. My analysis of policy as text rests on the premise that, apart from a consideration of the context, the text also needs to be understood in relation to other texts (Bowe et al., 1992). Throughout this chapter, analysing the notion of policy as text has helped me, as a researcher, to achieve agency by providing a space within which I could delve deeper into the linguistic and social dimensions of policy in order to come up with my own interpretation of the NCF and ELOF policy texts. Similarly, since policy texts are located within broader discourses, the notion of policy as discourse has assisted my analysis in questioning and challenging truth claims.

As elaborated upon in the preceding chapter, in order to conduct an in-depth critical analysis of LCE policy texts, I have utilised Hyatt’s (2013a, 2013b) analytical criteria, as embedded in his *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis Frame* (see Section 5.6.1.3). Given that policy texts need to be studied in context, I start my analysis by focusing on the *contextualisation* element, specifying the details of the temporal context within which the learner-centred curriculum policy reform has emerged. In contextualising the policy texts, I also draw attention to policy drivers and levers as well as to the establishment of warrants. Additionally, in accord with the second element of Hyatt’s frame concerning policy *deconstruction*, my analysis is supported by a set of criteria, which include modes

of legitimation, interdiscursivity and intertextuality, and features relating to lexico-grammatical constructions. To incorporate elements of multimodal texts, my policy analysis is further supplemented by four visual images, aimed at determining their “powerful role in the construction of truth and reality” (Hyatt, 2006, p. 120). These images are analysed in terms of the *representational* and *interpersonal metafunction*, as exemplified in Harrison’s (2003) *Visual Social Semiotic Framework* (see Section 5.6.2).

6.1 Contextualising policy

In Section 4.1.1.1, reference was made to Bowe et al.’s (1992) notion of the policy cycle through which the policy process can be examined by way of three interrelated contexts: the context of influence, signifying the key influences that impacted the policy; the context of policy text production, concerned with the analysis of policy documents; and the context of practice, involving the interpretation and enactment of policy by educational practitioners (Gondwe, 2018). My study is primarily located in the context of policy text production and the context of practice. In this chapter, my analysis of the textual production of both the NCF and ELOF seeks to provide “... insights into the politics of policy production and policy processes and provide insights into likely policy effects” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 61). The context of practice is analysed in Chapters 7 and 8.

6.1.1 Temporal context

Following the overview of the local and EU policy context in Section 1.1.1, I now take a glance at the Maltese socio-political context, covering the developments that took place between 1987–2015. During this period, major reforms were introduced in the Maltese state educational system, which have led to the

existing NCF. In 1987, soon after the Nationalist Government⁹ took power, a process was initiated by the Minister of Education, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, to introduce the concept of a National Curriculum, aimed at providing a minimum level of education for all learners in Malta. This resulted in the drafting of the 1988 Education Act, which provided the legal basis upon which the Maltese State could establish a National Minimum Curriculum (NMC).

In 1995, after the Nationalist Party was re-elected in government in 1992, an important document was published by the Consultative Education Committee, which was set up by the then Minister of Education and Human Resources, Michael Falzon. This publication, entitled *Tomorrow's Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (Wain et al., 1995), focused on key concerns which, according to the committee members, deserved to be given priority in any schooling system. Among the various recommendations, it gave precedence to the principle of entitlement by virtue of which each and every child is given access to the basic requirements of a quality education. It also advocated the notion of learning communities in order for schools to accommodate the wellbeing of learners whilst promoting the collaboration between teachers and parents.

In 1999, under the same Nationalist administration, the Minister of Education, Louis Galea, presented a new NMC, *Creating the Future Together* (Ministry for Education [MED], 1999). This policy document embraced a set of principles, centred around the concept of social justice, comprising of holistic education, critical and creative thinking, inclusion, and formative modes of assessment, amongst others. In her policy message, the then Director of Curriculum, Mary Vella, stressed that one of the distinguishing features of the NMC is that “it places

⁹ The Nationalist Party is one of Malta's two main modern political parties. It is a conservative, Christian democratic party that has also been characterised as centrist or centre-right on the political spectrum.

the needs of the learner before everything else. It is the child, the boy and girl and the adolescent who are at the centre of all the vision, the planning and the provision” (MED, 1999, p. 9). Although it was perceived by some stakeholders to be too prescriptive, the NMC was met with widespread national consensus (European Agency, 2014) and has remained relevant to the present day (DQSE, 2015b).

The publication of the 1999 NMC paved the way for other policy initiatives. From 2003 onwards, after the Nationalist Party won another general election, owing to its promise to get Malta into the EU, various discussions took place, which revolved around a number of key policy areas. Such discussions led to the publication of a series of policy documents and reports that served as a platform for reviewing and updating the National Curriculum, in the light of the increasing changes at global and national levels.

Among the various education policies which were published, following Malta’s accession to the EU in 2004, the policy document *For All Children to Succeed: A New Network Organisation for Quality Education in Malta* (MEYE, 2005) was instrumental in promoting a reorganisation of state schools into a college network system, as laid down in the Education Act Amendment (2006), where it was believed that networks would “respond creatively and collaboratively to the needs of each ‘whole’ learner” (MEYE, 2005, p. xxi, emphasis in original). Although the college system was predestined to serve as a vehicle for decentralisation, it was criticised for failing to instil greater autonomy through which schools could develop their own policies and practices, according to their needs (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012; Cutajar et al., 2013; Mifsud, 2017a).

The report *Transition from Primary to Secondary Schools in Malta: A Review* (Ministry for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports [MEYS], 2008) highlighted several priority measures that sought to maximize the potential development of individual learners. One important priority was the focus on the strengths claimed in favour of the developmental approach in education, as sustained by

Kelly (2009). The developmental approach, as the report outlines, sees education as a process and emphasises the importance of individual empowerment, with the learner being viewed as an active being who should be allowed to control his/her destiny. The report thus recommended a move towards a pedagogy that aims to develop the competences and skills that enable individuals “to become autonomous and effective citizens in a democratic society” (p. 174).

All these developments played their part in reviewing and updating the National Curriculum. The review process, which extended from 2008 to 2010, resulted in the publication of five consultative policy documents (Ministry for Education, Employment and the Family [MEEF], 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e), upon which a nationwide consultation process was held between 2011 to 2012, in preparation for the final version of the NCF. In 2013, following the consultation phase, the NCF (MEDE, 2012) was launched, aimed at elucidating Malta’s educational vision and aspirations during the period 2013 to 2026. The NCF was inaugurated towards the end of the fifth Nationalist legislature, after the Nationalist Party had spent twenty-five years in power. In being centred around the principles of entitlement and quality education, as accentuated in both *Tomorrow’s Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (Wain et al., 1995) and the NMC (MED, 1999), the NCF strives to depart from a selective system of education in order to embrace the concept of comprehensive schooling (European Agency, 2014; MEEF, 2011a).

After a change in government, when the Labour Party¹⁰ came into power, in March 2013, a new *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024* (MEDE, 2014a) was launched. This was aimed at reducing the gaps in educational outcomes, reducing the number of early school-leavers, and increasing participation in adult and lifelong learning. To achieve such goals, the Framework

¹⁰ The Labour Party is one of the two main political parties in Malta. It sits on the centre-left of the political spectrum. Despite its democratic-socialist claims, in the early 1990s it became more inclined towards a social-democratic ideology.

sought to endorse those skills and talents that European and world benchmarks promote for employability and citizenship in the 21st century, as exemplified in Section 1.1.1. Following the publication of the said Framework (MEDE, 2014a), the Labour Government embarked on a major reform to instil a more inclusive and equitable secondary education, whereby students started to be offered the possibility of choosing academic, vocational or applied subjects, to better meet their educational needs, as envisaged in the publication of *MyJourney* (MEDE, 2016).

Building on the various educational reforms that had taken place during the Nationalist administration, the Labour Government, by virtue of these two publications (MEDE, 2014a; 2016), asserted its commitment to consolidate the focus on the learner by continuing to sustain learner-centred and learning outcomes approaches, as projected in the NCF (MEDE, 2012). Usually, when there is a change in government, the newly-elected administration strives to adopt alternative policies to those proposed by the previous government (Schweisfurth, 2013b). The Labour Government, however, remained in support of the previous Nationalist Government's policies regarding LCE and LOs since the new government's educational agenda continued to be driven by global, neo-liberal rationality that promotes learner-centredness as the preferred pedagogical approach for economic development (Starkey, 2019; Tabulawa, 2003). Schweisfurth (2013b) remarks that "global directions sometimes rise above party politics, and there are global hegemonies ... pushing policies in neo-liberal directions" (p. 43).

In 2015, owing to the proposal made by the NCF (MEDE, 2012) to establish an LOF for compulsory schooling, several policy documents, entitled *Educators' Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment: Using a Learning Outcomes Approach*, were published. As outlined in Section 1.1.1, these LOF documents contain the relevant LOs for every subject along with teaching and assessment guidelines. The claim being made for the inclusion of LOs is that "by using learning outcomes

to describe the learning processes and outcomes, the NCF is addressing the interests of the student and the stakeholders in a learner-centred way” (MEDE, 2012, p. 11).

The introduction of the LOF in Malta in 2015 had been disputed by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) on the grounds of the uncertainty raised amongst teachers and other educators regarding its implementation. The lack of sufficient information as to how the LOF was meant to be implemented was a cause of concern for many professionals within the education sector. In a local newspaper, *Times of Malta* (“MUT regrets”, 2016), it was reported that during the discussions held between the Ministry of Education and the MUT, both parties agreed that the LOF, rather than being simply a reform, constitutes a change in mentality and culture since teachers in Malta were not accustomed to outcomes-oriented assessment. It therefore became clear that the introduction of the LOF required an implementation strategy and a consensus on work conditions. The whole issue of the LOF turned out to be a complex endeavour due to the challenges generated by the reform which, in turn, precipitated an atmosphere of apprehension and resistance to change. It was for this reason that the MUT insisted on a new Sectorial Agreement between the Ministry and the Union, prior to the LOF being accepted and implemented in schools.

The Training Needs Analysis (TNA) exercise which was carried out in Malta in 2015, as part of the *Train the Trainer Programme for a Learning Outcomes Framework Approach*, was targeted to identify the training needed for educators to be able to embark on a LOs approach in their respective schools. The report issued by *IDEA Management Consulting Services* in 2015, in relation to the TNA exercise highlighted a number of concerns. It was reported, for instance, that although most educators who responded to the questionnaire were aware of the LOF to varying degrees, ranging from moderate (40.86%) to high (30.16%) and very high (12.74%), 61.29% had very little or no training in connection with LOs, whilst 45.14% did not feel confident in implementing the LOF. As regards the

data collected during the professional development sessions in schools, teachers pointed out that the LOF may have a positive impact on students' achievement. Nevertheless, there were concerns, amongst other issues, about the lack of knowledge regarding the requirements of the LOF and the need was stressed for more guidance in connection with assessment procedures. They also drew attention to the amount of work involved in putting into practice the LOF and argued that they should have been consulted before the LOF was published.

6.1.2 The epistemic nature of the Maltese context

Drawing on Hyatt's (2013b) contextualisation element of his analytical frame, the analysis of the temporal context necessitates a consideration of Foucault's (1972) notion of the 'episteme', which Hyatt (2005b) refers to as 'epoch' to signify "what counts as knowledge or truth in a particular era" (p. 522). Hyatt (2005b) contends that "it is the episteme that determines how people within that epoch think, act and understand their identity and the world around them" (p. 518). Given the current educational scenario in Malta, despite the efforts to place the child at the very centre of the educational system, where the differentiated needs of individual learners are assumed to be given priority, the epistemic nature of the local context tends to revolve around neo-liberal discourses of skills for the knowledge-based society and economy. In such a context, the principle of entitlement to education (MEDE, 2012, p. 32) becomes meaningful insofar as students are equipped with the skills that primarily serve as a basis for Malta's future labour market. The point that needs to be stressed here, however, is that the needs of the labour market may be incompatible with those of the individual (Britton et al., 2019).

In an interview with a former Labour Minister for Education and Employment, Evarist Bartolo, the discourses of education and the economy are blended to reinforce the episteme of the knowledge economy: "... let us have education that is relevant for today's and tomorrow's economy and society, where people will

be expected to have new skills and to have the resilience to learn them” (Bartolo, 2017, p. 5). The emphasis on economic prosperity plays a key role in legitimating a discourse as normal or truthful. In 2016, in order to meet the market demands and to equip the future labour workforce, the same Minister took the decision to set up a National Skills Council (NSC), as recommended by the *Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020* (MEDE, 2014b, p. 49). The NSC was tasked with recommending policy changes to the government, aimed at reducing the skill gaps in key sectors in Malta, whilst preparing the labour workforce with the right skills. The skill-gaps issue was also dealt with by the Labour Minister for Finance and Employment, Clyde Caruana, who in 2021 launched *The National Employment Policy 2021–2030* (Ministry for Finance and Employment [MFE], 2021). Such policy seeks to improve education and training outcomes so that the skill gaps in the market can be addressed.

6.1.3 Policy drivers, levers and steering

In accordance with Hyatt’s (2013a, 2013b) analytical frame, as discussed in Section 5.6.1.3, a thorough understanding of policy requires an inquiry into *policy drivers* (the intended goals of a policy) and *policy levers* (the instruments that facilitate the implementation of the policy). It is through such levers that national governments seek to indirectly guide policy (Hyatt & Meraud, 2015).

6.1.3.1 The NCF policy drivers and levers

There are three key policy drivers which the NCF (MEDE, 2012) seeks to embrace. These drivers envisage that students should: (1) develop their full potential as lifelong learners; (2) sustain their chances in the world of work; and (3) become actively engaged citizens, capable of securing social justice in the community and the world around them (pp. 32–33). In fulfilling these policy drivers, a case is made for the adoption of LCE, whereby the arguments used in favour of learner-

centred approaches are usually situated within three *justificatory narratives* (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Indeed, as delineated in Sections 4.3.2.2–4.3.2.4, the three key claims for LCE revolve around the *cognitive narrative*, signifying the role of constructivism in the acquisition of knowledge; the *emancipatory narrative*, aimed at freeing individuals from traditional, oppressive forms of control; and the *preparatory narrative*, with its focus on preparing today’s learners for the future knowledge economy. Both the NCF and the ELOF embrace all three narratives, as I explain in more detail in the subsequent sections.

The above-stated policy drivers, as generic statements of intent, constitute the broad LOs of the NCF. These are overtly expressed in the then Nationalist Minister of Education and Employment, Dolores Cristina’s foreword to the curriculum policy framework, when she stated that:

The legacy that this document aims to achieve is the assurance that by the end of compulsory education learners will have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills, competences, attitudes and values that stimulate them to view lifelong learning as part and parcel of their development as individuals and as citizens of our country, of the European Union and of the world. The NCF 2012 looks upon education as a journey towards personal enrichment and empowerment, as a mechanism to uphold social justice and as an important tool for inclusion and employability. (MEDE, 2012, p. vii)

In order to achieve its goals, the NCF draws particular attention to a range of policy levers as the primary policy-steering mechanism. These policy levers, which are politically driven and influenced by neo-liberal principles, have become the central instruments “that the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change in public services” (Steer et al., 2007, p. 177). One important lever which features prominently in the NCF (MEDE, 2012) is that related to quality assurance (p. 32). Being one of the six general principles which form the foundation of the NCF, the quality assurance criterion is envisioned to secure school improvement by means of ongoing self-evaluation, monitoring and internal reviews in schools. These internal reviews are complemented by an external review mechanism that is carried out by a specialised Directorate which

the government set up for the surveillance of the quality of the educational provision in Maltese compulsory schooling.

The quality assurance principle stresses the need for schools and colleges to invest in capacity building in order to develop into communities of reflexive practice. In doing so, due consideration is given to school development planning to meet the policy requirements, mentoring and a performance appraisal system that aims to enhance the professional development of educators, whilst holding individuals accountable for their performance and productivity (p. 42). Besides these quality assurance measures, other policy levers were introduced. For instance, the emphasis that the NCF places on community partnership (p. 43) is expected to support the policy goals, mainly by: (1) encouraging schools to reinforce the concept of lifelong learning for the community; and (2) involving the community to assist schools in preparing learners for the world of work.

To steer policy, specific targets have also been identified, as shown in Table 6.1 below. These national, statistical targets are designed to serve as success criteria in assessing the impact of the NCF on the attainment of the policy goals. A distinguishing feature of such target-setting is the focus on students' performance, including students' compliance with reputable international benchmarks, in the form of global testing and surveillance, which Lingard et al. (2013) describe as *global panopticism* (p. 539). These targets, which are planned to be achieved within an established timeframe¹¹, resonate Foucault's (1977a) views of the disciplinary society whereby students' performance, through the notion of the 'examination', as a disciplinary apparatus, is tracked, judged and compared with others.

¹¹ The policy targets are projected to be achieved in 2027, at the end of compulsory schooling for students who entered the NCF-based education system in 2014–2015.

Statistical Targets		2026–2027
% of 19-year-old students participating in further and higher education, excluding Post-Secondary education ¹²		40%
% of 17-year-old students participating in further and higher education		90%
% rate of students who obtain 1 to 5 Grade in SEC in any five subjects ¹³		75%
% rate of students who obtain the Secondary School Certificate and Profile ¹⁴		95%
% of early school leavers ¹⁵		10%
PISA ¹⁶	Literacy (Levels 2 to 6)	85%
	Mathematical Literacy (Levels 2 to 6)	80%
	Scientific Literacy (Levels 2 to 6)	80%
TIMSS ¹⁷	Mathematics (Intermediate to Advanced)	70%
	Science (Intermediate to Advanced)	60%
SurveyLang ¹⁸	English (A2–B2)	95%
	Italian (A2–B2)	70%

Table 6.1 NCF policy targets for 2027 (MEDE, 2012, p. 24, p. 67)

¹² The projected target is based on the results of the *Further and Higher Education Statistics Survey 2010*, as held by the then National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE, 2011).

¹³ At the end of compulsory schooling, students in Malta are encouraged to sit for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) Examination, conducted by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board, within the University of Malta. The SEC Examination Grades 1–5 are comparable to Grades 9–4 of the UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

¹⁴ Students who finish their secondary education are eligible to receive the Secondary School Certificate and Profile (SSC&P) at Level 1, 2 or 3, as regulated by the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

¹⁵ In line with the objectives of the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ('ET 2020')* (Council of the European Union, 2009), the NCF defines early school leavers as those individuals, aged between 18–24 years, who have left school without sufficient qualifications and are no longer in education or training.

¹⁶ The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a study which is held every three years, in both member and non-member states, aimed at assessing 15-year-old students in mathematics, science and reading, according to 6 proficiency levels, with Level 6 being the highest level.

¹⁷ Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is run every four years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). TIMSS assesses the mathematics and science knowledge of students in Grade 4 (Year 5 locally) and Grade 8 (Year 9 locally) respectively. TIMSS measures students' achievement in mathematics and science according to 4 international benchmarks: Low, Intermediate, High and Advanced.

¹⁸ SurveyLang is a European Survey on Language Competences that was proposed by the European Commission to provide data relating to students' foreign language proficiency in listening, reading and writing. Students are assessed in their last year of lower secondary education or the second year of upper secondary education. The tests are measured in accordance with the 6 language proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), namely: A1–A2 (Basic User), B1–B2 (Independent User), and C1–C2 (Proficient User).

6.1.3.2 The ELOF policy drivers and levers

Since the NCF envisages that teachers need to operate within a framework that is based on LOs, the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a) policy document attempts to support teachers of English in fulfilling the policy goals of the NCF, that is “to reach the specific learning outcomes that young people ought to possess at the end of a learning process” (MEDE, 2012, p. 10). Therefore, whilst sharing the same policy drivers outlined in the NCF, by advocating lifelong learning, employment-related skills, and active citizenship (DQSE, 2015a, p. 5), the ELOF aims to guide teachers in dealing with learner-centred approaches and classroom assessment processes. The ELOF claims to provide more curricular autonomy to colleges and schools by allowing greater flexibility in the development of teaching and learning programmes, so as to better address the specific needs of their learners.

To support the development of a learning outcomes-based approach in classrooms, the ELOF policy text places emphasis on quality assurance (pp. 48–49, p. 53) as the central policy lever. Quality assurance procedures, by virtue of internal and external school evaluation systems, have been introduced to ensure that both teachers and students work towards the learning expectations, that is to say, the attainment of the intended LOs, as specified in all LOF policy texts. Another important policy lever which was earmarked to instil confidence in educators when implementing the LOs approach was the *Train the Trainer* capacity building programme, referred to in Section 6.1.1, which took place between October and December 2015. This programme, which included study visits abroad, aimed to train a cohort of 74 educators within schools and entities to become LOF trainers. These trainers, in turn, were required to provide training and support amongst their peers, thereby facilitating the LOs implementation process. According to Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016), these trainers “can be the driving force to represent the concerns of the educators and find ways of addressing the challenges” (p. 174).

6.1.4 Warrant

Warrant entails a consideration of the justifications provided for a particular course of action, which contribute to the ‘common sense’ assertions of policy texts (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). In the following sections, I explain how the policy discourse that is closely linked to curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment revolves rhetorically around three major warrants: *evidentiary*, *accountability* and *political*, which aim at ‘legitimizing’ policy.

6.1.4.1 The evidentiary warrant

The very few occasions during which a particular course of action is justified on grounds of evidence can be found exclusively in the NCF. As an example, the NCF policy claims concerning learners’ language competences for the future knowledge economy are being justified in terms of the empirical/statistical evidence provided by the European Survey on Language Competences, otherwise known as SurveyLang. The data collected by SurveyLang in 2011, in relation to the foreign language proficiency of secondary school students in fourteen European countries, is used to prove the usefulness of this competitive exam. Indeed, the positive results obtained by Maltese students in the 2011 SurveyLang test, as the statistical performance indicators suggest, serve as a “positivistic claim to objectivity” (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 839). For this reason, schools are compelled to assist students in reaching the established European standards so that students themselves become ‘normalised’ (Foucault, 1977a):

The high competency levels in foreign language teaching and learning developed by young people in Malta during the compulsory schooling have been confirmed in the results of the *European Survey on Language Competences – 2011*. This strength must be sustained in our education system. (MEDE, 2012, p. 7, p. 34)

Similar to other global tests, such as the OECD's PISA programme, the influence of this European survey is considered as a major driver and its positive results are interpreted as testimony of a sound education system.

6.1.4.2 The accountability warrant

The accountability warrant recurs frequently in the NCF policy text, whereby the justifications offered to support the learner-centred policy revolve around the anticipated outcomes of the recommended action, as in the following examples:

If learners are fully aware of what is expected of them (the learning intentions) and the success criteria against which their learning will be evaluated, they will then develop the self-evaluation skills which will help them become self-directed learners. (MEDE, 2012, p. 42)

Within a safe environment where they are accepted, given freedom of choice, and allowed to explore and experiment on their own and with others, children learn to become risk-takers. They can develop individual strategies which help them to cope with new challenges, become autonomous, self-regulating and self-determining individuals who make progress, overcome difficulties and feel satisfied with their endeavours. Hence, young learners become independent. (MEDE, 2012, p. 48)

The above extracts illustrate the need to empower learners by giving them greater agency. There is, at the same time, an emphasis on learners' accountability, aimed at producing self-governing individuals, which reveals how learners' behaviour, within the parameters of neo-liberal governmentality, is rationalised (Jankowski & Provezis, 2014).

The focus on outcomes and results to establish the accountability warrant is also manifested in the manner education is expected to contribute to Malta's economic success in Europe. In this case, the potential risk of not implementing the policy is specifically highlighted in the NCF in order to reinforce the accountability concept (Hyatt, 2013a, 2013b):

The development of Malta's vision as a high value-added knowledge and service base economy, as well as becoming one of the leading Member States in implementing the EU 2020 Strategy, will not be achieved if the

NCF isolates itself from the nation's economic aspirations and goals. (MEDE, 2012, p. 7)

To meet the requirements of the EU 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010), aimed at bringing about progress in the EU in terms of economy, competitiveness and productivity, as well as sustainable social market economy, the NCF regards the preparation arguments of LCE concerning the development of human capital as fundamental for a prosperous modern economy. Nonetheless, it is nearly impossible to determine the extent to which teachers can be held accountable for learners' preparedness for the future economy due to the variables involved during the transition from schooling to the workplace (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

In the NCF policy document, the accountability warrant is further strengthened by stressing the negative outcomes of an alternative policy approach, in lieu of the projected learner-centred policy initiatives. In so doing, an attempt is made to convince educators that no pedagogical alternative other than LCE is viable: "... a teacher-dominated pedagogy, which relegates learners to a passive role, emphasises memorisation and limits interactions between learners, is not recommended" (MEDE, 2012, p. 39). In a similar fashion, the accountability warrant can be found throughout the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), with various appeals to educators to act in accordance with the policy initiatives so as to improve learners' educational outcomes: "Educators need to keep up-to-date with the latest pedagogical strategies and concepts in order to be able to better understand and respond to learners' needs" (p. 28); and "Educators need to place the learner at the centre to ensure each learner with additional or diverse learning needs can achieve positive and sustained educational outcomes" (p. 50). Underpinning these quotations relating to the cognitive perspective of LCE is a differentiated approach to teaching and learning that gives primacy to learners' individual differences (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

6.1.4.3 The political warrant

Another justification for policy action revolves around the political warrant whereby policy is justified in terms of the public interest. In the NCF, the importance of the economic dimension is reaffirmed through the political warrant since learners' creativity and innovation are deemed to be essential ingredients for Malta's economy, in line with the preparatory narrative of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Indeed, by justifying policy in terms of the common good, the NCF views creativity and innovation as "agents for change and contribute to the economic prosperity of society in general and to the wellbeing of the individual in particular" (MEDE, 2012, p. 38). As one of the NCF's cross-curricular themes, *Education for entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation* aims at developing entrepreneurial subjects, typical of neo-liberal rationalities, who are responsible for their future. Foucault (2008) refers to the neo-liberal subject as *homo oeconomicus*, which he describes as "an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself" (p. 226), which presupposes conceptions of "individuality, rationality and self-interest" (Besley & Peters, 2007, p. 143).

A similar approach can be found in the ELOF whereby policy is justified, once again, on the premise of the 'good society' (Hattersley, 2004; Inglis, 2004): "The role of the CCTs [Cross-Curricular Themes] is to yield resilient, adaptable, empowered young people with the robust, transferable skills the country needs to remain caring, inclusive, competitive and productive" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 54). As far as the preparation narrative is concerned, this idea of preparing students for contemporary and future working life is conceived by promoters of LCE as crucial in a changing economy (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

6.2 Deconstructing policy

As noted in Section 5.6.1.3, policy deconstruction necessitates an enquiry into the process of 'naturalisation' (Fairclough, 2001), by virtue of which ideological

representations appear as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. I argue that the dominant ideologies surrounding the concept of learner-centredness have been naturalised, in both policy texts, thereby constituting a taken-for-granted discourse. When ideologies become naturalised or commonsensical, hegemonic power comes into play (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), whereby power is exerted through ideological influences. It is therefore the role of the critical discourse analyst to uncover the process of naturalisation, as illustrated below.

6.2.1 Modes of legitimation

Similar to the three approaches used in justifying policies via the construction of warrants, as discussed above, other ways of justifying policies to their audience can be employed by virtue of four modes of legitimation: *authorisation*, *rationalisation*, *moral evaluation* and *mythopoesis*.

6.2.1.1 Authorisation

Authorisation is a form of legitimation by making reference to different types of authority. The NCF attempts to legitimate its claims of improving the outcomes of future generations by reference to institutional authority. As a mode of legitimation, authorisation implies that the authority being referred to is unchallengeable (Hyatt, 2013a, 2013b). To establish legitimacy, therefore, the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. ix) seeks to contextualise the learner-centred policy framework within wider contexts by endorsing the practices (see Table 6.1) that are administered by respected authoritative organisations, as manifested, for example, in Malta’s participation in international (OECD and IEA) as well as EU surveys.

Indeed, both the NCF and ELOF give due importance to institutional authorities to achieve legitimation, such as when encouraging school leaders and teachers to adhere to the MQF Level Descriptors for Lifelong Learning (see Appendices

21–23), as advocated by the NCFHE; or when referring to Malta’s cultural diversity, which necessitates compliance with human rights’ obligations, as promoted both by the United Nations (UN) and the EU, as exemplified below:

It is ... important that school leaders and teachers are familiar with the level-descriptors of the MQF so that they gauge their success through the step-by-step process that the framework itself indicates. (MEDE, 2012, p. 13)

As a member state within the United Nations, Malta is a signatory to international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). As a member of the European Union, Malta is legally bound by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. (DQSE, 2015a, p. 63)

From a Foucauldian perspective, it becomes apparent how such authoritative bodies exert their influence in societies, thereby contributing to regimes of truth (Foucault, 2002). In this sense, as Mills (2003) asserts, “... statements will only be judged to be ‘true’ if they accord with, and fit in with, all of the other statements which are authorised within our society” (p. 58, emphasis in original).

6.2.1.2 Rationalisation

Rationalisation manifests itself when reference is made to the usefulness of a social action. The NCF policy text contains various instances through which legitimisation of policy is projected to be achieved on grounds of practices that appear rational. An example of this is when educators are encouraged to take “a genuine interest in listening to and responding to children to promote a pedagogy of respect, responsiveness and reciprocal relationships” (MEDE, 2012, p. 46). According to the NCF, in so doing, they will capitalise on the social dimension by interacting with children under their care in order to support their wellbeing. Viewed from this emancipatory pedagogical perspective, respecting

students' right to be heard and creating positive interpersonal relationships are considered as fundamental concepts of LCE (McCombs & Miller, 2007).

Another instance whereby legitimation is discursively accomplished by way of rationalisation is when the ELOF encourages teachers to engage learners in the English language learning process through interactive activities that require students to practise critical thinking skills:

Classroom and non-classroom activities should continue to underscore the value of interactivity and dialogic processes. Learners should be able to engage with relevant materials, literary texts and self-created content. The development of critical thinking skills at this stage becomes more important and hence learners should be encouraged to be even more analytical, evaluative and creative. (DQSE, 2015a, p. 29)

This social action that is being envisaged has particular relevance for LCE since it directs attention to skills and approaches that concern the cognitive, emancipatory and preparatory narratives of LCE.

6.2.1.3 Moral evaluation

Moral evaluation, Hyatt (2013a) contends, is realised by means of “an appeal to a value system around what is good or desirable” (p. 840). Such an appeal can be found in the NCF, which regards the outcome of education not only in terms of knowledge, skills and formal qualifications, but also as one which provides students “with a value system that reflects the moral and ethical fibre of a Maltese and European citizen” (MEDE, 2012, p. 5). Viewed in this way, the NCF embraces also “a value system that reflects attitudes and beliefs that include, but are not limited to, democracy, inclusivity, openness, tolerance, transparency and diversity” (p. 5).

In particular, the NCF claims it endeavours to assist children to view social justice and solidarity as key values that support the development of Maltese society (MEDE, 2012, p. iii). It therefore aims at developing individual capacities through

learners' active engagement in collaborative learning strategies, such as discussions, debates and governance procedures that promote socially-inclusive practices, whereby learners gain an understanding of their rights and responsibilities (pp. 52–54). In consonance with the LCE emancipatory frame, it is believed that such individual capacities assist future generations to be able to view “social justice and solidarity as pre-requisites to fairness and cohesion” (p. xiii).

6.2.1.4 Mythopoesis

As a form of legitimation that is conveyed through narratives, mythopoesis consists of moral and cautionary tales to highlight the “positive/negative outcomes of particular courses of action” (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 840). This is best illustrated by an example taken from the NCF. In this regard, the NCF post-consultation Working Group, which was tasked to review the proposed National Curriculum following the consultation process, draws on the narratives of the industry experts concerning Malta’s human resource capital comparative advantage in order to legitimate its claim in favour of the economic dimension in education:

A further contribution of the education system to the economic dimension is that of strengthening Malta’s comparative advantages. Malta’s human resource capital constitutes a comparative advantage. Studies show that foreign and local employers consider Maltese workers to be hard-working, flexible, intelligent, adaptable, trainable and diligent but caution that “potential dangers lurk: entrepreneurial spirit, discipline, work ethos, self-development in young and emerging workers are perceived to be regressing when compared to workers who are 30 years of age and over.”¹⁹ A second comparative advantage is the English and multi-lingual skills base developed during schooling. This is seen to give Malta an added edge on mainstream Europe and North Africa as English is both *the* business language and *the* technology and ICT language [emphasis in original]; the safeguarding of the ability to write and speak good English is imperative. Here too, however, studies caution that “potential dangers lurk [as] young and emerging workers are seen to have a lower command of the English

¹⁹ Department of Information [DOI] (2006), p. 33.

language compared to workers who are 30 years of age and over.”²⁰
(MEDE, 2012, p. 7)

In this excerpt, the NCF post-consultation Working Group aims at reaffirming the need for schools to make provision for Malta’s economic aspirations, as mirrored in the preparatory arguments of LCE. Consequently, the text employs a cautionary tale by underlining the potential dangers that will follow if schools do not conform to the norms of such legitimate practices. This short narrative about Malta’s human resource capital, based on studies by industry experts, can be said to represent a strategy that combines mythopoesis with authorisation (Fairclough, 2003).

6.2.2 Interdiscursivity and intertextuality

To establish the legitimacy of their claims, policy texts tend to employ the concepts of *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality*. This can be achieved when reference is made to “other texts, genres, discourses and individuals” (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 840), through which policy becomes recontextualised (Wodak & Fairclough, 2010). As Hyatt explains, the interdiscursivity of a text alludes to “the diverse ways in which genres and discourses interpenetrate each other” (p. 840). Throughout the NCF, there are many instances of interdiscursive references whereby the discourse of economics penetrates the discourse of education so as to legitimate policy claims. As noted already, particularly in Section 6.1.2, the constant emphasis that is being placed on the economic dimension is symptomatic of an education system that is subservient to neo-liberal, economic values. Despite the prominence given to learners’ needs and interests, the neo-liberal views of education remain dominant in the Minister’s opening message to the NCF:

Citizens with formal qualifications stand a better chance of employment; they add value to our economy, our work environments and, indeed, to the

²⁰ DOI (2006), p. 33.

general quality of life. Success in education adds to one's self-esteem and to the esteem of others. (MEDE, 2012, p. viii)

In essence, “the ethos of the NCF reflects the contribution that education makes to Malta’s national social and economic development” (MEDE, 2012, p. 5). Such hybrid discourses, whilst seeking to establish the legitimacy of their claims, are intended to hold schools accountable to society in fulfilling the social and economic needs.

To further legitimate the statements articulated in the text, both the NCF and ELOF make use of intertextuality by drawing upon and incorporating other texts. These “identifiable ... borrowings from other texts” (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 841) can be illustrated by two examples that focus specifically on the newly-established learning areas, which I elaborated upon in Section 1.1.1. In the first instance, to support the learning experience that is being envisaged by the NCF, an intertextual reference is made to Simister’s work, directly by means of a quotation, whereby learners are encouraged to become active thinkers through: “cooperation, concentration ... flexibility ... independence ... reflectiveness, responsibility, risk-taking and self-discipline” (Simister, 2007 as quoted in the NCF: MEDE, 2012, p. 33). In the second example, the intertextuality takes the form of a citation in order to align the descriptions of each learning area with the descriptions provided by the European Commission (2006), thereby supporting the ‘common sense’ assumptions: “The NCF presents a brief description of each learning area ... Many of the descriptions are adapted from *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework (2006/962/EC)*” (MEDE, 2012, p. 34).

Other examples of intertextual reference, found in the ELOF, are intended to reinforce the writers’ arguments concerning the purpose of assessment, as demonstrated below, whereby actual elements of Black et al.’s text are incorporated into the policy text by use of a quotation:

Ensuring that assessment of learning is complemented by assessment for learning is crucial given that the latter “provides information to be used as feedback by educators, and by their learners in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged”. (Black et al., 2003 as quoted in the ELOF: DQSE, 2015a, p. 45)

It is clear from the above extract that due attention is given, once again, to the need for students to manage their own learning by exercising greater control over the learning process, through metacognitive strategies that lead to the formation of self-governing subjects.

6.2.3 Lexico-grammatical construction

The lexico-grammatical aspect of textual construction aims at gaining an understanding of “how language is employed to make meanings” (Hyatt, 2007, p. 126). Such micro-level analysis also serves to shed light on the macro-level rhetorical constructions, that is to say, the manner in which warrant, legitimation as well as interdiscursive/intertextual references are constructed (Hyatt, 2013a), as I elaborate below.

6.2.3.1 Evaluation

A key feature of the lexico-grammatical construction is the type of evaluative statements expressed by text producers to denote their stance towards policy content, either by way of *inscribed* (explicit) or *evoked* (implicit) evaluation (Martin, 2000). In her opening message to the NCF, the Minister’s inscribed evaluation is carried out by the choice of specific lexis, whereby the non-hedged adverbs (‘really’ and ‘truly’) are giving the impression that the assertion being made is ‘factual’ and therefore indisputable. At the same time, the use of loaded language (‘flexible enough’) serves to reinforce the ‘truth’ claims: “This is an NCF that is really and truly student-centred; it is flexible enough to cater for the needs and the abilities of every individual student” (MEDE, 2012, p. vii). The idea of a

flexible, non-prescriptive approach to curriculum appears to be in harmony with learner-centred principles in that it advocates a greater teacher autonomy (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

By the same token, the use of the adjective 'confident' in the following extract aims to overtly display the writers' viewpoint vis-à-vis the NCF, whilst reassuring that teacher agency will be safeguarded, in an effort to match the teaching and learning process with the needs of all learners, as envisaged in LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b):

... we are confident that the curriculum framework has structures that permit teachers, as professionals, to take a leading role in designing learning and teaching processes that suit individual children. (MEDE, 2012, p. x)

The above example echoes Foucault's (2000) dual conceptualisation of *structure*, as a mechanism of power, and *agency*. Whilst structure aims at establishing the standards of accepted behaviour, human agency directs attention to a particular conception of power, as technologies of the self, which centre on the principle of care of the self (Skinner, 2012), signifying the individual's ability to act 'freely'. For Foucault, human agency allows individuals to "turn themselves into subjects" (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 22) by modifying "existing constraints and their own behaviour" (Campbell-Thomson, 2011, p. 1).

The ELOF policy text uses the expression "a great school is a caring school" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 40), to refer to the unconditional support that successful schools provide to all learners, within a progressive education culture that addresses learners' needs and interests (Darling, 1994; Hartley, 1987). To substantiate this argument, the statement "a hallmark of excellence" is added to describe those successful schools which aim to develop "an ethos of achievement and ambition" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 40), by focusing on what they expect to achieve and the success acquired, in terms of life, work and learning skills. The authors' views about the ideal school are clearly inscribed in the text,

via such lexical inscriptions, which serve to accentuate what they deem as incontrovertible facts.

Other terms which are included in both the NCF and ELOF, like 'vision and aspirations' (p. vii), 'empowerment' (p. vii), and 'reform process' (p. 3) (MEDE, 2012); as well as 'social cohesion' (p. 63), and 'decentralisation' (p. 5) (DQSE, 2015a), although being depicted as neutral, they are nonetheless envisioned to project a positive image of the curriculum policy reform. Such evoked evaluations act as "mechanisms through which evaluation is covertly constructed" (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 841) and therefore imply a hegemonic approach in the construction of value judgements.

6.2.3.2 Presupposition/implication

Both the NCF and the ELOF make use of a range of linguistic devices through which constructions are represented as "convincing realities" (Hyatt, 2013a, p. 841). It is therefore fitting to regard presuppositions in terms of the "implicit claims inherent in the explicit meaning of a text or utterance which are taken for granted" (Richardson, 2007, p. 63). Indeed, the use of change-of-state verbs in the NCF presupposes the factuality of the previous state: "Parents and educators [should] join forces in helping children develop into confident learners who can become active in their own learning" (MEDE, 2012, p. 48). The implication is that learners were neither confident nor actively engaged in their own learning, contrary to what is envisaged by LCE (Mayer, 2004; Mtika & Gates, 2010). This statement also presupposes that such concerns are addressed by the current curriculum policy reform.

Similarly, the Minister's statement, as expressed in her foreword to the NCF, gives the impression that a significant change is about to happen since schools were not functioning as they should have been: "The school will become a centre of learning where young students find the opportunity to acquire qualifications

necessary for them to assume an active role in society” (MEDE, 2012, p. viii). Such active notion of subjectivity or the idea of the ‘active society’ (Larner, 2000), can be understood in terms of a neo-liberal form of governmentality which presupposes the need for individuals to work on themselves, to become more enterprising and responsabilized citizens (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Joseph, 2010).

As a linguistic device, the use of change-of-state verbs features predominantly even within the ELOF. In order to empower all learners to succeed in the attainment of LOs, teachers are encouraged to “turn learners into resilient learners by ... making them aware of what they are expected to achieve by the end of the lesson” (DQSE, 2015a, p. 39). The implications which emerge from such a contention are that learners were previously not capable and competent enough to successfully adapt to different learning situations. Also, the use of the adjective ‘aware’ presents as a ‘fact’ what needs to be done for learners to become resilient.

For such reasons, teachers are urged to take the assessment process seriously: “Can they [learners] do what the SLO [Subject Learning Outcome] says they can do? Can they demonstrate the ability to do what the SLO claims for them and can they do it routinely, confidently and comfortably?” (DQSE, 2015a, p. 52). In this case, the use of rhetorical questions presupposes the answer implied by the text producers, that is that learners should reach the standards set. Again, in a Foucauldian sense, the focus on the intended LOs has no other purpose than to provide a prescription for normalising students.

6.2.3.3 Pronouns

Pronouns in texts can be viewed either as inclusive (e.g., ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’) or exclusive (e.g., ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘s/he’), depending on whether they are used to include or exclude groups (Hyatt, 2006). Throughout the text, the NCF (MEDE, 2012) makes extensive use of inclusive pronouns, mainly ‘we’ and ‘our’. In the

Minister's foreword, there are instances whereby the use of 'we' and 'our' reveals a clear reference to the Maltese society: "We are what we are because of our education and training. As a small Nation, our survival, freedom, wellbeing and identity will largely depend on qualified future generations who hold the key to our quality of life" (p. viii). Here, the reader is assumed to be in agreement with the statements made, without being offered the possibility of deviating from such a standpoint.

As often happens, 'we' changes meaning throughout texts (Fairclough, 2003). Such an inclusive pronoun is sometimes meant to refer to the voices of both the Permanent Secretary and the Director General: "... we have sought to ensure that the NCF focuses on the potential of each individual child" (p. ix). This shift in meaning does not seek to involve the reader. In a few instances, however, it is not always made clear to whom 'we' is referring – it could be the government, the Maltese nation, all readers or even the authors of the text: "This [NCF] document outlines the core components that should govern our national curriculum so that we continue to sustain personal growth and inclusivity, responsible citizenship and employability" (p. ix). Such vagueness situates the reader as an 'in-group member' with the authors, thereby assuming to share the same knowledge, beliefs and values (Hyatt, 2007).

In contrast, the ELOF adopts an impersonal tone since the text uses, to a large extent, exclusive pronouns (i.e., 'they', 'them', 'themselves' and 'their') when referring to teachers and learners. In so doing, readers are viewed as *outsiders*, as if they have "different beliefs and agendas" (Hyatt, 2006, p. 116). This reveals the political role of pronouns and the power relations involved in positioning the reader within the text.

6.2.3.4 Active/passive voice

The use of active and passive constructions helps to establish the transparency or otherwise of agency, as well as the attributions of responsibility for actions. A clear example is the use of the active language to describe the role of the NCF in the educational reform process. In this respect, the NCF is being projected as a means by virtue of which learners' needs can be met: "The NCF embraces a developmental approach to education whereby within and across all learning areas and subjects, the curriculum meets the needs of learners according to their stage of development" (MEDE, 2012, p. 32). This statement can be interpreted in terms of the government's pronounced commitment to support the diverse learning needs of students and therefore places responsibility on schools to 'activate' such measures. According to Foucault (1977a), this process of human development, which he refers to as *the organization of geneses* (p. 156), is to be understood as a technology of power since individuals are consistently trained to become more valuable, productive and capable of being controlled (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011).

The emphasis on training is also articulated via the passive voice. It is being contended that "to successfully implement the NCF, [teachers and school leaders] will need to be trained, at times up-skilled as well as re-skilled, in the new pedagogy – ranging from matters such as differentiated teaching to learner-centred learning" (MEDE, 2012, p. 6). Since teachers and school leaders are passivated, the agency is relegated into the background and therefore attention is shifted from the agent to the action. These passive constructions suggest that, in order for policy to get implemented, what is being emphasised is not 'who' will provide training but rather 'what' has to be done (Dumin, 2010). Similar passive constructions are found in the ELOF, whereby the exclusion of agency leads to the action envisaged being foregrounded: "... teachers will be encouraged to create situations and resources which are intrinsically interesting, culturally embedded and cognitively engaging and enable learners to connect

the various types of information that they have acquired” (DQSE, 2015a, p. 6). This constructivist view of learning is detailed in Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.2.

6.2.3.5 Tense and aspect

The NCF and the ELOF draw mostly on three main tenses: the present simple tense, the present perfect tense and the simple future tense. Hyatt (2013a, 2013b) argues that the use of tense and aspect aims to help text producers construct preferred intended meanings. Indeed, in several instances, both texts make use of the present simple tense to give the impression that what is stated in the policy is true. For instance, in stating that the NCF “addresses the gaps in our learning processes” (MEDE, 2012, p. vii), the Minister attempts to construct an assertion as a reality. In this respect, the message that is being conveyed is that the NCF, with its emphasis on learner centricity, responds to certain deficiencies in the Maltese educational system that over the years have contributed to absenteeism, early school leaving and, in some cases, inadequately skilled students. In a similar vein, the claim made by the ELOF that LOs “allow learners to progress at their own speed ...” (DQSE, 2015a, p. 37), is presented as a straightforward fact, even though, at the same time, the policy acknowledges that this may pose a challenge.

The present simple tense is also used to demonstrate, as a fact, that learning is most effective when it is rooted in constructivism. The NCF thus seeks to persuade the reader that what is being proposed is evidently the ‘best’ option. In these circumstances, the reader is situated in a position where s/he is constrained from thinking otherwise (Scott, 2000):

Effective learning takes place when the teacher elicits the learners’ prior knowledge, builds on it or modifies it, and guides learners to an understanding of new knowledge ... offers support to learners by scaffolding ... promotes deep learning by emphasising understanding and application of knowledge ... supports learners to become independent problem-solvers ... organises group tasks which help learners exchange ideas, co-construct knowledge and work collaboratively ... uses a variety of

learning experiences to provide learners with opportunities to practise and apply their skills ... provides timely feedback to learners based on a range of relevant evidence ... (MEDE, 2012, p. 40)

In the Minister's foreword to the NCF, the use of the present perfect tense 'has (always) been' is emphasising the link between the past and the present by predicting the success of the current policy on the basis of the importance which was always attached to education in the past: "I am confident that we will achieve these targets [relating to early school leavers and the participation of students in further and higher education, as specified in Table 6.1] because education has always been and will remain at the heart of the Maltese society" (MEDE, 2012, p. viii). Additionally, the use of the simple future tense ('we will') aims to convince the reader that the targets in question will be achieved.

On one particular occasion, the use of the present perfect tense, as employed by the ELOF, helps to highlight the shortages of the previous curricula that, according to the policy-makers, failed to provide a flexible approach to curriculum planning, as learners' diverse needs necessitate (Schweisfurth, 2013b): "Once the learning expectations are set educators can begin to introduce the flexibility in curriculum design and delivery that has been difficult to do up to this point" (DQSE, 2015a p. 31). This assertion is presented as being unquestionable, thereby encouraging educators to abide by the policy's provisions. Moreover, the ELOF states that the adoption of LOs, by virtue of which teachers tend to be inclined towards learner-centred approaches (CEDEFOP, 2008, 2009), "will mean [that teachers will be in a position of] knowing the many ways in which learners are different from one another" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 31). The use of the simple future tense ('will') assists in creating a sense of assurance about the manner in which teachers will deal with learners' diversity.

6.3 Visual images

In both texts, the inclusion of multimodal elements, other than the linguistic properties, such as the use of visual devices, aims at communicating meaningful messages that policy-makers intend to transmit. As a powerful mode of communication, the application of visual semiotics in the NCF and ELOF, although limited, at times gives rise to hegemonic tendencies in the way they construct 'reality'. The most striking images consist of four large photographs, all of the same A4 size, in order to attract the viewer's attention (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The first photo is found on the NCF front cover, whilst the other three serve to introduce the different sections within the ELOF policy document, as explained below.

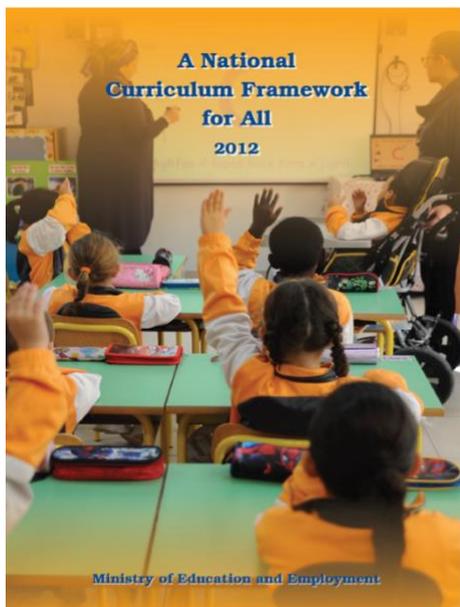


Figure 6.1 *The NCF front cover*

The NCF front cover (Figure 6.1) illustrates a classroom environment, whereby the use of the interactive whiteboard, as the main pedagogical resource, could be interpreted as an emphasis on technology-enhanced learning. The represented participants (RPs)²¹, apart from the whiteboard itself (as a non-human object), are the teacher (on the left-hand side), the Learning Support Educator (LSE) (on the right-hand side) and the mixed-gender students. The presence of a child with different learning

needs and another of a different ethnic origin compels the viewer to interpret

²¹ According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the term *represented participants* (RPs) refers to all objects and elements (both animate and inanimate) that actually exist within the visual image, that is to say, people, places and things (including abstract 'things') (pp. 47–48).

the image in terms of the policy commitment to address issues of diversity and inclusivity.

Nonetheless, the class set-up appears to be very formal, with students being seated in rows, all facing the teacher, as in traditional classroom layout, and whose engagement in the learning process is shown by their raised hands. In Foucault's (1977a) view, such a "distribution of individuals in space" (p. 141), as a disciplinary strategy, is aimed at supervising the conduct of each individual, which leads to the production of docile bodies, whilst at the same time creating a functional space for learning, as Figure 6.1 suggests. With the exception of technology, the teacher-led, whole-class approach is indicative of a conventional, behaviourist, teacher-dominated pedagogy (Schweisfurth, 2013b), and therefore the manner in which students appear to learn does not fit well with the constructivist and differentiated learning perspective, as envisioned in the NCF policy document (MEDE, 2012, pp. 39–40).



Figure 6.2 Introduction to the ELOF

In Figure 6.2, the learners are the main RPs in the visual image. Their smiling faces are meant to accentuate the 'positive' experience of the learning process. The learners' direction of the glance and the gesture of the male student suggest that they are involved in what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) refer to as a *reactional process*. The reactional structure in which they are involved is conceived as *non-transactional* since the phenomenon, that is, the participant/s with whom the learners or reactors are communicating (presumably the teacher) is/are not visible.

Moreover, the image does not provoke strong viewer involvement since learners' profiles, at an oblique angle, do not allow them to look at the viewer's direction, hence representing an image act which Harrison (2003) refers to as a visual *offer*. Again, a teacher-directed question and answer strategy, similar to Figure 6.1, seems to be employed in this case, to the extent that the image in question (Figure 6.2) can hardly be reckoned as an attempt to promote learner-centredness. This is in stark contrast with what the ELOF policy text recommends (DQSE, 2015a, pp. 29–31), in support of the NCF policy intentions.



Figure 6.3 *Pedagogy*

Figure 6.3 depicts a young teacher who is focusing her attention on the work being done by the learner. There is close proximity between the RPs (i.e., the teacher and the learner), which conveys a message of intimacy (Harrison, 2003). In this case, the viewer is compelled to think of learner-centred pedagogies in terms of individualised learning support that is responsive to learners' individual needs (Kiefer et al., 2014).

In contrast to Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 above, this visual image not only is envisioned to persuade the viewer of the importance of scaffolding processes for individual learners (Schweisfurth, 2013b), but it also aims at accentuating the value of teacher care, in respect of positive teacher-learner relationships, through which learners' socio-emotional and academic needs can be met (Daniels & Perry, 2003). The way the RPs are positioned, therefore, enhances the 'common sense' statements of the ELOF policy text (DQSE, 2015a, p. 37).



Figure 6.4 *Assessment*

Figure 6.4 may be understood in different ways. However, since such visual content is intended to serve as an introduction to the Assessment section of the ELOF, the viewer is more likely to be constrained by the claims made by text producers vis-à-vis the application of summative and formative modes of assessment, that is to say, assessment *of*, *for* and *as* learning (DQSE, 2015a, p. 45).

Learners, as the main RPs in the visual image, are therefore represented as *doing* something (i.e., working independently) so as to enable viewers to create a ‘narration’ (Harrison, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) about the possible ways in which learners’ performance can be assessed. One plausible interpretation is that learners are being supported through scaffolding strategies, as in the case of assessment *for* learning (AfL), whereby the feedback provided by the teacher allows learners to practise metacognitive skills by means of self-assessment (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Viewed in this way, Figure 6.4 could be construed as conceding some control to learners over the learning process, in conformity with learner-centred principles.

6.4 Conclusion

In addressing my first research question, the CDA findings reveal that the prevailing discourses of LCE, as emerging from both policy texts, are centred around three broad perspectives: *cognition*, *emancipation* and *preparation*. Within the cognitive perspective, which is founded on constructivist principles, the claims being made for the inclusion of LCE highlight the need of learners’ active control over the content and process of learning. In this respect, learners

are encouraged to engage with self-created content, whilst acting as independent problem-solvers and co-constructors of knowledge, through collaborative learning strategies. The cognitive arguments are further reinforced by discourses of scaffolding and differentiated and individualised teaching approaches, which are presumed to address learners' needs, according to their stage of development. Learners' active involvement in peer and self-assessment is also at play since this offers students the possibility of practicing metacognitive skills, which in turn enable them to become self-regulated subjects. From a Foucauldian perspective, however, self-assessment may 'discipline' students "if the ways in which power is exercised over students in self-assessment practices are not first understood" (Tan, 2009, p. 362). In this sense, students may undermine the real purpose of self-assessment if they are encouraged to work towards the pre-determined 'outcomes' of learning rather than working on 'learning' (Bourke, 2016).

The policy discourse around emancipation emphasises the importance of teacher-learner relationships within democratic classroom practices. It is hoped that within such democratic structures, students learn about social justice, and at the same time "develop an awareness of their rights and responsibilities as active citizens" (MEDE, 2012, p. 23). Within this emancipatory frame, the development of critical skills, dialogic processes and learner empowerment are considered as crucial. Learner empowerment is discursively projected as a means of power-sharing between teachers and students. Again, similar to the cognitive arguments of LCE, the notion of empowerment is being perceived in terms of providing greater control to learners over the content and process of learning. Empowering learners, however, can alternatively be seen as a disciplinary technology (Foucault, 1977a; Lawson, 2011), as when students act upon themselves (self-regulate) in order to comply with systems of accountability introduced, for instance, through international benchmarks and LOs.

The preparation perspective, as articulated in policy, accentuates the skills required in preparing learners for the world of work, in an ever-changing economy which necessitates a flexible approach to learning and the cultivation of creative and innovative, entrepreneurial mind-sets. Within such educational context, students are required to learn to become more resilient in the face of challenges. Indeed, in policy discourse, Malta's human resource capital is brought to centre stage, placing undue emphasis on preparing students for the labour market. But the preparation that is being envisaged for the future economy is problematic, both because of the unpredictability of the future as well as due to the inequalities brought about by the knowledge economy, whereby certain individuals stand to gain more than others, thus paving the way for further hegemonies (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

Underpinned by a strongly neo-liberal ideology, both the NCF and ELOF seek to hold schools accountable, not only for ensuring to acknowledge students' achievements, "in line with the agreed national standards", but also for proving that students are making adequate progress, "in line with expectations" (DQSE, 2015a, p. 53). In the following chapter, I present my analysis and discussion of findings that emerged from the individual interview data concerning school leaders' and teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

7

School Leaders' and Teachers' Enactment of Learner-Centred Policies: Analysis and Discussion of Findings

7.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the context of practice (Bowe et al., 1992) by analysing the manner in which the learner-centred policy texts, namely the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), are enacted in three state co-educational, non-selective, middle-school contexts, which are identified by their pseudonyms: Hompesch, Lascaris and Wignacourt. These pseudonyms represent the real names of three important Grand Masters of The Order of the Knights of Malta. As elaborated in Section 5.5, these three sample schools form part of three different state colleges in Malta, two of which are situated in the North and one in the South of the island.

In order to critically explore the way in which these middle schools respond to the demands of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform, here I specifically draw attention to how school leaders and English language teachers describe their enactment of the above-mentioned learner-centred policies, as articulated in my second research question: *How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?* As explained in Section 5.6.3.1, to obtain such data, I have designed interview guides (see Appendices 12–13) and carried out individual semi-structured interviews with three middle school leaders and fourteen middle school English language teachers, which included two NQTs and three HODs, teaching 11 to 13-year-old students. The responses of school leaders and teachers are also compared, insofar as the themes converge. To protect the

participants' identities, pseudonyms and codes have been used in reporting the findings, as seen in Table 5.4.

The data generated from the individual interviews illustrates the ways in which the NCF and ELOF policy texts are being understood, interpreted and translated into contextualised practices by school leaders and teachers, reflecting institutional, departmental as well as in-class and, occasionally, out-of-class enactments of learner-centred policies. My analysis of learner-centred policy enactment is further reinforced through visual data, as produced by the schools, consisting of a combination of different visual artefacts, including the schools' websites, lesson observation checklists, classroom charts, diaries, as well as SDPs.

For the purpose of analysis, this chapter draws on a range of theoretical resources. In essence, it is located within Ball et al.'s (2012) theoretical understandings of policy enactments in English secondary schools, as discussed in Section 4.2.3. Other theoretical concepts, such as Barthes' (1974) notions of *readerly* and *writerly* texts, as elaborated upon in Section 4.1.1.2, as well as Spillane et al.'s (2002, 2006) cognitive perspectives on policy implementation, which I explained briefly in Section 4.2.3.2, are also dealt with in analysing school leaders' and teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies. In addition, the main findings are examined in relation to learner-centred theories, which are detailed in Section 4.3, whilst being considered according to Foucault's conceptual framework, as presented in Chapter 3.

My analysis of learner-centred policy enactment, supported by school leaders' and teachers' excerpts, revolves around seven central themes that emerged from the individual interview data, as follows: (1) contextual dimensions of policy enactment; (2) school leaders' understandings of LCE; (3) school leaders' interpretations of learner-centred policies; (4) school leaders' translations of learner-centred policies; (5) teachers' understandings of LCE; (6) teachers' interpretations of learner-centred policies; and (7) teachers' translations of

learner-centred policies (see Appendices 17–18). This thematic approach to analysing qualitative data is based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework, as described in Section 5.7. I begin by analysing the role of school context in policy enactment, drawing attention to key institutional factors.

7.1 Contextual dimensions of policy enactment

As argued in Section 4.2.3.1, processes of policy enactment take place in context, in material conditions. Ball et al. (2012) reiterate that “context initiates and activates policy processes and choices which are continuously constructed and developed, both from within and without, in relation to policy imperatives and expectations” (p. 24). The contextualising data which was collected from three state co-ed middle schools in Malta draws particular attention to different aspects of context, which are classified into four sub-themes: (1) the historical and local context of the school; (2) the school’s ethos and cultural assets; (3) the ‘physical’ aspects of the school; and (4) support and pressures from external structures. These aspects of context aim at investigating and illuminating the manner in which policy becomes enacted. Indeed, as Ball et al. (2012) observe, “policies are intimately shaped and influenced by *school-specific factors* which act as constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments ...” (p. 19, emphasis in original). Very often, they argue, policy-makers and researchers tend to downplay the importance of such school factors.

7.1.1 The historical and local context of the school

Among the institutional factors, the historical aspects of the school, its location and intake characteristics, otherwise referred to as *situated contexts* (Ball et al., 2012), are deemed as critical variables in shaping policy enactment. I start by providing a snapshot of Wignacourt Middle School.

7.1.1.1 Wignacourt Middle School

Wignacourt is situated in the heart of a Northern town in Malta. It has been functioning as a school for over 60 years. Initially, it started to operate as a boys' primary school and later it became a boys' secondary school. As from 1981, Wignacourt started to accommodate secondary school girls who were less academically able than other students attending selective institutions. In scholastic year 2014–2015, Wignacourt was converted into a co-ed middle school, catering for mixed-ability students. Currently, the student population at Wignacourt exceeds 300 students and is expected to increase in the future. There is a small number of immigrant children attending the school but these do not have communication problems since they also speak in English. According to the Head of School, Evelyn, Wignacourt has always been renowned for its 'good' student intake. Since becoming a co-ed middle school, the parents have turned out to be more demanding:

A great deal of pressure that we face at school is from parents. They expect too much from the school, to the verge of being arrogant, and they create a lot of pressure on teachers, on the SMT and even on their own children.
(Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

At present, the students hail from six feeder primary schools, which form part of the college catchment area. A fairly large number of students reside in small rural villages and are generally perceived as respectful and obedient. The relatively few students who are considered as troublesome due to their physical aggressiveness, are being supported by means of a programme that focuses on good manners, which the school had incorporated in its SDP.

7.1.1.2 Hompesch Middle School

Hompesch is also located in the Northern region of the Maltese islands. The school building has a rich and varied history due to the various non-educational purposes it served before being converted into a school, in 1984. Initially, the

school catered for Year 5 and Year 6 primary students, as well as for girls' secondary students. Two years later, in 1986, it was transformed into a selective secondary school for high-achieving girls. It remained a selective institution until 2010–2011 since in scholastic year 2011–2012 mixed-ability classes started being phased in, due to the re-introduction of the comprehensive system in Maltese state schools. Today, there are over 800 students attending Hompesch School, half of which attend the middle school, within the same premises. The students come from the five feeder primary schools of the college, all of which are situated in nearby towns. A significant proportion of students (over 35%) are immigrants, several of whom do not communicate in either Maltese or English. Consequently, the school embarked on a project whereby the students in question, upon arrival, follow a one-scholastic-year induction programme in basic Maltese and English, as well as Mediterranean studies, prior to joining the mainstream classes.

The Head of Hompesch, Amelia, explained that with the re-introduction of comprehensive schooling and, consequently, the relocation of student catchment area, the disruptive behaviour in classrooms has escalated in recent years, to the extent that the school does no longer enjoy the good reputation it once had during the time it served as a selective institution. In her view, although the school has a decent proportion of “academically-able students”, little is being done to address the needs of disruptive children. Some of these students come from families with difficult social backgrounds and, to add insult to injury, the parents tend to support their children when they misbehave. The concluding comment of the Head of School says it all: “The catchment area is what it is”, resonating Ball et al.'s (2012) assertion that “schools can become defined by their intake, but they also define themselves by it” (p. 22).

7.1.1.3 Lascaris Middle School

Lascaris lies in the Southern part of Malta. It opened its doors in 2016 and currently has a population of approximately 450 students. The students' catchment area, in which the college feeder primary schools reside, comprises eight localities, most of which are small villages. Lascaris also has a small number of immigrant children and, in order to overcome the linguistic (communication) barriers of these students, the school is collaborating with the Migrants Unit in delivering a programme of two-weekly sessions in basic Maltese and English.

The Head of Lascaris, Elizabeth, reiterated that although some children are falling behind academically, due to the low socio-economic status of their parents, the majority of students in school are relatively doing well when compared to other middle schools. In this respect, Lascaris seems to be regarded as a 'good' school by many. Moreover, students who reside in two specific geographic locations tend to perform better than the rest of students who live in other localities within the college catchment area. Also, most of the parents at Lascaris take a keen interest in the education of their children, even though some parents have been described as "not academically motivated". One of the issues which the Head is concerned about, however, is the recurrent behavioural problems of a minority of students who challenge the school's authority by not adhering to the code of ethics which the school has established, particularly with regard to students' hairstyle. The Head commented that her hands are tied when it comes to exert disciplinary action:

Sometimes we bluff our way when we feel the need to implement sanctions since we know that we cannot expel students from school. All we can do is to forbid students from taking their break time. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

Millei and Petersen (2015) posit that behaviour management discourses tend to pathologize students whose behaviour is deemed to be non-normative. From a Foucauldian perspective, however, student behaviour is treated as highly complex, requiring a shift from the fixing of student problems to an analysis of

the formation of learner subjectivities. In so doing, emphasis is placed on how students are shaped by certain discourses and how they position themselves in relation to such discourses (Gillies, 2013).

7.1.2 The school's ethos and cultural assets

Another contextual dimension that deserves attention concerns the *professional culture* of the school, which according to Ball et al. (2012), necessitates an examination of the school's ethos, values and teachers' commitments and experiences. The three sample schools in the study claim to embrace values which aim at placing the learner at the centre of the educational system. These values constitute the personal ethos of the respective school leaders and, as research suggests (Gibson, 2015), they assist the schools in realising their ethos and vision.

In the study conducted by Yoeli and Berkovich (2010), "personal ethos proved to be a key element in formulating the leaders' personal and organization vision ... Typically, the leader's personal ethos evolves from past experiences which have left a deep imprint on his worldview and values" (p. 451, p. 457). For example, the educational values echoing Wignacourt's vision, as displayed on the school's website, revolve around students' active engagement in learning, inclusivity, creativity, critical thinking as well as individual responsibility and accountability. The professional experience factor played a key role in shaping the personal ethos of the Head of School (HOS1) and, subsequently, the institutional vision:

My vision is the culmination of my thirty years' experience in the education sector. I strongly believe that learning by doing is more effective than spoon-fed learning. Students need to be engaged in practical activities ... they need to practise critical thinking skills and above all they need to be responsible and accountable. In this day and age, you can't go on with doing something haphazardly – you have to make sure that what you are doing is at least on the right track. I feel that in most work situations in Malta we lack this sense of accountability. That is why I feel it is my duty to instil a culture of accountability in my school. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

The neo-liberal concepts of responsibility and accountability are high on the school agenda of Wignacourt. As Kopecký (2011) contends, accountability, in particular, “has become the word of the day” (p. 257). This accountability culture and processes of normalisation, aimed at keeping students “on the right track”, as Evelyn stated, serve as modes of regulation in order to ensure compliance.

Other forms of neo-liberal governmentality are depicted in the institutional vision of Hompesch and Lascaris, as shown on their respective websites, whereby the educational values that are being emphasised comprise elements within the cognitive, emancipatory and preparatory narratives of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013a, 2013b), as mirrored in such concepts as 21st century skills, learner freedom, autonomous and responsible individuals, as well as learner needs, independent and self-regulated learning. These concepts form part of the discursive formation of the said schools (Foucault, 1972), as outlined in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2.

As in the case of Wignacourt, the website content of Hompesch and Lascaris Schools, as an artefact of governmentality, aids in circulating and reinforcing the visionary leadership of the schools. Again, the professional experience of the school leaders (HOS2/HOS3) has helped in formulating not only their personal ethos but also the ethos of the institution they lead:

My experiences have taught me that the best way to approach learners is to allow them to exercise their freedom, to be autonomous and responsible learners, and to help them develop essential skills for the 21st century ... and that's what we're trying to do here. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

At the school where I worked before we used to promote independent learning, kind of self-regulated learning. In a way, it helped students to become aware of their individual needs. I am now encouraging teachers to adopt a similar approach. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

Taken together, concepts such as student active engagement in learning, inclusivity, creativity, critical thinking, learner needs, life skills, individual freedom, learner responsibility and accountability, as well as autonomous, independent and self-regulated learning, all reveal the link between the

institutional values of the three sample schools and some of the key values embedded in the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), as elaborated upon in Chapter 6, particularly in Sections 6.1.4.2, 6.1.4.3, 6.2.1.2, 6.2.1.3, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3.5.

According to the school leaders, teachers' commitments within the sample schools vary considerably. Some members within the professional community of Hompesch have been described by their Head of School (HOS2) as exhibiting "a lack of initiative" when it comes to realise the school-wide vision. A few others were labelled as "non-compliant", mainly the trade union representatives and union activists. At times, these union representatives and activists, as *policy critics* (Ball et al., 2012), tend to resist certain practices, as when they refused to participate in compulsory training sessions organised by the Head of School (HOS2), aimed at facilitating the implementation of LOs. Indeed, as Foucault (1978) maintains, "where there is power there is resistance" (pp. 95–96). Such oppositional behaviour appears also to pertain to what Hooks and West (1991) describe as *thick* forms of resistance, which aim to challenge major structures, as was the case with the introduction of the LOF in Malta in 2015, the details of which can be found in Sections 1.1.1 and 6.1.1. Conversely, the Heads of Wignacourt (HOS1) and Lascaris (HOS3) have commented rather positively on their professional community, with the former describing her teaching staff as both "energetic and supportive" and the latter as "co-operative".

7.1.3 The 'physical' aspects of the school

The various dimensions of the 'physical', or *material context* (Ball et al., 2012), such as the school buildings and funding, and information technologies, may have an impact on the way policies are enacted. This is because the more resources available, the greater are the chances to effect change (Schweisfurth, 2013b). The three sample schools in my study operate in very similar physical contexts. As far as the school buildings are concerned, Lascaris School was newly

built, whilst both Wignacourt and Hompesch have benefitted from refurbishment and new building extensions, under the government-led Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools (FTS).

All schools are furnished with the latest technological teaching equipment, including interactive whiteboards in all classrooms; top-notch science and home economics laboratories; multimedia and music rooms; as well as several sports facilities. The three schools also boast a number of recreational spaces where students can get involved in various activities, including art, crafts and cooking. At Wignacourt, plans are underway to convert a classroom into a dance studio to allow students to specialise in this area. The Head of Lascaris (HOS3), however, lamented about the fact that her school, despite being a modern one, does not have a hall and when a whole-school activity is to be organised, the school has to rely on its neighbouring secondary school within the college.

As with the rest of all state schools in Malta, the three schools benefit from government funding, on an annual basis, to cover their capital and recurrent expenditure, including repairs and maintenance, which is calculated according to student population. The government also pays the salaries of all teaching and non-teaching staff. Additionally, the schools have other ways of financing, such as through fund-raising activities and renting of school premises, with the Head of Hompesch (HOS2) declaring that her school generates a large amount of funds from rentals, some of which have been spent on the installation of CCTV cameras, whilst the majority of funds are being invested in the purchase of text books and other teaching resources. The installation of CCTV cameras, as a form of disciplinary technology, is aimed at producing self-regulating, 'normalised' subjects (Lawson, 2011). Taylor (2014) argues that "surveillance schools are emerging around the globe, characterised by new technologies and practices that identify, verify, categorise, and track pupils in ways never before thought possible" (p. 1).

Indeed, the physical aspects of the school were considered by the respective

school leaders as fundamental in realising the school's ethos and vision. For the Head of Wignacourt (HOS1), the location of the school's administration building was important in order for her to keep an eye on what is happening at school:

How can I expect to be an effective leader and supervise what is happening if my office is not centrally located? I'm proud to say that, under my leadership, nothing goes unnoticed. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

Again, the intention of Evelyn to monitor the school premises bears a resemblance to Foucault's (1977a) theory of regulatory control, as noted in Section 3.2.1, whereby the surveillance of individuals in space takes place, metaphorically, through panopticism, which leads to the formation of self-disciplined subjects.

7.1.4 Support and pressures from external structures

The final contextual dimension relates to *external contexts* (Ball et al., 2012). This dimension takes into consideration two significant factors that can influence the manner in which policy becomes enacted. Firstly, it draws attention to the quality of support being offered to schools through centralised structures, and secondly, it examines what is being demanded from schools, that is to say, the pressures exerted by broader policy frameworks, such as quality assurance mechanisms.

When it comes to supporting strategies, two school leaders (HOS1/HOS3) pointed their fingers at the Education Directorates, claiming that schools do not always get what they are entitled to. For instance, the Head of Wignacourt (HOS1) asserted that she does not get enough curricular support from the education authorities since many decisions are being taken in a top-down fashion:

The education authorities need to get out of their offices and get their hands dirty to grasp the reality which we are facing at school. It's not enough to have a nice building. I feel that certain decisions taken are filtered down to schools in a kind of *fait accompli*, sort of a top-down system, and schools are expected to abide by what has been decided ... the launch of the LOF is a case in point. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

The pressure “to abide by what has been decided”, as evidenced in Evelyn’s quote, is symptomatic of a bureaucratic educational apparatus, through which teachers and school leaders behave as *receivers* (Ball et al., 2012), and are simply required to follow procedures.

Similarly, the Head of Lascaris (HOS3) expressed her disappointment at the fact that the Education Directorates do not provide adequate support to schools when dealing with cases involving student disciplinary measures, despite the structures already in place, such as the Learning Support Zones (LSZs) and Learning Support Centres (LSCs).²² Nonetheless, she commented positively about the manner in which her school was being supported by a group of Education Officers (EOs). The role of such policy actors, as *outsiders* (Ball et al., 2012), was to train and prepare teachers in managing the implementation of the LOF. In a Foucauldian sense, it could be argued that such training is intended to ‘discipline’ individual subjects in order to become more effective in delivering the required output.

The same support was offered to Hompesch, whereby the EOs assisted the school in formulating an action plan on continuous assessment, with the ultimate goal being to enhance the LOs of all subject areas. Such action plan, however, as confirmed by the Head of School (HOS2), rather than emerging from the school internal review (NcNamara & O’Hara, 2005; Nevo, 2001), was sanctioned by the respective Head of College Network²³, through electronic correspondence, in response to the increasing demands of the LOF. The political pressures exerted by national policy frameworks have forced other Heads of College Network to follow suit:

²² The installation of LSZs and LSCs in the Maltese education system is intended to help students overcome social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Students exhibiting SEBD are either assigned to a LSZ, within the school, or in severe cases, are referred to a LSC, outside the school, for a stipulated period of time. Whilst students in both LSZs and LSCs follow specific programmes that will help them overcome their SEBD, students attending LSCs are supported in such a way so as to be reintegrated into the mainstream.

²³ The Head of College Network was previously referred to as the College Principal.

We [Heads of School] always follow the direction of the Principal, even more so when it concerns national policies. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

There were other pressures emanating from quality assurance procedures which compelled the Heads of School to exercise great caution in dealing with national quality standards of education, especially those relating to learning and teaching. Indeed, all Heads have expressed their concerns regarding the undue pressure being created by external school evaluations:

When we were informed that our next inspection was due, we panicked a lot, yeah, and we tried as much as we can to implement the changes that they [the DQSE] had drawn attention to during their previous visit. Basically, they had criticised a few teachers for not doing their utmost to provide a meaningful learning experience to students. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

We always give priority to what they [the DQSE] demand from us. In their last report, they weren't satisfied with some lesson plans, unbelievable. We're talking here of teachers who have almost twenty years teaching experience. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

The last time they [the DQSE] visited our school was two years ago. It wasn't a pleasant experience at all. They passed some negative comments on our teaching and learning and we went through tough times to take on board their recommendations, with very little support, that's not fair. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

As the above quotes suggest, the pressures exerted by quality assurance mechanisms, as technologies of governmentality (Foucault, 1977a, 1991), are specifically aimed at implanting greater surveillance systems and accountability measures. Such inspection regimes, as Tomlinson (2001b) observes, have compelled teachers to transform into "a technical workforce to be managed and controlled rather than a profession to be respected" (p. 36).

7.2 School leaders' understandings of LCE

In Section 4.3.2.1, LCE has been described as a contested concept due to the conceptual ambiguities surrounding its definition (Schweisfurth, 2013b; Starkey, 2019). With this in mind, in the next section I examine school leaders'

understandings of LCE in terms of the following sub-theme: conceptual differences.

7.2.1 Conceptual differences

One of the questions asked to school leaders was about their acquaintance with the term LCE. The Head of Lascaris (HOS3) confirmed that she first heard of LCE during her pre-service teacher education. The Head of Wignacourt (HOS1) became aware of LCE through her engagement with academic journals, whilst reading for a part-time master's degree in education. For the Head of Hompesch (HOS2), LCE was not a familiar concept until she started attending in-service training in pedagogy.

In all three schools, the school leaders exhibited different degrees of familiarity with the concept of LCE, similar to what Starkey (2019) had found in her study regarding school principals' views of LCE. Indeed, in my study, one school leader (HOS3) explained that "LCE is about addressing the needs of the child, kind of tailoring the curriculum according to his or her abilities" (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris). LCE was also understood in terms of "various activities that allow students to become actively involved in learning" (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch); whilst the Head of Wignacourt (HOS1) emphasised the importance of student's learning potential: "LCE aims at boosting children's academic potential, you know, by exploring different ways through which they can learn best and achieve results" (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt).

These school leaders' ideas about LCE can be summed up in terms of curriculum differentiation, learner engagement, learning styles and preferences, and learner achievement, which are predominantly aligned with the cognitive perspective of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b), as seen in Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.2. Although these school leaders' understandings of LCE are not broad enough, other key features of learner-centricity, as already noted in Section 7.1.2, have been

displayed on the schools' website, which include notions of inclusivity (Wignacourt), learner freedom (Hompesch), and self-regulated learning (Lascarlis).

7.3 School leaders' interpretations of learner-centred policies

In Section 4.2.3.2, attention has been drawn to how schools interpret and make sense of policy, that is the hermeneutics of policy, whereby actors in schools adopt different positions and are positioned differently in relation to policy (Ball et al., 2012). In formulating responses to policy, school leaders, in particular, are often viewed as receivers and agents of policy decisions (Spillane et al., 2002), as can be seen in the next section, which focuses on the following sub-theme: institutional narratives.

7.3.1 Institutional narratives

The ways in which the school leaders and their SMT members attempt to engage with the language of policy, that is their interpretation of the NCF and ELOF policy texts, shed light on the institutional political process involved in selecting, explaining, circulating and enforcing the policy focus among teaching staff members. In all three schools, these conversations take place mainly through various SMT meetings, subject departmental meetings, working groups as well as staff briefing sessions. As Maguire and Braun (2019) explain, "schools can only work effectively if they draw on principles of shared collegiality and dispersed leadership" (p. 111), whereby various policy actors are involved in the policy sense-making process, thus viewing school leadership from a distributed perspective (Spillane et al., 2007).

Since these authoritative interpretations of policy by school leaders and their SMTs take place in context, the contextual factors discussed above played a crucial role in determining the manner and the extent to which schools respond

to policy, thereby enabling policy to become recontextualised (Singh et al., 2013). For instance, the school leaders' articulation of their respective school vision, as noted in Section 7.1.2, contributes to this meaning-making process, in that they endeavour to embrace those policy values which they deem as fitting within their context. Such discursive articulations of policy constitute what Ball et al. (2012) describe as an *institutional narrative*. As narrators, school leaders' interpretations of the NCF and ELOF revolve around key policy discourses, the common factor being the focus on achievement, as spelled out in the outcomes-oriented approach to teaching and learning, which is a central concept within leadership discourse (Gillies, 2013).

We are currently focusing our attention on the learning outcomes because we want our students to do well in exams, and we have decided to give greater consideration to the outcomes of oracy since, unfortunately, our students are experiencing difficulties in communicating verbally. The majority of students do not seem to be encountering problems in writing, but when it comes to speaking they get stuck. So, we decided to focus on this area because of the low marks obtained by several students ... and we incorporated an action plan in our SDP which, apart from encouraging students to engage more actively in discussions, in group work, for example, it allows them to improve their critical thinking, their creativity and problem-solving skills. Students also learn to take responsibility for their learning. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

For next year, we will continue to work on improving the learning outcomes of literacy, numeracy and communicative skills, you know, self-expression, debates and so on. This should help them to improve their grades. We also feel the need to help our students to become independent learners. Last year we experimented with differentiated teaching and critical thinking skills, but we realised that, in the case of critical thinking, we may have aimed too high since it was our school's first year of operation. Perhaps our teachers were not trained enough to tackle this area. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

We strongly believe in learner autonomy cos this helps them [the students] to develop a sense of responsibility. But most importantly, we are dedicating most of our energy on the learning outcomes, across all subjects, to help our underachievers. At first, I was a bit sceptical about the real scope behind these learning outcomes, but after reading again the document and attending a couple of information meetings I became convinced, like many colleagues of mine, that the only way forward is to observe the recommended learning outcomes. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

I construe these responses of schools to policy as technologies of governmentality (Foucault, 1977a, 1991), whose intention is to shape the conduct of teachers and students. The feedback provided by Amelia, in particular, draws attention to Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, where a number of school leaders appear to have been influenced by the dominant discourses of the education authorities. In this respect, the prescribed levels of student academic achievement contained in the LOF policy documents are perceived as a fixed reading, leaving no room for alternative interpretations of policy, rendering the text as a *readerly* policy (Barthes, 1974), whilst positioning the respective school leader (HOS2) as a passive policy subject (Ball et al., 2012).

7.4 School leaders' translations of learner-centred policies

In Section 4.2.3.2, a distinction was drawn between policy interpretation and translation. Whereas interpretation relates to the meaning-making process of policy texts, translation is concerned with how policy texts are put into action. Although processes of policy interpretation and translation work together and sometimes overlap (Ball et al., 2012), in this section I move beyond the meaning-making process in order to examine one specific dimension of policy translations that emerged from my interview data, that is the use of policy levers by school leaders in supporting the enactment of learner-centred policy, as articulated in the NCF and ELOF. These policy levers have been dealt with in Sections 4.2.1, 5.6.1.3 and 6.1.3. In the next section, I explain how schools are relying mostly on three specific policy levers in order to get policy enacted, as illustrated in the following sub-themes: (1) planning; (2) inspection; and (3) training.

7.4.1 Planning

As explained in Section 6.1.3, both the NCF and ELOF place emphasis on quality assurance mechanisms, aimed at supporting schools to develop into

communities of reflexive practice. According to these policy documents, to be able to reflect critically on their actions, schools need to embark on school development planning and review processes, which are considered as important policy levers (DQSE, 2015a, pp. 48–49; MEDE, 2012, p. 42, p. 63). Indeed, planning and internal reviews occupy an important position in all three schools. They are construed by the respective school leaders as a reflexive exercise through which they can reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in order to prepare action plans for further school improvement. In a Foucauldian sense, as the following examples suggest, the SDP can potentially function as a disciplinary technology, aimed at ‘fixing’ students (Winter, 2017). In this respect, the normalisation of individual students is being projected in terms of a school-wide action plan:

When I first came in this school, I started working on a new SDP document. It wasn’t easy, as you can imagine. I tried hard to make them [the staff] aware of the importance of this exercise. Currently, we have three action plans, one targeting speaking skills, another one on critical and creative thinking erm, because students’ performance is not yet up to standard in those areas, and-and we also have an action plan on behaviour management. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

We take the SDP process very seriously. It’s an opportunity, you know, to reflect on what went well and not so well, and you plan accordingly. In our SDP we try, as much as possible, to give priority to students’ academic achievement. One action plan that our Principal had asked us to include in the SDP was on continuous assessment so that we can start monitoring students’ progress on a regular basis. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

Yes, I believe it’s important, the SDP. It gives the school a sense of direction. Even though we plan to make the lessons more interactive, the communicative abilities of our students are relatively low, so for the time being we need to continue to address this issue. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

The argument that can be made here is that development plans, imported from the world of business (Wain, 2018), represent “a complex web of tactics and procedures”, which combine the institutions’ priorities with those of the state. They can indeed be viewed as “a means of cultural engineering” (Ball, 2006, pp. 108–109).

7.4.2 Inspection

Inspections, as an essential component of quality assurance procedures, are given due recognition in the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. iii, p. 32) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, pp. 48–49), as noted in Section 6.1.3. Such inspections, as policy levers, are being carried out regularly in all three schools. This time round, the surveillance by school leaders takes place through lesson observations, as a means of policy enforcement. To facilitate compliance, each school has formulated a checklist (see Appendices 25–27), which functions as an artefact of governmentality that stipulates the ‘codes of behaviour’, including the learner-centred policy ‘norms’, such as teacher’s ability to differentiate the curriculum and the use of group work, as a teaching technique.

Lesson observations, facilitated by such artefacts, aim at creating a panopticon effect, in that in being subjected to the visibility of the school leader, teachers may start to regulate their own behaviour, as part of a system of self-surveillance, even when they are not being observed. These neo-liberal rationalities of accountability and performativity are evident in the school leaders’ comments, as the persons responsible for monitoring, thereby acting as *policy transactors* (Ball et al., 2012):

We [the SMT] prepared a checklist to help us focus on those areas that we feel should be given priority, so we make it a point to visit each teacher once a term. Teachers didn’t object to the checklist, they don’t mind, because they belong to it. (Evelyn/HOS1/Wignacourt)

We [the SMT] all do class visits. We don’t find anything irregular, except in one or two cases. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

I have observed teachers doing such activities [hands-on activities, group work, pair work]. At the end of the lesson I draw attention to what needs to be improved. I also check the teachers’ file and the record of work. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

As the examples above demonstrate, what is being practised in all three schools resonates Foucault’s concept of government, as ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Gordon, 1991), whereby the management of conduct by school leaders

becomes a way of “structuring the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790), that is to say, influencing teachers’ conduct to achieve the required levels of performance (Gillies, 2013).

7.4.3 Training

Another policy lever that features prominently in the NCF and ELOF, aimed at facilitating the implementation of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform, relates to training of professional staff within schools (DQSE, 2015a, p. 42, p. 48; MEDE, 2012, pp. 31–32, p. 42, p. 44), as can be seen in Sections 6.1.3 and 6.2.3.4. Such policy lever is widely used in schools and, as exemplified below, can act as a ritual of professional development that strives to classify, correct and normalise teacher subjects. In this regard, the training of teachers is geared towards the production of docile and more useful bodies (Foucault, 1977a). Teachers are thus positioned to act in certain ways, according to what is regarded as ‘acceptable’ behaviour:

One of the PD [professional development] sessions that we [the SMT] had to organise was on communication skills. Most of teachers were not so keen about it, but we couldn’t do otherwise since this is an area which requires greater focus. (Elizabeth/HOS3/Lascaris)

In the first term we had a PD session on critical and creative thinking ... was a bit boring and teachers didn’t engage in the discussion, so we had to repeat it in the second term. This was more interactive and included workshop sessions. (Evelyn/HOS/Wignacourt)

Our last PD session was on continuous assessment. I felt it was necessary for all of us to be trained in this area, given the demands of the LOF. (Amelia/HOS2/Hompesch)

As seen in the above quotes, the professional training envisaged by school leaders, as key *policy translators* (Ball et al., 2012), is in response to specific curricular areas that they chose to work on, as highlighted in Sections 7.3.1 and 7.4.1. Many researchers (e.g., Domitrovich et al., 2009; Gu, 2007; Rose & Sughrue, 2021) are of the opinion that continuing professional learning and development is a prerequisite for teachers’ commitment and their professional

effectiveness. However, Ryder and Banner (2013) also regard professional development as a means to encourage critical analysis of curriculum reforms rather than simply as an opportunity to support a specific reform. In the subsequent sections, I turn to teachers' interview data-set in order to exemplify how the learner-centred curriculum reform policies are being enacted in the three sample schools.

7.5 Teachers' understandings of LCE

Due to the contested nature of the term LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b; Starkey, 2019), as explained in Section 4.3.2.1, in the next section I explore teachers' understandings of LCE in terms of the following sub-themes: (1) conceptual differences; (2) strengths and limitations of LCE; and (3) the teacher's role in LCE.

7.5.1 Conceptual differences

As in the case of school leaders, teachers were asked to comment on how they became aware of the term LCE. Four teachers (T2/T3/NQT1/NQT2) affirmed that they became acquainted with LCE mainly through formal courses, another four (HOD1/T1/T7/T8) by means of in-service training and five others (HOD2/HOD3/T5/T6/T9) by way of private reading. One teacher (T4) acknowledged that she became accustomed to LCE when the new syllabus for middle schools was published.

When asked how LCE was being understood, some teachers (HOD1/HOD2/T1/T2/T3/T5/T9/NQT2) conceptualised learner-centredness as an approach through which teaching adaptations can be made to suit learners' needs, capacities and interests, as in the following examples:

To me it [LCE] means that you put the learner in the centre of the classroom. Basically, you think of the activities, whatever you're going to teach, in terms of what they need. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

It [LCE] means that when you're preparing your lessons, you think first of your students, who they are, what they know, what they like, their aptitude, and then you build up the lessons around them. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

I think it's [LCE] all about, it's basically putting the learner as centre [*sic*], and all the learning happening should be addressed vis-à-vis the learner's needs and abilities and the strengths, weaknesses ... (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

Other teachers understood LCE differently. It was viewed as an approach that “utilises different teaching strategies to help students make progress” (Cecilia/T4/Hompesch); as a means through which “students construct their own learning” (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt); as a method that “enables students to express themselves freely” (Maggie/T6/Hompesch); and also as a way of “responsibilising students to achieve good grades” (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris). Two other teachers understood LCE in terms of a strategy that focuses on “the learning process” (Felicity/T7/Lascaris; Demi/T8/Lascaris). Indeed, although the definitions provided are by no means exhaustive, teachers highlighted some important concepts of learner-centredness, which belong largely to the cognitive perspective of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b), as underlined in Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.2. It is interesting to note that the cognitive perspective was equally emphasised by school leaders, as can be recalled from Section 7.2.

7.5.2 Strengths and limitations of LCE

A key feature that emerged from the teachers' interview data concerned their perceptions of LCE in terms of its strengths and limitations, as briefly discussed below.

7.5.2.1 Strengths of LCE

All the teachers expressed their enthusiasm for LCE, which reinforces Hirsch's (1996) notion that “within the educational community, there is currently no

thinkable alternative” (p. 69, emphasis in original). Some teachers have argued that LCE is primarily beneficial for students since “everyone is different, everyone learns in a different way” (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt); and that “they [students] feel special when they’re at the centre of the learning, and you adapt your lessons to-to their needs” (Demi/T8/Lascarlis). LCE appears to be appealing also due to learners’ active participation in meaningful activities:

It’s more interesting for students to learn on their own, especially because I use a lot of group work. So, it’s more interesting for them and they learn from each other as well. (Felicity/T7/Lascarlis)

Another teacher valued LCE for “the opportunity it gives to students to become motivated” (Lillian/HOD3/Lascarlis). LCE was also the preferred approach through which “cognitive development occurs” (Scarlett/T9/Lascarlis). Again, as already noted in Section 7.5.1 above, the cognitive narrative of LCE has taken centre stage, owing to teachers’ (HOD1/HOD3/T7/T8/T9) beliefs about LCE as a mode of learning that is concerned with learners’ intellectual development, individual differences, learners’ needs and motivation, and their active participation in the learning process.

7.5.2.2 Limitations of LCE

Despite being enthusiastic about LCE, all teachers were of the opinion that sometimes it is difficult to put LCE into practice, particularly in large and diverse classrooms. Two teachers remarked that:

Given the different abilities within the same class, you can’t reach the target of every individual every time. If that’s the case, you know, I will really enjoy this utopia ... (Josephine/T1/Wignacourt)

In a classroom, you have a lot of diversity ... Although we’re working on levels, within one classroom, although it should be the same level, there are various levels, various aptitudes, different characters, and so it’s a bit difficult to manage to cater for the whole class. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

One of the HODs expressed a similar concern since, in her efforts to meet the needs of ‘the majority’, other students might be left behind, thereby leading to inequalities among students:

It [LCE] might not always be feasible because when you have a class of twenty-four, twenty-two students, all with different learning needs, you need to think of the majority and then you try and see to those who are not really getting what you want from them. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

Student diversity has been proved to be challenging for teachers (Brodie, 2002; Cartiera, 2006; Hadjioannou et al., 2016; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Indeed, several studies reveal that teachers in middle schools have failed to address student needs due to ineffective classroom practices (e.g., McEwin et al., 1996; Moon et al., 2003). In embracing a responsive pedagogy to diversity, teachers are constantly encouraged to engage students in classwork (Subban, 2006).

Eight teachers (HOD3/T1/T2/T5/T6/T7/NQT1/NQT2) believe that LCE cannot be completely detached from the more traditional forms of teaching and, at times, both teacher-dominated pedagogies and learner-centred approaches need to complement each other. In this sense, as reviewed in Section 4.3.2.1, teachers deal with pedagogies that hover somewhere along the continuum rather than towards one or the other of the extreme ends (Schweisfurth, 2013b):

I think there are certain classes which require more support, and in fact I’m thinking of a particular class. They constantly want your feedback, want your support. So, you need to give them more than that, sometimes. Ultimately, there needs to be a mixture of the two [learner and teacher-centred education]. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

I think there might be [drawbacks] if it [LCE] is taken a bit too far. I think there should be a balance between how much the teacher can adopt a learner-centred approach and how much she herself would do the old-fashioned teaching. (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris)

Sometimes it could be that some students would like actually to have everything given to them. After some activities, I do still give a kind of teaching, kind of revise what they have learnt, yes, sometimes I do revise my teaching in the traditional way and I’m giving them the notes. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

As these examples attest, to be able to support students adequately, teachers seek to strike a balance between learner-centred and teacher-led pedagogical approaches. Mayer (2004) claims that when students are given excessive freedom to work on their own, “they may fail to come into contact with the to-be-learned material” (p. 17). Similarly, Windschitl (2002) argues that teachers must understand how to combine constructivist teaching with more traditional models of pedagogy. Gipps and Macgilchrist (1999) also reported that some teachers in England frequently employed ‘mixed pedagogies’ in their classrooms, using teacher-centred approaches or social constructivist discovery learning models, depending on the adequacy of such pedagogies for the intended purpose.

7.5.3 The teacher’s role in LCE

According to teachers’ responses, the learner-centred approach calls for a redefinition of the teacher’s role, which they believe should focus more on facilitation, guidance and coordination/control.

7.5.3.1 Teachers as facilitators

In Section 4.3.1.2, I emphasised the importance of constructivist principles, by virtue of which students actively participate in the learning process, as opposed to behaviourist principles that compel students to behave as passive recipients of knowledge (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Scott & Sullivan Palincsar, 2009). From a constructivist perspective, the teacher’s role is that of a facilitator who assists students in constructing their own knowledge (de la Sablonnière et al., 2009; Pedersen & Liu, 2003). In line with this constructivist reasoning, some teachers (HOD3/T3/T6/T8/T9/NQT1) believe that they need to assume this facilitator role:

I should be like, more than a teacher, a facilitator. You should start off from what they know, what they like, and then you have to be able to, in a way, lead them to develop their own knowledge. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

I understand that my role is to try and help students to try, to try and facilitate them, to try and get the knowledge to themselves, without us actually giving it to them. So, it's like, less spoon-feeding. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

I think my role is as a facilitator, basically, to help them understand, to help them, to question them, so they learn to question everything ... to help them discover things on their own. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

Research has suggested that the role of a facilitator, as an autonomy-supportive teacher (Reeve, 2006), contributes to more democratic classrooms since, in facilitating students' learning, s/he provides a space within which students could exercise greater control over the learning process. Hence, facilitating students' learning, as the above teachers claimed to sympathise with, also ensures the dissolution of traditional, authoritarian student-teacher relationships (Schweisfurth, 2013b; Tabulawa, 2003). Moreover, the above quotes shed light on how scaffolding might function, as a form of interaction between the teacher-facilitator and the learner, which leads to development in the learner's ZPD (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Ferreira, 2008).

7.5.3.2 Teachers as guides

A small number of teachers (T1/T2/T7/NQT2) described their role as a *guide*, but the purpose of such guidance remains largely focused on how learners can achieve the best results and make progress. This is somewhat contrary to the facilitator's role described above of guiding students to construct their own knowledge (Brown, 2003; de la Sablonnière et al., 2009; Stroh & Sink, 2002):

You [as a teacher] are there obviously to teach, but mainly you are there to guide the students to achieve the best possible marks. Because some knowledge, if the students never achieve it, then it has to be imparted. (Josephine/T1/Wignacourt)

[The teacher's role is] more of a guide than a teacher. I like to guide [students] to get higher marks in exams. Sometimes guiding isn't enough,

sometimes you just have to give them the answer to be able to make progress. (William/NQT2/Hompesch)

That is our role, to guide students, kind of they need to be guided, obviously, to make progress and pass exams, some of them still need to be spoon-fed. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

The overemphasis on students' learning progress, which gives precedence to learners' cognitive development (Schweisfurth, 2013b), brings with it repercussions for the class teacher due to the increased accountability for learners' academic achievement, at the expense of the humanist and student agency ideals of LCE (Tangney, 2014). Whereas the humanist perspective focuses on the need to know the students as individual humans, student agency emphasises the need to empower students (Starkey, 2019). At times, the accountability culture prompts the teachers in question (T1/T2/T7/NQT2) to resort to traditional pedagogies, as noted already in Section 7.5.2.2. This is particularly so when learners seem to be encountering difficulties.

7.5.3.3 Teachers as coordinators and controllers

The role of the teacher was also understood by some teachers (HOD1/HOD2/T4/T5) as being that of a *coordinator* and *controller*, whose main task is to ensure the effective organisation and management of time:

You have to be in charge sort of, coordinating, seeing to the needs of the students, you have to time manage, you have to manage time, so there's a lot of time management involved as well. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

You have to keep good control over what is happening and manage time effectively ... keep them [students] focused, because otherwise they can get out of hand. (Cecilia/T4/Hompesch)

The comments of Grace and Cecilia reinforce the findings of Coe et al. (2014), whereby the efficient use of lesson time, the coordination of classroom resources and space, as well as the management of students' behaviour were all considered relevant in optimising the learning process. The authors described these factors as *hygiene factors* since they are not directly linked to learning, but

are nonetheless essential for making learning possible. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the correct use of time has become an integral part of pedagogical practice (Luzecy, 2009). In the examples above, teachers' exercise of disciplinary power is meant to ensure that all learning is being delivered in an efficient and timely manner. Foucault (1977a) explains that "in the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required" (p. 152).

7.6 Teachers' interpretations of learner-centred policies

Similar to school leaders' interpretations, teachers' interpretations of learner-centred policy draw attention to the processes involved in meaning-making, as a hermeneutic activity, which I detailed in Section 4.2.3.2. These contextualised interpretations, in different school settings, influence the manner in which policy becomes enacted. In the next section, teachers' interpretations of the NCF and ELOF policy texts are examined in terms of the following sub-theme: learner-centred policy values.

7.6.1 Learner-centred policy values

When teachers were asked to give their interpretation of LCE, as emanating from the policy values of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), their responses revealed that they were fairly conversant with the core policy values. Regardless of their level of familiarity with the values embedded in the NCF and ELOF, what has emerged from the interview data is that they all incorporate some elements of LCE in their teaching practice, as I explain in Section 7.7. One of the values that was mostly mentioned by teachers concerns learner entitlement (MEDE, 2012, p. 32). One teacher justified this educational value since it enables "the individual student to develop his full potential"

(Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt). As observed in Sections 6.1.1–6.1.3, this is also a requirement of the NCF, which emphasises the entitlement of a quality educational experience through which students’ personal excellence could be achieved. Another teacher described the principle of entitlement in terms of “the relevance of the curriculum to the student” (William/NQT2/Hompesch). According to the NCF, a relevant curriculum, to which students are entitled, should aim at developing a holistic education that is relevant for life.

For seven other teachers (T1/T2/T4/T5/T7/T8/T9), this notion of entitlement is geared specifically towards raising learner achievement, whereby students are equipped to “achieve academic excellence” (Felicity/T7/Lascaris), but also to “experience success in school life and beyond” (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris). Five of these seven teachers (T1/T2/T4/T5/T8) explained that the educational entitlement of students should aim at helping them develop the capacities to achieve the required level of attainment, as seen in Table 1.1. This approach corresponds to the cognitive, achievement-oriented perspective of LCE, which was given due prominence by the three school leaders (see Section 7.3.1). In emphasising outputs over inputs, classroom practices may run the risk of being determined by the requirements of performance and delivery. This can be seen in the following example, where the teacher’s (T2) fidelity approach to the ELOF policy text renders her as a passive policy subject (Ball et al., 2012) whose subjectivity is constituted by the hegemonic policy discourses of educational attainments:

At the moment, I think the [E]LOF deserves to be given top priority, so my intention is to help students, as much as I can, to-to achieve the levels required for their particular year group. I believe each learner is entitled to achieve these outcomes. (Pamela/T2/Wignacourt)

There were other teachers whose interpretation of learner-centred policy revolves around the values of ‘inclusivity’ (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt); ‘social justice’ (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris); and ‘autonomy’ (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt). In contrast to the narrow interpretation of Pamela, above, the following

examples highlight the manner in which the NCF's learner-centred intentions are actively interpreted in terms of 'democratic' values that aim to give learners greater agency in exercising their right to be heard. In this regard, teachers are conceptualised as active policy subjects whose creative response to policy yields, according to Barthes (1974), a sense of *writerliness*:

For me, it's very important to move away from the fact that the teacher is the sole person who has to give the information to the students. We have to give them more possibilities where they can express themselves and, if need be, they can even challenge the teacher. So, the teacher isn't the only source of information ... the learner can contribute as much as the teacher sometimes in the lesson. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

The fact that learners are given space to express themselves, I think is necessary, especially with the type of students we have nowadays. Because, maybe a few years ago, when I started teaching, you got students who listened and accepted passively what they were taught, and they had no issues about that. Now, people question you. So, sometimes you need to realise that you don't know everything. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

In the above comments, Maggie and Penelope speak of the need to depart from traditional teacher-student power relations in order to enable students to experience democratic relationships by exercising greater control over their learning process (Britton et al., 2019; Lattimer, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2013b; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019; Starkey, 2019). These views mirror, in particular, the values of learner freedom that Hompesch School claimed to embrace, as articulated in the school leader's (HOS2) vision (see Section 7.1.2). The move towards such democratic classroom practices entails the eradication of the 'banking' concept of education since students can no longer be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1972). According to Freire, in such democratic classrooms, both teachers and learners have the dual role of teaching and learning.

7.7 Teachers' translations of learner-centred policies

The primary focus in this section is on how the NCF's (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF's (DQSE, 2015a) learner-centred policy rhetoric became translated into practice, underlining in particular the day-to-day practices of the classroom. As noted in Section 4.2.3.2, interpretations of policy sometimes tend to overlap with processes of policy translation, and therefore issues of interpretation continue to play a part when analysing translations in practice (Ball et al., 2012). In dealing with contextualised processes of policy enactment, the three sample schools in my study have sought to translate, to varying degrees, certain aspects of LCE, with subject departments being encouraged to play their part. These can be classified under four analytical sub-themes that emerged from the interview data: (1) curriculum differentiation; (2) learner empowerment; (3) technologies of performance; and (4) a collective process of policy translation.

7.7.1 Curriculum differentiation

A major concern of LCE is to ensure that the learning needs of students are met. As outlined in Sections 4.3.2.1 and 4.3.2.2, one of the psychological factors that affect human learning draws attention to individual differences among learners (APA, 1997; Schweisfurth, 2013b), resulting in the need for teachers and schools to contribute to curriculum differentiation, as advocated in the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. 40, p. 63) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, pp. 38–39, p. 42).

7.7.1.1 Teachers' awareness of learners' individual differences

The interview data reveals that only six teachers (HOD1/HOD3/T2/T3/T5/T6) declared they were aware of learners' needs, despite the fact that all teachers meet their students six times a week. The remaining teachers (HOD2/T1/T4/T7/T8/T9/NQT1/NQT2) struggle to get to know their students due to the large

classrooms they teach. Matters can become complicated when teachers are not even aware of specific learning difficulties, as in the following example:

I try to be aware [of students' needs] but unfortunately, to be honest, sometimes I do realise, I say maybe, is she dyslexic? And then I realise, that yes, she is, but nobody has ever drawn my attention. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

Felicity's comment can be said to refer to individual students who have not so far been identified as requiring additional support, and consequently cannot as yet benefit from an individualised programme. In a local policy document regarding inclusion (MEDE, 2019), it was recommended that "training [should be] provided to educators on how to identify and support learners who may have 'invisible' disabilities since these learners experience greater risk of dropping out when their conditions go unnoticed in educational settings" (p. 38, emphasis in original).

Another teacher in my study (HOD2) hinted that awareness of learners' needs is also a matter of "getting to know students as unique human beings" (Starkey, 2019, p. 381), a conception that corresponds to the humanist perspective of LCE, where the needs of the individual learner are centred largely on the personal, social, emotional and cultural aspects:

[I do not know the students] as much as I would like to know them. In the few minutes you're in the classroom, you try to get to know them and you ask, you know, sometimes you do build that kind of relationship where they open up and they tell you what their life is like. What I find helps, sometimes, is compositions. Sometimes things that are heavy on their minds come out in what they write and that surprises me sometimes, the type of people I have in front of me and the problems that they have, but that's about it. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

According to Starkey (2019), this humanist view of LCE, with its emphasis on students' interests, aspirations, experiences and personalities, is central to education. In treating individuals as unique human beings, the humanist dimension seeks to establish positive learning relationships, whilst being culturally responsive. McCombs (2003) argues that, before they can start teaching, learner-centred teachers must seek to know their individual students

and make provision for a supportive learning environment. These ideals reverberate Rousseau's (1979) thinking that one cannot teach without knowing the child.

In other instances, as long as students seem to perform well, as productive subjects (Ball et al., 2012), no extra effort is seen to be needed to differentiate the curriculum in congruence with the needs of individual learners:

I have to admit that I don't know every individual's needs because you know, erm, during my every day lesson planning I see that [students are] coping and I don't stop to question what are their individual needs. If they are performing well, I have to be honest, I don't ask them. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

NQT2 highlighted the difficulty surrounding the identification of learners' individual needs, which puts pressure on teachers to find things out for themselves:

What are [learners'] individual needs? I'm ... even my individual needs, I'm not entirely aware of what I need. Nobody is, let alone of another person's, and sometimes we [teachers] are kind of pushed into the deep end, figure it out on your own. (William/NQT2/Hompesch)

Teachers' lack of awareness of students' needs, as evidenced in the above quotes, is problematic for students. In their study, Daniels and Perry (2003) have demonstrated that students wanted their teachers to be aware of their individual needs. They preferred teachers who were caring towards them and treated them as unique persons. Similarly, the research conducted by Hammerness et al. (2005) and Strahan and Hedt (2009) revealed that responsive teaching can only take place when teachers make an effort to get to know students as individuals. Such biographical knowledge about students is crucial in understanding their individuality (Pollard et al., 2019).

7.7.1.2 Meeting learners' needs

Although it can be difficult for some teachers (HOD2/T1/T4/T7/T8/T9/NQT1/NQT2) to get to know their students and find ways of addressing their learning needs, as demonstrated above, all the teachers who participated in this study, except for HOD2 and NQT2, stressed that they try to do their utmost to manage individual differences. They claimed that they attempt to meet learners' needs primarily by identifying the actual developmental level of each student, which serves as a backdrop for providing guidance to students in progressing and reaching their full potential. It is within this ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) that teachers confirmed to assist students, via scaffolding techniques, to bridge the gap between the actual and the potential levels of development. In the following example, there is a clear reference to students' prior knowledge on which teaching and learning can be built (Pollard et al., 2019):

What I've always done is, when I have new students in front of me, the first week I give them some sort of test ... to see where the students are. I have one particular student in mind who lives literally on a farm, all he thinks of are animals, so I try to start off from where he is and then we move on, maybe I'll get him to what I have in mind. Although it's not that easy, to get them motivated, even though you try to use learner-centred education. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

Five teachers (T2/T3/T7/T8/T9) claimed that, in responding to individual differences, one of the strategies that they find valuable is peer scaffolding whereby students in pairs can collaborate with and learn from their peers (James & Pollard, 2011; Smit & Humpert, 2012). According to these teachers, such constructivist strategies, whilst aiming at addressing the different abilities in each pair by assigning, for instance, different roles to learners (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010), encourage the students who do not perform well, in particular, to work on tasks that they cannot do independently. One teacher commented that, despite its advantages, peer scaffolding "does not always work and sometimes I have to interfere to put [students] back on track"

(Demi/T8/Lascaris), which implies that learning takes place under the constant 'normalising gaze' (Foucault, 1977a) of the teacher.

Six teachers (HOD3/T1/T3/T4/T7/T9) claimed that sometimes they scaffold the learning process by way of graded activities, that is to say, adjusting the nature of the task (Bekiryazici, 2015; Tomlinson, 2001a). Although these teachers seek to differentiate the curriculum, their emphasis on academic achievement prevails, which compels students to comply with the intended LOs that correspond to the level they 'fit in'. This results in tension between differentiation, on the one hand, and normalisation, on the other, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

We have graded questions or activities, but [students], if they don't work hard to reach the outcomes, they can even miss the benchmark [their current level] and move down [to a lower level]. (Cecilia/T4/Hompesch)

I try to do handouts which actually have different tasks which are graded, so that, obviously if [students are in] level 7–8, you have to give them tasks which are actually of that ability. But if they have some learning difficulties, I try to grade [the handout] by having exercises which they would be able to do, taking into consideration the learning outcomes which they need to achieve for their level. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

On other occasions, some teachers (HOD3/T2/T6) contribute to curriculum differentiation by assigning writing tasks of different word lengths, although this is not usually considered to be an effective way of differentiation since the more capable students could recognise that they are being assigned more work, whilst the less able students may feel that they are inferior (Bekiryazici, 2015; Tomlinson, 2001a). Once again, the Foucauldian concept of normalisation, as manifested below, tends to undermine the efforts made by teachers towards a differentiated approach to teaching and learning. The following examples can therefore be conceived as a form of governmentality, by virtue of which children are being measured, ranked and categorised according to their 'abilities'. Indeed, students can become the prime targets of pathologizing processes, where learners' deficits are deemed to be in need of fixing (Billington, 2000; Gore, 1995):

In a 7–8 [level] class, [students] are there for a reason, so if for example a writing task is about 150 words to 200 words, you are expected to reach that level, otherwise it means that you are not in the right classroom. If, for example, I know that a student has learning difficulties and can only write a paragraph instead of a whole composition, you know, I tell him: “At least the minimum that you can do is this, so I expect you to do it”. But, you have to set like targets for them as well, irrespective of their abilities, because they have to pass the exams. You would notice when a student isn’t in the right class, where they can go up to a higher class or whether they’re struggling in a level. But most of the time, the students are in the right band. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

When it comes to writing, you can assign different word lengths to cater for the different needs, but still, some students don’t seem to make particular progress. If a student, for example, has achieved a good mark [in the English exam] ... we have a number of cases in which the students have gone up to another level, to another track, so we do that. I’m remembering a case in point, I have a student who performed really badly in the exam due to his learning difficulties. So, then I spoke to the Assistant Head in charge, we spoke to the student to see what the problem is, now we’re going to see all the marks that he got in the other subjects, then we’re going to speak to his parents to see if it is in his interest to be transferred to a lower track. (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris)

Five teachers (HOD1/HOD3/T5/T6/NQT1) claimed to offer individualised learning support to particular students during lessons, in proportion to their learning needs. Such individual instruction is sometimes extended during break time, as confirmed by three teachers (HOD1/HOD3/NQT1), on a one-to-one basis, whereby adjustment of instruction is intended to better support students who are not performing well. Despite teachers’ claims that they had supported a number of students, individually, both within the context of whole class instruction and outside the normal class hours, many times the performance of children during exams, as observed above, remains the ultimate objective and overrides any accomplishments gained during the learning process. Subjecting students to examinations, as echoed in the comments of one teacher (T5), is seen as a means of establishing the ‘truth’ about the subject (Foucault, 1977a):

I have a particular student who is rather slow so even if he needs to copy something from the board, I go near him and I help him and sometimes I copy the notes for him as well. But now in the exam I mean he was pretty slow. He was given the extra time, and still he didn’t manage to finish the

paper, and the work he produced was not good enough. (Rebecca/T5/Hompesch)

What is interesting to note here is the way Foucault (1977a) describes the examination, as “[...] a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them” (p. 184).

Another teacher (T8) admitted that she feels happy if the low-achieving students simply participate in class. The high-achieving students, however, are treated differently since they are given additional space to practise critical thinking:

Sometimes with the lower [*sic*] students I feel happy if they just, you know, speak and talk and participate in English, because some of them just refuse or they just, you know, answer just one-word answer and tell me: “That’s it”. So, with the lower abilities I tend to be happier if they just participate. But the others, they do critical thinking. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

As is evident here, Demi does not seem to make an extra effort to differentiate the curriculum in a manner that is most relevant and meaningful to those students who do not perform well, in contrast to the feedback provided by her school leader (HOS3) (see Section 7.3.1). More importantly, though, is the fact that students in her class are not being allowed access to equal learning opportunities. This could be due to the lack of training to teach critical thinking skills, as stated by her school leader. Demi cannot be seen as a reflective teacher who focuses on what students can do (Pollard et al., 2019). Rather, she strives to emphasise what they cannot do. In failing to accommodate learner differences, students remain unable to “progress toward common curricular goals” (Corno, 2008, p. 162).

7.7.2 Learner empowerment

A key feature of LCE, as noted in Section 4.3.2.3, relates to the empowerment of students to act successfully within democratic structures (Dewey, 1916), mainly

by being actively involved in the entire learning process and schooling, including decisions regarding *what* and *how* they learn (Starkey, 2019). Drawing on Foucault's (1979) conception of power, as something that can be exercised in relations between individuals rather than possessed by people or groups, the analysis which ensues seeks to unveil how em(power)ment is "enmeshed in relations of power" (Rai et al., 2007, p. 2). In this sense, I explore the extent to which learner empowerment is being practised within the ordinary classroom practices and, in some instances, during extra-curricular and out-of-class activities. This concept of empowerment has been duly emphasised in both the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. viii, p. 38, pp. 58–59) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, p. 52, p. 67).

7.7.2.1 Learner involvement in lesson planning

Four teachers acknowledged that they do not involve learners when they plan their lessons, arguing that students do not know "what is best for them" (Josephine/T1/Wignacourt); that "they are not used to this sort of thing" (Cecilia/T4/Hompesch); that the voluminous material of the syllabus does not afford "the time to involve students" (Felicity/T7/Lascaris); and that the ideal approach is "to cover everything that's in the syllabus" (Demi/T8/Lacaris). Too often, teachers perceive the involvement of students in relation to the learning content as a form of intrusion in their professional work (Benson, 2011; Pollard et al., 2019).

Ten other teachers (HOD1/HOD2/HOD3/T2/T3/T5/T6/T9/NQT1/NQT2) claimed that, in lesson planning, they try to accommodate learners' needs and interests by empowering them to air their views on matters concerning their own learning. However, these teachers conceded that the time that they now need to devote to LOs, coupled with other curriculum constraints, interfere with their efforts to offer a more meaningful educational experience. It could be argued, therefore, that students are not being sufficiently empowered, if at all, to exercise greater control over the curriculum, as one would expect in learner-centred contexts

(Schweisfurth, 2013a, 2013b). Teachers' primary goal, same as school leaders (see Section 7.3.1), is to comply with the LOs' policy requirements. As one NQT puts it:

At the end of the day, the learning outcomes are there, so you need to make sure that you are actually getting to those. And I think sometimes if we leave it up to the hands of learners, then they might not choose to do all those things, so it would be even more difficult to actually reach all those goals. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

As in previous research findings, the above comments suggest that, for the most part, teaching is still teacher-led and the idea of content coverage remains high among teachers (Chisholm et al., 2000). In his study, Cuban (1993) also noted the absence of joint (student-teacher) decisions about class activities, with students being excluded from voicing their needs. Several scholars (e.g., Bovill et al., 2011; Brooman et al., 2015) argue that the involvement of students, as co-creators, in curriculum development, may result in improved learning. Similarly, Fielding and McGregor (2005) and Mayes and Groundwater-Smith (2013) advocate the role of students as co-researchers. These student-teacher partnerships, unlike the sole authority of the above-mentioned teachers, aim at promoting the joint construction of knowledge (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016).

7.7.2.2 Active ways of learning and teaching

All teachers claimed to employ different constructivist teaching techniques so as to enable students, as far as possible, to exercise greater control over classroom activities, whilst providing more opportunities for individual choices. One of these constructivist teaching techniques is co-operative learning, which is one of the NCF's cross-curricular themes (see Figure 1.1). According to teachers' responses, co-operative learning strategies, particularly group work, despite their educational value, can only occasionally be practised in classrooms due to the overloaded curriculum. For the same reason, one teacher (HOD2) admitted that she does not consider the possibility of organising group activities. Also, all

teachers reiterated that group work does not always work well and that much of its success depends on the group composition.

Six teachers (HOD1/HOD3/T1/T3/T9/NQT1) contended that group work not only provides a space where learners with different abilities help each other, but also offers them the possibility to practise problem-solving skills and enhance their relationship with peers, whilst observing the rules and exercising particular roles in group discussion. In promoting rules (e.g., take turns, do not interrupt, respect others' point of view ...) and roles (e.g., respond to others' ideas, ask questions which seek information ...) for collaborative group discussions (Wilkinson et al., 1990), teachers provide a structure through which they establish the norms of behaviour. One teacher (T9) explained that some of her students are enthusiastic about group work and enjoy being guided by such rules and roles. In embracing the rules and roles of group discussion, as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988), learners constitute their own subjectivity:

In group work, some students really enjoy practising their roles and they also like the idea to have a set of rules, you know, so that everybody can express his points of view freely. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

By the same token, in exercising their agency over their actions and choices, learners constitute themselves when they resist power. This occurs particularly when students choose the classmates they feel comfortable to work with, instead of conforming to the rules of group discussions. Indeed, student subjectivity can be seen as "a site of struggle and resistance" (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 85):

[In group work] the same friends stick together, but as a rule, I always insist with them to mix up. And they tell me: "Look, I'm staying with her or I'm not working", you know? So, sometimes, I leave it up to them to decide with whom they prefer to work. (Cecilia/T4/Hompesch)

There are students who refuse to work with some classmates. These are things we face every day. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

In contrast, in cases where students are unable to behave and engage in productive work, disciplinary power is used to 'normalise' their conduct, prior to being allowed to engage in group work:

If [students are] asking for group work and they're not behaving and working, they're not going to ask because they know I'm going to say no. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

As Brodie et al.'s (2002) research suggests, what is important is not whether group work actually takes place in classrooms but rather *how* it is being carried out. Indeed, in their study, the majority of teachers concentrated on the 'forms' of LCE rather than its 'substance' since they failed to explore ways of engaging students sufficiently in group activities. These scholars observed, for example, that students, albeit in groups, worked individually or only spent a short period of time working together. Thomson and Brown (2000) argue that the success of such co-operative learning strategies depends largely on the support provided by the school, as claimed, for example, by the Heads of School of Wignacourt and Lascaris (see Sections 7.3.1 and 7.4.1), and when teachers with common goals work together.

Other approaches being adopted within the constructivist paradigm include experiential learning and role-playing. Five teachers (HOD3/T3/T5/T8/T9) claimed that they experiment with hands-on experiential learning activities as a source of motivation, whereby students are engaged in project-based learning. Occasionally, such experiential learning activities take place outside the school environment, giving students the opportunity to consolidate what they have learnt in the classroom, but also helping them to construct knowledge from real-life experiences:

Once a year we go to the supermarket to-to practise what we have learnt. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

I had one particular student who was an average student, and whenever we used to visit a workplace to practise some hands-on activities, she felt really excited ... and really took interest in what she was doing. I remember her mother ... during Parents' Day, thanking me for this. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

For Dewey (1900), such outdoor activities enable students to participate in community life whilst reassuring that schools remain connected with society. As research suggests, outdoor learning has proved to be valuable for students, offering them freedom, self-direction and tactile learning, whilst supporting their educational attainment and the development of their self-esteem (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Maynard, 2007; Quibell et al., 2017).

Five teachers (HOD3/T1/T6/T7/T9) declared they employed collaborative role-playing strategies in their classrooms, as a vehicle to instil confidence in their learners, whilst practising communication skills. Role-playing is also being practised as a means through which learning can be reinforced in an enjoyable manner:

When we do drama or play ... [students] try to act it out, so the classroom is not just a place where they're just reading but they're having fun, they're enjoying what they're doing. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

Sharan (2010) asserts that the value of co-operative learning lies in its capacity to integrate and encourage academic and social skills. Not only can co-operative learning offer learners the opportunity to learn creatively, as a result of the interaction between fellow students, but it can also function as a flexible mode of teaching that caters for the culturally diverse classrooms.

7.7.2.3 Learner capacities

All teachers maintained that they seek to empower students through the development of individual capacities, by focusing primarily on one or more of the key soft skills that they deem essential for students to acquire and master, thus paving the way for their self-regulation of conduct (Foucault, 2004). These soft skills include communication and debating skills, critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, research, teamwork, metacognitive skills through peer and self-assessment, as well as accepting responsibility. Hirsch (2016) posits that the widespread concentration on generic skills, which can be termed *skill-centrism*,

is problematic since they cannot be taught independently of knowledge/content. There is a tendency to focus on soft skills demanded by the workplace, rather than on “‘powerful knowledge’ required to critically engage with the world” (Priestley & Biesta, 2013, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Indeed, all teachers attach great importance to the responsabilisation of students. They claimed that they attempt to empower learners by encouraging them to shoulder responsibility for their own actions, which in turn would enable them to become active and autonomous subjects. This conception of individual responsibility is often situated within a performative, neo-liberal context, whereby students are held accountable for their own successes and failures:

I encourage students to be responsible because they have to understand that, for whatever action they are doing, there would be consequences. So, empowering them to take control of their learning would enable them to understand that if I am performing to my utmost, the consequence would be a positive one. If I am not, if I am under-achieving, there would be a negative consequence. (Pamela/T2/Wignacourt)

I always try to empower [students] in order to take ownership of their learning, to achieve what needs to be achieved, otherwise they will fall behind. (Josephine/T1/Wignacourt)

These examples reveal how neo-liberalism, through learner-centred approaches, “cultivates the self-disciplining capacity of learners by way of empowering their individuality in accordance with the values of self-responsibility and self-autonomy” (Susar, 2014, p. 2300). For eight teachers (HOD2/HOD3/T1/T3/T6/T7/T8/NQT2), this shift of responsibility for learning, from the teacher to the student, can only be realised in the case of motivated learners. The other learners are perceived as not being able to develop the capacity to contribute to their own learning, and therefore ‘unfit’ to normalise their own conduct. This is best illustrated by two examples from Hompesch:

In an ideal world, yes, learners should be given more power. I would love to have that, yes, but if you have students who are motivated. A case in point is a teacher I am thinking of, who is teaching a very good class. She had to change the way she taught to give them much more initiative and

much more control over their learning. So, there are certain classes. But they're few and far between. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

I agree with [learner empowerment] but not with the students that we have. Their attitude towards education and towards learning is so poor ... sometimes, not all of them ... but unless I'm the one to go up to them, tell them: "Please, can you take out your book, can you take out your pen?", they're not going to do anything. So, I mean it's a joke, if I told them: "Seize the day, feel empowered ..." because they're going to be like, OK, and sit down and do nothing. (William/NQT2/Hompesch)

As research suggests, students may not always be prepared or willing to take responsibility for their learning (Altinyelken, 2011). They may experience difficulty to actively engage in learning and may also prefer to remain passive recipients of knowledge (Yilmaz, 2009).

Eight teachers (HOD1/HOD3/T4/T6/T7/T8/T9/NQT2) empower learners by way of oral communication skills. Three of these eight teachers (HOD3/T7/T8) believe that verbal skills can be enhanced through well-structured debates, whereby students are given the opportunity to research the chosen theme in advance in order to be able to express their views:

I started a debate club in school and I worked with three teachers. We have weekly debates for students during break time. They have to do some research beforehand and have to speak in English all the time, so it has helped them a lot. One girl told me, and this made me very proud, it made me very happy, it paid for all the breaks we stayed in ... she told me: "Listen Miss, thank you so much ... next year, my sister is coming from the primary school, are you going to hold debates again, so that both of us will come?". (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris)

Here, Lillian assumes the role of a *policy enthusiast* (Ball et al., 2012). Her enthusiasm about policy-related events, as depicted in the debating club set up, enables her to engage creatively in processes of policy enactment, contributing to a meaningful learning experience for students, whilst recruiting other teachers in translating the NCF policy text into practice. The students are also conceived as policy actors who act upon themselves, in the technology of the self (Foucault, 1988), behaving as 'free subjects' and willingly committed to self-improvement.

For seven teachers (HOD3/T1/T3/T7/T8/T9/NQT1), empowering students through critical consciousness, as echoed in Freire's (1972, 2005) notion of critical pedagogy, is deemed as indispensable in developing learner emancipation (Cobb, 2019; Starkey, 2019). Since critical pedagogy aims at emancipating individuals from oppression by way of critical consciousness, it "eschews any approach to pedagogy that would reduce it to the teaching of narrow thinking-skills in isolation from the contentious debates and contexts in which such skills are employed" (McLaren, 2007, p. 31). Hence, as the following examples suggest, although teachers strive to nurture in their students the capacity for critical thinking, one cannot assume that learners are capable to effect social change, say, for example, within their school community, unless they achieve critical consciousness of the social world, in the Freirean sense. Here, again, teachers assume the role of *policy enthusiasts* (Ball et al., 2012):

I like to try and get my students to question information which they hear. That's something I value a lot, to be critical, not to accept everything as it's heard. I like to leave a mark on my students, to empower them for their future. I consider myself a critical thinker. I don't believe everything I hear. I question. And I'd like to empower them in the same way. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

I do like debates, because even [students] enjoy them as well, because I put them into different groups, some agree, some disagree, and they take it really seriously. I hate it when a student just sits there and is ready to be given all the knowledge and that's it. And even in life, I think it's important for them not to be shy, to be confident, and to be critical and give their own opinion, why not? (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

Most of the time I try to use critical thinking, because I feel that if you empower students in that way, no matter what it is, they'll be able to do problem solving too. It's a lifelong skill, which should be there, especially nowadays since we've got all these frustrations of media and whatever. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

Jasmine's feedback on critical thinking corresponds with the comments of the school leader, Evelyn (see Sections 7.1.2, 7.3.1, 7.4.1 and 7.4.3). Contrastingly, although Felicity and Scarlett attach great importance to critical thinking skills, their views do not align with the feedback provided by the school leader,

Elizabeth, since in her opinion, teachers at Lascaris School may not have been trained enough to teach such skills (see Section 7.3.1).

If critical thinking is considered as crucial in empowering learners to think for themselves (Lawson, 2011), so is creative thinking reckoned by some teachers (HOD2/HOD3/T5/T6/NQT2) as vital for developing human capacity, in preparation for future working life, as illustrated below:

Creativity and innovation are very much useful for [students'] future ... so because nowadays you can't really say I know this much and that's all that I will need in my life. We know very well technology is changing, mindsets are changing, and we have to change our way of looking at things on the job, sort of reinventing yourself. So, these are important skills which we try to nurture in our students, in preparation for their future. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

The idea of preparing students for future working life, as Penelope remarked, aligns with the preparatory narrative of LCE, which has, as one of its priorities, the development of capacity for creativity and innovation, as dictated by the future knowledge economy (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Ironically, the Heads of Hompesch and Lascaris Schools did not mention the practice of creative thinking skills, as the above teachers indicated.

Through peer and self-assessment, which all teachers claimed to employ, students are also empowered to develop metacognitive skills that enable them to become self-sufficient, turning their bodies into self-governing subjects, with a predisposition to improve on their own 'free' will. As one teacher commented:

[Students] love to assess themselves. They love it. They also love to give advice to their fellow students. Obviously, they're being the teachers so, everybody loves that. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

As previously noted, however, not all of the students are deemed as capable of taking control of their own learning:

Some students weren't capable to assess their own work. They weren't. I mean, it took a lot of effort, and some of them weren't even bothered. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

I tried many times to engage students in peer or self-assessment, but lately I tend to correct things myself and then I give it to the [students], because the weak students are not able to identify the mistakes on their own. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

Bourke (2016) argues that when students are given the opportunity to self-assess their work, they will be able to develop their *reflective intelligence*, that is “the ability to engage in the metacognitive monitoring of one’s own learning that is likely to be the central feature of successful learning in the future” (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 212). Here, students will be encouraged to set their own learning goals and “explore and interrogate [assessment] criteria, rather than accept them as given” (Torrance, 2007, p. 292). Hence, empowering students through self-assessment encourages them to commit themselves to self-technology (Foucault, 1988) by exercising more control over their bodies.

7.7.2.4 Teacher-learner relationship

Four teachers (HOD1/T3/T5/T6) stated that they already enjoy a good relationship with their students, mainly by supporting them in their social and emotional needs. Research findings suggest that when teachers make an effort to build positive relationships with students and address their academic and socio-emotional needs, learner motivation and engagement in schoolwork increase (e.g., Daniels et al., 2001; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Kiefer et al., 2014; Roorda et al., 2011; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). The rest of the teachers (HOD2/HOD3/T1/T2/T4/T7/T8/T9/NQT1/NQT2) admitted that their relationship could be enriched if there is more mutual respect, as “a key attitude for development in classrooms ...” (Schweisfurth, 2013b, p. 149). As one teacher put it very simply:

I’m sure I’m not loved by each and every student, but we deserve to be respected as much as we respect them. (Felicity/T7/Lascaris)

Roeser et al. (2000) stress that many middle school students experience decreased motivation and are more likely to engage in undesirable behaviour. This could result, for instance, from factors relating to the school setting or the

teaching practices of class teachers, which may be inconsistent with students' developmental needs (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This explains why some students find it challenging to balance their academic, social and emotional needs (Roeser et al., 2000).

Seven teachers (HOD2/HOD3/T4/T5/T6/T9/NQT2) established rules of conduct in order to instil a positive climate for learning. In so doing, students are made aware of their rights and responsibilities, which may allow them to exercise greater control over the learning process, thereby enabling them to work on themselves to shape and construct their own subjectivities:

I think if you have the right balance in the classroom, where students know that they can follow certain rules ... I build a lot of rules upon respect – that they have to come to the classroom on time, just basic rules; that the work that is being done, both at school and at home, is there for them to reinforce what they have learnt; that we have to listen to and respect each other's opinion; that active participation and ownership of learning are really important. These are things that I would usually recommend, that are established at the very beginning of scholastic year. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

One teacher explained how she 'involves' the learners in formulating the classroom rules:

At the beginning of the year, we discuss the classroom rules, what should be, what shouldn't be. What we do is we all come up with the rules. It's not me prescribing the rules to them, but we all have to agree about that. And usually it's either a chart in the classroom or a printout. I usually come up with the keywords. You try to get them where you want because you have to establish certain rules about the behaviour in the classroom, but also about their work, whether it's punctual or not, the type of work they present ... and even what they expect from me. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

Here, learner empowerment is being used to mask the power relations involved, with the teacher exercising control over students (e.g., "You try to get them where you want ..."), and with students being subjected to the same rules, as displayed in the following chart, hanging on a wall in Scarlett's English classroom, which functions as an artefact of governmentality:

RULES TO BE FOLLOWED DURING THE ENGLISH LESSON

Respect

You are **EXPECTED** to respect one another in the classroom. Respect includes **MANNERS**.

- Raise your hand if you want to ask a question. **DO NOT SHOUT** out from your place.
- If another teacher or any other member of administration comes into the classroom, stand up and greet him/her politely.



Punctuality

It is very important to come to class on time. Latecomers will cause disruptions, and hinder learning.

Homework done and coursebooks brought

You must get the required books along with the assigned work. The teacher allots homework to enhance learning. You do not do your homework for your teacher ... **YOU DO IT FOR YOUR OWN INTEREST.**



Attention focus when lesson begins

Once the lesson starts, you are to concentrate on the task at hand. Unnecessary disruptions will **NOT** be tolerated during the lesson.

Permission taken from the teacher, before action

Before doing anything, raise your hand and ask for the teacher's permission. You **CANNOT** simply stand up and roam around the classroom.

Figure 7.1 *Scarlett's classroom rules chart*

This set of rules that is representative of the teacher voice rather than the student voice, comprises guidelines which revolve around respect and appropriate classroom behaviour. In a study conducted by Drew (2020), classroom rules charts were found to be instrumental in producing “normative messages about how to ‘do’ student subjectivity in the space of the classroom, and send messages about how students should be seen, and see themselves, as social actors” (p. 54, emphasis in original).

7.7.3 Technologies of performance

As discussed in Section 4.2.3, although policy enactments can be “creative and sophisticated ... they are set within a logic of conformity and the imperatives of performance and competition” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 97). Thus, the main purpose here is to analyse the way technologies of performance, in terms of student

academic achievement and productivity, operate across the three sample schools.

Since the NCF (MEDE, 2012) operates within a framework that is based on LOs, as explained in Sections 1.1.1 and 6.1.1, it is fitting to analyse teachers' engagement with the prescribed LOs, as projected in the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a). The policy-makers' intention is that such LOs would enable teachers to become more inclined towards learner-centred pedagogies (DQSE, 2015a, p. 31; MEDE, 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, given that the NCF has set performance-related targets, as broad indicators of policy success (see Table 6.1), the discussion then moves on to examine the impact of international educational assessments, such as PISA. As Schweisfurth (2013b) observes, one of the arguments made in relation to LCE is that, if learner-centred pedagogy is really more effective than traditional modes of teaching, one would expect that the countries in which LCE has been widely practised should perform better in international assessments than those using traditional approaches. However, as discussed in Section 4.3.2.8, this is not always the case.

7.7.3.1 Teachers' engagement with LOs

In line with one of the priorities expressed by school leaders (see Section 7.3.1), all teachers supported the idea behind LOs, as an approach that focuses on learners' anticipated achievement. However, teachers were critical of the fact that assessment procedures have now turned into a complex endeavour. Given that the implementation of LOs in middle schools was in its initial phase at the time of the interviews, teachers were still experimenting with outcomes-oriented assessment, and this might have influenced their responses.

One of the issues that is being encountered in classrooms concerns learners' individual assessment against the intended LOs. This is because in larger classes, as one NQT lamented, "you might not be entirely sure that [students] are actually

reaching each and every goal” (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt). Such ongoing, classroom assessment processes, are always complemented with summative, exam-oriented modes of assessment, which all teachers still believe remain treated as the most significant “means of correct training” (Foucault, 1977a, p. 170). The same NQT commented that:

At the end of the day, there are the annual exams, so we don’t really know what’s going to come out and you need to cover everything.

NQT2 argued that some LOs are problematic, especially those relating to oral presentation skills since, as a teacher, he finds it challenging to capture and assess students’ talk simultaneously. As a result, he does not consider himself as “being able to give the student an accurate or fair assessment” and, in order to cope, sometimes he has to “turn to the HOD for her guidance” (William/NQT2/Hompesch). As one may recall from Section 4.2.3.2, most NQTs tend to act as *policy receivers* because, in an effort to comply with the ELOF policy imperatives, or what has been described as *policy dependency* (Ball et al., 2012), they seek guidance and direction from other senior staff members rather than exercising their creativity and professional judgement. As receivers of policy enactment, early career teachers are “often concerned with safeguarding their positions and conveying their competence to others” (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014, p. 616). In this sense, complying with pre-specified LOs leaves “little space for alternative ways of thinking” (Winter, 2017, p. 59).

The lack of confidence amongst teachers in implementing the LOF approach is evident, with most of them (HOD2/T1/T2/T4/T5/T6/T7/NQT1/NQT2) declaring that they find difficulties assessing learners’ performance against the pre-specified LO statements. Ironically, these concerns were also clearly expressed by one of the HODs whom the NQTs consult:

What I’m a bit worried about is ... fine, I know what I’m going to do in class, but Jack is different from Jill. Am I simply going to say: “OK everyone has reached [the LOs].” How will I know that? That student might still be struggling. Is it going to be the mark or is it something more than just that? So that to me is still a vague grey area. As a teacher, I know that very often,

you might give them a piece of work, they do it well today, if you ask them in a week's time, do they still know it? I don't know. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

Although nine teachers (HOD1/HOD2/HOD3/T1/T3/T4/T6/T8/T9) acknowledged that the ELOF offers them greater flexibility in curriculum design and delivery, as one would expect in learner-centred contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013b), they were concerned about the demands of the LOs and the time involved to achieve them:

I think [the ELOF] is quite flexible. You know exactly what you want to achieve but how you are going to achieve it is not specified, it's up to you. But it's more time consuming because you have to literally sit down and focus and think of every individual student. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

As long as the outcomes are achieved, we are free to do any activity. But that is what is worrying us most, because there's a lot of work to do at home. That's the only problem, the time issue. Because we have our families, you know? (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

As exemplified in the above quotes, teachers' exercise of freedom, aimed at achieving the predetermined LOs, takes the form of neo-liberal governmentality, with teachers being governed from a distance. In the following extract, the power exerted by EOs, through their *art of government* (Foucault, 1991), serves to self-subjectify the teachers into compliance:

The LOFs are pretty flexible. Erm, in fact at first I was a bit worried, but after I read them out and we had the meeting with the EOs, they're pretty flexible, so I'm pretty happy with that. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

In contrast to the above-described curricular flexibility, the NQTs find the application of the ELOF quite perplexing, labelling it as vast and prescriptive:

In reality [the ELOF is] so vast, there's so much that we need to do, that truthfully it's not that flexible at all. (William/NQT2/Hompesch)

[The ELOF is] prescriptive in a way. I mean there are a number of things that you still need to do and a number of things that you need to reach. So, in a way it does tell you that you have to do this, this and this. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

Two teachers (HOD1/T9) believe that the ELOF has been imposed on them and that the only choice they have is to follow the list of outcomes that is readily

available. It is through such 'disciplinary power' that teachers and students are being subjected to subordination and rendered as bodies of docility (Foucault, 1977a):

I think [LOs] are our Bible now. They have been imposed on us. I realise that we have no choice. And I feel helpless as well. In the sense that if they are there to stay, what can you do about it? So, I am trying to look at it in a positive way. The LOs are binding ... that's what I've been told to tell my teachers, but then the way you unpack them will depend a lot on the level of the students. Your scheme of work has to fit in with the LOs. That's the idea being given. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

I feel that most of the time, things are being imposed, and so teachers don't feel they own [the LOs], and probably that's one of the problems why things are not implemented the way they should be. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

With the prime focus being on what learners need to accomplish, assessment processes have become too mechanical, in that they strive to resort to technology to provide students and parents with information about the progress achieved:

The good in the LOFs that I see is that they are very personal. In the sense that they show you what the student can do at the end of the day. And it's a good way of reporting to the parents, because the parents have access to MySchool [a software system] and can monitor their child's progress. Students can also see what level they've reached and they see how far they've gone. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

These techniques of monitoring and surveillance, recording and reporting of student progress, whilst emphasising the output of teaching and learning, serve to generate a "distribution of individuals in space" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 141). Such interventions, as a means of policy enforcement, are enacted through Letter Circular DLAP 334/2018 (see Appendix 24), which requires teachers to provide evidence, on a regular basis, of the progress made by ticking the LOs reached via computer software. These policy artefacts act as technologies of performance and contribute to what Ball et al. (2012) label as *technical professionalism*, whereby emphasis is on "the collection and analysis of [student] data ... often using software systems" (p. 85).

7.7.3.2 The impact of international educational assessments

In my interviews with teachers, it transpired that they were not completely aware of the statistical targets set out in the NCF, as exhibited in Table 6.1. Hence, during the interview, teachers were made aware of such targets. Since most of these targets, as policy levers, focus on students' performance, they pay particular attention to students' output, as reflected not just in local examination results, at the end of compulsory schooling, but also in international benchmarks, such as PISA and TIMSS. Despite not being fully aware of the targets that the NCF aims to reach in 2027²⁴, all teachers declared that they place a high premium on local exams. They also commented on Malta's participation in international surveys and the importance they attach to such studies, for their own benefit, as teachers, and that of their schools as well as the country.

Indeed, all teachers, except for HOD3, argued that Malta's participation in international surveys is of great help to them since, as professionals, they try to focus more on those aspects which students are finding hard to achieve. Their comments suggest that these surveys have a positive backwash effect on 'what' and 'how' they teach. Schweisfurth (2015) argues that learning measurement and metrics are not necessarily problematic as long as they do not become "ends in themselves and creating unintended backwash effects" (p. 260). The comments of one of the HODs provide an insight into how teachers were trying to adapt to the results of international testing regimes:

I was a corrector in both SurveyLang and PISA a few years ago. When you start correcting you start realising that certain questions gave the students more problems than others, so you start realising where our students are lacking. And that was an eye-opener. I think reading these reports should help the teacher realise which aspects need to be addressed. For example, back to five years ago, PISA highlighted how lacking [students] are in visual skills ... if you give them a graph, you give them a picture, and ask them to interpret it, they seem to be lost. So, we made it a point to focus more on those skills. Problem-solving is part of [LCE]. These are all skills they need

²⁴ The policy targets are projected to be achieved in 2027, at the end of compulsory schooling for students who entered the NCF-based education system in 2014–2015.

to practise in order to become autonomous learners. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

For HOD3, such global test rankings are not beneficial since they do not have a direct impact on her teaching practice. She finds greater satisfaction when her students perform well in local exams:

To me, as a teacher, these surveys are not important because my goal is that all my students pass their SEC exam. So obviously, in a way I am working towards that. (Lillian/HOD3/Lascaris)

Apart from HOD3, all teachers were of the opinion that international testing of academic ability is significant for schools, in that students' test scores prompt schools, as professional communities, to work harder towards academic success. Besides being viewed as indicators of learners' knowledge, students' test scores, as panoptic modalities of power, are also regarded as key indicators of the quality of schools, as well as the quality of school leaders, teachers and parents (Graham & Dean, 2004; Webb et al., 2009). Complying with this globalised, neo-liberal rationality results in schools being placed under performative pressures:

As a school, we always try hard to help students achieve academic success. So, it's disappointing to know that after trying so hard, you still don't get results [referring to Malta's outcome in the PISA tests]. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

Our school gives some importance to these surveys because we always try to improve, and for the minority of students, for the high achievers, these surveys are good. (Rebecca/T5/Hompesch)

I think every school wants to have high achievers, and at the end of the day, knowing that most of the time people look at statistics, we definitely want to have that. So, the school takes these test results seriously. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

Scarlett, however, added that performance targets could have an adverse effect on students who are not performing well, even more so when such target-setting is infused within a system that supports learner-centred principles:

I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a target, but if we are supposed to have a learner-centred pedagogy, what happens to the rest of students who do not reach these targets? They're not part of our percent, so we're

done. So, we don't challenge them? What happens? Is it just that that we're interested in? (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

There was also a consensus amongst all teachers, with the exception of HOD3, that global tests are most meaningful for the country. The reasons given range from those teachers (HOD1/HOD2/T4/T6/NQT1/NQT2) who value comparison of students' performance across systems, through those teachers (T1/T2/T3) who favour global competition, to other teachers (T5/T7/T8/T9) who view students' preparation for global testing as an investment in human capital and economic growth. As far as students' comparative performance is concerned, teachers are subjectified by the normalising judgements of international organisations, which they welcome and seek to conform to, as shown in the examples below:

Well I think [these surveys] are important, especially if we are comparing ourselves and our country with other countries across the world. Although we give a lot of importance to literacy, we need to generate more interest and motivation in students to actually reach those levels. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

As a country? Yes, I think you'd like to know that maybe in comparison with other countries you have reached certain levels, so yes, I think it's important. You know, you don't want to be left behind, so we are continuously working to raise the literary standards of our students. (Maggie/T6/Hompesch)

Sternberg (2007) maintains that such comparisons of international test scores across cultures are problematic since the scores may be interpreted differently in different contexts. Knowledge of the context of learners' development is essential when comparing results. In some contexts, the importance attached to different aspects of learning and assessment may vary and learners will be keener to perform in certain tests rather than others (Schweisfurth, 2015).

For T1, T2 and T3, the competitive element of international surveys should serve as an opportunity for the country to continue to enhance learner performance. As the following quotes suggest, valuing such a competitive system embodies a neo-liberal marketization of schooling, with the learner being viewed as a commodified subject:

Malta should compete in such international exams. Why not? If I don't compete with somebody, how would I know my standards? I find nothing wrong in competition and being competitive, because I think it drives you to achieve more, to achieve better. I don't find anything wrong in competition. Even in the classroom, I sometimes prepare competitive tasks, like quizzes and debates. Life is a whole competition, isn't it? (Josephine/T1/Wignacourt)

Yes, I think these [surveys] are important because as a country we would know where we stand, in which area we need to improve ((pause)). Competition I think is healthy. Even within a class, when they are sort of trying to compete to get a better mark, because I always set a goal, an aim, sort of. (Pamela/T2/Wignacourt)

Woods and Jeffrey (2002) postulate that the marketization of schooling and the emphasis placed on efficiency and performativity are transforming teachers' subjectivities, forcing them to re-examine "their beliefs, values, roles, biographies, and ambitions in ways they had not anticipated" (p. 90). As Gillies (2013) puts it, "educators are not only *implicated in* the market, but can also be *active producers* of their own market identities and practices" (p. 94, emphasis in original).

According to T5, T7, T8 and T9, in order for the country to develop the human capital essential for the future economy, students need to be prepared for contemporary and future life. This coincides with the preparatory narrative of LCE, as noted in Section 4.3.2.4. In this sense, the NCF policy targets, as represented in Table 6.1, are portrayed as a major economic driver, underpinned by neo-liberal governmentality which, according to Foucault (2008), promotes the idea of *homo oeconomicus*, as "the man of enterprise and production" (p. 147):

The country, yes, needs these [policy targets] because after all, we need a workforce. There's no other way. For the economy, our human power is our asset. We don't have any other resources, so we have to focus on that, and that's what we do in the classroom – we try to develop the full potential of our students, using learner-centred approaches, as far as possible, to add value to our economy. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

As a school, we're trying to aim high, so we should aim to reach those [policy] targets. A country always benefits if its people are educated. I don't

think that's debatable. Even the jobs created will render better income. We will have more skilled citizens. So, in future, even the economy benefits, everything depends on the economy. (Demi/T8/Lascaris)

We try to include students as much as possible, but if you were to include them a little bit more, maybe they would actually achieve their-those [policy] goals. I mean once they finish school they are going out there in the world, they would have to face many different things, and so I think we do need to prepare them for the economy and their future. (Rebecca/T5/Hompesch)

As Rose (1999) contends, one of the core principles of neo-liberal government is the promotion of "individual and national wellbeing by their [people's] responsibility and enterprise ... Once responsabilized and entrepreneurialized, they would govern themselves within a state-secured framework of law and order" (p. 139). Neo-liberalism thus advances the idea that individual and national wellbeing are reliant on the development of individuals' capacities, including independent and creative thinking (Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019), through which adaptations to the economic structure can be made (Susar, 2014). For this reason, learner-centred pedagogies are conceived as the ideal choice for promoting neo-liberal ideologies (Tabulawa, 2003).

7.7.4 A collective process of policy translation

As seen in Section 4.2.3.2, enactments are collective in nature. This has been corroborated by the interview data whereby all teachers, except for T3, claimed that they work collaboratively and socially, mainly within and sometimes across subject departments. This collaboration, through regular subject departmental meetings, during which teachers can plan and share best practices, is encouraged by both the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. 6, p. 32) and the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, p. 49).

Within the socio-cultural environment of secondary (including middle) schools, subject departments are perceived as "important organisational sub-structures" (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 496). Such sub-structures of power that teachers encounter have an impact on their agency, in that they can either enable or

constrain their actions. Indeed, the way subject departments operate provides insights into the relationship between 'structure' and 'agency', which according to Foucault's (1988) concept of technologies can be conceptualised in terms of technologies of power and technologies of the self.

Very often, within subject departments attention is focused on structure rather than agency, with teachers' creativity being constrained by the pressures of standardisation, as confirmed by seven teachers (T3/T4/T5/T6/T7/T8/T9). Similar results were observed in Ball et al.'s study (2011, 2012). One of the HODs, however, felt that it is necessary for teachers to move towards standardisation:

Nobody can work on his own. If we are a team, everything has to be standard, in the sense that I cannot do a task and then someone else gives marks on a different task. So, we try and standardise as far as possible in order to be fair. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

I subscribe to the stance taken by Holloway and Brass (2018), in that any attempt towards standardisation, aimed at producing common responses to policy, fails to acknowledge "the complexity, messiness, intersubjectivity, unpredictability and socially situated nature of teaching and learning processes" (p. 379). When such standardisation procedures are envisioned to hold teachers accountable for student achievement, in terms of measurable outcomes, outputs and efficiency may become more valued than inputs and processes, as the following examples suggest:

As an English department, we meet up on a weekly basis and we discuss mostly the LOs. Recently it's all we talk about, because a lot of teachers have concerns about how to go about them, and I try to answer. So recently, that's all we've been talking about basically – how to standardise our work to achieve the [prescribed] LOs. (Grace/HOD1/Wignacourt)

This year we've tied our SDP to the LOF, as instructed by our Head. Every subject had to take its own area of focus. English, Maltese and the foreign languages decided to look at writing as a focus. First, we met together – the school administration and the HODs, and we kind of decided what we felt needed to be focused on. Then we went to our department meetings, we discussed it with teachers. So, what we're going to do next year is, for English obviously, we're going to focus on a common set of writing tasks. We're going to work on editing, students editing each other's work. Then

we'll see what LOs [from those prescribed] students should achieve. (Penelope/HOD2/Hompesch)

We [the English department] came up with an action plan for English. It's about promoting self-expression, debate, oracy and literacy. Most importantly, we-we had to determine how students will reach the [prescribed] LOs, using standard worksheets. These decisions were taken by the SMT and then during our department meetings we had to formulate a plan about them. Well the headmistress said: "We're going to work on this ... You have to include these in your ..." So, in a way they were imposed. There wasn't a consensus about what to include in the action plan. If you ask me if there was a consultation with the teacher, no there wasn't. (Scarlett/T9/Lascaris)

The comments of Penelope and Scarlett clearly reveal that subject departments can serve as a conduit of information (Ball et al., 2012), whereby the policy priorities set by the SMT are passed on to department members, holding them accountable to directives and relegating them to subordinate roles (Webb, 2002). In such circumstances, the English departments' main priority, same as that of the school leaders (see Section 7.3.1), is to conform to policy expectations, particularly insofar as LOs are concerned. As Ball et al. (2012) affirm, what seems to drive policy enactment in the 21st century schooling is the focus on 'deliverology', as a technology of performance, which aims to ensure that policy gets done. Performativity leaves little space for teachers' sense-making of policy. The pressure to perform appears to revolve around policy enactment that takes place within "a logic of conformity" (p. 97). Indeed, performativity links together "the aspirations of authorities and the activities of individuals and groups" (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 173).

The NQTs spoke about the collegial working environment within their department:

As a department, we discuss what can be done and the activities which you can do, especially with regard to LOs. So, these [departmental] meetings are important for me because I get different ideas from different teachers, which help me to improve. (Valentina/NQT1/Wignacourt)

I really learn from my colleagues because in these [departmental] meetings we talk about how to address diversity in the classroom, communication

skills ... which lead towards learner-centred development. It is very important I feel in this school, that the approach is learner-centred. (William/NQT2/Hompesch)

As observed in Section 7.7.3.1, these NQTs exhibit *policy dependency* since, as usually happens in the case of junior teachers, they depend heavily on senior colleagues and other forms of guidance when enacting policy. In so doing, they behave as *receivers* of policy (Ball et al., 2012). In contrast to the NQTs' views, one teacher spoke about the lack of a collegial working atmosphere within her department:

If we would be able to work as a team, it's very difficult because of the different characters, different ideas, different teaching methods. We have never really done this. We do discuss, but then in the long run we never share our material. (Jasmine/T3/Wignacourt)

According to Jasmine's comments, the department she works in can be described as a weak professional community where mutual engagement is often missing and where practices and resources are kept undisclosed (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). This lack of collegiality defeats the fundamental role of a professional community, which aims to work towards a shared sense of purpose (Wong, 2010).

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on middle school leaders' and English language teachers' enactment of the prevailing learner-centred policy discourses, as articulated in the NCF and ELOF. It explored the schools' contextual dimensions as well as school leaders' and teachers' understandings of LCE and their interpretations and translations of the learner-centred curriculum reform policy texts. The results revealed that school leaders' understandings of LCE focused mainly on the cognitive dimension. It emerged that school leaders were pressured to concentrate on students' attainment levels, in view of the importance attached to student academic achievement by the Education

Directorates, as well as pressures of national quality assurance mechanisms. However, at the same time, school leaders also focused on those learner-centred policy values which were deemed appropriate within their school context, as reflected in their school vision. Hence, during processes of policy interpretation, school leaders acted both as receivers and agents of policy decisions (Spillane et al., 2002). To facilitate the enactment process, school leaders gave precedence to school development planning, lesson observations and training of professional staff. These policy levers are underpinned by neo-liberal ideologies of accountability and performativity.

Similarly, teachers' understanding of LCE revolved mainly around the cognitive perspective. At times, teachers encountered difficulties when putting LCE into practice and some preferred a blended pedagogical approach. The findings demonstrate that teachers viewed their roles in relation to LCE in different ways: some as facilitators, others as guides or as coordinators/controllers. Half of the teachers acknowledged that they felt constrained by the hegemonic policy discourses of academic achievement, similar to the views expressed by the school leaders. In order to address issues of differentiation, the majority of teachers resorted to scaffolding strategies, which remained focused primarily on how learners can perform better.

Another key finding was that students were not adequately empowered, if at all, to exert some control over the learning content and classroom activities. The reason given by teachers was that their time was taken up by curricular requirements, particularly the emphasis on LOs. Teachers claimed that soft skills were essential to empower students. In order for students to become self-disciplined, teachers stated that they practised peer and self-assessment to nurture their metacognitive skills.

Half of the teachers claimed to make use of rules of conduct to create a positive climate for learning. However, power-sharing between teachers and learners can be difficult to achieve if student voice remains unheard, as implied in one of the

teachers' comments. Another issue which emerged from the interview data concerned the difficulties encountered by teachers when assessing students in terms of measurable outcomes. Local exams as well as Malta's participation in international surveys were also given due importance, with the latter being considered beneficial for teachers, schools and the country.

During departmental meetings, pressures of standardisation, aimed at achieving the prescribed LOs, were restricting teachers' creativity. This was confirmed by half of the teachers. Moreover, more emphasis was placed on the product rather than the process of learning when teachers were held accountable for student academic achievement. In the next chapter, I focus on students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in order to obtain a deeper understanding of teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

8

Student Perspectives of Learner-Centred Practices: Analysis and Discussion of Findings

8.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the context of practice (Bowe et al., 1992). As explained in Sections 1.2–1.6 and 5.6.4, this chapter probes into the perspectives of mixed gender, Years 7–8, that is 11 to 13-year-old students, on their experiences of LCE during English lessons, as emanating from the three sample schools that were chosen for this study, referred to by their pseudonyms: Hompesch, Lascaris and Wignacourt. As indicated in Section 5.5, these three schools belong to three different state colleges in Malta, situated in both the Northern and Southern geographical regions of the island. Pseudonyms and codes were also used in the case of students in order to protect their identity (see Table 5.5)

The data generated from the student focus group interviews, with a sample population of thirty-five students, served to address the third research question: *What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?* For this purpose, I designed an interview guide (see Appendix 14). In listening to learners' voices, I sought to acquire a deeper understanding of teachers' professional practice. Indeed, through such insights into the perspectives of co-educational, middle-school learners, hailing from nine different countries (Britain, Bulgaria, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Libya, Lithuania, Malta and the Philippines), this chapter continues to explore how schools respond to policy demands, and the extent to which students are being exposed to learner-centred practices, as projected in the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a).

This chapter also considers the correlation between learners' responses and their teachers' feedback, as analysed and discussed in Chapter 7, so as to compare and contrast the two sets of data, when the themes converge. This is done in terms of three dominant and recurring themes that emerged from the student focus group interview data: (1) individual learner differences; (2) learner empowerment; and (3) preparation for future working life (see Appendix 19). To analyse the focus group data, I applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, together with students' excerpts and citations from relevant literature, as detailed in Chapter 4. The Foucauldian concepts of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity remain crucial in revealing how students are constituted as subjects.

8.1 Individual learner differences

As delineated in Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.2, notions of differentiated learning are fundamental to the cognitive narrative of LCE. In Section 7.7.1, the question of individual learner differences and how teachers worked around them emerged as one of the key issues in addressing learners' needs. This is not surprising, given that LCE has provoked much criticism for its inability to manage differentiation (e.g., Brighton & Hertberg, 2004; Schweisfurth, 2013b; Simpson, 1997; Strogilos et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the provision for curriculum differentiation, as advocated in LCE, remains instrumental in identifying and capitalising on students' diversity, capacities and interests. In this section, issues relating to differentiation are subdivided into three main sub-themes: (1) peer scaffolding during paired activities; (2) individualised learning support; and (3) student learning styles and preferences.

8.1.1 Peer scaffolding during paired activities

According to the NCF (MEDE, 2012), processes of scaffolding for individual learners are critical in helping students progress and become independent problem-solvers (p. 40). Through peer collaboration, students are also envisaged to support each other's learning (p. 9, pp. 37–38, p. 42). A similar stance is taken by the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a) whereby scaffolding strategies are projected to support students in reaching the required standard (p. 37), whilst providing opportunities for peer support (p. 39).

In this study, the responses of students concerning differentiation give a different picture from what was expected. This is partly because none of the students who attend Lascaris declared that they had been engaged in pair work, which enables them to practise peer scaffolding strategies, as their teachers (T7/T8/T9) had stated. Moreover, only four students (S1/S2/S4/S12), from a total of thirty-five, affirmed that they had been involved in peer scaffolding during paired activities. These four students hail from Wignacourt and their responses substantiated what their teachers (T2/T3) said in relation to student engagement in pair work, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

Once in a while the teacher [T3] tells us to work in pairs so that those who need more help can learn from the more intelligent ones ... I enjoy helping my friends cos we learn together ... it's really fun. (Anne/S2/Wignacourt)

Sometimes my teacher [T2] tells me to work with [Laura] [*pseudonym*] so that she can help me out when we do a composition ... I don't mind cos she's really nice and we work well together. (Petra/S1/Wignacourt)

When we're working in pairs the teacher [T3] tells us to help each other, so she gives us different roles. For example, when we discuss a text, maybe one is good at asking the right questions ... so she tells her or him to help out ... the other student may be good at explaining certain words ... so I enjoy working in pairs. (Deborah/S12/Wignacourt)

Such responses of students align with previous research findings (e.g., Calder, 2015; Frederick et al., 2014; Garton & Pratt, 2001; Kamps et al., 2008; Sim Phek Lin & Samuel, 2013), where peer-assisted learning strategies proved to be

valuable in assisting students within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The scaffolding process described above does not only contribute to higher levels of student engagement and motivation but, more importantly, in working within their zone, students can perform at levels that they cannot accomplish on their own.

Indeed, as the comments of Anne and Petra suggest, students in pair work assume an expert-novice role, in the same expert-novice pattern that is found in some types of pair work (e.g., Kowal & Swain, 1994; Ohta, 1995; Storch, 2002), whereby a more knowledgeable student assists a less knowledgeable peer by tailoring support according to specific needs (Puntambekar & Hübscher, 2005) so that eventually learners would be able to work independently (Holton & Clarke, 2006; Sim Phek Lin & Samuel, 2013). It transpired from Ohta's (1995) study that both students in their respective roles could benefit from the interaction. This was also corroborated by van Lier (1996) who demonstrated that students could learn from teaching others.

Conversely, in assuming different but complementary social roles (Forman & Cazden, 1985; Huong, 2007), as Deborah has stated in her description of pair work, both partners (the one who acts as an 'observer' by asking questions, and the other who behaves as a 'performer' by explaining the vocabulary) can be seen as collaborating equally and both are capable of solving problems together, *before* they could solve them independently. This approach represents another kind of scaffolding assistance, which Forman and Cazden (1985) coined as *peer collaboration* or *collaborative problem-solving*, which requires a mutual task, where partners' knowledge is more or less perceived as equal and therefore neither partner is presumed more capable.

Apart from the cognitive value of peer scaffolding, the above students from Wignacourt (S1/S2/S4/S12) admitted that they enjoy supporting or being supported by their peers. They view such practice as an opportunity for self-improvement. In so doing, they engage in technologies of the self (Foucault,

1988), by seeking to act upon their own conduct in order to conform to academic expectations.

8.1.2 Individualised learning support

One of the aims of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) is to sustain individualised attention that enables students to fulfil their capacity (p. iii, p. 60). It therefore encourages schools to acknowledge and address the needs of each individual learner (pp. xiii–xiv, p. 50). Support for individual learners is also accentuated in the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), which emphasises the need for all children to receive appropriate attention that allows them to progress (p. 31, p. 46).

This notion of individualised teaching resonates with Rousseau’s (1979) reasoning about the way children were supposed to be educated, under the guidance of a tutor, as outlined in Section 4.3.1.1. Indeed, one way of providing support for learning is through teacher-learner interaction that allows teachers to monitor students’ development, whilst making allowance for individualised learning patterns (Daniels & Perry, 2003). This is evidenced in the responses of four of the students attending Hompesch (S13/S15/S16/S18) who reported experiences of individualised learning support during English lessons, in conformity with what their teachers (T5, T6) claimed to have been practising. According to Kiefer et al. (2014), such individualised learning support, as illustrated in Figure 6.3, takes place when the teacher provides responsive instruction to meet the needs of individual learners as, for example, by stepping in and out of a learning activity, similar to teacher scaffolding:

The teacher [T6] treats everybody fairly. She’s teaching us like, for example, I don’t understand something, she comes to me and tells me: “What don’t you understand?” and she keeps explaining, explaining ... till I get it. (Sophia/S15/Hompesch)

The teacher [T5] like, she gives us each individual attention ... Like she ... when someone doesn’t understand, the teacher comes near him and explains it to him. (Owen/S18/Hompesch)

If someone doesn't understand, the teacher [T6] goes next to him sometimes, or he goes next to her and she explains to the student who didn't understand. (Abigail/S16/Hompesch)

The comments of Sophia, Owen and Abigail reinforce the findings of Kiefer et al. (2014, 2015), in that in attending to learners' basic and developmental needs in a responsive, individualised manner, teachers can potentially maximize and support student academic motivation. However, research conducted in 2010 by the then National Middle School Association of America (NMSA) suggests that teacher instructional practices may not always be responsive to learners' needs when such practices are not perceived by students as motivating.

Other studies have demonstrated that the student's level of academic performance is key, not only in determining the manner in which teachers adapt their instructional practices to benefit his/her individual needs (Babad, 1990; Corno, 2008), but also in predicting how teachers handle individual students later on, that is to say, by increasing the amount of individual instruction the poorer the student performance is (Nurmi et al., 2012). This is best illustrated by the feedback of four students attending Wignacourt (S5/S10/S11/S12). They described how their teachers (HOD1/T2/T3) increased the provision of individual instruction in the case of low-performing students whereby, apart from being accommodated within the context of whole class instruction, the low achievers are afforded one-on-one tutoring, outside the normal class hours, as exemplified below:

Usually, after the teacher [HOD1] finishes the lesson, if someone doesn't understand, she explains more and if they still don't understand, she will take them during break to make sure they understand. (Melanie/S5/Wignacourt)

When you don't understand, she [T3] explains again and if that is not enough she offers to help you during break. (Luke/S11/Wignacourt)

Although these examples support the claim that students' academic performance is deemed to have an 'evocative impact' on teacher instruction (Rutter, 1997; Scarr & McCartney, 1983 as cited in Nurmi et al., 2012), the

teacher interview data reveals that, out of the three teachers mentioned above (HOD1/T2/T3), only one (HOD1) used to adjust her instruction to assist students during break time. Other students (S6/S7/S31/S32), contrary to what their teachers (HOD3/NQT1) maintained, denied that they or their classmates ever received one-to-one support, during break time.

It is interesting to note that all quotes above place emphasis on student understanding, with a view to monitor learning. As a form of responsive instruction (Kiefer et al., 2014), teacher monitoring of student learning, despite being a source of motivation (Jang et al., 2010), may have the reverse effect of demotivating students if they perceive such monitoring as being too controlling (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In such instances, the monitoring of student learning becomes a mechanism of surveillance, a technique to exercise power over students and to transform them into docile and useful bodies (Foucault, 1977a). As Foucault (1977a) maintained, “a relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency” (p. 176).

8.1.3 Student learning styles and preferences

In order to reach different learners within a framework that is based on LOs, both the NCF and the ELOF encourage teachers to respect learners’ cognitive development and to explore a range of learning styles and preferences (MEDE, 2012, p. viii, p. 46) that would enable learners to become resilient (DQSE, 2015a, p. 39). In responding to learners’ multiple levels of intelligence, the sensory modality learning style has attracted a great deal of attention in education from amongst the many identified learning styles (Lodge et al., 2016). Sensory modality pertains to how learners perceive information through their senses via the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile modalities.

In convergence with the belief of several scholars (e.g., Barbe & Milone, 1981; Brown, 2003; Dunn & Dunn, 1978, 1979; Lovelace, 2005) who maintain that each individual has a dominant sense through which s/he learns best, the preliminary findings reveal that all students claimed to prefer to learn English predominantly through the auditory modality, mainly by working co-operatively in small groups. According to students' comments, they learn most when they listen to each other and participate in group discussion since this enables them to share ideas and different points of view, thereby facilitating the co-construction of knowledge. But as highlighted in Section 7.7.2.2, despite its popularity amongst students, co-operative learning, in the form of group work, is seldom employed by teachers.

Some students (S18/S21/S25/S29/S30/S35) noted that such co-operative strategies are most effective when learners are grouped with classmates whom they feel comfortable working with. In contrast, a few others (S15/S16/S20) believe that co-operative learning provides an opportunity for them to get to know each other better and therefore do not mind if they are not working with their friends as long as they are able to discuss the information within the group. Learners' preference to work in co-operation with others is in tune with the sociological variable embedded in the Dunn and Dunn (1978) model of learning styles, which purports that some individuals may feel more at ease working alone, in pairs or in groups. Learners' inclination towards a collaborative learning environment is also in harmony with the inclusion of one of the NCF's cross-curricular themes – *Learning to learn and co-operative learning* (see Figure 1.1), whereby it is recommended that students engage with their peers in order to be able to learn several processes, such as processing and synthesising information (MEDE, 2012, pp. 37–38).

In practice, however, it transpired from the focus group interview data that auditory-based tasks, as in co-operative learning (Miller, 2017), vary substantially in frequency. On the one hand, eleven students (S1/S2/S3/S4/S5/S6/S7/S28/

S31/S32/S33) declared that interactive activities in small groups are held approximately once a month during English lessons. While such activities differ in the way students are grouped, the tasks described below aim to instil elements that are deemed to form the basis of co-operative learning, whereby positive interdependence, individual accountability, student interaction, the appropriate use of social skills and the group reflection process are all essential ingredients in developing a healthy co-operative learning environment (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Thomson & Brown, 2000):

Last time we discussed the topic of 'friends'... we worked in groups of four ... mhm ... we had to decide whom to work with. We had to find the best qualities of friends. I liked this cos everyone had something different to say ... there was a quality I didn't think about and when someone mentioned it, I noted it down and they did the same when I said something they didn't mention. We were then asked to write all the qualities which were mentioned on a chart and to look for pictures erm ... about these qualities. (Nora/S7/Wignacourt)

The groups are not made up of the four students who are sitting next to each other. The students are chosen at random so that we'll always be with different children. Yeah, since there will be four students, there will be more ideas in the group and erm ... we work according to our role. When the teacher [T3] gives us a composition, she asks us to discuss the ideas between us and erm ... to think about them before we discuss [the ideas] together with her in class. (Christopher/S4/Wignacourt)

When we have listening comprehension we sometimes stay in a group of four, according to our ability, and together we discuss the main theme ... we take it in turns to discuss different aspects ... and erm ... in this way I think we learn more. (Jessica/S33/Lascaris)

Irrespective of learners' preference for auditory input, co-operative learning strategies, such as those intended to generate ideas amongst group members, as Nora, Christopher and Jessica demonstrated, not only provide the means for students to be active recipients of knowledge, but also allow them to enhance their academic and social skills (Sharan, 2010). Thus, as long as teachers and students are sufficiently prepared, with appropriately structured task designs (Gillies, 2004; Sharan, 2010), co-operative learning enables students to develop more positive peer relationships and experience greater academic achievement

(Roseth et al., 2008). As Mercer and Littleton (2007) attest, when students talk together, they not only interact but, more importantly, 'interthink', which enables them to engage in collective thinking.

Contrastingly, two other students in the same class (S23/S24) lamented that their teacher (HOD2) never allowed them to work in groups, whilst almost half of the students interviewed asserted that their engagement in collaborative group work, where information is discussed within a group, is much less frequent than what the other students stated, as seen above. For example, some of the students who complained of insufficient group discussions, stated that co-operative learning takes place approximately once every two months (S14/S20/S25); whereas other students reported a lesser degree of learner engagement in group work, such as three times a year (S18/S21/S34/S35); twice a year (S12/S17/S19/ S22/S27/S30); and even once a year (S13/S15/S16).

Students tend to become frustrated when they are not afforded adequate space to participate in group discussions, as can be seen from the comment of Deborah:

When we sometimes work in a group to discuss a topic, it gets noisy and so the teacher [T3] doesn't like it and usually she separates us and places us in rows, facing her. I really feel frustrated. Usually we work alone in English, but when we do reading comprehension she asks us to work in pairs. (Deborah/S12/Wignacourt)

Other students (S2/S4/S11) who are also taught by Deborah's teacher (T3), but who all happened to be in different classes, have not experienced similar problems when carrying out group discussions. The noise produced by group work, in Deborah's case, prompted the teacher (T3) to place students in traditional rows, as shown in the NCF's front cover (Figure 6.1), whereby the avoidance of students' "distributions in groups" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 143) is intended to put them in a 'better' position to function more effectively whilst being easily supervised. When the teacher (T3) does this and fails to acknowledge that some activities require noise (Bennett, 2012), students

become subjectified as a direct consequence of the teacher's "art of government" (Foucault, 1991, p. 87).

Similarly, Lucas and Hazel expressed frustration because they felt that their needs were not being met:

I do not like how she [HOD2] does the lesson, not a lot. [My learning needs are not being addressed], not really, not really, no ... I just need some good activities, group discussions ... more fun things, not all the time writing, working, on your own. (Lucas/S23/Hompesch)

I agree with Lucas, not all the time writing and doing past papers ... I would like to have more fun lessons and group discussions. (Hazel/S22/Hompesch)

Although Lucas and Hazel are not in the same class and not being taught by the same teacher, they both emphasised the value of fun in learning and the importance of group discussions by virtue of which the learning process could be enhanced. In a study conducted by O'Connell Schmakiel (2008), it was found that early adolescents' academic motivation and achievement could improve if classroom instructional practices revolve around key constructs, including the provision of more enjoyable activities along with opportunities for peer group interaction. In another survey about learners' expectations of teachers and the curriculum (Osler, 2010), students stressed the need for teachers to make learning more fun and interesting by asking for "new and imaginative teaching" (p. 76).

Whereas the auditory modality is shown to be the preferred learning style of the students, this is especially the case when the nature of the task necessitates the sharing of information between learners in small groups. At times, students' preference for auditory input materialises through listening to the teacher, in the traditional teacher-led instruction, or else through whole-class discussions. Some students (S2/S3/S6/S12/S14/S26/S30/S31/S33) felt that the traditional teacher-led, auditory-based instruction is also appropriate, particularly when they encounter difficulties. This concurs with the feedback provided by eight of the teachers (HOD3/T1/T2/T5/T6/T7/NQT1/NQT2).

Dunn (1991) argues that traditional modes of teaching impact only those learners who learn by listening and those who favour the old-fashioned classroom set-up. However, in a more recent report, based on numerous pieces of research (Coe et al., 2014), it was highlighted that traditional teaching styles, such as teacher-directed instruction and passive listening could contribute to effective teaching, irrespective of students' preferred learning styles. This is similar to the view shared by Nespoli-Koppleman and Verna (2002) whose investigation into middle school students' preferred learning styles did not yield any significant improvements when compared to the results obtained by students who had been taught through traditional modes of teaching. Other studies (e.g., Kavale & Forness, 1987; Snider, 1992; Stahl, 1999) also reported disappointing outcomes when contrasting the efficacy of sensory modality-based instruction (i.e., matching instruction to students' sensory preferences), with other (non-customised) instructional approaches that do not take into account students' preferred method of learning. It can therefore be argued that student learning-style-responsive strategies do not necessarily enhance learning.

In other learning situations, some students (S4/S5/S6/S8/S12/S22/S23/S24/S26/S32) acknowledged that they learn best through visual means of communication and interaction, as for example when they learn about English culture through pictures, maps and other graphic material. Yet, such information did not transpire from the teachers' interview data. The significance of such visual input rests on learner's (spatial) ability to think through images (Bissell et al., 1971). In line with the modality-based learning style theory, the more visually accessible the information is to the *visual learner*, the easier it is for him/her to learn (Miller, 2017; Pashler et al., 2009; Willingham et al., 2015).

The above students who opted for visual means of communication also indicated that, occasionally, lessons on English culture are enhanced by means of audio-visual resources, through a set of digital pictures and its corresponding audio-based material. Jeung et al. (1997) observe that learners could avail themselves

of additional cognitive processing capacity when the information is presented to them in audio-visual format rather than relying simply on the visual mode. In their study, Jeung et al. reported that the mixed sensory mode (audio-visual), which students referred to, was proved to be superior to single (visual) mode, in that it enhances learning, but only if learners are not required to use their visual sense extensively, in which case it becomes harder for them to coordinate the auditory and visual information. Although in some studies (e.g., Leahy & Sweller, 2011; Yaghoub Mousavi et al., 1995), the audio-visual sensory mode was found to be superior to the visual channel of information, in some others, mostly in the case of adults (e.g., Kalyuga et al., 2004; Murray & Thomson, 2011), the inclusion of audio-visual stimuli resulted in cognitive overload.

Moreover, a few students (S8/S9/S13/S15/S27/S29/S30/S32/S33) admitted that during prose lessons they sometimes prefer direct involvement in what they are learning by assuming a role, as in role-playing, same as confirmed by their teachers (HOD3/T1/T6/T7/T9). This kinaesthetic learning preference is also mirrored in the responses of those students (S11/S12/S18/S21/S27/S30/S31/S33/S35) who were more inclined towards hands-on experience, especially when the activities are held outdoors, as part of a project-based learning (PBL) approach. Again, this corresponds with what the teachers (HOD3/T3/T5/T8/T9) stated.

According to the learning style theory, the kinaesthetic modality assumes that *kinaesthetic students* could retain more information from the material presented if they are physically involved in the learning process (Miller, 2017; Zapalska & Dabb, 2002). Despite the claims made by Dunn and Dunn (1993) and Honigsfeld and Dunn (2009) that kinaesthetic/tactile activities are the preferred mode of learning for underachievers, including at-risk students, in this study the students who were enthusiastic about such activities were of mixed ability. A similar conclusion was reached in the study carried out by Barbe and Milone (1982), which showed that even gifted children can be kinaesthetic learners. As already

noted, these kinaesthetic approaches to learning were deemed by the students in my study to be effective particularly in specific learning situations, such as during prose lessons and outdoor activities.

The students' overall comments indicate that while learners may be inclined towards a particular sensory modality, their preferred learning style was not always the same for specific learning situations, thereby suggesting that modality preference is largely dependent on the nature of the task rather than the students' preferences (Hansen & Cottrell, 2013; Lodge et al., 2016; Welch & Warren, 1986). This explains why such scholars give precedence to the 'modality appropriateness hypothesis' rather than 'modality preference' – to emphasise their belief that a particular task ought to be presented through the sensory mode most appropriate for the task in question, rather than matching teaching to learners' modality preference.

Viewed from a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1977a), student learning style preferences are also problematic in that learners tend to be classified into distinct groups, as though they are placed in pigeonholes (Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013), according to their preferred modality – as visual, auditory or kinaesthetic/tactile learners. These classifications of student preferences may hinder the learning process since students remain attached to their preferred learning modality and, in being tied to an identity or a fixed mind-set about how they can actually learn, they fail to recognise the possibility of learning new things through other modes of learning.

8.2 Learner empowerment

As has been observed in Section 4.3.2.3, the idea of empowering students to take charge of their learning entails a collaborative effort whereby teachers depart from a transmission model of teaching (Lawson, 2011) in order to allow students to play a more active role in deciding *what* and *how* they learn (Starkey, 2019).

Such collaborative effort gives rise to more democratic classroom practices (Schweisfurth, 2013b) and, in exercising their autonomy, students lay the foundation for lifelong learning which, in turn, is believed to support the notion of the knowledge society and economy (Green, 2006). From a Foucauldian perspective, the issue of power-sharing between teachers and students is, therefore, instrumental in explicating the extent to which students control their own learning. In this regard, the practices of empowerment are analysed in relation to two interrelated sub-themes: (1) learner control over the content and process of learning; and (2) teacher-learner relationship.

8.2.1 Learner control over the content and process of learning

In both the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a), there are multiple calls for providing learners with opportunities to develop into empowered citizens who assume active involvement in decision-making, whereby a degree of learner control over the learning content, activities and assessment is required (MEDE, 2012, pp. 32–34, pp. 37–42; DQSE, 2015a, pp. 5–6, pp. 29–31, pp. 45–48).

According to students' responses, control over the learning content is a prerogative of the class teacher, in compliance with the belief that students do not have the capacity to determine what they need to learn (Carrier, 1984; Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013). This contrasts with what the majority of teachers (HOD1/HOD2/HOD3/T2/T3/T5/T6/T9/NQT1/NQT2) stated, that is that they attempt to involve students in lesson planning, as opposed to the other four teachers (T1/T4/T7/T8) who negated such learner involvement. The only two students (S31/S34) who declared that they were allowed, along with their peers, to exercise some form of control over the content of learning tended to concentrate exclusively on the choice of topic, without exerting effective control over the setting of learning goals that might potentially boost the development of autonomous learning capacity (Benson, 2011):

Sometimes she [HOD3] lets us choose topics that we are interested in. It depends on what lesson we're doing, but that's it ... she then decides on the way forward. (Ella/S31/Lascaris)

She [T8] sometimes listens to our opinions ... to what topics we think we should learn and she tries to include them in the lesson ... but we don't discuss the learning aims, not really. (Samantha/S34/Lascaris)

If, in actual fact, students were provided with opportunities to exercise choice over topic, as Ella and Samantha declared, this might have been due to the students' competence in that particular topic (Sasscar & Moore, 1984). Likewise, Chung and Reigeluth (1992) posit that the higher the attainment of the learner, the better the student is in making the best content choices, depending on his/her needs. From a motivational perspective, both self-determined content and goals are fundamental to autonomy in learning, presupposing also that when the content and the learning goals are self-determined, students become intrinsically motivated (Benson, 2011). According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the more self-determined or autonomous the student is, the more s/he performs in accordance with his/her free will (Gorissen et al., 2015). Drawing on Foucault's notion of power, self-determination is to be understood as a form of self-regulation by virtue of which individuals constitute themselves as ethical subjects (Lazaroiu, 2013).

The two other students (S32/S35) who are taught by the teachers of Ella and Samantha (HOD3/T8), denied any involvement in decision-making concerning the content of their own learning. This is in agreement with what the rest of the students, who are taught by other teachers, said. The failure of students to act autonomously about content-related aspects, that is their lack of active participation in collective decision-making, may suggest that teachers at times behave as content experts or perhaps imparters, rather than facilitators, of knowledge (Freakley & Burgh, 2000; Mong & Ertmer, 2013), as exemplified below:

When the teacher [T3] thinks that a particular lesson should be done, then we have no choice but to do that lesson. Our teacher would have planned

out the lesson beforehand and tells us: “This is more important than the lesson you want”. (Christopher/S4/Wignacourt)

Unfortunately, we don’t discuss what we will learn. We have to do what the teacher [HOD1] says because she tells us we need to cover all the syllabus ... there are lessons that the teacher must do as she has planned. (Melanie/S5/Wignacourt)

When we’re doing a topic, we don’t choose. It’s really annoying because she [T4] always decides for us. She has a plan for the lesson and we have to do it. (Olivia/S19/Hompesch)

These examples reveal that what needs to be covered is not being negotiated since teachers are assuming an exclusive, authoritative role that impedes the involvement of students. As Benson (2011) asserts, “the desire to take control over learning content can also bring students into conflict with teachers and institutions ...” (p. 112). Some teachers may deem the involvement of students risky since this might lead to the contestation of certain issues (Pollard et al., 2019).

Indeed, although teachers might have been flexible in determining the content of learning, in conformity with the NCF principles (MEDE, 2012, p. ix, p. xiii), their reluctance to negotiate curricula with students renders teachers as “the source of all learning” (Schweisfurth, 2013b, p. 13). In failing to engage with their students in more positive ways, by not allowing them to participate in social interactions regarding their learning, as several scholars advocate (e.g., Benson, 2011; McCombs, 2003; Osler, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2013b), teachers run the risk of becoming dependent on the ‘banking’ model of education, with knowledge being transmitted or ‘deposited’ into passive students, similar to depositing money in a bank (Freire, 1972). Under these circumstances, learners are unable to question the relevance of knowledge for their own learning, even though, from an emancipatory perspective, they have a right to do so (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

Moreover, the lack of negotiated content, as the examples of Christopher, Melanie and Olivia above illustrate, can be regarded as non-intrinsically

motivated practices since students' behaviour is regulated by external factors. In essence, the feeling that one gets when reading these students' comments is that learners are being motivated through coercion rather than free choice, so as to satisfy teachers' demands (Mears & Kilpatrick, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such practices compel teachers to employ a technology of domination (Foucault, 1977a, 2000) that serves to disempower learners, making it impossible for them to have "a jointly derived meaningful, negotiated curriculum and pedagogy" (McCombs, 2003, p. 99). Students' subjectivity is indeed constituted by the prevailing micro-level, classroom-based power structures, whereby engagement in the emancipatory potential of empowerment (Lawson, 2011) is undermined.

Other students (S26/S28/S29) not only complained about their lack of content control, but also criticised their teacher (T7) for not giving them the opportunity to exercise some control over the pace of learning, as in the following examples:

The teacher [T7] hurries too much and does not give us enough time to understand the lesson. She sometimes gives us homework for the following day. (Noah/S26/Lascaris)

Her [T7] lessons are too fast and nobody asks her to slow down. (Veronica/S29/Lascaris)

The responses provided by Noah and Veronica contradict their teacher's [T7] claim that she revises some of her lessons. These students' feedback confirms that although the adoption of the LOs approach, as envisaged in the ELOF, is assumed to "allow learners to progress at their own speed", this could prove to be challenging (DQSE, 2015a, p. 37). As Pollard et al. (2019) demonstrate, pacing entails the exercise of appropriate judgements concerning the organisation of learning activities whereby students may need to undergo different phases, as for example when the activity they are involved in requires to be *restructured* so as to clarify objectives and procedures or *reviewed* in order to consolidate what has been achieved.

Pollard et al. affirm that the more flexible and sensitive teachers are with regard to how learners are responding to activities, the more learners are likely to be

engaged in the learning process. Tennyson et al. (1985) also argue that such flexibility in pacing is likely to improve learner performance. Berliner (1990) notes that usually the faster the pace of instruction, the less students are exposed to in-depth content coverage. If the feedback of Noah and Veronica holds true, the locus of control remains in the teacher's hands and the possibility of negotiating some degree of flexibility in pacing becomes more remote. Again, these technologies of control that students claimed to have experienced in their classrooms continue to shed light on the power imbalance that exists between teachers and learners, with the latter being deprived of their freedom or effective agency.

The student focus group interview data also reveals that teachers are not willing to relinquish some control that they have traditionally held with respect to assessment practices. This can be seen from the fact that classroom assessment routines do not give much scope for more productive learner involvement into the assessment process, say for example through self, peer or collaborative assessment (Falchikov, 2004; Roskos & Neuman, 2012; Topping, 2009). The process of marking is predominantly left in the hands of teachers, even though when they had been asked they claimed otherwise:

When we correct an exercise, the teacher [T2] chooses who will answer the question. She first asks someone and if he doesn't know the answer she asks someone else. After she gives us the correct answer. (Alexia/S10/Wignacourt)

Sometimes she [T6] collects our work and then she gives it back to us, but usually we do class correction ... erm ... she says the correct answers or she writes them down on the board and then we correct them together. (Sophia/S15/Hompesch)

We do class correction by raising our hands to say the answer. If the answer is wrong, the teacher [T7] turns to someone else to give the answer. She then writes the correct answer on the board ... but when we write a composition, the teacher corrects it herself to see how we went on. (Emily/S28/Lascaris)

A conclusion that can be drawn from such findings, therefore, is that the conditions set in classrooms for assessment purposes do not contribute to a

climate where students are encouraged to think about their own learning, as in Assessment for Learning (AfL) (Pollard et al., 2019). The lack of exposure to assessment practices that are conducive to 'learning how to learn' compromises the development of independent and autonomous learning (James, 2007), which in turn jeopardises the production of self-governing individuals.

Two other students (S23/S24) who are in the same class voiced their concern about their teacher's (HOD2) lack of interest in their work, as opposed to what their teacher stated. Apparently, as far as pupil assessment is concerned, these students are unhappy with the laissez-faire attitude displayed by their teacher:

She [HOD2] [does not collect the copybooks to correct them], not really. If a person doesn't do his homework she doesn't really mind, she doesn't even know. She doesn't ask for the homework. She just says: "Get out your copybooks", and she just corrects something on the whiteboard and that's it. (Lucas/S23/Hompesch)

Who doesn't bring the work, he just doesn't bring it, the teacher [HOD2] doesn't ask for it ... It's like if you bring your homework nothing happens and if you don't bring it nothing happens. (Layla/S24/Hompesch)

As these students' comments suggest, since pupil assessment is not being given prominence, it cannot function as a "bridge between teaching and learning" (William, 2013, p. 15), and so the learning process cannot be adequately supported, as when employing formative assessment strategies (Bransford et al., 1999; James, 2007; Pollard et al., 2019). Hence, in relation to LCE, of major concern is the fact that, in such a learning environment, students remain unable to control and develop ownership of their learning.

In other instances, student involvement in assessment is simply restricted to obtaining summative information about individual performance at a particular point in time (Harlen et al., 1992). Although some students (S27/S31/S34) are allowed to correct each other's work after completing a test, this is done merely to prevent cheating in test performance rather than to empower pupils to act as "learning resources for one another", whereby they can focus more on improvement (William, 2013, p. 18):

When we have a test, we never check our own answers since we can cheat by changing a wrong answer ... so to avoid this we sometimes check each other's work by swapping papers with the person sitting next to us and checking them with the teacher's [T9] answers on the whiteboard. (Jack/S27/Lascaris)

My teacher [HOD3] doesn't let us check our work on our own. She either takes it and she checks it herself or we switch it with other students next to us ... but this only happens when we have a test, for example, I check my friend's paper and my friend checks mine, so no one tries to cheat when checking with the teacher's answers. (Ella/S31/Lascaris)

She [T8] doesn't let us correct our own work because some students may cheat to get higher marks when checking the answers from the whiteboard. If we do a test, she asks us to swap the work with the student who is next to you so that he corrects yours and you correct his ... erm ... and so the marks will not be changed. (Samantha/S34/Lascaris)

These examples prove that on the few occasions that peer assessment is presumably employed, students are not permitted to engage in effective dialogue, and so they lack the ability to provide constructive peer feedback, whereby they can "learn socially, through and with others" (Swaffield, 2011, p. 443). Such an approach adopted by teachers (HOD3/T8/T9) hinders students' capacity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulatory skills (Topping, 2009). It can be argued that pupil assessment still tends to operate as a more traditional technology of discipline through which students are passively constructed in the process of subject formation.

Whereas the quotes highlighted in this section about the content and pace of learning, as well as pupil assessment, could hardly generate any capacity for students to act autonomously, some degree of learner control over the process of learning could be noted, as reflected in the comments of some of the students (S1/S2/S4/S7/S12/S33) about their engagement in collaborative group work or pair work, as observed in Sections 8.1.1 and 8.1.3. In such descriptions of peer interaction, students are represented as active subjects who are empowered to exercise some control over their language learning process, that is to say, control over certain aspects of learning, as for example learners' use of cognitive,

metacognitive and social strategies to manage their own learning (Benson, 2011; Lewis & Vialleton, 2011; Ruelens, 2019).

8.2.2 Teacher-learner relationship

In promoting egalitarian classroom relationships, the NCF strives to contribute to students' wellbeing by cultivating a learning environment that is founded on trust and respect, which is conducive to learners' self-confidence, self-identity and self-esteem (MEDE, 2012, p. 46, p. 48, p. 51, p. 57), and which enables students to make their voices heard (MEDE, 2012, p. 7, p. 38, p. 46, p. 60). In such an environment, where students are given freedom of choice, learners are not only assumed to become autonomous, self-regulating and self-determining individuals, but are also envisioned to develop socio-emotional competences, which help them learn how to deal with their feelings (MEDE, 2012, p. 48, p. 50, p. 58). The importance of nurturing an emotionally and psychologically supportive environment for students is also reinforced in the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, p. 37), whereby schools are encouraged to promote wellbeing and respect (DQSE, 2015a, p. 40), whilst ensuring the inclusion of learners' multiple perspectives and voices (DQSE, 2015a, p. 29, p. 63).

According to students' responses (S14/S15/S19/S21/S24/S31/S33), which coincide with teachers' feedback (HOD2/HOD3/T4/T5/T6/T9/NQT2), the creation of a positive environment for learning is necessitated by the observance of classroom rules. Chaplain (2003) maintains that rules create the conditions for learning, providing a sense of personal and psychological safety, whilst helping develop positive working relationships. Such rules, he argues, are supported by rewards and sanctions which reveal a clear connection between cause and effect, as the following excerpts suggest:

If, for example, there are students who don't do the work, the teacher [T6] writes a note on the copybook ... hmmm ... on her diary ... and you probably get a white sheet, and that's a good thing cos ... the white sheet controls you ... to get better behaviour. The white sheet is the first warning, and

then there is the yellow sheet, which is the second warning. The green sheet is for good behaviour, for example participating in activities, for doing your homework ... and the red sheet means that you're suspended. Everything is explained in the school diary. (Sophia/S15/Hompesch)

The teacher [NQT2] tells us that if we don't do the homework we get a white sheet ... cos the white sheet can help ... when you grow up ... to control you. You have these rules written in your [school] diary so that everyone is aware of them. (Emma/S14/Hompesch)

A lot of kids interrupt the class while the teacher [T4] is explaining. Sometimes the teacher cannot handle it, so she brings someone in the class. Last time she brought Ms [Bonello] [*pseudonym*], a strict teacher, to help her control the class, because she cannot handle it; they interrupt a lot and throw things at her. She gives green sheets to those who try to improve their behaviour ... who follow the rules ... the rules that we have in our [school] diary. (Olivia/S19/Hompesch)

Although negotiation of rules is a key factor of democratic classroom practice (Pollard, 1985, 1996; Power & Scott, 2014; Reich-Shapiro, 2014; Schweisfurth, 2013b; Tammi & Rajala, 2018), at no point did the students imply that they have been involved in negotiating the rules-in-play. As the above examples from Hompesch School illustrate, the rules-in-play seem to be derived from whole-school policy and practices displayed in the school diary that serves as an artefact of governmentality (Ball et al., 2012). As Gore (1995) has demonstrated in her study, rules constitute an explicit form of regulation through which students can be kept under control.

Very often, teachers struggle to balance control and freedom in classrooms (Alexander, 2000; Schweisfurth, 2002), as vividly portrayed in Olivia's description of her English lessons whereby students act without consideration of existing rules. On the other hand, Sophia and Emma seem to acknowledge the real purpose of such rules – that of enabling them to control their own behaviour, as self-governing subjects. This self-governance may be conceived as a micro-disciplinary technique by virtue of which students are 'empowered' to become self-disciplined through self-monitoring of their own conduct (Lawson, 2011). In so doing, student behaviour becomes compliant with the standardised rules. As

Foucault (1982) contends, “the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (p. 789).

In the following examples, two students from Lascaris School (S26/S33) explained how their teachers (T7/T9) attempt to exclude students whose behaviour and attitudes are deemed to be incompatible with norms of the ‘good student’. As Gore’s (1995) research study suggests, such exclusionary techniques are used as a way of pathologizing student behaviour that does not fit within a particular notion of normality:

I think she [T9] tries to involve us ... for example, she needed to choose her class prefect and assistant class prefect, and instead of just choosing on her own, she wanted to involve us ... erm to listen to us. But she ended up involving a few students – those whom she trusted most, those who usually do what she says ... yeah, who behave ... the best students. (Jessica/S33/Lascaris)

If you obey and do what she [T7] says, she will listen to you, will give you more attention, will be more trusted. (Noah/S26/Lascaris)

These students’ comments support the belief that student voice remains largely unheard and subordinated to the more powerful voices of teachers (Cook-Sather, 2007 as cited in Bourke, 2016). As Tyler (1993) has shown, some students are constructed as ‘better’ and those who are excluded as ‘other’. Indeed, some students are ‘trusted’ more than others since they think, behave and act as their teachers want. Czerniawski (2012) labels such trust as *synthetic*, implying an instrumental, contrived, rational and fragile trust. Rudduck (2006) argues that student voice may only be permitted when teachers allow it, and in ways that prevent any criticism of prevailing conditions. According to Fielding and McGregor (2005), when the institutional conditions aim at increasing organisational performance and reputation, student voice becomes totalitarian, in that “[it] only has significance and is only legitimate insofar as it enhances organisational ends” (p. 15). In such circumstances, power resides primarily with the teacher, signifying the power imbalance inherent in child-adult relationships, which contribute to existing technologies of power (Charteris & Smardon, 2019).

Other exclusionary techniques occurred in the following examples of children attending Hompesch School (S19/S22/S23), in conformity with Gore's (1995) empirical study, whereby exclusion has resulted, once again, from the imposition of a particular norm:

We don't get along so well with each other. Sometimes I raise my hand but she [T4] doesn't respond ... yeah ... perhaps because she thinks that I'm going to say something silly. (Olivia/S19/Hompesch)

Sometimes we don't agree with each other that much ... erm ... There are times when she [T4] doesn't let me speak in class because she says I'm too noisy. (Hazel/S22/Hompesch)

We don't always agree on the same things and it's not the first time that she [HOD2] didn't give me a chance to speak ... erm ... because she says that she doesn't like to be disturbed during the lesson ... but sometimes she doesn't mind letting others speak. (Lucas/S23/Hompesch)

In the examples above, teachers (HOD2/T4) may be seen to be acting unfairly when prohibiting students from making their voices heard, whilst at the same time impacting the social conditions of learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). In such a situation, students feel frustrated when their interests are ignored or threatened (Pollard et al., 2019). More importantly, though, is the fact that students do not feel empowered to act as full participants in class, as in inclusive learning settings, where they can feel valued (Kershner, 2009). Drawing on Foucault's (1981) 'procedures of exclusion', there can be limitations as to who can speak, what can be said and when it can be said. There are indeed unequal teacher-student power relations, with teachers exercising technologies of domination (Foucault, 1977a, 2000), which reduce students to docile and subjected bodies.

Other students (S3/S12/S13/S15/S16/S21) highlighted the social and emotional dimensions of the classroom environment, which were also emphasised by their teachers (HOD1/T3/T5/T6), as being particularly significant in establishing positive and supportive relationships:

I think that I have a good relationship with her [T6]. She's really kind, nice and caring. She makes us laugh and she's always willing to listen to you if you have a problem. (Sophia/S15/Hompesch)

I have a good relationship with my teacher [T6]. She is strict but fair, and to be honest, it looks like we're friends. She respects us and listens to our concerns and stuff like that. (Abigail/S16/Hompesch)

She [T5] cares about us and listen[s] to our problems and tries to help out if you really need help. She treats us with respect, so yes, it's a friendly relationship. I talked to her when my grandfather died because I was very upset and she helped me to move on. (Jordan/S21/Hompesch)

In these examples, as in previous research findings (e.g., Bibby, 2009; Daniels & Perry, 2003; Kiefer et al., 2014; Simmons et al., 2015), the students feel that they matter when they are listened to and cared for by their teachers. Such relatedness or caring relationships tend to support student motivation (Meece, 2003; O'Connell Schmakel, 2008; Ryan & Patrick, 2001), and are closely related to student wellbeing, classroom learning and effective discipline (Pollard et al., 2019; Raphael & Burke, 2012). In their study, Deakin Crick et al. (2007) have shown how teacher support and respect towards students play a key role in the creation of an emotionally-literate school. It can be argued that the student voice practices experienced by Sophia, Abigail, and Jordan have produced positive emotions, thereby sustaining the notion, albeit contested (e.g., Arnot & Reay, 2007; Bragg, 2007; Mayes, 2020), that student voice could potentially generate "relations of trust, respect, belonging and student empowerment" (Black & Mayes, 2020, p. 1064). In a Foucauldian sense, student voice might operate as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) since, in confessing and reflecting on their feelings with others, students shape their own subjectivity (Fejes, 2008).

8.3 Preparation for future working life

As elaborated upon in Section 4.3.2.4, one line of reasoning for the adoption of LCE in national policies is that it can be "an appropriate preparation for contemporary and future life" (Schweisfurth, 2013b, p. 21), which goes against

Dewey's (1897) philosophy, which claims that education should be considered as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (p. 78). Since the preparation narrative of LCE emphasises the need for learners to develop the 21st century skills for the knowledge economy, such as critical and creative thinking, independent research and flexibility, it encourages them to practise independence and collaboration rather than relying on the content of textbooks and information provided by the teacher (Britton et al., 2019; Schweisfurth, 2019; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Learners' preparedness for future employment is analysed in terms of two parallel sub-themes: (1) self-reliant and responsible individuals; and (2) examination performance.

8.3.1 Self-reliant and responsible individuals

The NCF (MEDE, 2012) encourages teachers to regard children as Malta's future workforce, thereby promoting a learning process that fosters learner responsibility, commitment, entrepreneurship and flexibility (p. iii). As the NCF affirms, responsibility for learning is expected to increase as learners move from the primary to the secondary school sector (p. 40, p. 58). Since learners are envisioned to become capable of sustaining their chances in the world of work, it is hoped that they develop a capacity to work independently and collaboratively (pp. 51–52, p. 57, p. 59, p. 66). Similarly, the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a) emphasises the need for students to acquire the skills that will increase the likelihood of lifelong employability (p. 5, p. 65), whilst promoting the cultivation of responsible and autonomous learners (p. 30, p. 36, pp. 38–40).

Though the NCF and ELOF aim at increasing student ownership and responsibility for learning, which all teachers claimed to nurture, almost all students, except for S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S23, S24 and S29, expressed their wish to be given more space to be able to work and learn on their own. The majority of students, therefore, were of the opinion that they should shoulder responsibility for their own learning since when provided with opportunities through which they can

learn independently, they will, at the same time, be preparing themselves for their future employment:

When we have a difficulty, the teacher [T3] keeps on explaining, but sometimes she tells us: "You need to think for yourself, I will not tell you everything". So, every now and then she tells us to work alone, but we can do more. I think it is very important to be responsible cos in future, at the place of work, no one will tell you what to do. You have to be independent and understand what you're doing. (Christopher/S4/Wignacourt)

We rarely work on our own in class, but she's [T6] a good teacher... Erm, I think it's important [to work on our own] because when I'm gonna grow up and get a job, no one is gonna be by my side. I should learn when I'm younger because when I grow up I have no one to stay with, so I have to be responsible for myself. At work, I have to do things by myself. So, I have to be responsible when I'm young so I can continue my life being a responsible person. (Sophia/S15/Hompesch)

Our teacher [T8] really explains, and really helps us, but we also need to be responsible. We need to be given more opportunities to be alone and to do work individually, not to depend totally on her [the teacher] ... because when you grow up and start working, you will be alone and you will have no one to help you. (Samantha/S34/Lascaris)

As research has suggested, there is a need for learners to work things out for themselves (Ginnis, 2002), to develop their cognitive abilities, and to gain independence and autonomy (Meece, 2003), a need which features prominently in the above students' excerpts. Whilst LCE aims at promoting such a learning environment (Weimer, 2013), individuality and creativity may not be sufficiently encouraged, as students' comments suggest, thereby deterring learners from taking responsibility for their own learning (Balçikanli, 2010). For this reason, it has been felt that children should be exposed to different challenging learning experiences in order for them to become lifelong learners (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

This idea of independent, self-reliant learners, coupled with the students' understanding of learning as a key for future employment, serve to accommodate the neo-liberal educational agenda. Similar findings emerged from the study carried out by Pimlott-Wilson and Coates (2019) whereby

children's perception of classroom learning was clearly aligned with the neo-liberal approach to education in creating responsible citizens of the future. Indeed, within the neo-liberal form of government, "students are commodified as future labour power" (Rodgers Gibson, 2019, p. 989). In striving to become self-regulated learners, students comply with a neo-liberal form of subjectivity (Vassallo, 2013), which enables them to work on themselves by engaging in technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988), in order to meet the demands of the neo-liberal society.

8.3.2 Examination performance

The need for learners to strive for certification and qualifications in order to gain access to further and higher education and employment is clearly articulated in the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. viii, p. xiv, pp. 13–14, p. 58). Furthermore, the ELOF (DQSE, 2015a, p. 40) encourages schools to develop an ethos of achievement and ambition for all learners, aimed at promoting healthy and productive attitudes, as well as skills, in relation to learning, life and work. Indeed, when asked about exams and the importance attached to them in the classroom, all students, apart from S1, S3, S19 and S20, were of the opinion that exams play a key role in their lives since, if they perform well, their chances of future employment will increase, in line with what their teachers stated:

I think that I should work hard to pass my exams. We do past papers but not enough and I need to go over the things we learned because exams are just around the corner, and if you don't get high marks you're not going to get a good job. (Deborah/S12/Wignacourt)

For me, exams are very important, so I have to work for them ... because I want to stay in a good class and because I want to have a good job in the future, and I want to make my parents proud ... even the teacher [NQT2], he gives us a test every month to check how we're doing and he tells us to study hard to succeed in life. (Elena/S25/Hompesch)

Basically, what she [T4] does is help us to get on better in the exam, but we have to do our part too, cos if you don't get good grades you won't get a job when you grow up. (Hazel/S22/Hompesch)

Again, what is striking in students' comments is the sense of individualised responsibility for their future attainment. But, although the need of preparing for future employment is at play, students provide no information as to how they are being prepared for this, except that there is now greater emphasis on examination performance, which reflects an achievement-oriented approach, and thus points towards the cognitive narrative of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Such accounts of children echo the findings of Pimlott-Wilson (2017) where students narrate the anxiety they feel in complying with neo-liberal principles of success, which compel them to perform well academically in order to secure a successful future. As Beach and Dovemark (2009) have demonstrated in their ethnographic research on personalised learning, performance-related demands tend to hinder teachers' ability to acknowledge the importance of learners' agency and creativity. Indeed, examinations, as a discursive practice of testing (McBride, 1989), continue to hold centre stage and, as the extracts above suggest, the pressure to perform enables students to participate in practices of self-formation, through self-governance, as a form of self-discipline that results in the construction of docile bodies (Lawson, 2011).

As has been shown in Section 3.2.1, Foucault (1977a) views the examination as a normalising gaze, a form of surveillance through which students can be classified and punished, distinguished and judged. Students' commitment to self-technology can therefore be represented as a move towards self-improvement and self-transformation, in preparation for future working life. Grant (1997) contends that the practices adopted by students, as technologies of the self, empower learners to construct a particular identity – that of the good student, but sometimes at the expense of their other interests.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored and analysed the main findings relating to middle-school students' perspectives of LCE practices, as presented under three key

thematic headings: (1) individual learner differences; (2) learner empowerment; and (3) preparation for future working life. The results revealed a number of key issues. The first was concerned with differentiated learning approaches that are tied to the cognitive narrative of LCE. In this regard, peer scaffolding strategies involving pair work were only employed to a very limited extent by teachers, with the result that very few students profited from such pedagogical techniques. Differentiation was also addressed by means of one-to-one support, whereby the needs of low-performing students were being catered for individually, either in the classroom or during break time. Again, such practice was very limited since only a few teachers managed to offer individual instruction. Data also showed that, even though all students preferred to learn English primarily through the auditory modality, as in co-operative group work, they were not being adequately accommodated, if at all. Additionally, it transpired that, for specific learning situations, more than half of the students interviewed opted for other modes of learning (i.e., visual or kinaesthetic), which demonstrates that learning is most effective when the learning style is matched to the task at hand rather than students' preferences.

The second key issue was linked to the practices of learner empowerment. In this respect, the research evidence suggests that students did not seem to exercise any control over the learning content, thus hindering their ability to challenge the appropriateness of knowledge for their own learning. For a few students, their lack of control over the pace of learning was also problematic since they were unable to progress at their own speed. Moreover, students have not been empowered to exercise some control over the process of classroom assessment. This lack of power-sharing between teachers and learners has not helped in promoting learner emancipation, as one of the key purposes of LCE. As noted above, some control over the learning process was only exercised by very few students during pair work, whilst on very few occasions did some of the students appear to be in control of their learning during co-operative group work. As regards teacher-learner relationship, it emerged that classroom rules were not

being negotiated with students, as in democratic classrooms. In addition, some students were trusted less than others and were excluded for not complying with the norms imposed. However, there were instances where some students appeared to have experienced positive and supportive relationships due to the caring attitude of their teachers.

The final key issue pertained to learners' preparedness for future employment and thus coincides with the preparatory perspective of LCE. According to the data, the majority of students felt that they were not given adequate opportunities through which they can learn independently, as in self-regulatory, autonomous learning, which they perceived as a prerequisite for their future employment. This sense of responsibility for learning and their future accomplishment, in compliance with neo-liberal ideologies, was also mirrored in the importance students attached to examination performance, as a way of securing their future job prospects. In the next chapter, I outline the key findings of my research, discuss the implications of my findings to LCE policy and practice, whilst highlighting the limitations of this study and making recommendations for future research.

9

Conclusion

9.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter I begin by focusing on the research questions that my study aimed to address, followed by some recommendations for policy and practice. Next, I justify my work's original contribution to knowledge and then move on to reflect on the limitations of this study and propose avenues for further research. Finally, I reflect on my doctoral journey.

9.1 Addressing the research questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to critically evaluate the notion of LCE in both policy and practice, as articulated in my central research question: *How are learner-centred practices envisioned and enacted within the context of the curriculum policy reform in Malta?* This overarching research question guided my entire research project. It was subdivided into three subsidiary questions, which served to narrow the focus of the study. In the following sections, I revisit the key insights that arose from each subsidiary question.

9.1.1 Research question 1

What discourses of LCE frame the curriculum reform policy texts?

My analysis of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and ELOF (DQSE, 2015a) policy texts has demonstrated that the dominant discourses surrounding the concept of LCE fall

within the three broad categories of *cognition*, *emancipation* and *preparation*, as outlined in Sections 4.3.2.2–4.3.2.4. Indeed, as Schweisfurth (2013b) points out, proponents of LCE lean upon these perspectives in order to promote its adoption.

Findings from my study revealed that within the cognitive domain, the policy discourse around constructivism stresses the need for learners to gain increased control over their learning, which enables them to become more engaged and motivated. Whilst being actively involved in the learning process, learners are assumed to construct knowledge for themselves, either individually, as *cognitive constructivists*, or socially, as *social constructivists* (Altinyelken, 2011; Windschitl, 2002), as elaborated upon in Section 4.3.1.2. This cognitive approach to LCE, as emphasised in policy, builds upon learners' prior knowledge, which enables the teacher to offer support to learners by scaffolding, within their ZPD, with a focus on problem-solving.

The cognitive arguments are also mirrored in discourses concerning learners' individual differences, which necessitate individualised attention and a focus on a range of learning styles and preferences. Moreover, the introduction of learning areas and cross-curricular themes, as advocated in policy, is meant to nourish a holistic approach to education (Schweisfurth, 2013b). The focus on cognition is also reinforced by policy rhetoric that encourages formative modes of assessment, as in peer and self-assessment, aimed at enhancing metacognitive skills, whilst enabling students to become self-regulated learners. This concept of self-regulation is often associated with a neo-liberal form of subjectivity (Vassallo, 2013), whereby students become engaged in technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988).

Since the goals of LCE, from a cognitive perspective, are achievement-oriented, the policy discourse attaches greater importance to learners' attainment of the prescribed LOs, consistent with managerialist models (Marginson, 1997). Just like LCE, OBE is perceived as a *travelling policy* (Schweisfurth, 2013b), but as

highlighted in Section 4.3.2.6, its implementation was problematic. Problems can also arise if teachers are held accountable for such outcomes, as dictated by policy, especially in large classrooms where it becomes more difficult to assess learners' mastery of each prescribed LO (Schweisfurth, 2013b). In policy, this concern for effectiveness of learning is also manifested in view of Malta's participation in international surveys, which serve as a yardstick for comparing the quality of education across countries.

My findings also showed that the discourse of emancipation is embedded within the notions of empowerment, social justice and democratic classroom practices. In this regard, similar to the cognitive narrative, claims are being made for the provision of learning opportunities whereby students can exercise greater control over the learning content, activities and assessment. This demands a departure from authoritarian to democratic power relations between teachers and students (Schweisfurth, 2013b). Claims regarding learners' increased freedom to act autonomously, coupled with assertions about pedagogies of respect, teacher-student reciprocal relationships, and a disposition towards critical and dialogic processes are all assumed to support democratic citizenship. However, empowering learners in such ways is often interpreted as a move towards neo-liberal rationalities (Wright, 2012).

Another discourse that surfaced frequently in the policy documents lies within the preparation narrative, with emphasis being placed on the development of human capital for the future knowledge economy. Learners' preparation for certification and qualifications is not only viewed as advantageous for their employment but also for the country's competitive economy. To respond to this neo-liberal view of economic rationality, learners, as future workers, are required to develop employability-related skills, such as critical thinking, metacognition, problem-solving, information technology and creativity and innovation which, apart from facilitating their prospects to become lifelong learners, enable them to compete efficiently. However, as Schweisfurth (2013b)

contends, it is virtually impossible to hold teachers accountable for learners' eventual contribution to the country's economy.

As the global educational agenda continues to be driven by neo-liberal ideologies (Apple, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), LCE has remained the most desirable pedagogical approach for promoting such doctrines (Starkey, 2019; Tabulawa, 2003). It is therefore not surprising that both the NCF and ELOF were found to be closely connected with modern discourses of neo-liberal schooling whose primary concern lies within the market logic. The naturalisation of neo-liberal discourse, such as competitive economy, measurable outcomes, and individual responsibility and accountability, as projected in these policy documents, has helped in making such ideologies appear commonsensical. By legitimating certain modes of thinking, the NCF and ELOF policy texts seek to constrain the reader from thinking differently (Scott, 2000). As Apple (2006) posits, "Such policies almost never require justification anymore. They have become the common sense of an emerging international consensus" (p. 15).

9.1.2 Research question 2

How do school leaders and teachers interpret and enact the learner-centred curriculum reform policies within their school context?

One key finding that emerged from my study is that school leaders' understandings of LCE were centred largely around the cognitive domain. It is interesting to note however, that within their schools' professional culture, they promoted learner-centred values that conform not only to the cognitive, but also to the emancipatory and preparatory narratives of LCE, as explained in further detail in Sections 4.3.2.2–4.3.2.4. This was clearly evident in each of the three school visions, as shown on their respective websites, even though no direct reference was made to LCE. Wignacourt's website displayed values of learner engagement, responsibility, accountability, creativity, inclusive learning and

critical thinking. Hompesch's vision emphasised learner freedom, autonomy and responsibility, and the skills needed for the 21st century. Lascaris' institutional vision was constructed around learner needs, independent and self-regulated learning. These values align with some of the key values embedded in the NCF and ELOF, as detailed in Chapter 6, and, in advocating individuality and personal responsibility, they operate within the boundaries of neo-liberal governmentality (Ludwig, 2016).

Findings from my study revealed, however, that school leaders were constrained to focus mostly on the attainment levels of students' prescribed LOs, as contained in each LOF policy document, owing to the top-down pressures exerted by the Education Directorates whose approach to schooling is predominantly oriented towards student academic achievement. Tensions among school leaders also occurred as a result of other pressures exerted by quality assurance mechanisms, in pursuit of national quality standards of education. This focus on outcomes and standards is primarily aimed at producing "docile bodies but 'productive' minds" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 80, emphasis in original).

It emerged that while school leaders worked hard to comply with the outcomes-related policy imperatives, they strived, at the same time, to embrace those learner-centred policy values which they considered as most relevant for their context, such as those included in their school vision. In engaging with the language of policy, therefore, school leaders and their SMTs decided on what they needed to focus on, developing these priorities into an institutional narrative (Ball et al., 2012), whilst putting aside other policy ideas which were deemed not to be important to accomplish their objectives. Given the elasticity of LCE (Schweisfurth, 2013b), schools can indeed be flexible in deciding how to approach it. These school-based authoritative interpretations of policy led to the "recontextualisation of official policy discourses" (Singh et al., 2013, p. 477). During this process, the school leaders' role, in particular, was crucial since, in

responding to policy, they were both receivers and agents of policy decisions (Spillane et al., 2002).

Moreover, the research findings demonstrated that school leaders resorted to three specific policy levers in order to get policy enacted: (1) school development planning, consisting of action plans for further school improvement; (2) lesson observations, as a means of policy enforcement; and (3) training of professional staff within schools, in response to the curricular areas that schools decided to work on. These policy levers, as the schools' primary policy-steering mechanism, are underpinned by neo-liberal principles of accountability and performativity which, from a governmentality perspective, contribute to the formation and constitution of teacher and student subjects.

Another key finding was that during the policy enactment process, each school leader in my study assumed policy positions of *narrators*, *transactors* and *translators*. Additionally, a group of EOs from the Education Directorates acted as *outsiders* since they supported the school leaders of Hompesch and Lascaris Schools in the implementation of the LOF. These policy roles correspond with those described by Ball et al. (2012), as discussed in Section 4.2.3.2.

Similar to school leaders' understandings of LCE, the majority of class teachers conceptualised learner-centredness mainly within the cognitive realm. This cognitive perspective was perceived by a few teachers to be the most advantageous for students. However, all teachers declared that sometimes it is difficult to put LCE into practice, given the complexities of the classrooms, and some of them advocated a blended approach, combining learner-centred with traditional models of pedagogy, as reported in some studies (e.g., Gipps & Macgilchrist, 1999; Mayer, 2004; Windschitl, 2002).

Moreover, for some teachers, their role in LCE was understood to be that of a facilitator, which is believed to contribute to more democratic student-teacher relationships (Schweisfurth, 2013b). A few others described their role as a guide,

whereby emphasis was placed mainly on guiding students to achieve the best results, to the detriment of the humanist and student agency beliefs of LCE (Gay, 2010; Kurtz, 2007; Starkey, 2019). The few teachers who believed that they should assume the role of a coordinator/controller were mostly concerned with the effective organisation and management of time, which enable them to exercise disciplinary power over students.

Teachers were somewhat conversant with the core policy values, and just like their school leaders, half of them admitted that they were strongly influenced by the hegemonic policy discourses of educational attainments, as highlighted in the ELOF, thereby adopting *readerly* (Barthes, 1974) approaches to policy enactment, since the text was read uncritically and taken as given. This contrasts with the interpretations of the NCF policy text by some other teachers who spoke of democratic classroom practices and, in getting involved in the creation of meaning, they adopted *writerly* (Barthes, 1974) approaches.

Although more than half of the teachers struggled to get to know their students, nearly all claimed that they attempted to cater for individual differences mainly through scaffolding strategies. However, such efforts remained primarily focused on how learners can achieve the required levels of performance, as productive subjects (Ball et al., 2012), and succeed in exams, with students being subjected to pathologizing practices (Billington, 2000; Gore, 1995).

From the research findings, it transpired that teachers empowered students to varying degrees, if at all. Whereas a few teachers regarded the involvement of students in lesson planning as a form of intrusion in their professional work (Benson, 2011; Pollard et al., 2019), the majority of teachers felt that the time devoted to LOs, in particular, left them with less time to engage students in lesson planning. Students were thus unable to exercise some control over the learning content. To enable students to take greater control over classroom activities, all teachers, except for one, resorted to different types of co-operative learning strategies, such as group work, role-playing and experiential (project-

based) learning. Although teachers considered such co-operative learning techniques as important, they were only being practised occasionally or not at all, owing to curricular constraints.

Teachers also highlighted the importance of certain soft skills, as a capacity for empowering students. Learner responsibility is one such skill that was highly valued by all teachers since students can be held accountable for their own learning. However, for some teachers, learners can only take on responsibility if they are motivated. Some teachers focused on verbal communication skills and creative and critical thinking in order to empower learners. Whereas creative thinking was seen by some teachers as a preparation for future working life (Schweisfurth, 2013b), critical thinking was also considered to aid the development of learner emancipation (Lawson, 2011). All teachers also claimed to practise peer and self-assessment to instil metacognitive skills in their students, thereby enabling them to become self-disciplined, governable individuals.

Whilst some teachers felt that they enjoyed a good relationship with their students, mainly by addressing their social and emotional needs, other teachers were of the opinion that more mutual respect would help to improve teacher-student relationships. Rules of conduct were used by half of the teachers in my study in order to promote a positive learning environment. However, if student voice is not given due prominence in the setting of such rules, classrooms cannot function democratically (Power & Scott, 2014; Reich-Shapiro, 2014). There could be instances where classroom rules are more representative of the teacher voice rather than the student voice, as evidenced in the comments of one of the teachers, hinting at the lack of power-sharing between teachers and learners (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

Insofar as LOs are concerned, although all teachers supported the thinking behind LOs, with most of them acknowledging their flexible approach to curricular design and delivery, they felt that assessment procedures had become

more complicated and time-consuming. The main issue mentioned was the difficulty encountered when assessing individual students' performance against the pre-specified LOs, particularly in the case of larger classes. Two teachers felt that the ELOF was imposed on them, signifying how systems of power can enforce docility on teachers' bodies (Foucault, 1977a). The study revealed that ongoing, classroom assessment procedures have become too mechanical due to the emphasis placed on monitoring, surveillance, recording and reporting of student progress by means of computer software, as dictated by policy. Such policy requirements can indeed transform teachers into *technical professionals* (Ball et al., 2012).

Another important finding was that teachers were not fully aware of the NCF policy targets relating to students' performance, both in terms of local exams and international assessments, as represented in Table 6.1. Despite this lack of awareness, all teachers admitted that they attach great importance to local exams and all of them, except for one, were in favour of Malta's participation in international surveys. The results of international surveys were considered as an opportunity for teachers to focus more on those areas which students were still struggling to achieve. This had a positive backwash effect on learning since the skills envisaged by international surveys were consistent with those advocated in national curricula, thereby encouraging the realisation of teaching objectives (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Mizutani et al., 2011).

International surveys were also perceived by teachers to be beneficial for schools since results obtained prompted them, as school communities, to work harder towards academic success. Such results were also deemed to be important for the country for three specific reasons: comparison of students' performance across countries, promotion of global competition as well as investment in human capital and economic growth. These international assessments have been subject to various criticisms, in that they are looked upon as instruments of discipline and normalisation, as a neo-liberal mode of governance that serves to

regulate education systems, as manifested in the ranking of nations and the marketization of schooling (Lingard et al., 2013; Pongratz, 2006).

The interview data also revealed that all teachers, except for one, stated that they collaborate with each other, both within their English department as well as with other departments. The NQTs also praised the collegial working environment in their respective schools, probably due to their dependence on more senior colleagues when enacting policy (Ball et al., 2012). Half of the teachers interviewed felt that their creativity was somewhat constrained due to the pressures of standardisation, similar to what was observed in Ball et al.'s (2011, 2012) study. It transpired that these teachers were compelled to standardise their work in relation to LOs and, in being held accountable for student achievement, greater emphasis was being placed on outputs rather than inputs. This demonstrates that subject departments were primarily functioning as channels of communication, rendering teachers as passive recipients of school authorities' decisions.

Similar to the school leaders' policy positions, teachers in my study adopted different policy-related roles during the enactment process, ranging from *enthusiasts* and *translators* to *receivers*, *critics* and *transactors*, similar to those described by Ball et al. (2012), as outlined in Section 4.2.3.2. These roles were not fixed but changed over time, since teachers moved from one role to another during processes of policy interpretation and translation. Some policy critics, as union representatives and activists, who resisted to participate in compulsory training sessions on LOs, were found exclusively at Hompesch School. A rather different role adopted by a few policy critics, across the sample schools, is that relating to constructive critique about LCE and classroom enactments, resembling the role played by *policy-constructive critics* in Golding's (2017) study. Over and above these roles, within the English departments, the HODs acted also as *narrators*, by explaining to their colleagues what can and cannot be done.

9.1.3 Research question 3

What are students' perspectives of learner-centred practices in relation to teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies?

One of the key findings of my study focused on individual learner differences, which were being catered for through different approaches, namely peer scaffolding during paired activities, individualised learning support, and student learning styles and preferences. Peer scaffolding was used to a very limited extent since only four out of thirty-five students claimed that they had benefitted from such learning strategies during pair work. This confirmed what the teachers of these four students, from Wignacourt, had stated. Peer-assisted learning strategies were found to be advantageous for these students since, in supporting others or in being supported within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), they claimed that they became more engaged and motivated.

Individualised learning support was also used to a very limited extent since only four students attending Hompesch reported experiencing such support during English lessons, in line with what their teachers stated. As research has shown (e.g., Kiefer et al., 2014, 2015), individualised learning support has been proved to be critical, not only in responding to learners' developmental needs, but also in increasing their academic motivation. The responses of another four students from Wignacourt revealed that in cases of low levels of attainment, students were being provided with more individualised assistance, both in the classroom setting as well as outside the normal class hours. However, there were other students from Lascaris and Wignacourt whose responses contradicted the feedback given by their teachers since they negated that they or their classmates ever received one-to-one support during break time.

Other differentiated approaches which all students drew attention to correspond to the sensory modality learning style. In this regard, the data revealed that, although all students were mostly inclined towards the auditory

modality, on very few occasions, if any, did teachers allow them to work cooperatively in small groups, where they can listen to each other and share ideas. Some students, mostly from Lascaris and Wignacourt, also valued the traditional, teacher-directed (auditory-based) instruction since, in listening to their teacher or participating in whole-class discussions, they could resolve their learning difficulties, as was also evidenced by the feedback given by some teachers. Coe et al. (2014) have found that teacher-directed instruction and passive listening could also lead to meaningful learning. For specific learning situations, more than half of the students interviewed preferred to be taught through the visual or kinaesthetic sensory modes instead of the auditory modality. This shift from one sensory mode to another suggests that modality preference is task-dependent rather than student preference-dependent, thereby supporting the views of several scholars concerning the *modality appropriateness hypothesis* (Hansen & Cottrell, 2013; Lodge et al., 2016; Welch & Warren, 1986).

Another key finding concerned the practices of empowerment which was treated from two different perspectives: learner control over the content and process of learning, and teacher-learner relationship. It emerged that students claimed they were not being provided with opportunities to exercise control over the learning content, in line with the belief that learners are not capable to decide on what to learn (Carrier, 1984; Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013). This contrasted with the views of the majority of teachers. Teachers' reluctance to negotiate curricula with students can not only contribute towards the adoption of the *banking* concept of education (Freire, 1972), whereby students are moulded as passive recipients of knowledge, but it can also lead to learners being unable to exercise their right to challenge the relevance of knowledge for their own learning (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

Three students attending Lascaris also complained of being deprived from exercising control over the pace of learning, whilst all students, contrary to what their teachers stated, claimed that they were not being empowered to exert

some control over the process of classroom assessment, as in peer or self-assessment (Falchikov, 2004; Roskos & Neuman, 2012; Topping, 2009). Student assessment appeared to be operating as a more traditional technology of discipline. The few occasions during which some students exercised a certain degree of control over the learning process was when they were engaged in pair work and co-operative group work.

My study also revealed that students were not consulted in the creation of classroom rules, as an essential feature of democratic classroom practice (Power & Scott, 2014; Tammi & Rajala, 2018). In the case of Hompesch, these rules were supported by rewards and sanctions (Chaplain, 2003; Payne, 2015), emerging from whole-school policy and practices, as evidenced in the students' comments and the school diary, which served as an artefact of governmentality (Ball et al., 2012). It is through such rules, as a micro-disciplinary technique, that students became 'empowered' to monitor their own conduct, as self-disciplined individuals (Lawson, 2011).

Some students attending Hompesch and Lascaris reported instances of exclusionary techniques when their behaviour did not conform with the norms imposed by the class teacher. These students were trusted less than others and were not allowed to make their voices heard. These exclusionary techniques served to pathologize student behaviour (Gore, 1995). Contrastingly, a few students from Hompesch and Wignacourt praised their teachers for exhibiting positive and caring relationships, which aim at cultivating an emotionally-literate school (Deakin Crick et al., 2007).

Another issue emanating from the student focus group interview data concerned learners' preparedness for future working life, which focused on students' perspectives in terms of self-reliance and responsibility, as well as examination performance. Individual responsibility was highly valued by the majority of students since they considered it essential to work and learn on their own, which in turn would prepare them for their future employment. They felt, however,

that they should be given more opportunities during which they can learn independently, as autonomous, self-reliant learners.

Finally, this study showed that the majority of students, as with the teachers interviewed, gave due consideration to examination performance since they believed that good examination results would increase their chances of future employment. Students, however, provided no details as to how they were being prepared for exams. These neo-liberal notions of responsabilisation and academic performance compelled students to engage in practices of self-formation (Lawson, 2011), similar to the research findings of other studies (e.g., Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019).

9.2 Recommendations for policy and practice

In the light of my research findings, several recommendations can be proposed to improve current policy and practice within the local and global context. My first recommendation, similar to that which Simbürger and Donoso (2020) propose, is for policy-makers to move away from the naturalisation of neo-liberal discourse. Despite the impact of neo-liberal ideologies on education policy, which aim to safeguard economic interests, as is evident in the NCF and ELOF, it is essential for policy-makers to work towards a model of learning that prioritises emancipatory practices, founded on social justice and egalitarian politics (Olssen, 2006).

Secondly, this study has found that the accountability concept is given high importance in policy texts, with various appeals to educators to improve learners' educational outcomes and to meet the nations' economic aspirations. However, as Schweisfurth (2013b) suggests, LCE cannot be enacted through discourses of compliance and accountability since its practice demands autonomy and trust between educators and other educational stakeholders. Ball

(2015b) goes so far as to state that “accountability policies ... produce new and sometimes distorted possibilities for action and identity and self-worth” (p. 467).

The overemphasis on 21st century skills was another important policy feature identified as affecting teachers’ practices. As research has shown (e.g., Feltovich et al., 2006; Hirsch, 2016; Moore & Young, 2001), imparting such generic skills as critical and creative thinking and problem-solving can be problematic if treated separately from knowledge/content. I would argue, similar to Hirsch’s (2016) position, that a carefully planned knowledge-based curriculum, through which generic skills can be imparted, is essential for young students.

It is also necessary for policy-makers to move beyond the narrow view of LOs since the intense focus on measurable outcomes is a clear indication that students’ output is more valued than their input. This was corroborated by the research findings which revealed how schools were still being guided by this neo-liberal drive for results and performance metrics, and thus a reduced emphasis on examinations is encouraged. The neo-liberal focus on technologies of performance was also evident in the importance the schools attached to examination regimes, including global rankings. This obsession with international benchmarks, such as PISA, should cease if schooling is to be shaped by emancipatory pedagogies. As Schweisfurth (2015) contends, the data generated by international test results “have the power to distort the policy process and impact on practice in ways which do not necessarily promote quality processes or outcomes” (p. 260).

Another key factor that was shown to have an impact on practices of policy enactment was the school context. Given that pedagogy cannot be separated from its social and resource context (Schweisfurth, 2015), and the fact that policy-makers have frequently underestimated the importance of school-specific factors, I concur with Maguire et al. (2020) in recommending “a more contextually sensitive approach towards policy-making and policy enactment that recognizes distinctions between schools [since this] is likely to be more

effective than a ‘one size fits all’ policy approach” (p. 505, emphasis in original). Hence, schools will have more freedom in the way they respond to policy. Similarly, on a global level, LCE does not work to the same extent in every culture (Clifford, 2015) but builds on the existing “pedagogical traditions and deeply-held cultural beliefs” (Schweisfurth, 2013b, p. 154). In this regard, policy-makers may be guided by a practical framework which Schweisfurth (2013b) has proposed for the adoption of LCE, consisting of minimum standards that can be adapted to different contexts. These standards revolve around students’ engagement, relationships, students’ prior knowledge, dialogue, relevance of curriculum to students’ lives, curricular content, skills and attitudes, and assessment (p. 146).

The research findings also showed that school leaders and teachers had a narrow conception of LCE, pertaining mostly to the cognitive dimension. This lack of familiarity with the term LCE demands that educators become accustomed to its theoretical foundations and, in so doing, they develop a deeper and more informed engagement with such pedagogical approaches. Other issues emanating from this study concerned instances of lack of curricular support during processes of policy enactment. Schools should ideally be supported when enacting policy by including *outsiders* (Ball et al., 2012), such as EOs, in the policy process. These key players can assist schools in processes of policy interpretation and translation and organise PD sessions for school staff. I argue, however, that rather than imposing decisions on schools to faithfully implement the policy, these *outsiders*, same as policy-makers, should respect the experience and expertise of educators (Matland, 1995). More importantly, as policy sociology suggests, since policies do not follow the linear path of “formulation – adoption – implementation – reformulation” (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, p. 196), greater attention should be given to the complexities involved in policy processes.

Furthermore, the findings pointed towards the inadequacies of the English language departments, operating under the guise of professional learning

communities, whereby teachers' creativity was constrained by the pressures of standardisation, holding them accountable for student achievement. Douglas (2009) argues that the increased use of performance data has created tensions and uneasy relationships within subject departments. What is clear is that schools will need to invest in high-quality departmental leadership that provides opportunities for the department members to frequently engage in reflective dialogues about educational matters (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018), beyond the rhetorics of standardisation and performance outcomes.

Similarly, given that the three schools involved in this study employed the same policy levers to bring about the desired change, two of which were *planning* and *training*, there is also scope for schools to develop their capacity to become communities of reflexive practice. As communities of reflexive practice, schools should endeavour to voluntarily employ action research methodologies, both as an integral part of their internal review process as well as a means to teacher professional development.

Finally, as the findings of this study revealed, the concept of student voice remained largely marginalised and therefore warrants an evaluation of the existing school structures in order to create opportunities for students to articulate what they think. Rather than providing a somewhat tokenistic student participation whereby the voice of learners can be seen operating as "an instrument for school improvement and performativity" (Fleming, 2015, p. 223), schools should strive to reframe classroom power relations by enabling students to engage in dialogue, whilst exerting greater control over the curriculum, activities and assessment. Capitalising on such practices is key in helping students feel more valued and empowered.

9.3 Main contributions of the study

This study makes a number of contributions to the field of learner-centred policy and practice. The first contribution is attributed to the fact that both the NCF and ELOF policy texts have never been reviewed through a critical, interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis by integrating linguistic with social theories, as demonstrated in the application of the CDA framework, in Chapter 6. In conducting an in-depth analysis of how learner-centred and neo-liberal concepts are discursively constructed within the NCF and ELOF, I provide an explanation as to how political ideologies become authorised, thereby leading to a deeper and clearer understanding of the processes involved in policy legitimisation, as detailed in Section 5.6.1.3, whilst adding on to the ongoing body of knowledge in critical policy research. My analysis of these policy documents, from the lens of three justificatory narratives – *cognition*, *emancipation* and *preparation* (Schweisfurth, 2013b), as delineated in Sections 4.3.2.2–4.3.2.4, also serves to enhance the understanding of how LCE, as a travelling policy (Ozga & Jones, 2006), has been adopted in national curricula.

Secondly, this study is also original and unique since it provides detailed insights into the ways in which the NCF and ELOF policy texts are understood, interpreted and translated into practice by school leaders and class teachers, in different contexts of schooling, resulting in a process of policy recontextualisation. In doing so, it contributes to the under-researched field of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Branigan, 2021; Dorner et al., 2022; Maguire et al., 2013; Tan, 2017) and, more specifically, to learner-centred policy enactment. Whilst drawing on Ball et al.'s (2012) research on policy enactments, including their typology of policy actors' roles, as outlined in Section 4.2.3.2, this study sheds further light on the complex ways in which policy becomes enacted by relying significantly on classroom enactments and, to a lesser extent, on department policy enactments, rather than treating enactments of policy solely from a whole-school perspective.

Thirdly, this study makes a distinct contribution to knowledge by foregrounding learners' voices in relation to their lived experiences of learner-centred practices, whilst at the same time obtaining deeper insights into teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies. Given that in many educational settings, the concept of student voice remains underestimated (Deasyanti, 2015; Partovi & Wyness, 2022; Smith, 2007), this study does not only contribute to the expansion of the existing body of research on student voice, but also helps to narrow the gap that exists within the local context in relation to middle school students' perspectives on learner-centred policy enactments.

The fourth contribution lies in the thorough analysis of the processes of governance operating both within the NCF and ELOF policy texts as well as through their complex enactment within institutions, departments and classrooms (Ball et al., 2012). In the local educational context, the only research that is currently available on issues of governance, informed by the Foucauldian theory of power, is restricted to such fields as educational leadership (e.g., Mifsud, 2014, 2017b, 2017c), disability studies (e.g., Bajada et al., 2022), prison education (e.g., Fenech, 2014; Zammit, 2014), quality assurance (e.g., Spiteri, 2017), and migrant students (e.g., Cassar & Attard Tonna, 2018), thus rendering this study original in its approach to analysing how power is exercised in relation to learner-centred policy and practice. By drawing on the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, discipline, governmentality and subjectivity, this study uncovers the power relations involved in the official policy texts, whilst illuminating the ways in which power relations unfold during practices of policy enactment.

The final contribution of the study emerges from the combination of methods used for data collection, which leads to more convincing conclusions. The multiple methods used, as seen in the application of Hyatt's (2013a, 2013b) critical policy discourse analysis frame and Harrison's (2003) visual social semiotic framework; the integration of school leaders' and teachers' individual interviews with student focus group interviews; as well as the attention drawn

to visual artefacts, including the sample schools' websites, lesson observation checklists, classroom charts, diaries and SDPs, all provide depth and richness to this qualitative research study (Flick, 2002). In Malta, there is currently no research within the specific field of learner-centred policy enactment at primary, middle or secondary school level which has utilised such a combination of data sources. The range of methods employed not only complement each other but also help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how schools respond to policy.

9.4 Limitations of the study

Despite the aforementioned contributions, I acknowledge that there are certain limitations within this study. Firstly, from a methodological viewpoint, a key limitation concerns the fact that observations of policy enactment practices, such as class lessons, SMT and subject departmental meetings and professional development sessions, were not carried out, as is usually the case in ethnographic studies of policy enactment (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2010; Dorner et al., 2022; Nolan, 2018). Although such observations would have provided a more accurate account of the learner-centred reform enactment in the researched schools, my previous and current leadership roles within the Education Directorates, as explained in Sections 5.4 and 5.6.3, prevented me from opting for ethnographic research due to ethical concerns, including my long-term presence in schools and the unequal power relations between the school-based research participants and myself, which might have influenced their behaviours.

Secondly, lack of time and space hindered a deeper investigation of the context of influence, as one of the contexts forming part of the policy cycle (Bowe et al., 1992), as seen in Section 4.1.1.1. For this reason, although details concerning national, supranational and global influences were incorporated in this study, by focusing on the key policy developments that took place within the local context,

as highlighted in Sections 1.1.1 and 6.1.1–6.1.2, the views of *elite* people (Harvey, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) occupying senior management level positions within the local education sector were not taken. Such elite interviews would have provided a richer description of the policy formation process (Maguire & Ball, 1994).

This study, being qualitative in nature, is also limited due to the relatively small sample of school leaders, teachers and students within three sample schools, and therefore cannot substantiate the generalisation of the findings. The number of research participants had to be limited in order for the study to be more manageable. It can be argued, however, that despite the small sample size, the research findings can still inform other theories and may even provide insights that can prove useful in other contexts.

Another limitation pertains to the translation of data. Some of the interviews with school leaders and teachers as well as a number of student focus group interviews were conducted in Maltese, as their preferred medium of communication. When translating these interviews into English, although I tried to be as faithful as possible to the original spoken texts, and in spite of the fact that the translated data was also double-checked by a colleague of mine, certain meanings might have been lost in translation.

Furthermore, my interpretation of the research findings has inevitably been influenced by the methods used for data collection and my history and positionality as a researcher, as detailed in Sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.6, and therefore the potential for bias cannot be ruled out, even though I exercised caution when analysing the data. Finally, this study offers a snapshot of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform during the early years of the launch of the NCF and ELOF, and their subsequent enactments in three sample schools. Owing to the fact that both policy and practice continued to evolve since I collected my data, in 2018, this study does not provide a full picture of the policy reform.

9.5 Recommendations for future research

There are three key areas that merit further investigation, the first being the need for research to continue exploring the notion of LCE, as embedded in official local policy documentation, by extending the critical analysis of learner-centred policy discourses, whilst focusing more on multimodal analytical approaches to policy texts, which help to reveal the ‘legitimation’ of political ideologies. In this respect, further research can expand upon the work carried out in this study by employing Hyatt’s (2013a, 2013b) and Harrison’s (2003) analytical criteria for the purpose of policy analysis. Seeking the views of elite people occupying senior management level positions within the local education sector would also be useful since they could provide deeper insights into the policy formation process (Maguire & Ball, 1994)

Secondly, further analysis of learner-centred policy enactment is needed, both through ethnographic methods, involving long-term participant observation, as well as through other qualitative methods with a larger sample of school leaders, teachers and students, in different educational settings across Malta. Given that most of the research on policy enactment is treated largely from a whole-school perspective (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Bradbury et al., 2023; Maguire et al., 2020), it is recommended that further analysis of policy enactment continues to build on the insights highlighted in this study by being cognizant also of learner-centred classroom and departmental experiences. More research of this kind would help to create a better understanding of the complex ways in which schools respond to policy demands, that is to say, “the ways in which policy is understood, interpreted, acted upon and resisted in real world situations” (Bradbury et al., 2023, p. 765).

My final recommendation is that there is also scope for more in-depth research into issues of power. As this study has confirmed, since educational policies and practices are increasingly driven by such neo-liberal discourses as competitive economy, measurable outcomes, and individual responsibility and

accountability, further research into the influence of power relations, through the practice of LCE, as the preferred pedagogical approach for promoting neo-liberal doctrines (Starkey, 2019; Tabulawa, 2003), is needed for an improved critical understanding of how discipline and governmentality work in diverse educational contexts in Malta.

9.6 My research journey

As explained in Section 1.4, I embarked on this study with the aim of investigating the notion of LCE in the curriculum policy and its enactment in three state middle schools in Malta. As this study developed, I became more concerned with how schools actually respond to the learner-centred policy imperatives by analysing processes of policy interpretation, translation and reconstruction in different contexts of schooling, rather than focusing on how well policy is implemented.

This research, which spread over a number of years of part-time study, is a continuation of my educational journey. At the start, I did not know what it would entail since I encountered a lot of highs and lows along the way. However, looking back, I must say that it has been a positive and enriching experience. Indeed, the rewards gained are definitely worth the struggles I experienced to carry out this research project till the end. In the process of this long journey, I have developed qualities of patience, determination and perseverance. The doctoral experience has also enabled me to accept and respond thoughtfully to ongoing reviews from my supervisors and feedback from fellow students during the Malta-based Study Schools.

This journey helped me to further consolidate my research skills, including my ability to critically engage with the literature and communicate my ideas through an appropriate academic writing style. Although I was already familiar with qualitative research, I now have a much deeper understanding of data collection processes and the ways in which data is analysed and made sense of.

Additionally, the University's ethics review procedure guided me to think ethically and make sound judgements at all stages of the research process. Certainly, carrying out educational research is by no means a straightforward process since there will always be challenges, regardless of the degree of familiarity with the research context.

Before I started this research, my perception was that policies were created and implemented in a simplistic and chronological manner. My view was that policy needed to be implemented as originally intended. Through my study, I became increasingly aware of the complexities involved when schools interpret and translate policy texts into practice, in the context of their situated realities. This explains the shift in focus from policy implementation to policy enactment. I now also have a clearer understanding of the politics and power relations involved in policy processes. In this regard, my readings of Foucault deeply influenced my way of thinking and, as my study progressed, I became more inclined towards a poststructuralist perspective. The insights obtained from this study have placed me in a better position to offer sound advice and adopt a more critical stance in my current employment.

I must say that this study has indeed changed me as a person. When I first embarked on this journey to follow my dream, I had no idea where my adventure would take me, but I pursued it nonetheless, believing that I would ultimately succeed. If I had anticipated the difficulties I would encounter along the way, I might never have pursued my dream:

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? ... The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know where it will end (Foucault as quoted in Martin, 1988, p. 9).

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Appendix 1

Research ethics approval letter



Downloaded: 17/04/2015
Approved: 16/04/2015

Anthony Sammut
Registration number: 120220667
School of Education
EDUR33 PhD Malta Programme (Distance Learning)

Dear Anthony

PROJECT TITLE: EDUR33 - An Enquiry into Teachers' and Students' Perspectives on the Implementation of Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta: A Specific Focus on Learner-Centred Learning

APPLICATION: Reference Number 001973

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 16/04/2015 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 001973 (dated 08/03/2015).
- Participant information sheet 006151 (07/03/2015)
- Participant information sheet 006152 (07/03/2015)
- Participant information sheet 006153 (07/03/2015)
- Participant consent form 005211 (10/02/2015)
- Participant consent form 005212 (10/02/2015)
- Participant consent form 005213 (10/02/2015)

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

Appendix 2

Permission to conduct research study

DIPARTIMENT GHALL-KURRIKULU, TAGHLIM
TUL IL-HAJJA U IMPJEGABILITA'
FLORIANA FRN 1810



DEPARTMENT FOR THE CURRICULUM, LIFELONG
LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY (DCLÉ)
FLORIANA FRN 1810

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Tel: 25982265

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 28th May 2018

Ref: RI2018/105

To: Head of School
From: Assistant Director (Research and Innovation)

Title of Research Study: *Enacting a learner-centred curriculum policy reform in State middle schools in Malta*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to Anthony Sammut to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the Data Protection Act and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/Grazio Grixti
Assistant Director (Research and Innovation)
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
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Facebook: @researchinnovation | Twitter: @RI_MEDE



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

MINISTERU GHALL-EDUKAZZJONI U X-XOGHOL
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Appendix 3

Letter to Head of School

Letter to Head of School

Dear Head of School,

I am currently reading for a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) degree with the University of Sheffield School of Education (UK), specialising in educational research. As part of my studies, I am carrying out research with the aim to analyse school leaders', teachers' and students' perspectives on the enactment of curriculum policy reform in state middle schools in Malta, with a specific focus on learner-centred education. It is hoped that this study will provide insights about the processes involved in policy enactment.

In order to carry out this research, I would like to conduct individual semi-structured interviews with teachers of English of Years 7–8 (i.e., Forms 1–2), aimed at eliciting teachers' perspectives about their learner-centred practices. In addition, I intend to hold two focus group interview sessions with Year 7–8 students in order to obtain further insights on learner-centred practices. I will also be carrying out a semi-structured interview with your good self to obtain your views on learner-centred practices and information relating to the school context. Interviews will take between 45–60 minutes. A second interview may be necessary if further clarifications are required.

Prior to the interviewing sessions, in order to explain the details of the research project, I would like to request permission to hold individual meetings with class teachers as well as a class discussion with students. Moreover, information sheets and consent/assent forms for all participants involved have been prepared to explain in writing what the study is about and the procedure to be followed during interviews. Therefore, all data will be collected with the written, informed consent/assent of all participants. None of the participants will be asked for any personal information. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality, names of colleges/schools, school leaders, teachers and students will **not** be disclosed. Should you require any further details regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on mobile number [REDACTED] or by sending an email at edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk.

I would appreciate it if your school participates in this research project.

Kind regards,

Anthony Sammut

Appendix 4

Participant information sheet: School Leaders

Participant Information Sheet: School Leaders

1. Research Project Title

Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to participate in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this 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. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

The purpose of the project is to investigate the inclusion of learner-centred education in national curricula and its enactment in three state middle schools in Malta. It is designed to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyse critically how the learner-centred policy discourse has been constructed and debated within the NCF and ELOF;
- To critically explore how school leaders and teachers, within the sample schools, respond to the demands of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform; and
- To examine critically students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen in order to provide information relating to learner-centred policy enactment and the school context. Middle schools are the focus of this study since they were the first schools whose curricula have been redesigned in line with the learner-centred pedagogy envisaged in the NCF.

5. Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). If, at any

time, you wish to withdraw from the project you should say so. You do not have to give a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in an interview, on an individual basis, to discuss how your school is responding to the demands of the NCF and ELOF policy texts. The interview should not take more than 60 minutes and will take place in your school. A second interview might be necessary if further clarifications are required. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed and some notes may also be taken. All notes, recordings, transcriptions and analyses will be kept in a secure place and destroyed one year after the completion of the research project.

7. What do I have to do?

In order to participate you need to read and sign the consent form.

8. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this study will provide important findings about the processes involved in policy enactment. The ultimate goal is to contribute towards the body of knowledge on learner-centred policy enactment.

9. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

It is not anticipated that the research will stop prior to completion. If this is necessary due to any reason, you will be informed and the data collected will be destroyed.

10. What if something goes wrong?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of the project, please contact me straight away and I will address any concerns as soon as possible. You can contact me on telephone number [REDACTED]; mobile number [REDACTED] or at edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Christine Winter on [REDACTED] or at c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

11. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I will be collecting during interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Neither you nor your school will be identified in any reports, presentations or publications. Data will be stored in a password protected computer in my home. I will be the only person with access to the data. The data will be destroyed 12 months after the end of the project. A participant consent form will be signed by participants before recording media are used.

12. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The research findings may eventually be published in a book or peer reviewed journals, in which case you will be informed as to how you can obtain a copy of the published material. Neither you nor your school will be identified by name or other details in any such report or publication. Reports on the project may be shared at conferences. However, your identity and that of your school will not be disclosed.

13. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being partly funded by the Maltese Government through the Malta Government Scholarships Scheme (MGSS). This participant information sheet covers also the regulations governing the MGSS Scholarship.

14. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved in accordance with the University of Sheffield Ethics Review Procedure, as operated by the University of Sheffield School of Education.

15. Contact for further information

Dr Christine Winter, University of Sheffield, School of Education, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA. Telephone: [REDACTED]. E-mail: c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and the consent form to keep.

Thank you

Appendix 5

Participant information sheet: Teachers

Participant Information Sheet: Teachers

1. Research Project Title

Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to participate in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this 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. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

The purpose of the project is to investigate the inclusion of learner-centred education in national curricula and its enactment in three state middle schools in Malta. It is designed to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyse critically how the learner-centred policy discourse has been constructed and debated within the NCF and ELOF;
- To critically explore how school leaders and teachers, within the sample schools, respond to the demands of the learner-centred curriculum policy reform; and
- To examine critically students' perspectives of learner-centred practices, with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of teachers' enactment of learner-centred policies.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen in order to provide information relating to learner-centred policy enactment. Middle schools are the focus of this study since they were the first schools whose curricula have been redesigned in line with the learner-centred pedagogy envisaged in the NCF. Moreover, teachers' perspectives on learner-centred policy enactment were never explored in the Maltese context and are meant to support my research aims and objectives.

5. Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). If, at any time, you wish to withdraw from the project you should say so. You do not have to give a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in an interview, on an individual basis, to discuss your learner-centred practices, in response to the NCF and ELOF policy demands. The interview should not take more than 60 minutes and will take place at the school in which you teach. A second interview might be necessary if further clarifications are required. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed and some notes may also be taken. All notes, recordings, transcriptions and analyses will be kept in a secure place and destroyed one year after the completion of the research project.

7. What do I have to do?

In order to participate you need to read and sign the consent form.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are minimal risks or disadvantages in taking part. In order to avoid the possibility of teachers and students disclosing sensitive information (e.g., students passing negative comments about their teachers or vice versa), I will set clear instructions at the beginning of the interviewing sessions so that teachers and students will provide their general feedback rather than targeting particular individuals. Notwithstanding the said possible risks, by reflecting on your experiences and expressing your views on learner-centred practices, you will make an important contribution to curriculum policy and practice.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this study will provide important findings about the processes involved in policy enactment. You will have the opportunity to reflect on your own teaching methodologies. The ultimate goal is to contribute towards the body of knowledge on learner-centred policy enactment.

10. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

It is not anticipated that the research will stop prior to completion. If this is necessary due to any reason, you will be informed and the data collected will be destroyed.

11. What if something goes wrong?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of the project, please contact me straight away and I will address any concerns as soon as possible. You can contact me on telephone number [REDACTED]; mobile number [REDACTED] or at edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Christine Winter on [REDACTED] or at c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

12. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I will be collecting during interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Neither you nor your school will be identified in any reports, presentations or publications. Data will be stored in a password protected computer in my home. I will be the only person with access to the data. The data will be destroyed 12 months after the end of the project. A participant consent form will be signed by participants before recording media are used.

13. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The research findings may eventually be published in a book or peer reviewed journals, in which case you will be informed as to how you can obtain a copy of the published material. Neither you nor your school will be identified by name or other details in any such report or publication. Reports on the project may be shared at conferences. However, your identity and that of your school will not be disclosed.

14. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being partly funded by the Maltese Government through the Malta Government Scholarships Scheme (MGSS). This participant information sheet covers also the regulations governing the MGSS Scholarship.

15. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved in accordance with the University of Sheffield Ethics Review Procedure, as operated by the University of Sheffield School of Education.

16. Contact for further information

Dr Christine Winter, University of Sheffield, School of Education, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA. Telephone: [REDACTED]. E-mail: c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and the consent form to keep.

Thank you

Appendix 6

Participant information sheet: Parents/legal guardians

Parents'/Legal Guardians' Information Sheet

1. Research Project Title

Enacting a Learner-Centred²⁵ Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

2. Invitation paragraph

Your son/daughter is being invited to participate in a research project. Before s/he decides, it is important for him/her to understand why this 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. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

The purpose of the project is to investigate the inclusion of learner-centred education in national curricula and its enactment in three state middle schools in Malta. Apart from analysing national curriculum policies, as well as school leaders' and teachers' perspectives of learner-centred education, the project aims at exploring students' perspectives and experiences of learner-centred practices.

4. Why has your son/daughter been chosen?

Your son/daughter has been chosen to give his/her views about learner-centred practices in middle schools. Middle schools have been selected since they were the first schools whose curricula have been redesigned in line with learner-centred practices, as recommended in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF). Moreover, students' perspectives on learner-centred education were never explored in the Maltese context and are meant to support my research aims and objectives.

5. Does my son/daughter have to take part?

Participation in the project is entirely voluntary. If your son/daughter decides to take part s/he will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign an assent form). The same procedure applies to you, as their parent/legal guardian. If, at any time,

²⁵ A learner-centred approach is understood as an educational method that places the learner and their experiences at the forefront of the learning process.

your son/daughter wishes to withdraw from the project they should say so. They do not have to give a reason.

6. What will happen to my son/daughter if s/he takes part?

Your son/daughter will be invited to participate in a focus group interview which will be made up of approximately 6–10 students in each focus group. The aim is to explore students' perspectives and experiences of learner-centred education. The focus group interview will take between 45–60 minutes and will take place at the school in which your son/daughter attends. A second interview might be necessary if further clarifications are required. The interview will be recorded and some notes may also be taken. All notes, recordings, write-ups and analyses will be kept in a secure place and destroyed one year after the completion of the research project.

7. What does my son/daughter have to do?

In order to participate, both your son/daughter and yourself, as parent/legal guardian, need to read, agree to the content and sign the consent/assent forms.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are minimal risks or disadvantages in taking part. In order to avoid the possibility of teachers and students disclosing sensitive information (e.g., students passing negative comments about their teachers or vice versa), I will set clear instructions at the beginning of the interviewing sessions so that teachers and students will provide their general feedback rather than targeting particular individuals.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Benefits include an opportunity for your son/daughter to give his/her views on learner-centred education in order to improve the curriculum, teaching and learning in schools. Your son/daughter will have the opportunity to reflect on his/her learning. It is hoped that this study will provide insights about learner-centred practices which will benefit all students, the educational community and society in general.

10. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

It is not expected that the research will stop before the end of the project. If this happens, whatever the reason, you and your son/daughter will be informed and the data collected will be destroyed.

11. What if something goes wrong?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of the project, please contact me straight away and I will sort out any concerns as soon as possible. You can contact me on telephone number [REDACTED]; mobile number [REDACTED] or at edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk.

Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Christine Winter on [REDACTED] or at c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

12. Will my son's/daughter's participation in this project be kept confidential?

Information that is collected at interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Neither your son/daughter nor his/her school will be identified in any reports, presentations or publications. Actual names of participants will not be used at the interview write-up stage. Data will be stored in a password protected computer in my home. I will be the only person with access to the data. The data will be destroyed 12 months after the end of the project. A participant assent form will be signed by your son/daughter and a consent form by your good self before recording media are used.

13. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The research findings may eventually be published in a book or academic journals, in which case you and your son/daughter will both be informed as to how you can obtain a copy of the published material. Neither your son/daughter nor his/her school will be identified by name or other details in any such report or publication. Reports on the project may be shared at conferences. However, your son's/daughter's identity and that of his/her school will not be disclosed.

14. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being partly funded by the Maltese Government through the Malta Government Scholarships Scheme (MGSS). This participant information sheet covers also the regulations governing the MGSS scholarship.

15. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Sheffield Ethics Review Procedure, as operated by the University of Sheffield School of Education.

16. Contact for further information

Dr Christine Winter, University of Sheffield, School of Education, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA. Telephone: [REDACTED]. E-mail: c.winter@sheffield.ac.uk.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and the consent form to keep.

Thank you

Appendix 7

Participant information sheet: Students

Participant Information Sheet: Students

1. Research Project Title

Enacting a Learner-Centred²⁶ Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to participate in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your parents/legal guardians or other persons of your trust, if you wish. Kindly ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

The purpose of the project is to explore learner-centred practices in middle schools in Malta.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to give your views about learner-centred practices in middle schools. Students' perspectives on learner-centred education were never explored in the Maltese context and are meant to support my research aims and objectives.

5. Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign an assent form). Your parents/legal guardians will be asked to sign a consent form. If, at any time, you wish to withdraw from the project you should say so. You do not have to give a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in a focus group interview which will be made up of approximately 6–10 students in each focus group. The aim is to explore students' perspectives and experiences of learner-centred education. The focus group interview

²⁶ A learner-centred approach is understood as an educational method that places the learner and their experiences at the forefront of the learning process.

will take between 45–60 minutes and will take place at the school in which you attend. A second interview might be necessary if further clarifications are required. The interview will be recorded and some notes may also be taken. All notes, recordings, write-ups and analyses will be kept in a secure place and destroyed one year after the completion of the research project.

7. What do I have to do?

In order to participate you and your parent/legal guardian both need to read, agree to the content and sign the consent/assent forms.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are minimal risks or disadvantages in taking part. In order to avoid the possibility of teachers and students disclosing sensitive information (e.g., students passing negative comments about their teachers or vice versa), I will set clear instructions at the beginning of the interviewing sessions so that teachers and students will provide their general feedback rather than targeting particular individuals.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Benefits include an opportunity to give your views on learner-centred education in order to improve the curriculum, teaching and learning in schools. You will have the opportunity to reflect on your own learning. It is hoped that this study will provide insights about learner-centred practices which will benefit all students, the educational community and society in general.

10. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Information that is collected at interviews will be kept strictly confidential. Neither you nor your school will be mentioned in any reports, presentations or publications. Actual names of participants will not be used at the interview write-up stage. Data will be stored in a password protected computer in my home. I will be the only person with access to the data. The data will be destroyed 12 months after the end of the project. Participant consent/assent forms will be signed both by your parent/legal guardian and your good self before recording media are used.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and the assent form to keep.

Thank you

Appendix 8

Participant consent form: School leaders

Participant Consent Form: School Leaders

Title of Project: Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

Name of Researcher: Anthony Sammut

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet/letter (delete as applicable) dated _____ 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. Contact details: Anthony Sammut – email address: edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk; telephone number: [REDACTED]; mobile number: [REDACTED].
3. I understand that my responses will be kept confidential at all times. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my confidential responses.
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Lead Researcher

Date

Signature

To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet, and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the project's main record, which will be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 9

Participant consent form: Teachers

Participant Consent Form: Teachers		
Title of Project: Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.		
Name of Researcher: Anthony Sammut		
Participant Identification Number for this project:	<input type="text"/>	
Please initial box		
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet/letter (delete as applicable) dated _____ for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Contact details: Anthony Sammut – email address: edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk ; telephone number: [REDACTED]; mobile number: [REDACTED].	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. I understand that my responses will be kept confidential at all times. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my confidential responses.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. I agree to take part in the above research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
<input type="text" value="Anthony Sammut"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature
<i>To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant</i>		
Copies:		
<i>Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet, and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the project's main record, which will be kept in a secure location.</i>		

Appendix 10

Consent form: Parent/legal guardian

Parent/Legal Guardian Consent Form

Title of Project: Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

Name of Researcher: Anthony Sammut

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet/letter (delete as applicable) dated _____ in relation to my son's/daughter's participation in the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my son's/daughter's participation is voluntary and that s/he is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Contact details: Anthony Sammut – email address: edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk; telephone number: [REDACTED]; mobile number: [REDACTED].
3. I understand that my son's/daughter's responses will be kept confidential at all times. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my son's/daughter's confidential responses.
4. I agree to the participation of my son/daughter *[insert his/her name]* _____ in the above research project.

Name of Parent/Legal Guardian

Date

Signature

Lead Researcher

Date

Signature

Please return the signed sheet with your son/daughter

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated parent/legal guardian consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet, and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the project's main record, which will be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 11

Participant assent form: Students

Participant Assent Form: Students

Title of Project: Enacting a Learner-Centred Curriculum Policy Reform in State Middle Schools in Malta.

Name of Researcher: Anthony Sammut

Participant Identification Number for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that the study has been explained to me and I 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. Contact details: Anthony Sammut – email address: edq12as@sheffield.ac.uk; telephone number: ; mobile number:
3. I understand that my responses will be kept confidential at all times. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my confidential responses.
4. I agree (assent) to take part in the above research project.

5. I, the researcher, have discussed this research study with _____, using language which is comprehensible and appropriate for the participant. I believe that I have fully informed him/her of the nature of the study and its possible risks and benefits. I believe that the participant understood this explanation and assents to participate in this study.

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Anthony Sammut	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Lead Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant

Copies:

Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant assent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet, and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated assent form will be placed in the project's main record, which will be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 12

School leaders' interview guide

Opening Questions

1. How long have you been working as Head of School?
2. How long have you been working at this school?
3. How many years have you spent in the educational sector?
4. What is your highest qualification?

Main Questions

5. How would you describe the context in which your school is situated, particularly with regard to: (1) the school history; (2) its location; and (3) intake characteristics?
6. What is your perception of the school's ethos, teachers' commitments and experiences?
 - (a) Do these factors influence the manner in which your school responds to policy?
7. To what extent do the physical aspects of the school (i.e., staffing, budget, buildings, information technology and infrastructure) impact the teaching and learning process?
8. Are there any external pressures on the school to improve its performance, as reflected, for example, in external review reports?
 - (a) Do you think that the school is being adequately supported by the College and the Education Authorities in the policy enactment process?
9. Are you familiar with the term *learner-centred education*?
 - (a) What do you think it means?
 - (b) Where have you heard of it?
 - (c) Are you aware of its place in the NCF?
10. What is your interpretation of learner-centred education as it is presented in the NCF?
 - (a) Do you agree with it?
 - (b) Can you tell me why?
 - (c) Are there any drawbacks to it?
11. Since schools are required to adopt a learner-centred approach in reaching the policy goals of the NCF, what course of action has the school embarked upon in order to achieve the desired policy change?
 - (a) How are such decisions being communicated to staff members?
12. How does the school support the enactment of a learner-centred approach, as articulated in the NCF?
 - (a) What policy levers (e.g., monitoring, school partnerships, performance appraisal systems ... etc.), if any, are being emphasised most, at school level, to enforce policy?

Clean-up Question

13. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 13

Teachers' interview guide

Opening Questions

1. How long have you been working as a teacher of English?
2. How long have you been working at this school?
3. How many years have you spent in the educational sector?
4. What is your highest qualification?

Main Questions

5. Are you familiar with the term *learner-centred education*?
 - (a) What do you think it means?
 - (b) Where have you heard of it?
 - (c) Are you aware of its place in the NCF?
6. What is your interpretation of learner-centred education as it is presented in the NCF?
 - (a) Do you agree with it?
 - (b) Can you tell me why?
 - (c) Are there any drawbacks to it?
7. How do you describe your role, as a teacher, in a learner-centred classroom?
8. What learner-centred classroom activities do you find useful?
 - (a) Why?
 - (b) How do you plan and implement such activities?
9. Which learner-centred skills/competences (e.g., skills relating to creativity and innovation, problem-solving, critical thinking, debates, metacognitive strategies ... etc.) do you emphasise most?
 - (a) Why?
10. Are you aware of your learners' individual needs?
 - (a) How do you address issues of diversity and inclusivity in a learner-centred classroom?
11. How flexible is the NCF and the ELOF in allowing teachers to adapt to the individual needs and abilities of students?
12. Are you familiar with the term *learner empowerment* used in learner-centred education?
 - (a) What do you think it means?
 - (b) Do you agree with it?
 - (c) How do you empower students?
13. Do you think that learners should be given the opportunity to learn independently and in co-operation with others in order to assume responsibility for their own learning?
 - (a) Why?
14. How do you describe the relationship between the students and yourself?
 - (a) How does this relationship impact on the teaching and learning process?
15. Are you aware of the statistical (performance-related) targets set out in the NCF, which are intended to be achieved by 2026–2027?
 - (a) Are these targets important to you, to your school and to the country? Please explain.
 - (b) How important is it for students to comply with the performance-related targets?

- (c) In your opinion, can learner-centred education help in the eventual attainment of such targets?
16. What methods of assessment do you employ in your learner-centred classroom?
 - (a) How are these learner-centred methods being implemented?
 - (b) Do you encourage learners to assess their own work or the work of each other? Why?
 17. How much importance do you give to the learning outcomes approach?
 - (a) Do you envisage any problems in implementing a learning outcomes approach?
 - (b) Do you feel confident in assessing students according to the intended learning outcomes?
 - (c) If no, do you seek help?
 - (d) If yes, what steps will you take to ensure that students have reached the required standard?
 18. How do you negotiate the NCF and ELOF policy texts?
 - (a) In what way do you collaborate with your colleagues (i.e., teachers and members of the senior management team) in order to discuss and enact the learner-centred policy initiatives?
 - (b) Can you mention some of the learner-centred initiatives you have taken, either individually or collectively?
 19. Does the school administration help to promote a learner-centred environment?
 - (a) If yes, in what way is such support being provided?
 - (b) If no, in your opinion, why is no support being given?

Clean-up Question

20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 14

Students' interview guide

Opening Questions

1. Which country are you from?
2. How long have you been in this school?
3. Do you enjoy coming to school?

Main Questions

4. Which classroom activities do you enjoy most?
 - (a) Individual work?
 - (b) Pair work?
 - (c) Group work?
 - (d) Hands-on activities?
 - (e) Why?
 - (f) What do you do in such activities?
 - (g) How often do you participate in these activities?
 - (h) Do girls and boys enjoy different activities?
5. Which are those classroom activities that you do not find useful?
 - (a) Why?
 - (b) What do you do in such activities?
 - (c) How often do you participate in these activities?
6. In your opinion, how can your teacher help you to learn better?
7. Do you think that your learning needs are being addressed?
 - (a) How?
8. As a student, do you think that you should be responsible for your own learning (e.g., working independently and in co-operation with others, not just depending on the teacher) or should the teacher provide you with all the information and resources to learn?
9. How do you describe the relationship between your teacher and yourself?
 - (a) How do you think this relationship is helping you to learn better?
10. Does the teacher involve you in decisions regarding how and what you learn?
 - (a) Can you give examples?
 - (b) How often does this happen?
11. Can you describe how you are being assessed in class?
12. Do teachers give you the opportunity to assess your own work or the work of each other?
13. How important are exams for you?
 - (a) Why?
 - (b) Do you think that exams are given priority by your teacher?
14. Do you think that your teacher puts pressure on you to perform well in school and exams?
 - (a) What happens if you do not perform well?

Clean-up Question

15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 15

Duration of individual interviews

ID Code ²⁷	Participant pseudonyms	Gender	Age	State middle school pseudonyms	Interview date	Interview duration (minutes)
HOS1	Evelyn	Female	51	Wignacourt	29/05/2018	50.04
HOS2	Amelia	Female	61	Hompesch	30/05/2018	45.12
HOS3	Elizabeth	Female	48	Lascaris	31/05/2018	48.33
HOD1	Grace	Female	48	Wignacourt	04/06/2018	52.01
HOD2	Penelope	Female	53	Hompesch	13/06/2018	53.03
HOD3	Lillian	Female	46	Lascaris	06/07/2018	48.09
NQT1	Valentina	Female	24	Wignacourt	06/06/2018	53.23
NQT2	William	Male	27	Hompesch	14/06/2018	48.07
T1	Josephine	Female	60	Wignacourt	05/06/2018	51.01
T2	Pamela	Female	45	Wignacourt	11/06/2018	49.06
T3	Jasmine	Female	43	Wignacourt	01/06/2018	52.03
T4	Cecilia	Female	42	Hompesch	18/06/2018	55.07
T5	Rebecca	Female	46	Hompesch	20/06/2018	50.08
T6	Maggie	Female	44	Hompesch	15/06/2018	58.00
T7	Felicity	Female	32	Lascaris	02/07/2018	47.03
T8	Demi	Female	37	Lascaris	03/07/2018	46.03
T9	Scarlett	Female	34	Lascaris	04/07/2018	56.09

²⁷ **HOS:** Head of School; **HOD:** Head of Department; **T:** Teacher; **NQT:** Newly Qualified Teacher

Appendix 16

Duration of student focus group interviews

ID Code ²⁸	Student pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Nationality	State middle school pseudonyms	Class
FOCUS GROUP 1						
Focus Group Interview Date: 30/10/2018						
Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 47.23 minutes						
S1	Petra	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.1
S2	Anne	Female	13	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.1
S3	Kirsty	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.2
S4	Christopher	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.2
S5	Melanie	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.3
S6	Darren	Male	12	Italian	Wignacourt	8.3
S7	Nora	Female	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	8.3
FOCUS GROUP 2						
Focus Group Interview Date: 31/10/2018						
Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 48.11 minutes						
S8	David	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1
S9	Liam	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1
S10	Alexia	Female	11	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.1
S11	Luke	Male	12	Maltese	Wignacourt	7.2
S12	Deborah	Female	11	Italian	Wignacourt	7.3
FOCUS GROUP 3						
Focus Group Interview Date: 9/11/2018						
Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 50.08 minutes						
S13	Charlotte	Female	12	Maltese	Hompesch	7.3
S14	Emma	Female	11	Maltese	Hompesch	7.4
S15	Sophia	Female	12	British	Hompesch	7.4
S16	Abigail	Female	11	Maltese	Hompesch	7.5
S17	Benjamin	Male	12	Japanese	Hompesch	7.6
S18	Owen	Male	12	Philippine	Hompesch	7.6
S19	Olivia	Female	12	Maltese	Hompesch	7.6

²⁸ S: Student

ID Code ²⁹	Student pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Nationality	State middle school pseudonyms	Class
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FOCUS GROUP 4

Focus Group Interview Date: 12/11/2018

Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 55.38 minutes

S20	James	Male	13	Libyan	Hompesch	8.4
S21	Jordan	Male	12	Bulgarian	Hompesch	8.6
S22	Hazel	Female	13	Bulgarian	Hompesch	8.6
S23	Lucas	Male	12	Lithuanian	Hompesch	8.7
S24	Layla	Female	13	Libyan	Hompesch	8.7
S25	Elena	Female	12	Italian	Hompesch	8.8

FOCUS GROUP 5

Focus Group Interview Date: 26/10/2018

Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 54.00 minutes

S26	Noah	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.2
S27	Jack	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.3
S28	Emily	Female	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.5
S29	Veronica	Female	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.5
S30	Harry	Male	12	Maltese	Lascaris	8.12

FOCUS GROUP 6

Focus Group Interview Date: 29/10/2018

Duration of Focus Group Interview Session: 52.05 minutes

S31	Ella	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.2
S32	Adam	Male	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.2
S33	Jessica	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.3
S34	Samantha	Female	11	Maltese	Lascaris	7.3
S35	Max	Male	11	Indonesian	Lascaris	7.11

²⁹ S: Student

Appendix 17

The final list of themes and sub-themes generated from the school leaders' coded interview data

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Contextual dimensions of policy enactment	The historical and local context of the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The school's setting ▪ Historical aspects of the school ▪ Student population ▪ Catchment area ▪ Intake characteristics ▪ The school's reputation
	The school's ethos and cultural assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Institutional values and vision ▪ Professional commitments
	The 'physical' aspects of the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School buildings ▪ Educational facilities ▪ Educational resources ▪ Recreational spaces ▪ CCTV cameras ▪ School budgets
	Support and pressures from external structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External support ▪ External pressures ▪ Top-down approach to policy decisions
School leaders' understandings of LCE	Conceptual differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Curriculum differentiation ▪ Learner active involvement in the learning process ▪ Learner responsibility ▪ Academic achievement
School leaders' interpretations of learner-centred policies	Institutional narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Literacy, numeracy and communication skills ▪ Critical thinking ▪ Creative thinking ▪ Problem-solving skills ▪ Learner autonomy and responsibility ▪ Curriculum differentiation
School leaders' translations of learner-centred policies	Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School internal reviews and school development planning ▪ Technologies of performativity
	Inspection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lesson observations ▪ Lesson observation checklists ▪ Teacher self-surveillance

	Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Continuing professional learning and development▪ Normalising school leaders' and teachers' behaviour
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Appendix 18

The final list of themes and sub-themes generated from the teachers' coded interview data

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Teachers' understandings of LCE	Conceptual differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Curriculum differentiation ▪ The use of different teaching strategies ▪ Students as constructors of knowledge ▪ Student voice ▪ Learner responsibility ▪ Emphasis on the learning process
	Strengths and limitations of LCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers' enthusiasm for LCE ▪ Individual differences ▪ Learner needs ▪ Learner motivation ▪ Learner active participation in the learning process ▪ Learner intellectual development ▪ Difficulties to put LCE into practice ▪ Co-existence of learner-centred and teacher-led pedagogies
	The teacher's role in LCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers as facilitators ▪ Teachers as guides ▪ Teachers as coordinators/controllers
Teachers' interpretations of learner-centred policies	Learner-centred policy values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner entitlement ▪ Inclusive education ▪ Social justice ▪ Learner autonomy ▪ Democratic classroom practices
Teachers' translations of learner-centred policies	Curriculum differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness of learner individual needs ▪ Meeting learners' needs ▪ Scaffolding techniques ▪ Pathologizing practices ▪ Unequal learning opportunities
	Learner empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner involvement in lesson planning

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active ways of learning and teaching ▪ Learner capacities ▪ Self-governing subjects ▪ Teacher-learner relationship
	Technologies of performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Complexity of LOs ▪ Prescriptive LOs ▪ International benchmarks ▪ Student competition ▪ Performative pressures ▪ Perceived curricular flexibility ▪ Conformity with policy expectations ▪ Student progress
	A collective process of policy translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subject departments ▪ Teacher accountability ▪ Standardisation procedures ▪ Structure vs. agency

Appendix 19

The final list of themes and sub-themes generated from the students' coded interview data

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Individual learner differences	Peer-scaffolding during paired activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Independent problem solvers ▪ Peer collaboration ▪ Enjoyable activities
	Individualised learning support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner motivation ▪ Remedial teaching ▪ Student understanding
	Student learning styles and preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Auditory-based tasks ▪ Co-construction of knowledge ▪ Co-operative learning ▪ Frustrated students ▪ Visual means of communication ▪ Audio-visual resources ▪ Hands-on learning experience
Learner empowerment	Learner control over the content and process of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner control over classroom activities ▪ Lack of learner control over the content of learning ▪ Lack of learner control over classroom activities ▪ Lack of learner control over the pace of learning ▪ Lack of learner control over assessment practices
	Teacher-learner relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Psychological safety ▪ Democratic classroom practice ▪ Classroom rules ▪ Exclusionary techniques
Preparation for future working life	Self-reliant and responsible individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner responsibility ▪ Future workforce ▪ Responsible citizens of the future
	Examination performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performance-related demands ▪ Future employment ▪ Self-improvement/self transformation

Appendix 20

Transcription notation system for orthographic transcription (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 165–166)

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
The identity of the speaker; turn-taking in talk	The speaker's name, followed by a colon (e.g., Anna:) signals the identity of a speaker (use Moderator/Mod: or Interviewer/Int: for when the moderator/interviewer is speaking; or the moderator/interviewer's first name); start a new line every time a new speaker enters the conversation, and start the first word of each new turn of talk with a capital letter.
Laughing, coughing, etc.	((laughs)) and ((coughs)) signals a speaker laughing or coughing during a turn of talk; ((General laughter)) signals multiple speakers laughing at once and should appear on a separate line (to signal that no one speaker 'owns' the laughter).
Pausing	((pause)) signals a significant pause (i.e., a few seconds or more; precise timing of pauses is not necessary); can also use (.) to signal a short pause (a second or less) or ((long pause)) to signal a much longer pause.
Spoken abbreviations	If someone speaks an abbreviation, then use that abbreviation (e.g., TV for television; WHO for World Health Organization), but do not abbreviate unless a speaker does so.
Overlapping speech	Type ((in overlap)) before the start of the overlapping speech.
Inaudible speech	Use ((inaudible)) for speech and sounds that are completely inaudible; when you can hear something but you're not sure if it's correct, use single parentheses to signal your best guess or guesses as to what was said – for example (ways of life) or (ways of life/married wife).
Uncertainty about who is speaking	Use ? to signal uncertainty about the speaker – just ? for total uncertainty, F? or M? if you can identify sex of the speaker, or a name followed by a question mark (e.g., Judy?) if you think you might know who it is.

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
Non-verbal utterances	Render phonetically and consistently common non-verbal sounds uttered by your participants. For English-as-a-first-language speakers, these include ‘erm’, ‘er’, ‘mm’, ‘mm-hm’, but note that how these are written is context-dependent. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the first two would be written ‘um’ and ‘ah’.
Spoken numbers	Spell out all numbers (and be mindful of the difference between ‘a hundred’ and ‘one hundred’).
Use of punctuation	It is common to use punctuation to signal some features of spoken language (such as using a question mark to signal the rising intonation of a question or a comma to signal a slight pause but with the intonation of continuing speech). However, adding punctuation to a transcript is not straightforward and it is important to be mindful of the ways in which adding punctuation can change the meaning of an extract of data. Equally, punctuation enhances the readability of spoken data, especially extracts quoted in written reports.
Cut-off speech and speech-sounds	This level of detail is not necessary for most experiential forms of analysis, although it can be useful to signal moments when participants are struggling to articulate their thoughts, feelings etc.; to signal cut-off speech, type out the sounds you can hear, then add a dash (e.g., wa-, wor-, worl-); try to capture this at the level of phonetic sound.
Emphasis on particular words	Again, this level of detail is not necessary for most experiential forms of analysis, although it can be useful to indicate words or sounds that are particularly emphasised by underlining (e.g., <u>word</u>).
Reported speech	Reported speech is when a person provides an apparent verbatim account of the speech (or thoughts) of another person (or reports their own speech in the past). Signal this with the use of inverted commas around the reported speech (e.g., ... and she said “I think your bum does look big in that dress” and I said “thanks a bunch” ...).

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
Accents and abbreviations/vernacular usage/mispronunciation	It's important not to transform participants' speech into 'standard' English; however, fully representing a strong regional accent can be a complex and time consuming process. A good compromise is to signal only the very obvious or common (and easy to translate into written text) abbreviations and vernacular usage, such as 'cos' instead of 'because' or a Welsh speaker saying 'me Mam' (instead of the English 'my Mum'), unless it is absolutely critical for your analysis to fully represent exactly how a speaker pronounces words and sounds. Don't 'correct' mispronunciation or misspeaking of words, such as 'compostle' instead of 'compostable'.
Names of media (e.g., television programmes, books, magazines)	Should be presented in italics (e.g., <i>The Wire</i> , <i>Men's Health</i>).
Identifying information	<p>You can change identifying information such as people's names and occupations, places, events, etc. in one of two ways:</p> <p>By changing details and providing unmarked, appropriate alternatives (e.g., 'Bristol' to 'Manchester'; 'my sister is 14' to 'my sister is 12'; 'I'm a really keen knitter' to 'I'm a really keen sewer');</p> <p>By replacing specific information with marked generic descriptions (indicated by square brackets, so 'London' might be replaced with [large city]; 'Michael' with [oldest brother]; 'running' with [form of exercise]).</p>

Appendix 21

The Level 1 Descriptors of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) for Lifelong Learning

MQF Level Descriptors for Level 1		
	Level 1 EQF ³⁰	Level 1 MQF
Level Knowledge	Basic general knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acquires basic general knowledge related to the immediate environment and expressed through a variety of simple tools and context as an entry point to lifelong learning; 2. Knows and understands the steps needed to complete simple tasks and activities in familiar environments; 3. Is aware and understands basic tasks and instructions; 4. Understands basic textbooks.
Skills	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the ability to apply basic knowledge and carry out a limited range of simple tasks; 2. Has basic repetitive communication skills to complete well defined routine tasks and identifies whether actions have been accomplished; 3. Follows instructions and be aware of consequences of basic actions for self and others.
Competences	Work out or study under direct supervision in a structured context	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Applies basic knowledge and skills to do simple, repetitive and familiar tasks; 2. Participates in and takes basic responsibility for the action of simple tasks; 3. Activities are carried out under guidance and within simple defined timeframes; 4. Acquires and applies basic key competences at this level.
Learning Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge and Understanding; 2. Applying Knowledge and Understanding; 3. Communication Skills; 4. Judgmental Skills; 5. Learning Skills; 6. Autonomy and Responsibility. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has basic knowledge and understanding of textbooks and simple tasks while relating to the immediate environment; 2. Follows instructions and completes repetitive simple tasks in familiar contexts and under a quality controlled system; 3. Communicates basic information in familiar repetitive contexts; 4. Assesses and ensures that assigned tasks have been completed effectively; 5. Acquires and applies key competences to defined actions; 6. Takes some responsibility for completing simple tasks and exercises limited autonomy.

³⁰ European Qualifications Framework

Appendix 22

The Level 2 Descriptors of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) for Lifelong Learning

MQF Level Descriptors for Level 2		
	Level 2 EQF ³¹	Level 2 MQF
Level Knowledge	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Possess good knowledge of a field of work or study; 2. Is aware and interprets type of information and ideas; 3. Understands facts and procedures in the application of basic tasks and instructions; 4. Selects and uses relevant knowledge to accomplish specific actions for self and others.
Skills	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the ability to demonstrate a range of skills by carrying out a range of complex tasks within a specified field of work or study; 2. Communicates basic information; 3. Ensures tasks are carried out effectively.
Competences	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Applies factual knowledge and practical skills to do some structured tasks; 2. Ensures one acts pro-actively; 3. Carries out activities under limited supervision and with limited responsibility in a quality controlled context; 4. Acquires and applies basic key competences at this level.
Learning Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge and Understanding; 2. Applying Knowledge and Understanding; 3. Communication Skills; 4. Judgmental Skills; 5. Learning Skills; 6. Autonomy and Responsibility. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understands and uses good knowledge for tasks, procedures or a field of work or study; 2. Follows instructions and completes a range of well-defined tasks; 3. Communicates basic information in unfamiliar contexts; 4. Selects and uses information for specified tasks and is pro-active; 5. Acquires and applies key competences to a range of actions; 6. Takes responsibility and exercises autonomy in well-defined tasks under a quality controlled system.

³¹ European Qualifications Framework

Appendix 23

The Level 3 Descriptors of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) for Lifelong Learning

MQF Level Descriptors for Level 3		
	Level 3 EQF ³²	Level 3 MQF
Level Knowledge	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field of work or study	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understands the relevancy of theoretical knowledge and information related to one field of work or study; 2. Assesses, evaluates and interprets facts, establishing basic principles and concepts in a particular field of work or study; 3. Understands facts and procedures in the application of more complex tasks and instructions; 4. Selects and uses relevant knowledge acquired on one's own initiative to accomplish specific actions for self and others.
Skills	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demonstrates a range of developed skills to carry out more than one complex task effectively and in unfamiliar and unpredictable contexts; 2. Communicates more complex information; 3. Solves basic problems by applying basic methods, tools, materials and information given in a restricted learning environment.
Competences	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study and adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Applies knowledge and skills to do some tasks systematically; 2. Adapts own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems by participating pro-actively in structured learning environments; 3. Uses own initiative with established responsibility and autonomy, but is supervised in quality controlled learning environments, normally in a trade environment; 4. Acquires key competences at this level as a basis for lifelong learning.
Learning Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge and Understanding; 2. Applying Knowledge and Understanding; 3. Communication Skills; 4. Judgmental Skills; 5. Learning Skills; 6. Autonomy and Responsibility. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understands theoretical knowledge and information related to complex procedures in a field of work or study; 2. Follows instructions and carries out complex tasks systematically and in unfamiliar and unpredictable contexts; 3. Communicates complex information in unfamiliar and unpredictable contexts; 4. Assesses, evaluates and interprets facts related to a field of work or study and applies basic problem solving techniques; 5. Acquires and applies key competences as a basis for lifelong learning; 6. Takes agreed responsibility for completing complex tasks, and interacts with the immediate environment and in defined actions at one's own initiative.

³² European Qualifications Framework

Appendix 24

Recording of broad learning outcomes in Year 3 and Year 7 classes

DIPARTIMENT GHALL-KURRIKULU,
TAGHLIM TUL IL-HAJJA U IMPJEGABILITÀ
FLORIANA VLT 2000
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DEPARTMENT FOR CURRICULUM,
LIFELONG LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY
FLORIANA VLT 2000
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LETTER CIRCULAR

Information: X **Date:** 8th November 2018
Action Required: X **Ref:** DLAP 334/2018
To: All Heads of College Network, Heads of State Primary and Secondary Schools and Sections
From: Director General, Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability
Director, Learning and Assessment Programmes
Subject: Recording of Broad Learning Outcomes in Year 3 and Year 7 classes

Heads of School are kindly asked to bring this information to all teachers of Year 3 and Year 7.

The ticking of broad learning outcomes according to the achievement of the students for work conducted in class, at home or a combination of both, will provide students and parents with more information about the progress achieved during the scholastic year. It is expected that this information will support further learning and raise the engagement and achievement levels of the students. Evidence for written tasks will be found in the students' workbooks, copybooks, school files or other students' materials.

The process of marking the broad learning outcomes as part of the implementation of the Learning Programmes will now start, using either the software MySchool or the software e1, depending upon the management information system which each school is presently using. All information recorded on e1 will be transferred to MySchool by technical personnel, during this scholastic year, so that all the inputted data will be transferred from one software to another.

To be able to tick the broad learning outcomes of the year/subject, teachers are kindly asked to view the online video tutorials containing step by step content through the links available as follows:

- Year 3 Learning Outcomes for schools using e1
<https://vimeo.com/291267955>
- Year 3 Learning Outcomes for schools using MySchool
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDUYyLnqCSw>
- Year 7 Learning Outcomes for schools using e1
<https://vimeo.com/298128409>

The broad learning outcomes per year/subject have been formulated by Education Officers and Heads of Department in consultation with teachers, during meetings held during the last scholastic year.

Teachers can tick the broad learning outcomes at their own pace, using their laptop or other digital devices. Teachers of PE who may have difficulties to tick the outcomes due to lack of wifi connectivity in the school yard, are to contact respective Education Officer for direction.

For the 1st term of this scholastic year, teachers are kindly requested to complete the ticking of these broad learning outcomes by **17th December 2018**. Parents/guardians will be able to view this information about their son/daughter at the beginning of the 2nd term, in January 2019.

Teachers may choose to tick broad learning outcomes in whatever sequence they prefer according to the needs of their students. They may tick outcomes listed under different scholastic terms. As students progress during the scholastic year, teachers do not need to review the ticks of learning outcomes marked in previous terms, as progression will be shown through the marking of the latest outcomes. No duplication of work is required. Parents/guardians will only be able to view those broad learning outcomes which have been ticked by the teachers.

During this scholastic year, teachers will also be asked to tick the broad learning outcomes pertaining to their class/subject, before Easter recess and before Annual Exams/end of scholastic year.

Teachers of students using the Provisional Mapping software do not need to replicate this information on MySchool or on e1 software. Teachers of students who are following an alternative programme in the primary school may indicate that a student is following an alternative programme by writing a short note on the software programme.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Stephen Cachia
Director General,
Curriculum, Lifelong Learning &Employability

Gaetano Bugeja
Director,
Learning &Assessment Programmes

Appendix 25

Lesson observation checklist – Hompesch Middle School

Name of Teacher:		Subject:	Class:
Date of Class Support Visit:	Time:	Topic:	
Number of Students on Attendance List:	Actual Number of Students Present:	Number of Learning Support Educators (LSEs) Present:	

No	Teacher ...	Guidelines	Achieved	Not Achieved
1	... is able to provide an organised and meaningful classroom environment	Attendance taken		
		Evidence of flexible seating		
2	... is able to prepare and deliver a lesson that shows logical sequence of activities	Lesson planning shows clarity of objectives and outcomes		
		Number of activities		
3	... is able to design schemes of work that show curricular progression & development	Record of work up to date and lesson notes available		
4	... is able to work effectively with other staff members	Working collaboratively with colleagues particularly with LSE/s in class		
5	... is interacting with the whole class and with individual students	Educator made clear attempts to involve learners in a session		
		Evidence of an effective working relationship was observed		
6	... is able to differentiate work to cater for the individual needs	Used differentiated activities in class that were suited to the learners' abilities		
7	... manages time effectively	Started lesson on time		

No	Teacher ...	Guidelines	Achieved	Note achieved
8	... used appropriate materials and learning activities relevant to the lesson objectives	Utilised a variety of resources, including information and communication technology (ICT)		
		Learning activities were appropriate and relevant for lesson objectives		
9	... is able to maintain learner's interest	Evidence that all learners were engaged and interested in the lesson		
		Evidence of regular formative feedback		
10	... conducts an effective introduction and closure of lesson activity	Dedicated time for processing		
		Summarised learning outcomes		
		Asked for feedback on learning outcomes		

Appendix 26

Lesson observation checklist – Lascaris Middle School

Date:	Topic:		
Teacher:		Class:	
Subject:		Time:	
Learners present:		Learners absent:	

1 – Meets Expectations | **2** – Does Not Yet Meet Expectations | **NA** – Not Applicable

Planning and Preparation	1	2	NA
Scheme of work			
Forecast			
Attendance/record of student's work			

Teaching and Learning Process	1	2	NA
Adopts a clear structure in the lesson			
Asks appropriate and challenging questions			
Makes effective use of time			
Makes effective use of resources, including information and communication technology (ICT) and interactive whiteboard (IWB)			
Gives clear and precise instructions			
Encourages pupils' participation			
Differentiation evident			

Monitoring Assessment and Recording	1	2	NA
Marks pupils' work regularly			
Sets homework to reinforce/extend school work			
Marks pupils' work formatively			

Classroom Organisation and Management	1	2	NA
Class environment			
Class control (reward and sanctions)			
Relationships and interaction			

Effective use of LSE and other support	1	2	NA
Scheme of work handed to Learning Support Educator (LSE)			
Evidence of lesson adaption in lesson note			

Appendix 27

Lesson observation checklist – Wignacourt Middle School

Teacher's Name:	
Date of Visit:	Lesson:
Year:	Class/Group:
Each item will be ticked (✓) according to the following scale: S – Satisfactory; RFI – Room for Improvement; N – Not Observed. Any Commendable Feature will be indicated in the last column – C*	

TEACHING TECHNIQUES		S	RFI	N	C*
1.	General delivery of lesson				
2.	Demonstrates sufficient mastery of content				
3.	Makes effective use of a variety of available materials				
4.	Teaching methods chosen are appropriate and effective				
5.	Makes clear, practical demonstrations				
6.	Provides for student participation				
7.	Uses a variety of questioning techniques				
8.	Provides interesting and adequate reinforcement				
9.	Engages the students throughout the lesson				
10.	Makes use of technology				
11.	Use of group work/pair work				

EFFECTIVE PLANNING		S	RFI	N	C*
1.	Displays evidence of teacher preparation				
2.	Materials for class are organised and available				
3.	Student assignments show evidence of careful preparation				
4.	Assigns homework and corrects work given				

STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIP		S	RFI	N	C*
1.	Maintains student interest and attention				
2.	Works constructively with individual or group				
3.	Manages routine so as to avoid confusion				
4.	Exhibits poise, voice control, and tact				
5.	Graciously accepts less than 'right' response with slow students				
6.	Uses positive statements to students				
7.	Makes supportive statements to students				
8.	Maintains a friendly and respectful teacher-student relationship				

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT		S	RFI	N	C*
1.	Class control				
2.	Time management				

PREPARATION		S	RFI	N	C*
1.	Teaching file				
2.	Scheme of work				
3.	Record of work				

OVERALL GENERAL COMMENT	
Name of Head/ Assistant Head of School:	Signature: