Early Literacy and Language Development:
Parental Awareness and Understanding

Stephanie Borg

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Abstract

Early literacy and language are key factors in early childhood, and research underscores the first five years of a child's life as a critical period in which a child's relationships and interactions with primary caregivers are highly influential on their cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. This highlights the centrality of the parental role and gives weight to this study's overarching research question, which seeks to identify how parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, and their awareness of their own role in it. Drawing on social constructivist theory in its focus on knowledge as linguistically, socially and culturally constructed, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Data was collected through informal, semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews with twelve parents of kindergartners, and explored their perceptions of early literacy and language development in the earliest years of a child's life, the learning experiences they provide at home, their understanding of the parental role, and perceived needs and challenges experienced in terms of early literacy, language development and quality interaction. Reflexive thematic analysis provided the framework for data analysis, classification and interpretation. The study's key findings suggest that participants hold a socioculturally circumscribed, narrow view of early literacy which constrains their own home literacy activities, in turn. They heavily equate early literacy to traditional literacy, with a dedicated focus on letters, numbers and reading, and do not fully grasp the capacity for language learning in the first few years of a child's life, nor the value of high-quality parent-child verbal interaction. This detracts from the possible benefits to young children in bilingual contexts, such as Malta. Findings suggest that although strongly invested in their child's education, participants do not recognise the full gamut of the parental role in child early literacy and language development. Furthermore, this study exposes restricted opportunities for young children's vocabulary and general knowledge acquisition within the home, indicating the need to support parents in expanding their view of what early literacy and language development is, how to go about it within the home learning environment, and why it is significant. The research concludes with a summary of the key findings, their implications for educational stakeholders, and recommendations for further research, policy and service development within the Early Years field.

Keywords: Early literacy, language development, high-quality verbal interaction, parents, Malta.

Dedication

To my family

and

to the wonderful learning potential in early childhood

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List of Abbreviations

DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
EC	Early Childhood
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EU	European Union
EY	Early Years
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
KG1	First Year of Kindergarten
KG2	Second Year of Kindergarten
KGE	Kindergarten Educator
LOF	Learning Outcomes Framework
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCF	National Curriculum Framework 2012
NLA	National Literacy Agency
NSO	National Statistics Office
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEL	Socio-emotional Learning
SfCE	Secretariat for Catholic Education
SST	Sustained Shared Thinking
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Declaration

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 been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

Signed: Stephanie Borg

Dated: December 2024

Chapter One

Introduction to the Research

1.0 Introduction

Early literacy and language are key factors in a young child's overall development (Gatt, 2017; Head Zauche et al., 2017), and, as outlined below, both are influenced by the child's primary socializing agents and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1978). Adopting a social constructivist approach, wherein knowledge is linguistically, socially, culturally, and contextually constructed and shared through one's interaction with others and within the world (Bastalich, 2020), this research focuses on parents of kindergarten children and explores their knowledge and understanding of early literacy and language development, the early literacy practices they engage in with their children, and their awareness of the importance of their own role in their child's linguistic and cognitive development.

1.1 Rationale

A significant body of research underscores the first five years of a child's life as a critical period of development (Baldacchino, 2020; Gatt, 2017; Head Zauche et al., 2017; Hoff, 2009) in which a child's relationships and interactions with primary caregivers, namely parents, family members and Early Years (EY) practitioners, are highly influential on their cognitive and linguistic development (Thomason & La Paro, 2009). A strong foundation in language and literacy during these early years enables a child not only to build up, but more importantly to firmly entrench, all the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional characteristics conducive to lifelong learning and to a happy and healthy school life, such as persistence, resilience, effective communication, and problem-solving abilities (Traunter & Traunter, 2021). During these formative years, children need nurturing and stimulating care,

as well as high-quality verbal interaction (Baldacchino, 2020; Bredekamp & Copple, 2009), and this highlights the importance of primary caregivers having the awareness, knowledge, and ability to provide it.

Although Tobin et al. (2009, p. 2) state that "preschool is where child-rearing meets education", I argue that child-rearing is also in itself, education. My positionality aligns with that of Bruner (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) in that "from birth…the baby's every sense is attuned to exploring and learning" (Gelb, 2004, p. 49). Key predictors of literacy attainment, such as vocabulary, general knowledge and conversation skills develop through experience and interactions with others (Place & Hoff, 2011; Snow & Matthews, 2016). Whilst practitioners within EY settings are valued and influential educational stakeholders, I argue that parents or carers within the home are the most significant adults in children's lives (Abela & Grech Lanfranco, 2014; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Eilertsen et al., 2016; European Commission, 2014). Indeed, Snow and Matthews (2016) argue that however well-planned and applied EY instruction is, in terms of the young child's cognitive and linguistic development it does not compare to "the accumulated advantages that accrue to children who've been exposed to rich language and content from birth" (p. 72). As primary socializing agents and role models (Fuertes et al., 2018, Raban & Scull, 2013), parents have substantial influence on their child's perceptions, behaviour and wellbeing, and are central to their early literacy and language development (Butler, 2020; Head Zauche et al., 2017; Rowe, 2008). The beliefs parents hold about children and how they learn are key (Rowe, 2008), and developmental theories emphasize the criticality of understanding how parents scaffold learning and the sort of learning experiences they present (Yu et al., 2019). Within the Maltese context, research indicates that parents may not be cognizant of their own role in "children's quality experiences" (Sollars, 2020, p. 10), that parental involvement in their

child's learning is lacking (Agius and Formosa, 2015), and that there is a need for better parental education pertaining to EY language acquisition processes (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2014). This highlights a lacuna that must be addressed to increase opportunities for young children's early literacy and language development locally.

1.2 Research Agenda and Relevance

This study draws on social-constructivist theory in its focus on socially mediated learning, and on the parental role in a child's early literacy and language development. The qualitative methodology adopted lends itself to the exploration of parental beliefs of learning in the earliest years of a child's life, and to the investigation of perceived needs and challenges experienced in terms of early literacy, language development and quality verbal interaction. This study is proactive in its attempt to identify ways in which parents can gain awareness and become more critically reflective in their approach towards their interaction with children. Through informal, semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews, this study engages in conversation with twelve Maltese parents whose first child is between 3 to 4 years old and about to start the second kindergarten year (KG2) in a long-established, formal educational institution that will lead their child through a continuous sequence of both primary and secondary schooling. Participants are thus positioned to inform the issue being explored (Stroh, 2000) since, as parents, they will soon be experiencing KG2 within a formal learning environment for the first time and may not yet have been exposed to the more academic focus on early literacy inherent in formal educational institutions.

As outlined earlier, the literature identifies a clear lacuna in terms of parental understanding of early literacy and language development, and their awareness of their own role in it. This study's primary focus, then, is highly relevant locally and has the potential to generate a

greater understanding of the present early literacy practices of Maltese parents of kindergartners, particularly in terms of the quality of adult-child verbal interaction. The study aligns with Malta's Strategic Priorities and the EU 2020 Strategy, which advocates for more research and development, the amelioration of education, and a decrease in poverty and social exclusion. Its findings may provide useful data to inform local educational policy, practice and service development, and to address social exclusion issues, such as a lack of linguistic ability. Research in education aims to develop knowledge, practice and policy, and this study is an investment in the development of Malta's EY sector, and thus an investment in its people, and in its present and future well-being and sustainability.

1.3 Core Research Question and Supplementary Questions

The overarching research question is:

How do parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, and what awareness do they have of their own role in it?

This is broken down into the following supplementary questions:

1. What knowledge and awareness do parents of kindergartners have of early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and of their own role in it?
2. What literacy practices do they engage in with their children?
3. What challenges, if any, do parents face in promoting early literacy and learning at home, and what do they feel would be helpful in this regard?

The focus of this study, therefore, is to understand what early literacy means to parents of kindergarten-aged children, what importance it holds for them, what literacy practices they engage in with their children, and why. It also focuses on their awareness of the parental role in a child's linguistic and early literacy acquisition.

1.4 Researcher Positionality

I undertake this research, like all other researchers, through the lens of my own positioning (Dean et al., 2017). Whilst I will discuss this in further detail in Chapter Three, a brief indication is apt at this point. I have always had a love of learning, but its importance has grown exponentially throughout my parenting and teaching careers with the realisation of the huge potential for learning that is present in a child's first few years of life, and that depends on, and is co-created with, their primary caregivers (Cole et al., 2018). I recently came across a quote by Wood and Hedges (2016) stating that "guiding development is not the same as guiding learning" (p. 46), and I am curious to explore whether parents of kindergartners are aware of the difference, and how this impacts their perceptions about early literacy and language development, and their engagement in literacy activities with their children within the home environment.

1.5 Malta's Early Childhood Education Landscape

Whilst the focus of this thesis is on parental perceptions of early literacy and language development, perceptions are shaped and coloured by one's context and culture, and an overview of the political, social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions influencing EC literacy and language learning in Malta is important. It is thus necessary to clarify the contemporary Maltese ECE context, which has been highly fluid and rapidly-changing during the past decade, as well as the commodification of this important sector. In addition, young children are heavily influenced by the interaction of the various contexts they frequent, namely the home, the school and the wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1978), and challenges faced by the EY sector in Malta make a case for the importance of parental awareness and involvement in their child's early cognitive and linguistic development.

1.5.1 Language in Malta

Malta is a bilingual country with language choice directly related to the social context (Baldacchino, 2020) and associated with ideologies of geographical location, level of education and social class (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Maltese is the national language, and predominant for most Maltese nationals (Ariza et al., 2019), whilst English is the second language (Milton, 2021). The use of the English language has culturally been equated with a higher socioeconomic standing (Caruana, 2007), but unprecedented, rapidly changing socio-demographic factors and a high rate of immigration (Milton, 2021; National Statistics Office [NSO], 2021) are inevitably altering this landscape. Nowadays, many Maltese people have no choice but to speak in English in order to communicate with service providers due to the huge amount of non-Maltese workers employed in hotels and restaurants, retail outlets, the construction industry, the gaming sector, governmental departments, and hospitals (Agius, 2023; Borg, 2022). According to the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE, 2015) "the sociolinguistic situation of Malta is one of a diffuse societal bilingualism with official and de facto bilingualism in Maltese and English" (p. 9), however EY classrooms have become a multilingual hotchpotch, and Malta may be in a state of transition from a bilingual to a multilingual nation when "in some areas between 50% and 70% of the school population is made up of non-Maltese children, with some schools having as many as 38 different nationalities of students" (Cefai et al., 2019).

Having said that, the majority of Maltese people speak Maltese within the home (Vella, 2018), although it is highly unlikely that language use is strictly monolingual (Vella, 2013). Indeed, Maltese people use both languages in daily life (Milton, 2021), and young children are increasingly exposed to the English language through the media (Pace & Borg, 2017), both within and outside of educational settings (Baldacchino, 2020; Gatt, 2017). Most

Maltese children thus experience significant bilingual interaction (Scerri, 2015), with Panzavecchia (2020) referring to them as crib bilinguals, exposed to both languages from birth. Research on young children in bilingual households shows that the human brain is proficient in acquiring two languages at once (Ferjan-Ramirez & Kuhl, 2020), so that from the very early years, young children can navigate the social and literate worlds of both languages (Moll, 2014) . Although Maltese is predominant in State schools, Independent schools favour the English language (Vella, 2018) whilst Church schools adopt a more balanced approach to both languages (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Vella's (2013) claim that strictly monolingual use within the home environment is improbable is mirrored within schools, as up to 70% of educators code-switch between the two languages to aid student comprehension (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). The concept of code-switching, which is the seamless movement between languages whilst still upholding grammatical, conversational and sequencing rules, has been embraced by the Council of Europe's *Language Education Policy Profile* (2015) as a learning tool and Macrory (2020) explains that it does not indicate a child's linguistic confusion, but rather a larger, more available repertoire. This view of language users as able to switch fluidly between languages, both in thought and in speech, so as to navigate communication and make meaning is referred to as translanguaging (Vogel & Garcia, 2017), and the term also refers to the pedagogical approach that supports this ability (Najarro, 2023). Moll (2014) argues for the flexibility of code-switching as the "power of biliteracy". Young children have much to gain from bilingual development in the early years, namely heightened mental flexibility, critical thinking and metalinguistic awareness that allows them access to a wide range of cultural resources for thinking (Moll, 2014; Serratrice, 2013), however, whilst code-switching is an advantageous reality in Maltese schools (Panzavecchia, 2020), very young children in kindergartens and EY settings are often exposed to code-mixing instead (Caruana Lia, 2016), where grammatical accuracy is not

maintained and which is not similarly conducive to proper language development (Gatt et al., 2016).

1.5.2 Malta's Contemporary Approach to Early Childhood Education

Malta's annual investment in education is substantial (European Commission, 2019), yet despite this, more than a third of 15-year-olds leave secondary schooling without basic levels in reading, mathematics and science (European Commission, 2019). Government expenditure on childcare services alone amounted to €28 million in 2019, more than double the expenditure just three years earlier (NSO, 2020). This substantial increase may be due to the burgeoning number of early childcare settings that have flourished since 2014, when the Maltese government introduced free childcare services to children between 3 months and 3 years of age, whose parents are in full-time employment or education (Borg, 2015; Sollars, 2020). This scheme was pledged as part of the government's electoral manifesto, and its implementation was quick (Borg, 2015), so that within eight months, the percentage of children under the age of three in childcare shot up from the lowest in the EU at 11% (The Malta Independent, 2014), to 21% (Borg, 2015; Debono, 2018), and presently stands at just over 38% (Eurostat, 2021). Recent statistics indicate that the initial 70 childcare centres open in 2014 now number 149 (Eurostat, 2021; The Malta Independent, 2014), but this number excludes centres not participating in the free childcare scheme, so does not reflect the total amount of childcare settings in Malta (Eurostat, 2021), where it is not necessary for non-participating centres to be officially registered (Sollars, 2018).

1.5.3 The Commodification of Early Childhood Education in Malta

Due to the obvious success of this scheme, the increase in the number of EY settings brought about an urgent demand for EY practitioners in a comparatively short time (Borg, 2015;

Sollars, 2020). As a result, service providers resorted to employing insufficiently qualified or unqualified staff (Borg, 2015; Sollars, 2018); this when research highlights the presence of specialized, well-trained staff as strongly conducive to "stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions in ECEC settings" (OECD, 2019, p. 11). To maximize income, providers also accepted as many children as possible, creating centres with a reduced quality of care and a lack of physical space for children (Balzan, 2024; Borg, 2015). Sansone (2016) reports lax control of the free childcare scheme, both in terms of the number of children present in a centre at any one time, as well as in terms of financial controls, with evidence that some of the participating centres "tampered with attendance records to siphon off more public money from the free childcare scheme". In addition to these concerns, some centres function with unmanageable adult-child ratios (Mizzi, 2015), and although work in EY settings can be demanding, stressful and carries substantial responsibility (Jeon et al., 2021), this sector is characterized by low wages and a high turnover rate (Borg, 2015). In preschool settings, educator stress has been linked to lower quality teaching and care-giving practices and less stable emotional support for children (Blewitt et al., 2020). Statistically, young children spend more time in these EY settings than in kindergarten (Sollars, 2017a), so all this is substantially detrimental to children's early learning experience. Borg (2015) further points out that the scheme excludes at risk children most likely to benefit from it due to the present eligibility criteria for participation. This despite a primary aim of the scheme citing the provision of "equitable early childhood education and care irrespective of their parents' financial means and social background" (Eurydice, 2021).

The European Commission (2013) states that childcare in Malta was perceived as being of high quality prior to 2014. The government's investment in childcare was an important cog in its economic plan and has been successful in giving mothers of young children the

opportunity to return to full-time employment (The Malta Independent, 2014). However, quality childcare is pivotal to early literacy and language development, and can play a significant role in mitigating social inequalities in these formative years (Borg, 2015). These aspects appear to have been pushed aside under the government's blinkered vision, or at the minimum, improperly considered, with Sollars (2018) arguing that notions of high-quality provision have taken a back seat. This is in spite of Malta's *Early Childhood Education and Care: A National Policy 2006*, which had previously recognized that strong staff training is paramount, that unqualified staff cannot provide the self-reflection and evaluation required for high-quality provision, and that working conditions should be fair. This situation of the "commodification of early childhood programming" (Smith et al., 2016) is mirrored in the UK, with government policies unable to separate, or perhaps distinguish, between policies supporting working parents and those concerned with young children's learning and development, and where the main priority clearly lies in the former (Kay et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2015; Traunter, 2019; Wild et al., 2015). Unfortunately, within the Maltese EY context, issues of recruitment, retention, and qualifications of staff in childcare and kindergarten settings remain a challenge (Sollars, 2017b; Sollars, 2020) and Malta appears to have forgotten that the primary importance of EY settings lies in the very young children themselves, who not only need care, love and protection, but also positive learning experiences, cognitive stimulation and warm, responsive, high-quality adult-child interactions. The challenges faced by the Maltese EY sector further highlight the importance of parents and the home literacy environment in young children's cognitive and linguistic development.

1.5.4 Malta's ECE Policies and Challenges: The Case for Parental Involvement

Malta's *National Curriculum Framework for All in Malta and Gozo 2012* (NCF) supported by a *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF), was created in response to a changing Malta (Schembri, 2020), and to address the promotion of 21st century competencies and a more modern approach to education. It heralded an important first-time focus on the EY as a distinct cycle in the education of children from 3 to 7 years of age – an area that had previously simply been paid lip service (Sollars, 2018). Within the Maltese context, compulsory schooling begins at 5 years of age with children's entry into Year 1 (NCF, 2012). This is preceded by non-compulsory ECE, in the form of two consecutive kindergarten years, KG1 and KG2, for children between the ages of 2 years 9 months and 4 years 9 months (Sollars, 2021). More than 97% of children attend these kindergarten years (Eurydice, 2019), in addition to the increasing number of younger children (from 3 months to 3 years of age) who attend the earlier-mentioned childcare.

These EY settings provide very young children with the opportunity for social interaction with peers and educators. Several renowned theorists, such as Dewey (1916), Vygotsky (1934), Bruner (1966), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) have argued for the important role that social interaction plays in children's learning, with its effectiveness dependent on factors such as affect, adult responsiveness, and an environment that is both cognitively and linguistically stimulating (Cekaite & Ekstrom, 2019; Head Zauche et al., 2017; Rowe, 2008). However, studies indicate a narrow understanding of, and inadequate attention paid to early literacy skills (Snow & Matthews, 2016), and that many associate language-learning with a limited range of teacher-led activities like shared reading and singing (Degotardi & Gill, 2019). Superficial curricular activities, inadequate pedagogical skills, a dearth of high-quality adult-child interaction, and a lack of due consideration to learning processes are also evident within

the Maltese EY context (Farrugia & Gatt, 2015; Schembri, 2014; Sollars as cited in Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2017), denoting an overall restricted view of early literacy and language learning. For example, Malta's NCF and LOF acknowledge the importance of language learning from an early age, emphasizing the value of children becoming effective bilingual communicators, and yet some gaps are evident and need to be addressed. Educators are guided to spread early literacy and language learning across four levels that target children aged 0 to 5 years, however they are urged to initially expose children to language in a sequential manner (first L1, then L2) over the first 3 years (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Considering that language exposure is so important to bilingual language acquisition (Baldacchino, 2020), and that home language use enhances the development of both languages (Muscat, 2022), I argue that this approach does not take advantage of young children's translanguaging capabilities, which allow them to switch fluidly between languages to navigate different communicative contexts and make meaning (Najarro, 2023; Vogel & Garcia, 2017). This may lead both educators and parents to focus on only one language in the first formative years of language development, to the detriment of the other, for fear of confusing their children. It is common for parents to feel compelled to use the language of the school at home, rather than encouraging use of the other language (McRoary, 2006), and yet research points to the importance of exposure to each language from a very early age (De Houwer, 2020). In addition, whereas oracy is listed as a primary objective in *A National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014-2019*, adult-child meaningful dialogue and supporting parents to promote their children's literacy skills are only mentioned as principal aims in the kindergarten years, which cater for children between 3 and 5 years of age, but are absent in aims outlined for the earlier childcare years.

Regrettably, although the NCF supports a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Schembri, 2020), a decade after its launch in 2012, traditional teaching methods and a curriculum revolving around the teaching of numbers and letters are still applied in Malta's kindergartens (Mifsud & Vella, 2020), and the implementation of an emergent curriculum in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has proven to be challenging (Baldacchino, 2021; Chesworth et al., 2023) and is still very much in its infancy. Children receive literacy instruction from a very young age and before formal schooling begins (Muscat, 2022). Eaude (2021) argues that children under the age of 5 years do not generally have the cognitive skills required to benefit from formal instruction, but that they learn better through experience, activities, and supportive feedback. The over-emphasis on academics, instructions, and worksheets in EY settings may negatively impact a child's self-esteem and motivation to learn (Sharp, 2002), and excludes more active, balanced approaches (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Pica, 2018). Unfortunately, this is also evident in Maltese classrooms (Sollars, 2021). In addition, practitioners within EY settings may not have the confidence or time to focus on enhancing verbal interactions with the children in their care (Gellel, 2018; Rogers et al., 2020; Snow & Matthews, 2016). This more traditional, academic, and directive method of teaching allows children few conversational opportunities to build their emerging literacy skills (Cabell et al., 2015; Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014; Ota & Berghout Austin, 2013; Yin et al., 2020). A further challenge nationally is the paucity of adequately qualified EY practitioners who are truly reflexive in their practice, and fluent in both Maltese and English, enabling them to be "confident in their own linguistic repertoires" (MEDE, 2021). This is concerning when considering the large number of young children who attend local EY settings, whether childcare or kindergarten, and again points to the importance of the home literacy environment in mitigating these challenges.

In the EY, very young children are dependent on their primary caregivers and are thus necessarily impacted by the society and culture in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and which influences their learning. The substantial recent political, social and cultural upheavals within the EY sector in Malta have cast a shadow on the quality of ECE services, as well as on national understandings of early literacy. Parents and the learning environment they provide at home are important factors in a young child's cognitive and linguistic development, and their importance is heightened in the face of challenges experienced by the EY sector.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Following this initial chapter overviewing this study's rationale, research agenda and research questions, as well as its relevance within the Maltese context, the thesis continues with a further four chapters. Chapter Two constitutes the literature review and presents an historic overview of Early Childhood (EC) literacy, outlining the main paradigm shifts that have led to contemporary understandings of early literacy. In it, I clarify semantic differences between the phrases 'emergent' and 'early' literacy, as experienced in Malta, and explain what is meant by 'multiliteracies'. I detail the wide scope of EC literacy as including both constrained and unconstrained skills, and examine, in turn, four principal influencing factors, namely adult-child verbal interactions, vocabulary and general knowledge, shared reading, and sustained shared thinking. I then identify a working definition of early literacy as understood in this research study and go on to provide an overview of the role of early literacy in child cognitive and linguistic development, and the impact of early literacy and language learning on academic achievement. This information is then viewed in terms of parental beliefs and the perceived role of parents in a child's early literacy and language development, including the home learning environment and its important contribution to early

literacy practices. Finally, I present this study's theoretical framework, highlighting social constructivist concepts in early literacy that are directly relevant to this research.

Chapter Three concerns the research approach I adopted and begins with an outline of the research aims and research questions, the research rationale, and my positionality as a researcher. This is followed by an in-depth account of the methodology and research methods espoused throughout this research, and clearly shows relevant justification for the use of qualitative methodology and informal, semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews as the main research tool. Next, I describe the sampling procedure, the pilot study and methods used for data collection and data analysis. I conclude the chapter with an account of the ethical considerations inherent in this study, as well as its limitations.

In Chapter Four, the research findings are presented. This chapter identifies what participants, as parents of kindergartners, understand by early literacy and language development in the early years, how they come by this understanding, and what they do about it. In addition, the home literacy environment is investigated, and challenges experienced by parents in terms of their child's early literacy and language development are analysed. The chapter concludes with parents' own thoughts about the sort of information that would help new parents better enable their child's cognitive and linguistic development from an early age.

Chapter Five presents an overview of the main research question, followed by a summary of the key findings. I then go on to debate their broader implications for all stakeholders within the Maltese EY context, and discuss how the findings contribute to a wider understanding of this field. The limitations of the study are then outlined, and in conclusion, I draw upon the research findings to put forward recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The phrase 'early literacy' may not mean the same thing to everyone, and conceptualizations of literacy continue to evolve over time (Teale et al., 2020; Raban & Scull, 2013). Since it is the primary focus of this research, however, a clear definition is an important starting point. This chapter outlines how the literature search for this study was conducted and goes on to provide an historic overview of EC literacy and main paradigm shifts, examining and drawing upon contemporary understandings and definitions of early literacy to present a working definition of early literacy as defined in this study. It then goes on to locate the importance of early literacy and language acquisition in a young child's life, and its impact on academic achievement. The social constructivist approach to early literacy and language adopted within this research advocates for early literacy learning as beginning at home, long before formal schooling begins. Language is seen as leading development, and along with early literacy, is a cultural tool that children use to make meaning of the world around them, transforming behaviours as they become internalized (Crawford, 1995). The role of parents, parental beliefs, and the home literacy environment in a young child's cognitive and linguistic development are thus also examined. The chapter then concludes with a detailed outline of the theoretical framework that guides and positions this research study.

2.1 The Literature Search

Initially, the literature search conducted was purposefully rather wide, as I believed in the importance of breadth in gaining a more complete overview of the field. I first used several databases, such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate and the University of Malta's library portal,

HyDi, to gain access to the Abstract sections of numerous articles and theses. These were helpful both in terms of gaining an overview of studies carried out, and of different methodologies used. I then used both HyDi and the University of Sheffield's StarPlus portal to access myriad publications, both national and international. This comprehensive exploration of published literature helped me to identify potential gaps in knowledge, narrow down the focus of the study, and formulate my overarching research question. Through the use of specific criteria for inclusion, namely key words, phrases, synonyms, and language, year and type of publication, I looked up key researchers and papers in the field. Reviewing citations and references within their work continuously provided me with further relevant literature. In addition, the databases used automatically recommended similar pertinent articles to peruse. All the above contributed towards a more complete and coherent synthesis of existing evidence to inform the literature review.

2.2 An Overview of Early Literacy

2.2.1 Contemporary Definitions of Literacy

Books and the Internet provide a plethora of definitions regarding literacy, suggesting that McLane and McNamee (1990) were right to describe it as "a complex and multifaceted phenomenon" (p. 2). In spite of this complexity, however, literacy is generally viewed as a measurement of a society's health and competence (Head Zauche et al., 2017), with strong corroboration between high literacy rates and economic opportunity, gender equality and sustainable infrastructure (Peterson, 2020). This positive link to socio-economic status was highlighted in a study by Evans et al. (2010), who found that the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] in the United States determined which students qualified for free lunch on the basis of the number of books in the home rather than via traditional measures of determining family socio-economic status.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], (2023) gives a wide definition of literacy as

> ...the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. Generally, literacy also encompasses numeracy, the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations.

From the perspective of EC literacy, this definition appears to focus on traditional notions of literacy in terms of reading and writing, whilst glossing over other aspects of literacy that are just as important in the EY, such as high-quality adult-child verbal interactions, play, and multimodal literacies, which will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter. Peterson (2020) defines literacy simply as the way a person interacts with the world, shapes it and is shaped by it in return, by communicating with others through reading, writing, speaking, listening and creating; a definition that is more in line with this study's social constructivist perspective since it acknowledges the affective, aesthetic, creative, and socio-cultural aspects influencing literacy (Kennedy et al., 2012).

2.2.2 Main Shifts in Early Literacy

EC literacy research is informed by various theoretical perspectives which have changed, progressed, and sometimes arguably regressed over time, albeit evolving through a rich EC history. Its fascinating literature indicates that even as far back as the 1st century AD, the Roman rhetorician "Quintilian argued that children younger than 7 could profitably engage in literacy education if one ensured that the studies be made an amusement" (Van Kleeck & Shuele, 2010, p. 342). The more recent main historical shifts in our understandings of EC literacy occurred during the 20th century with movement from a behaviourist to a cognitive and then a socio-cultural perspective (Kennedy et al., 2012; Teale et al., 2020). Within the

former shift, the dominant and long-held reading readiness maturational perspective, gave way to the 'emergent literacy' perspective largely based on the cognitive acquisition of knowledge (Crawford, 1995). This term was first coined by Clay in 1966, although EC history suggests that others before her, such as Iredell (1898) and Huey (1908) held similar views decades before (Van Kleeck & Shuele, 2010). The social constructivist approach to early literacy espoused in this study finds substantial similarity to the emergent literacy perspective (Crawford, 1995). Both view language and literacy learning as an ongoing process that begins at home, and both recognize the importance of a linguistic- and print-rich environment. However, whereas the emergent perspective is strongly influenced by cognitive and developmental psychologists such as Piaget, Clay (1966), and Teale and Sulzby (1986), social constructivism looks at Vygotskian theory, where language and literacy are socially and culturally constructed, and where children actively use literacy and language to make sense of the world around them (Crawford, 1995).

2.2.3 Early, Emergent, Digital and Multimodal Literacy

Nomenclature-wise, literacy in the early years is now often referred to either as early literacy or emergent literacy. For clarity's sake, therefore, I emphasize that within today's EY sector, this latter 'emergent literacy' can no longer be understood as being exclusive to the afore-mentioned cognitive approach, but is instead very much embedded in the social and cultural, and appears to have become a synonym for early literacy in general. Indeed, whilst some may argue that the two are distinct and that emergent literacy precedes early literacy, the distinction between the two appears to have become muddied. Roskos et al. (2003) define *early* literacy as "an emerging set of relationships between reading and writing" (p. 53) and adopt the term as the most succinct account of the skills, knowledge and dispositions that precede learning to read and write in the preschool and early school years. Comparable

definitions of *emergent* literacy also cite it as the attitudes, skills and knowledge that precede reading and writing (Van Kleeck & Shuele, 2010). The similarities are evident, as is the emphasis on the centrality of the acquisition of conventional skills, and on the primacy of reading, writing, and print to early literacy. This heavy focus on young children learning the alphabet, phonemic awareness and phonics (Casbergue, 2017), and on their ability to reproduce "a tightly confined set of linguistic conventions" (Mills, 2009, p. 7) denigrates the much broader understanding of early literacy required in contemporary society (Hesterman, 2013). This wider notion of functional or multimodal literacy encompasses one's education as well as one's knowledge base. As with the Reggio Emilia Approach's *The Hundred Languages of Children*, these cognitive, communicative and expressive multiliteracies "embrace the notion that there are multiple 'modes of representation' which are much broader than language alone" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5) and which are necessary for full participation in today's fluid and culturally diverse world (Hesterman, 2013; Mills, 2009). Early literacy that is thought of in the traditional sense of proficiency in reading and writing does not take into account the varied and multimodal ways in which young children learn and communicate (Hesterman, 2013). Digital literacy, for example, brought about by rapid changes in technologies and the Internet, plays a significant part in early literacy, redefining the concept itself, as well as home literacy environments and the teaching of literacy in EY educational settings (Teale et al., 2020). Different forms of media and technologies, such as mobile phones, videos, the Internet, and computer games have become part and parcel of young children's lives, new "cultural forms" providing them with "new ways of mediating and representing the world, and of communicating" (Buckingham, 2010, p. 59). Digital literacy does not simply entail technical skills such as being able to use a digital device but rather having the ability to participate easily and meaningfully in modern digital societies (Alexander et al., 2016). Multimodality thus plays such a big part in early learning that a

definition of early literacy should look beyond reading and writing to include children's interests and inquiries in the world around them (Chesworth, 2019), their modes of representation like drawing and play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007), as well as digital literacy (Buckingham, 2010).

2.2.4 Early Literacy as Constrained and Unconstrained Skills

Early literacy must thus be understood in a broad way if young children are to reap all its benefits. This section is important in clarifying what is meant by 'broad' in its differentiation between constrained and unconstrained literacy skills (Paris, 2005), and in elucidating the substantial benefits of each.

Drawing on Paris' (2005) Constrained Skills Theory, early literacy skills can be broadly categorized into two main types, namely constrained and unconstrained skills. These will be explained in detail further below, however, a notably critical point is that whilst both are important in early literacy (Leech et al., 2022), constrained learning is code-related and leads to the acquisition of a definite set of knowledge, whilst unconstrained learning is meaning-related and has unlimited potential across the lifespan, allows the exploration of our cognitive world, and supports linguistic, cognitive, academic and communicative skill development (Lawrence, 2021). Besides the direct impact on cognition, therefore, these skills significantly enable one's inclusion and participation in social, societal and familial contexts. In addition, unconstrained skills are linked to greater cognitive flexibility and critical thinking (Stahl, 2011).

So, whilst as mentioned above, both are important in terms of early literacy (Leech et al., 2022), greater emphasis should be placed on unconstrained skills, which leave an indelible

influence on later academic achievement (Paris, 2005; Stahl, 2011). The difference between the two lies mainly in their finite versus unlimited characteristics. Whereas constrained skills are set or restricted in quantity, such as learning the letters of the alphabet or writing one's own name, a ceiling cannot be put on unconstrained skills, which have the potential to continue developing. Stahl (2011) argues that whilst constrained skills are a necessity, they are insufficient. So, whilst alphabet and phonemic knowledge, and print awareness are important, they alone do not comprise literacy. Unconstrained skills, on the other hand, such as oral language, vocabulary, critical thinking skills and comprehension, are not limited to the EY but continue to develop throughout the lifespan and, perhaps more importantly, require meaningful interaction to do so (Paris, 2005; Stahl, 2011). They are also more influential on the development of other skills (Stahl, 2011) but although language skills and general knowledge have been widely recognized as especially important for long-term literacy success, many EY settings "still focus on constrained skills, which are easy to teach and easy to test" (Snow & Matthews, 2016, p. 60). Indeed, studies indicate that unconstrained skills are more difficult to shape through classroom instruction (Snow & Matthews, 2016), thus highlighting the role of parents in their children's development of unconstrained skills. Although the growth of unconstrained skills has been linked to higher socio-economic status households and parental education (Snow & Matthews, 2016), McCormick et al. (2020) recently found that after early literacy intervention within the home environment, children's language gains resulted from parent-child engagement in unconstrained activities, but not constrained activities, despite low parental education levels. Paris and Luo (2010) warn that an over-emphasis on the teaching of constrained skills, albeit yielding short-term improvements, will overshadow the development of more complex and wide-ranging early literacy skills.

2.2.5 Constrained Skills

Constrained skills can be related to both sound and print, and include such aspects as reciting the alphabet, rhyme, letter recognition, lower and uppercase letters, letter to sound correspondence (phonics), writing one's own name, recognizing, and reading environmental print, and book handling (Snow & Matthews, 2016). In all of these, the steps to be mastered are finite, so these skills have narrow scope and a relatively short duration of acquisition (Paris, 2005). The same is true for such concepts as holding a book upright, turning pages, directionality of reading, punctuation, initial and final consonants, syllables, blending and segmenting, sentences, and spelling according to sound, onset-rime, word patterns or spelling rules (Paris, 2005; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Stahl, 2011). Research suggests that mastery of constrained skills is generally achieved by third grade (Bear et al., 2008; Paris, 2005).

Phonological awareness, letter knowledge, phonics and spelling are strongly intertwined, and difficulty in their acquisition can be an indication of a child's possible struggles with early literacy skills (Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Stahl, 2011). These constrained skills are necessary components in reading development and useful in determining ongoing progress but are not associated with oral language, wider academic knowledge, the growth of more complex reading skills or in predicting long-term development (Paris & Luo, 2010; Stahl, 2011). In terms of the Maltese language specifically, not all aspects of phonological awareness appear to be relevant, and research suggests that although young Maltese children do not develop rhyme awareness until the age of 5 years, this does not hinder their reading development (Pace Gellel, 2004). Paris (2005) claims that knowing the names of letters in kindergarten will not facilitate reading comprehension in later grades, and that although some research links constrained skills to future measures of reading acquisition (Drouin et al., 2012; Ecalle et al., 2008), the effects are fleeting and fail to transfer to more sophisticated reading skills

and general knowledge. In contrast to constrained skills, the unconstrained skills of vocabulary and comprehension have not received adequate attention (Paris, 2005) and if these skills are not addressed, it is likely to lead to children experiencing general reading difficulties in the upper grades (Stahl, 2011).

2.2.6 Unconstrained Skills

2.2.6.1 Adult-Child Verbal Interactions

Several studies underscore the importance of adult-child dialogue in the early years and find that in the first three years of life, both quantity and quality of talk impact a child's emerging literacy and language skills more than socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or parental level of education (Head Zauche et al., 2017; Rowe, 2012). During this time, a child's brain architecture is shaped faster through interactive and stimulating experiences and relationships (Britto et al., 2017; Shonkoff & Bales, 2011). Children need to talk, as talk is the basis for learning (Tunnicliffe & Ueckert, 2011), and according to bell hooks (2010), "the future of learning lies with the cultivation of conversations, of dialogue" (p. 44). This finds agreement with Caruso's (2013) argument that dialogue is paramount for child language development and for the development of other important skills, such as observation. Through dialogue, a person can achieve completeness since, in accordance with the social model of thinking, dialogue may also be viewed as a cultural and psychological tool, and a route to understanding others (Yin et al., 2020). Quality and quantity of both verbal input and interaction are pivotal for young children's linguistic and cognitive development (Butler, 2020). Cognition entails all the conscious and unconscious forms of awareness and knowing, such as perceiving, imagining, reasoning, problem solving, and intelligence. Intelligence itself is multidimensional and includes functions such as language proficiency, vocabulary and general knowledge (Colom et al., 2010). A strong positive correlation exists between

adult-child conversations and child understanding, vocabulary, and IQ a decade later (Shanty et al., 2019). This adds weight to the importance of parents' awareness and understanding of high-quality verbal interaction in the EY.

Vocabulary acquisition and oral language development are related to the amount of exposure a child has to language through meaningful interactions (O'Toole & Hickey, 2017; Thordardottir, 2017), and high-quality interaction is a key factor in children's holistic growth (Sylva et al. 2004). A key characteristic of learning through dialogue is the adult being tuned-in to the child and present on an emotional level (Gerhardt, 2008). Indeed, Calkins and Bell (2010) see emotion and cognition as inherent and bidirectional in children's development, and Yin et al. (2019) argue that high-quality interactions in the early years promote emotional processing, self-regulation, and higher order thinking skills. Thus, primary caregivers play a pivotal role in enabling children's social and emotional proficiency (Kostelnik et al., 2015).

Some researchers advocate for quality over quantity (Rowe, 2012). Romeo et al. (2018) further build upon the importance of talk and claim that the prime factor influencing cognition and proper brain functioning is the way in which that talk is carried out, suggesting "a direct relation between conversational turns and brain function during language processing" (p. 708). Speaking *with* a child, therefore, has a greater effect on brain development than speaking *to* a child. Directive language that is intrusive or that repeatedly expects certain action on the part of the child, for example, robs children of any opportunity to provide input themselves (Tulviste & Tamm, 2023). Adult-child interactions, then, should be of high quality, providing real opportunities for children's participation and learning (Yin et al., 2020). Quantity and quality of speech, frequency of exposure to language and the use

of a wide vocabulary are all characteristics of high-quality verbal interaction (Baldacchino, 2020; Rowe, 2008). Head Zauche et al. (2016) underlined the importance of the richness of language used by coining the phrase Language Nutrition, implying that richness of language is as important and nourishing to a child's health as all the other nutrients s/he consumes. Very young children at the onset of word production need to hear speech that is directed towards them, since speech that is simply overheard does not support early lexical development (Paavola-Ruotsalainen et al., 2018; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). Conversational turns allow a child with or without verbal skills to communicate through a social relationship (Head Zauche et al., 2017). Unfortunately, consistent high-quality interactions are lacking in the prekindergarten and kindergarten years (Cash et al., 2019), and in terms of oral language, there is a narrow focus on words at recognition level only (Ouellette, 2006), once again highlighting the importance of the parental role in ensuring high-quality interactions.

Adult-child conversational turns have a positive influence on children's comprehension, expressive vocabulary learning and oral language skills (Strouse et al., 2013; Rowe & Snow, 2020). These conversational turns are sometimes referred to in the literature as Serve and Return, associating them with the back-and-forth play of tennis. Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child [CDC] (2019), which supports research promoting better life outcomes for children, states that:

> Serve and return interactions shape brain architecture. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that supports the development of communication and social skills. Much like a lively game of tennis, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity building. (p. 1)

Rowe and Snow (2020) argue, however, that quick, short lobs are insufficient, and that longer volleys are needed "if interactive responsiveness is to feed into the linguistic and conceptual development one hopes for" (p. 9). Whilst infants benefit most from parentese, prosody and repetition of words (Newman et al., 2016; Saint-Georges et al. 2013), it is cognitive stimulation and language that is more diverse and sophisticated which promotes vocabulary growth in toddlers (Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Möwisch et al., 2023). Such language entails the use of more complex words (Hoff, 2003), wh- questions (Rowe et al., 2017), open-ended questions and alternative viewpoints (Möwisch et al., 2023). Adults will be in a better position to promote children's language and conversation skills by listening to them more attentively, thereby being able to make informed decisions about what information to gather and what questions to ask (Dombro et al., 2011). Such observations on the part of adults provide a basis for sensitive and meaningful interactions (Brodie, 2014; Jones & Twani, 2014), and "nothing matters more than stopping, listening and responding positively to the young child" (Fisher, 2016, p. 1).

Rowe and Snow (2020) further contribute to this research area when they argue that there is a pivotal third, conceptual element that must be added to the interaction-language duo, namely topics of conversation. This conceptual content should "offer appropriate challenge for the child's developmental level" (Rowe & Snow, 2020, p. 6). Concept development and vocabulary are pivotal to language learning, and can facilitate learning in science, technology, mathematics, and the arts (State Government of Victoria, 2022). In terms of quality, better vocabulary in kindergarten may also result from decontextualized talk about past or future events, and adults' causal explanations of things or happenings around them (Rowe, 2012). Parents who use decontextualized talk with their toddlers generate toddlers who use more decontextualized language with them in return (Demir et al., 2015), and the amount of this

talk used influences children's academic language skills in adolescence (Uccelli et al., 2019). Siraj-Blatchford (2009) contends that through high-quality adult-child verbal interactions, as children practice describing, explaining, and justifying their thinking to others, this also enables the development of children's "meta-cognition, that is so important in learning-to-learn" (p. 84). In contrast, low-quality dialogue only serves to diminish both the level and meaning of children's involvement.

Besides Serve and Return, there are other approaches to adult-child verbal interaction that also positively influence early language development in these first few years of life. Recasting, or expanding on what a child says by adding on to the words used, aids in increasing that child's vocabulary and can indirectly show the child correct syntax and grammar, without the need for explicit correction (Cleave et al., 2015). Adults' avoidance of overt correction, and their use of expansions and recasting strategies are conducive to young children's involvement in language production (Fleta, 2018). Parents' use of expansions furthers children's language development by allowing them to enhance and broaden their knowledge about the word and what it means (Levickis et al., 2018; Taumoepeau, 2016). Early language and vocabulary development is also linked to the responsivity of primary caregivers (Bornstein et al., 2008; Cabell et al., 2011; Hudson et al., 2015) emphasizing the importance of open, warm responses to children's verbal serves and of adults' awareness of children's interests as a means of furthering their learning. Children's interaction attempts increase in line with parental responsiveness (Mol & Neuman, 2014) and such high-quality adult-child interactions are positively linked to language development, and lead to improved attention and memory load in the child's brain (Kuhl, 2010). Rowe and Snow (2020) further contend that adult responsivity not only promotes language, but also knowledge acquisition. The importance of the parental role in this is brought to the fore when research highlights a

lack of opportunities in terms of conversations in EY settings that could otherwise support and strengthen young children's emerging language skills (Cabell et al., 2015; Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014), and a displacement of exploratory learning and arts by academic preparation in terms of literacy and numeracy (Campbell, 2021; Haslip & Gullo, 2018). This is also concerning locally, where the recent introduction of an emergent curriculum in the EY has proven to be challenging for educators who are unsure as to how to implement it (Baldacchino, 2018; Chesworth et al., 2023), and where learning is still very much focused on learning letters and numbers (Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Sollars, 2021), to the detriment of a broad general knowledge foundation.

2.2.6.2 Vocabulary and General Knowledge

Knowing about words and knowing about things are not one and the same, but one may argue that the former (vocabulary) potentially leads to the latter (general knowledge), since once a word is known, one can then learn about and experience that word in a broader sense (State Government of Victoria, 2022). When children know the meaning of a word, they can understand better, and use that word in different aspects of language, such as speaking, listening, reading, or writing (Sinatra et al., 2012). Vocabulary knowledge is the basis for later reading comprehension (Torr, 2020). Besides better equipping children to understand instruction at school (Hindman et al., 2010), a large vocabulary also enables healthy social interactions and children's expression of their emotional needs (Arnold et al., 2012; Monopoli & Kingston, 2012). Unfortunately, many EY settings are lacking in vocabulary-learning opportunities (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009; Skibbe et al., 2011).

A large amount of high-quality language input contributes towards children's vocabulary development (Hurtado et al., 2008), and in turn, vocabulary is seen as a contributing factor in general knowledge acquisition, and essential for child development (Möwisch et al., 2023). Snow and Matthews (2016) claim that "embedding the unconstrained domain of vocabulary inside another unconstrained domain, world knowledge, promotes the learning of both" (p. 67). Acquiring a rich vocabulary and a sizeable general knowledge is important, with ample research highlighting the significance of vocabulary for cognitive and language development (Hoff, 2012) in babies, toddlers, as well as older preschoolers (Scott et al., 2020), and as a predictor of later literacy outcomes (Gunter & Koenig, 2010). The acquisition of other important language skills, such as grammar, reading proficiency and listening comprehension, is influenced by, and depends on, vocabulary knowledge (Möwisch et al., 2023), which "influences the complexities and nuances of children's thinking and how well they will understand printed texts" (Sinatra et al., 2012, p. 333). The importance of both vocabulary and general knowledge is heightened as texts increase in difficulty, when simply recognizing words will not automatically lead to comprehension (Stahl, 2011). Vocabulary acquisition has also been linked with children's intellectual and social development (Volodina et al., 2020), and with their ability to engage with new concepts relevant for literacy, numeracy, and science (State Government of Victoria, 2022). Science, in turn, contributes towards expanding children's vocabulary (Casha, 2015) and strengthening their linguistic and social skills (Settlage & Southerland, 2007). Empirical evidence indeed highlights the bidirectional beneficial relationship between conceptual knowledge and vocabulary (Borovsky & Elman, 2006; Möwisch et al., 2023). The importance of early vocabulary is thus very evident. It is one of the soundest predictors of school success (Dickinson et al., 2011) and should be placed at the forefront of early literacy (Neuman et al., 2011).

2.2.6.3 Shared Reading

Much research highlights the many, varied benefits of shared reading practices between adults and children (Dowdall et al., 2020; Mifsud et al., 2021). Shared reading allows opportunities for infants and young children to build their background knowledge (Torr, 2020), and other benefits include building children's oral language skills, receptive and expressive vocabularies, and inferencing skills (Zibulsky et al., 2019). In terms of learning, parent-child shared reading is viewed as highly effective in promoting emergent literacy and later school success (Flack & Horst, 2018), in supporting children's attention and memory, and in allowing for bonding between parent and child (Chaparro-Moreno et al., 2017; Ezell & Justice, 2005). This may, in part, be due to the enhanced opportunities for physical proximity, joint attention and social interaction that shared reading contexts provide (Murray et al., 2022; Preece & Levy, 2020). Indeed, children employ richer vocabulary in book-reading contexts than during play or mealtimes (Hoff, 2010). Just as importantly, engaging and emotionally supportive shared reading interactions can foster the development of positive orientations to reading (Bingham, 2007), and provide the opportunity for adults to model a love of reading (Campbell, 2021). The affective characteristics of shared reading in positively influencing children's outlook towards reading is important to note, and reading failure is likely when reading pleasure is absent (Morrow, 1997). Sriram (2020) echoes this in her insistence on the importance of young children enjoying the process of learning rather than focusing on their performance.

Children's language and early literacy gains in shared reading are thus not linked to the reading of a book per se, but rather to the quality of adult-child interaction surrounding it and specifically to extratextual talk, namely the conversations that go beyond the reading of the book itself (Torr, 2020). The nature and quantity of extratextual talk before, during and after

shared reading is closely linked to children's vocabulary development (Blewitt & Langan, 2016; Dickinson et al., 2012). Making text-to-life connections and questioning on the part of adults are also important tools in enabling children's learning (Davis & Torr, 2015). Indeed, how- and why- questions "emerge as the strongest mechanism for eliciting more extended verbal language from young children during shared reading" (Deshmukh et al., 2019, p. 66). Repeated readings are also beneficial since the child's familiarity with the book is heightened, allowing them greater understanding and participation in discussions (McGee & Schickendanz, 2007; Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010). Repetition allows children to better acquire the concepts depicted in the book (Deshmukh et al., 2022).

Children's picture books are very powerful tools in language learning (Murray, 2004), but book choice is also relevant (Torr, 2020), determining the opportunities for children to come across different linguistic and orthographic patterns and unusual vocabulary (Rawlings & Invernizzi, 2019). For example, whilst constrained books like graded readers are very useful for practicing phonics and allowing children to feel more confident and in control of their reading, they are often lacking in engaging topic content and rich vocabulary that can encourage reading for enjoyment (Adiniou et al., 2018). Good picture books are the vehicles through which children can reflect on different characters and their intentions, as well as events and their causes (Murray, 2004). Schickendanz and Collins (2013) argue for books with higher quality illustrations and writing, and Sun et al. (2020) concur, stating that the use of informational books, as opposed to narrative books, increases child participation by allowing for more discourse, and greater opportunities for questions and interactions that involve reasoning and are more cognitively demanding. All young children, whether kindergartners or younger, have much to gain from support in causal reasoning, inferencing, problem solving and emotional conceptualization (Deitcher et al., 2021; McMahon-Morin et al., 2020).

Despite its many, varied benefits on young children's cognition and language, research indicates the presence of barriers that obstruct primary caregivers' engagement in shared reading, both within EY settings and at home (Zibulsky et al. 2019). Within the home environment, families of low socio-economic status are less likely to have resources like learning materials and books (Le Roux, 2012). The quality and amount of shared reading may also be affected by factors such as parental reading styles (Carreteiro et al., 2015), parental knowledge, stress, and child characteristics (Zibulsky et al., 2019). For example, some studies indicate low parental responsiveness and verbal scaffolding during parent-child shared reading interactions (Dieterich et al., 2006; Guttentag et al., 2006). Since scaffolding is an approach that builds on children's existing understanding to offer support and challenge (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010), this indicates that parents do not adequately build on children's current understanding by extending their knowledge further through extratextual talk. This is even more evident where digital rather than paper books are involved (Mifsud et al. 2021). Parental perceptions of the value of reading, and what shared reading should look like is another significant barrier. For example, parents may not value reading activities with their babies because they do not receive any feedback in return, and thus perceive it as not worthwhile (Preece & Levy, 2020). Their fixed ideas as to the 'correct' way of reading is also detrimental when parents misinterpret a child's behaviour during shared reading, such as not sitting still, looking elsewhere, and skipping pages, as disinterest. In her local study, Cachia (2004) showed that mothers "took great pains to try and 'force' their children to read, however although these children were imbued with oral testimonies about the values of reading, they had very few models of reading behaviour" (p. 62). Children's reactions are pivotal elements in enabling parents to engage in shared reading (Lin et al., 2015), so whereas it may be assumed that parental literacy practices spark children's interest in reading, the relationship appears to be more bidirectional, in line with Sameroff's (2010) transactional

model of development (Hume et al., 2015; Pezoa et al., 2019). Increased parental awareness in adopting a more flexible outlook to shared reading practices that focus more on the enjoyment of reading and on extratextual talk would therefore be beneficial in enhancing motivation for reading, particularly since evidence of child enjoyment is a key factor in sustaining parental behaviours (Preece & Levy, 2020). Interventions aimed at improving parents' perceptions in terms of children's reading interest are more successful than those that focus on parental behaviour change (Pezoa et al., 2019). Since shared reading is so conducive to young children's language and cognition, providing parents with more information about it is important, especially since research suggests that some parents are unsure of how to read to their children. Training parents in shared reading practices is an effective strategy to sustain children's language development (Dowdall et al., 2020).

Within EY settings, quality children's literature is being consistently sidelined by a phonics-first approach (Campbell, 2021), with less opportunities available for children to engage in shared reading. Whilst, as previously discussed, learning phonics is an important aspect in early literacy, reading entails much more than simply blending letters according to their sound. It also entails activating prior concept knowledge, constructing meanings for unfamiliar words, and identifying text structures (Daskalovska, 2018). In her study in long day-care centres, Torr (2020) found that the interactions necessary for quality shared reading did not occur, and Deshmukh et al. (2022) contend that teachers do not take advantage of the opportunities afforded by shared reading to scaffold children's emergent literacy skills, underscoring teachers' infrequent use of optimum shared reading strategies like recasts, predictions, questions, and causal effects. Indeed, Goh et al. (2012) underscored the presence of low cognitive-level questions in EY settings. Within the local scenario, a lack of emphasis on meaning-making during shared reading in EY settings and a greater focus on phonics and

decoding have also been identified (Farrugia & Gatt, 2015). The dearth of optimum shared reading opportunities within EY settings emphasizes the importance of the parental role in engaging their children in this highly effective learning activity.

2.2.6.4 Sustained Shared Thinking

The same factors that contribute towards enhanced adult-child conversations apply to Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), namely stopping to listen to a child, being responsive, asking questions, and so on. In addition, however, during SST adults model their own thought processes 'out loud', thus showing the child how to think about thinking, then extend learning further (Brodie, 2014; Melhuish et al., 2015). Renowned theorists such as Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) advocated for a child-centred approach to learning and the importance of social interactions within a language-rich environment. Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes echo with Bruner's emphasis on linguistic interaction and again with Dewey, who argued that strong educational experiences result from continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned. Young children need time to think, ponder and play with different notions in the process of consolidating meaning-making (Wood & Hedges, 2016). SST is associated with improved child cognition and is viewed as pivotal in EY practice (Hayes et al., 2017). It makes use of high-quality adult-child conversations to sustain and further support children's learning at a deeper level, promoting creativity and thinking skills (Brodie, 2014), and differs from transient conversations in that SST is a process that builds improvement over time (Brodie, 2014). Sylva et al. (2004) define SST as "an episode in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, and extend a narrative. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend" (p. 36). Deep-level learning is more meaningful as it encourages children to think

critically rather than simply learn facts (Brodie, 2014; Laevers, 2005). Interestingly, Lohse et al. (2022) found that children's reasoning and their involvement in dialogue is directly influenced by subtle differences in adults' talk. When adults provide them with incomplete or unreliable information, young children pick up on it, and their thinking and participation in dialogue are encouraged. Indeed, Lohse et al. (2022) advocate for the use of hypotheses on the part of adults, which enables children to dig deeper in terms of thinking and reasoning, and to generate more and lengthier explanations. When children are encouraged to discuss things and think of alternative solutions, their thinking skills become honed, and they will also be more adept in such situations over time (Brodie, 2014). When compared to direct instructions, the use of open questions and incomplete or unreliable information encourages more explorative behaviour on the part of children (Bonawitz et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2018), allowing them to generate their own ideas. In terms of open questions, why questions are most conducive to the promotion of children's thinking and conceptual learning (Wellman & Liu, 2007). Tickell (2011, in Brodie, 2014) claims that developing cognitive strategies and thinking skills are predictors of life success, and that children should be supported in developing them. Indeed, when referring to SST, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) contends that in terms of "competence, progression moves from mastering the very informal and strongly improvised *sustained* and *shared* interactions to more highly structured and much more formal *sustained* and *shared* interactions in adult life" (p. 82). Unfortunately, within the local EY context, there does not appear to be space for SST, with research indicating the perennial rush against time is resulting in an environment where hearing is substituting listening (Gellel, 2018; Zimmerman & Morgan, 2016) and where educators plan short activities and move quickly onto the next one to avoid children getting tired and thus losing interest (Schembri, 2014). This emphasizes the importance of parents and children using SST within the home learning environment.

2.2.7 A Working Definition of Early Literacy

Drawing on social-constructivist theory, a young child's early literacy journey is a social and cultural process and one in which the child is an active participant (Van Kleeck & Shuele, 2010). As outlined earlier, oral communication is key to early literacy (Roskos et al., 2003) and young children make sense of the world around them through language and symbols (Kennedy et al. 2012). Whilst phonemic awareness, phonics, reading, writing, and print are all important aspects of early literacy, high-quality adult-child verbal interaction is *the* fundamental building block that provides young children with the greatest benefit (Torr, 2020; Van Kleeck & Shuele, 2010). It is thus important to recognize that EC literacy is much more than simply the process of learning how to read and write, and yet several studies highlight the primacy of, and over-emphasis on constrained early literacy skills, such as phonics and phonemic awareness, within the EY when compared to unconstrained early literacy skills, such as verbal interaction, vocabulary and general knowledge (Campbell, 2021; Deshmukh et al., 2022; Paris, 2005). Whilst recognizing the value of constrained early literacy skills, this study's focus is on a deeper, more holistic and complete understanding of early literacy as being socially and culturally constructed by the child through his or her life experiences and in collaboration with parents and other primary caregivers. Language and early literacy learning are thus part and parcel of everyday life and not tied uniquely to the teaching of letters or numbers, or to educational institutions. This study focuses on this wider vision of early literacy that looks beyond the academic and instead delves into the learning inherent in a young child's daily life.

2.3 The Role of Early Literacy in Child Cognitive and Linguistic Development

Fetuses are responsive to their mother's voice and touch even when in utero (Marx & Nagy, 2015), and newborn babies can already distinguish native language sounds from foreign

languages (Moon et al., 2013). A large body of international research highlights the importance of the first five years of life for a child's language and literacy development (Hoff, 2009), and pinpoints interactions with significant others as a key contributing factor (Thomason & La Paro, 2009). Language learning is socially mediated (Kuhl, 2007), and children's relationships with their primary caregivers are therefore highly influential on their brain development. These first few years see 'drastic changes' in children's language and cognitive growth (Butler, 2020), and this process is highly influenced by social, cultural, individual, and instructional factors – complicated further where more than one language is concerned, as is the case in Malta, where bilingualism prevails (Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Vella, 2013). These early years are thus a critical time for brain development, with Sriram (2020) suggesting that not all skills can be learned as well afterwards. Notwithstanding the brain being primed for learning, early language experiences are required to waken language production (Arshavsky, 2009 as cited in Paavola-Ruotsalainen et al., 2018; Kisilevsky et al., 2009; Perani et al., 2011; Romeo et al., 2018). The development of early literacy and language skills begins at birth (Bailey et al., 2023) through a child's interactions with primary caregivers in everyday activities such as talking, singing, reciting nursery rhymes and sharing books (Shanty et al., 2019). The brain's capacity for language and literacy increases through exposure to such literacy-rich environments, which stimulate brain growth and enhance opportunities for learning (Rowe, 2008; Thordardottir, 2017). In addition, young children's development and emotion socialization are secured within caregiver-child interactions (Cekaite & Ekstrom, 2019). The development of early literacy and socio-emotional learning (SEL) include many of the same skills (Doyle & Bramwell, 2011; Kozak & Recchia, 2018), and children's emotion knowledge and regulation patterns are linked to early literacy skills (Curby et al., 2015). Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child [CDC] (2019), emphasizes that "emotional wellbeing and social competence provide a strong foundation for

emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar of brain architecture" (p. 1). The development of emotion skills and SEL facilitates young children's engagement in the learning process, positively influences long-term academic success (CDC, 2019; Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007), and predicts literacy scores amongst kindergartners, even after controlling for IQ (Graziano et al., 2007). Language skills are thus associated with both cognitive and social skills, and with the development of Theory of Mind (ToM) (Sharhaeian et al., 2023). This refers to a child's understanding that others experience feelings and beliefs that may be different to their own, and plays a key role in children's development through its link to emotional, social and behavioural adjustment (Sharhaeian et al., 2023). The development of early literacy is thus fundamental on a number of levels in early childhood (Bailey et al., 2023).

Recent studies in brain architecture highlight the need for young children to be immersed in meaningful social experiences and rich language (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). The linguistic development that arises out of such an environment is crucial to children's social, emotional, and intellectual development (Macrory, 2020). Thus, the rich potential (Caruso, 2013) for the development of linguistic and literacy skills during these initial years cannot be ignored (Tussey & Haas, 2021) and must be carefully addressed, if we are to enable children's cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and cultural growth.

2.4 Early Literacy, Language Learning and Academic Achievement

One's motivation to engage in learning is dependent on one's positive experiences in EY education (Betts, 2014). Engagement and motivational levels positively predict children's academic achievement and are critical in aiding children to develop "both the skill and will to engage in literacy activities" (Baker & Wigfield, 1999 cited in Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 65). It

is important to cultivate such engagement and motivation through real opportunities to enjoy learning and thinking (bell hooks, 2010). Wood and Hedges (2016) argue that through participation, discussion, observation, and listening, children develop working theories that broaden, spread, and find connections that help them to make sense of the world around them, and to further their learning. As outlined earlier on, however, contemporary notions of early literacy are very much aligned with the acquisition of skills for reading and writing, leading to a perceived strong link between constrained literacy skills and school success. I argue that it is the more visible and tangible nature of constrained literacy skills, such as alphabet knowledge, that contributes towards this perspective, and that leads to a narrow vision of early literacy. In the EY, for example, children who learn the alphabet can be seen to have learnt it when assessed at school or by their parents at home, while their unconstrained skills may go unnoticed.

Early literacy and language learning impacts positively on a child's future academic trajectory, with research underscoring vocabulary, general knowledge and discourse skills as pivotal factors predicting long-term literacy (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Children who are exposed to early literacy from a very young age experience greater success from kindergarten (Miller & Warschauer, 2013 in Muscat, 2022). Language development is key to school success (Attig & Weinert, 2020), with a strong link between oral language abilities in children under 5 years of age and future academic achievement, both during primary school as well as in adolescence (Halle et al., 2012; Kieffer, 2012; Uccelli et al., 2019). Young children who experience substantial language input are at an advantage when compared to peers with weaker vocabulary (Hurtado et al., 2008), in both mono- and bilingual scenarios (Hammer et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2016) and listening to stories is highly significant in learning to read at a later stage. Vella (2018) states that maternal language and language

spoken at school are the strongest factors in children's language development. Socio-economic disparities, however, give rise to situations where children may not be exposed to early literacy and language learning at home, and Bourdieu (1977 in Dumais, 2006) posits that these disparities begin in early childhood and are cumulative, creating a lag in vocabulary and long-term school achievement (Head Zauche et al., 2017). Overburdened teachers may themselves not make use of the full potential for language teaching, and pre-service educators in EY settings struggle to provide a rich language environment, displaying hesitancy in terms of how best to interact and communicate with emerging-verbal young children (Salaman & Stratigos, 2019). EY settings do not always allow students adequate communicative space (Vezzani, 2019), and this heightens the importance of the parental role and the home learning environment in language learning.

2.5 The Role of the Parent and Parental Beliefs in Early Literacy and Language Learning

In Malta, besides the increasing number of children in childcare, close to 97% of children between 3 and 4 years of age attend kindergarten full-time (Eurydice, 2019; Sollars, 2020). Although in such settings children find the opportunity to interact with significant adults outside the home, I argue that the most important adults in most children's life, and the principal educational stakeholders, are their primary caregivers at home, namely their parents or carers (Abela & Grech Lanfranco, 2014; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Eilertsen et al., 2016; European Commission, 2014). Research recognizes them as role models, primary socializing agents (Fuertes et al., 2018), and as highly influential on a child's perceptions, behaviour and wellbeing (Johnson et al., 2008). Parents are key factors in their child's early literacy and language development (Butler, 2020; Head Zauche et al., 2017; Rowe, 2008), as are the perceptions they hold about children and how they learn (Rowe, 2008).

2.5.1 Parental Understandings of Early Literacy and Language Development

The onset of early literacy development may not be clear to parents, who often perceive it as starting at school (Tussey & Haas, 2021), and yet education (and hence learning) encompasses much more than schooling (Eaude, 2021). Parents' understanding and beliefs about early literacy influence their behaviour, and what parents know or don't know about child development impacts the way they communicate with their children (Rowe, 2008). For example, parents may be unaware that talking to, and interacting with their child can positively influence their child's early literacy and language development or may simply think that children just 'pick up language' and that parental input does not matter (De Houwer, 2009; Macrory, 2020). However, children do not simply acquire early literacy and language (Abu Baker, 2021), but it is verbal interaction between parent and child that stimulates the child's brain and promotes cognitive and linguistic development. Children's vocabulary and language development depend on parental language input (Hoff, 2013; Rowe, 2008), and this also holds true for children exposed to more than one language, as in Malta (Gatt, 2017). Thus, it is paramount that parents' beliefs about the plasticity of children's linguistic and cognitive skills are addressed (Suskind et al., 2016). Dweck (2006) suggests that many people believe in one of two opposing theories of intelligence, either entity theory or incremental theory. As opposed to entity theory, which posits that whilst skills can be learned, underlying intelligence is largely static, people upholding incremental theory believe in the malleability of intelligence and the positive impact of effort. Moorman and Pomerantz (2010) showed that mothers' perceptions about the malleability of intelligence can be altered, and Suskind et al. (2016) claim it is critical that parents understand their own role in building their child's intelligence, and that this is not static.

Implicit assumptions about children and their learning are deeply ingrained in culture (Eaude, 2021; Wills et al., 2021), and the impact of parental beliefs is particularly salient locally, where research indicates a lack of involvement of Maltese parents in their children's learning (Agius & Formosa, 2015). Parental involvement requires that parents understand the importance of learning to future academic success, and that parents and educators develop a good working relationship (Young et al., 2013). Parental involvement can mitigate the negative effects of low parental education and socio-economic background (Sengonul, 2022), which are considered high-risk factors in terms of early literacy achievement and school readiness (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010), and much research shows that parental involvement is predictive of child improved social competences and better academic performance (McDowell et al., 2018). It is important, therefore, that parents have a clear picture as to what early literacy is and as to their own role in their child's cognitive and linguistic development.

2.5.2 The Importance of Parental Knowledge of Early Literacy and Language Learning

Within the local EY context, Maltese parents appear to equate quality in childcare with EY practitioners' love and care, with exposure to letters, numbers, and shapes, and to "what is observable", namely structural factors within EY settings (Sollars, 2020). Whilst all these are important, quality in the EY must be viewed through a wider lens incorporating a broader vision of early literacy and language learning, and parents need to be more conscious and mindful of their own role and influence on children's quality experiences (Sollars, 2020). Indeed, the need for greater parental awareness of, and education in EY language processes has been underscored locally (MEDE, 2014). Raising such awareness amongst parents is crucial (Nutbrown et al., 2015; Suskind et al., 2018), since the embedded notions parents hold about children's teaching and learning influence how they themselves perceive and instruct their children (Bruner, 1996; Makovichuk et al., 2014). Parental beliefs thus shape their

decision-making, and influence opportunities afforded to children for learning and development (Makovichuk et al., 2014). In addition, parental perceptions of their child's ability to understand and learn language directly influences their attempts at communication (Rowe, 2008), and studies maintain that parents become more pro-active when they become aware of, and understand, the importance of the parental role in child development (Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Suskind et al., 2016).

It is important, therefore, for parents to understand how to facilitate and extend their children's learning (Hannon et al., 2020), and to reflect on *how* language is used with their child since many parents are unaware of the importance of talking to their young children, or of the best way to do so (Suskind et al., 2016), or even of taking the time to explain things to them, rather than giving uninformative, pat answers that effectively block the child from further discussion (Knight, 2017). This is significant when research highlights the strong positive impact of parental emotional and verbal responsivity on children's vocabulary acquisition and language development from birth (Rowe & Snow, 2020). Some parents think babies are not ready for activities such as shared reading (Preece & Levy, 2020), even though children exposed to literacy activities "early in life tend to read earlier and excel in school compared to children who are not exposed to language and books at a young age" (Lazorita, 2019 cited in Tussey & Haas, 2021, no page number). Parental awareness is a key factor in facilitating change in parental behaviour (Suskind et al., 2016), and in moving parents towards a broader vision of early literacy (Moffitt, 2019) that goes beyond simply letters, numbers, reading and writing. Parents would thus benefit from understanding that the *process* by which children learn is more valuable than the product of what children know (Lynch et al., 2006). In other words, *how* children learn rather than *what* they learn is key (Hayes et al., 2017). The value of this study lies in enabling a greater understanding of

parental awareness of early literacy and language development, and the home learning environment they provide. Such data may contribute towards better informed practice, policy and service development within this field.

2.5.3 Socio-economic Factors Impacting Parental Involvement

In Malta, parental education and occupation appear to be the strongest predictors of children's language acquisition (Gatt et al., 2020), and Eilertsen et al. (2016) cite parental education as the primary influence on a child's intellectual functioning. These two demographic factors also play a role in parental perceptions of literacy (Lynch et al., 2006) and affect home literacy practices (Muscat, 2022). Although the linguistic input of primary caregivers varies in quantity and quality both across and within socioeconomic groups, in general, children from high socioeconomic status environments experience language that is ample and rich in comparison to their low socioeconomic status counterparts (Cachia, 2004; Hoff & Tian, 2005; Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016). Parents of low socioeconomic status read less and use less dialogic reading with their children (Murray et al., 2023). This may be due to parents in a low socioeconomic demographic possibly having lower levels of education and weaker literacy and language skills that prevent them from adequately supporting their children's linguistic development (Rowe et al., 2005; Wasik & Van Horn, 2012; White, 2016). The adverse effect of low socioeconomic status on children's vocabulary acquisition endures beyond the school years (Chiat & Polisenska, 2016), and these children often remain disadvantaged in terms of educational outcomes, social status, and future employability (Wasik & Van Horn, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, there is a substantial association between parental employment and time invested in a child's learning, with mother-child quality and reading time negatively impacted

by maternal employment, leading to approximately 6 hours less time available for quality interactions (Heiland et al., 2017; Justice et al., 2020). On the other hand, maternal age has been linked to improved child outcomes, with older mothers exhibiting higher quality interactions and more positive parenting with their children (Singletary et al., 2022). Parental expectations about their young child's achievements are also influential and have been associated with a child's increased competence, self-worth, sense of identity (Stonehouse, n.d.), and academic achievement (Castro et al., 2015). Parents' perceptions and expectations are themselves influenced by their own interactions in the broader social context, and although a recent local study suggests that Maltese parents hold high expectations for their children's achievements, their perspectives about the influence of good quality childcare on children's potential growth have not developed substantially, with a continued emphasis still placed on child-minding and preparation for school (Sollars, 2018; Sollars, 2021). This points to an overall lack of awareness among parents of the importance of their own role in their child's early literacy and language learning.

2.6 The Home Learning Environment: Early Literacy Practices

"Literacy is not a commodity to be transmitted to children when they walk through the school gate" (Herrera, 2003, p. 15), and whilst young children are exposed to learning in EY settings, most learning occurs outside of school hours and parents remain pivotal to their child's early literacy and language learning (Camilleri, 2012). The home learning environment is multi-dimensional (Lehrl et al., 2020), and comprises both the physical characteristics of the home, as well as the quality of learning support for children. Key features of the home learning environment include the learning resources available, the learning activities provided, and the quality of parent-child interactions (Lehrl, 2020). Parental support is central to a positive home learning environment, and research suggests

that when the home learning environment is strong in the early years, this has positive lasting effects throughout the child's schooling (Rose et al., 2018). In addition, studies also indicate that parents who provide their children with a rich early home learning environment are more likely to continue this trend as their children grow older, thus providing on-going, sustained support (Sammons et al., 2015). It is highly important, therefore, that parents are aware of their role in providing a positive home learning environment, and of its impact on a child's cognitive and linguistic growth.

Parent-child interactions and family literacy practices are impacted by the demands of everyday life and by the expectations that parents hold for their child (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Children's first introduction to language is within the home environment, where they learn through interactions with family (Wasik & Van Horn, 2012). The home learning environment is significant, and children's early literacy acquisition depends on their language and literacy experiences at home in the preschool years (Lehrl et al., 2020; Weigel et al., 2010), with a clear link established between a poor home learning environment and children who struggle with literacy at school (Cachia, 2004). Parents, however, may be unaware of the important role they play in their child's cognitive and linguistic development, preventing them from making better and more agentive choices in terms of language use at home (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Research indicates that many parents hold a narrow view as to what activities comprise the home learning environment (Leech et al., 2022), and that this may limit the learning opportunities available to young children. For example, parents are still taken by the notion of formal instruction of literacy skills in Maltese and English, which may be lacking in meaningful interaction (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). They do not make adequate use of creative social contexts, but instead rely on "didactic commercial materials to engage their

child in early literacy activities" (White, 2016, no page number) such as shop-bought letter flashcards, or printed worksheets, for example. In addition, parents from a low socioeconomic status may find difficulty in obtaining such resources (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Children's vocabulary skills development has been associated with the availability and quantity of literacy materials in the home (Johnson et al., 2008), and children's observation skills are honed when they engage with rich literacy environments (Engel, 2015). Casha (2015) claims that dialogue quality is also linked to the environment and to available resources since these offer the opportunity for greater, more exciting, and challenging interactions. For example, hands-on activities are more mentally engaging for the child and support higher thought processes (Casha, 2015). Children construct knowledge through experiences and interactions with people and things in their environment, and Fisher (2016) argues for the potential effectiveness of interactions within the home since these often arise in the moment, are initiated by children, and provide opportunities for questions and conversations. Historically, mothers have been both the main caregivers, as well as the most active parent in terms of home literacy activities (Liu et al., 2022), however this distinct boundary appears to have become blurred, at least in terms of participation in home literacy activities (Huang et al., 2021). Interestingly, mothers and fathers contribute to children's literacy development in different ways (Duursma, 2014; Newland et al., 2013), with mothers more likely to participate in educational activities and fathers involved in play and exploration (Newland et al., 2013). Fathers have also been found to use more challenging and complex speech with their children (Liu et al., 2022).

Home literacy activities fit into two main domains: constrained or unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005; Snow & Matthews, 2016). Whereas, as outlined earlier, constrained skills can be mastered and are therefore finite, such as the alphabet, unconstrained skills such as

conversational abilities, general knowledge and vocabulary have no performance capping and can continue to be improved upon (Leech et al., 2022). Unconstrained skills are viewed as strong predictors of broader academic achievement (Snow & Matthews, 2016), and certain home literacy activities, such as storytelling, encourage their development. Parents may not realize that everyday routines, such as carrying out chores, writing a shopping list, cooking, or gardening, provide opportunities for the development of children's unconstrained literacy skills, through conversations and exposure to diverse vocabulary (Elliot et al., 2023; Leech et al., 2022; Purdon, 2021). Such home activities are highly conducive to the promotion of literacy and language development (Hoff, 2003; Rowe, 2012). Both process and structural features of the home learning environment are important in the early childhood years and are linked to children's language development (Attig & Weinert, 2020). Whilst certain factors, such as a low socioeconomic status of the family and low parental education, negatively impinge on both, there is ample evidence to suggest that a warm, emotionally positive environment has mitigating effects (Murray et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021). International policies acknowledge that children develop socio-emotionally in warm, supportive relationships, and through responsive and intellectually stimulating interactions (Blewitt et al., 2020). Such interactions "may improve children's outcomes beyond the impact of language-rich and cognitively stimulating interactions on their own" (Canfield et al., 2020, no page number) since a strong socio-emotional foundation helps children's development and learning (Ho & Funk, 2018).

As outlined earlier on in this chapter, digital literacy is also a relevant aspect of early literacy in the lives of today's young children (Nascimbeni & Vosloo, 2019), and plays a leading role, with families considering it an important factor in a child's academic and future success (Guernsey, 2012 in Miller, 2016). Children's lives are digital (Hesterman, 2013) and parents

see media exposure as both conducive to infant cognition, as well as convenient in terms of keeping children occupied (Vaala, 2014). Debates about EC and digital literacy, however, are complex. For example, policy on children's digital practices is moving from a risk and safety approach towards a rights-based approach, with research suggesting that the benefits of children's online practices outweigh the risks (Livingstone et al., 2019). Whilst the importance of digital literacy for children is paramount (Nascimbeni & Vosloo, 2019), and allows children to develop the necessary abilities that enable their inclusion in a digital society (Jisc, 2014), when it comes to children there is still the need for balance between these two perspectives (Byrne et al., 2016).

The effects of technology are not all positive and have been found to be dependent on certain factors, such as media content and design, how it is used and the child's age (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2019). Before 2 years of age, media influence appears to be detrimental to children's cognitive and linguistic development (Mendelsohn et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2007), as at that age, children process information best through live interactions with people, and not through digital media (Butler, 2020). To gain vocabulary, children under 3 years of age need interaction with adults during media exposure (Roseberry et al., 2009), whereas at a later age, linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cognitive skills can be enhanced by digital media, such as games and television (Butler, 2020; Prosic-Santovac, 2017 in Macrory, 2020). Parental perceptions, however, strongly impact their behaviour, so parental awareness of digital literacy and its potentially negative effects in the very early childhood years is essential to promote more beneficial social interactions and foster optimal child development (Suskind et al., 2018).

2.7 The Theoretical Framework

2.7.1 Social Constructivist Concepts in Early Literacy

Social constructivist theory highlights that children construct their knowledge through their interactions with more knowledgeable others within their social environment (Mcleod, 2023; Yin et al., 2020). Social constructivism has been spotlighted even more within the early childhood educational sphere with the increasing popularity of child-centered teaching and learning (Yin et al., 2020). Several renowned theorists, such as Dewey (1916), Vygotsky (1934), Bruner (1966), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) argue for the importance of recognizing the impact of the social context on child development. This research draws on social constructivism in outlining the role of the social context in young children's language and literacy learning, with particular emphasis on the concepts posed by Vygotsky, who argues that children's thinking first develops through social interaction before then becoming internalized (Moll, 2014; Young, 2012). Wells (2012) suggests that Vygotsky's notion of child development is a 'theory of education', finding root in the recognition that for Vygotsky, as for Durkheim, who was one of the founding fathers of sociology, human "social relations are fundamentally pedagogic" (Young, 2012, p. 8). Butler (2020) also argues that according to Vygotsky, instruction plays a dynamic, functioning role in child development that is necessary for academic reasoning. Vygotsky furthers the notion of pedagogic social relations as integral to a young child's assimilation of knowledge, to the process of making meaning, and to the development of higher or cultural forms of thinking (Mcleod, 2023; Young, 2012). He argues that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and is a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). One of the clearest explanations I've encountered in terms of Vygotsky's "theory of education" (Wells, 2012) is that "one cannot understand Vygotsky, if one does not understand that for him, human development is not the process of progressive socialization of

the individual, but the process of progressive individuation: the child is social from the beginning" (Riviere, 2003, no page number).

2.7.2 Vygotsky's Concept of Mediation

Vygotsky has been described as a "theoretical giant" (Hedges, 2021) in terms of his insightful contributions to our understanding of young children's learning. He was a pioneer in his belief that learning leads development, in direct opposition to Piaget (1964), and that affect and intellect contribute jointly towards this (Hedges, 2021). Central to Vygotsky's work are the notions of mediation, internalization, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Damianova & Sullivan, 2011; Hedges, 2021). He viewed cognitive development as the internalization of socially and culturally shared activities (Le Pham, 2003). From infancy, children's attention can be caught via stimuli, or mediating factors, in their environment, which may then lead to learning (Shotter & Lock, 2012). This is what Vygotsky refers to as mediation – a tool for cognitive change (Le Pham, 2003). Moll (2014) posits that various kinds of mediation are important in one's psychological and social development, and Wertsch (2007) breaks down sources of mediation as social or cultural, instrumental, semiotic, anatomical, and individual. By social mediation, he refers to children's social and cultural interactions with others around them, while instrumental mediation refers to the use of cultural artifacts, such as a pencil or a fork during participation in activities and daily living. Semiotic mediation is concerned with the use of symbol systems, such as numbers, letters, art, and language, whereas anatomical and individual mediation involve the use of one's body and one's agency respectively, in the mediation of learning. Mediation can therefore be seen as children interacting within their social worlds, replete with cultural artifacts (such as language), which in turn play a key role in the construction and growth of human cognition and cognitive skills. In terms of this study's focus on early literacy and language

development, semiotic mediation is key, and Vygotsky himself argued that "speech lies at the very beginning of the child's development and becomes its most decisive factor" (Vygotsky & Luria, 1934/1944, cited in Wells, 2012, p. 149).

2.7.3 Vygotsky's Concept of Internalization

The family is a primary agent in the early socialization of children (Wells, 2012). From infancy, language is a principal means by which adults and children interact, and although the young child may not yet have the skills required to communicate verbally, hearing language is a necessary component of child language acquisition (Wells, 2012). Within responsive and affectionate relationships, verbal interactions comprise the semiotic mediation through which children come to know words, what they mean and how they fit within a particular context. It is the process by which children eventually come to make sense of the world they live in. However, Hasan (2012) argues that in terms of higher mental processes, which are Vygotsky's key concern, semiotic mediation is insufficient. Indeed, Vygotsky elaborates:

> *Prior* to mastering his own behaviour, the child begins to master his surroundings with the help of speech. This produces new relations with the environment in addition to the new organization of behaviour itself. The creation of these uniquely human forms of behaviour *later* produce the intellect and become the basis for productive work: the specifically human form of the use of tool (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 25, my emphases).

Thus, child language acquisition does not solely depend on modelling an adult's language, what Vygotsky refers to as 'external speech', but involves "the creation of new psychological processes that are only made possible by the child's taking over and making her own the semiotic resources of the community's language" (Wells, 2012). This is what Vygotsky refers to as the process of internalization, where in this case, social or external speech is

adopted, interpreted, and reflected upon by the child, creating a medium for individual thought, or inner speech. In this way, as Vygotsky claimed, learning precedes development. He argues that by two years of age, a child's language and thought are connected, and that from then on, language determines intellectual development (Butler, 2020). Once language and thought merge, social language is internalized into inner speech, which enables the child to reason, giving rise to cognitive development (Mcleod, 2023). This highlights the crucial importance of high-quality verbal interaction in the early years, since children's linguistic skills impact the development of their thought processes (Purdon, 2016). Linguistic skills and new concepts are formed as a child plays and communicates with others, hence the significance of the child's social environment in cognitive development (Mcleod, 2023). Through interactions within the sociocultural environment in the first 2 years of life, a child's "elementary mental functions" (Vygotsky, 1978), namely attention, memory, sensation and perception, develop through mediation and internalization into more effective and sophisticated mental processes, or "higher mental functions".

Vygotsky distinguished between the thinking involved in acquiring everyday concepts that develop naturally through one's daily experiences, and scientific concepts, which require deliberate instruction for academic reasoning (Butler, 2020). Hasan (2002) elucidates this further by differentiating between visible and invisible semiotic mediation. Whilst visible mediation is purposive and requires a conscious pedagogical act, invisible mediation is ubiquitous and embedded in sociocultural activities, such as the learning that is acquired through daily routine occurrences. Hasan (2002) found that the talk used in invisible mediation, which often occurred spontaneously during some activity or other, was brief and could not be deemed a discussion. On the other hand, talk during visible mediation was lengthier, more value-laden and had a joint focus of attention (Wells, 2012). Hasan (2002)

argues that due to its pervasive nature, invisible mediation creates 'habits of the mind', which is the tendency "to treat some situations rather than others as relevant and worthy of attention and involvement" (Wells, 2012, p. 145). She goes on to say that the "habits of the mind" created in children who experience visible mediation foster mental dispositions that make connections between what Vygotsky called everyday and scientific concepts; in other words, the development of higher mental functions in thinking and reasoning. Hasan (2002) concludes by saying that young children who experience visible mediation are at an advantage and find it easier to adjust to, and engage with, schooling.

2.7.4 Vygotsky's More Knowledgeable Other and the Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky's notion of knowledge as socially mediated has at its core the concepts of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Mcleod, 2023), which work in tandem. The MKO refers to anyone in a child's environment who is more knowledgeable and thus has the potential to teach the child something new. This could be any adult primary caregiver, such as a parent, grandparent or educator, or even the child's peers. Mcleod (2023) claims that in today's digital and technological world, the MKO need not be a person, but can also refer to electronic support systems. I argue, however, that this latter point ignores Vygotsky's principal contention that learning is socially mediated and may also be particularly damaging to learning in the early years, which is so highly dependent on responsive and warm social interactions. Indeed, according to Vygotsky (1978), without the benefit of social interaction, children will not develop to their full potential.

The ZPD refers to a hypothetical area wherein children's emergent functions can be built upon (Butler, 2020). Vygotsky defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential

development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The role of adults, or the MKO, is thus critical in promoting children's learning and enabling them to achieve higher levels of thinking, and Vygotsky argues for the creation of a learning environment that nurtures child development through high-quality, affective verbal interactions and joint participation between the child and adult (Ogunnaike, 2015). Learning occurs when the adult "adjusts the amount of guidance needed to support a child's potential level of performance" (Beloglovsky & Daly, 2015, p.18) in such a way as to mediate knowledge that builds up the child's repertoire (Ogunnaike, 2015). The verbal interactions inherent in the ZPD, as well as the guidance provided by the MKO, are commonly referred to as 'scaffolding' - a term first coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). Scaffolding is of pivotal importance and concerns the way the MKO extends a child's current knowledge and skills, and "structures the problem-solving contexts which provide the bedrock on which cognitive development is founded" (Shotter & Lock, 2012, p. 64). Mcleod (2023) explains the concept of scaffolding by saying that through shared dialogues, the MKO provides just enough hints, encouragement, and know-how to enable the child to tackle a task, and then to use that knowledge independently to be able to do so again. The MKO allows the child to slowly gain mastery of a task, gradually decreasing the amount of scaffolding necessary in the process. According to Vygotsky (1978), play contexts are conducive to creating the ZPD since play allows children to practice a diverse range of skills, such as problem-solving and self-regulation, and fosters higher cognitive functioning (Ogunnaike, 2015; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). He defines a child's play as "not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired", going on to add that "play is converted to internal processes at school age, going to internal speech, logical memory, and abstract thought" (Vygotsky, 1933/ 2004, cited in Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, p. 81/85). Elliot et

al. (2023) also posit that activities that occur in everyday, playful interactions may particularly influence children's learning.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a working definition of early literacy as understood within this research study and has underscored the importance of a child's early literacy and language development, highlighting both positively as well as negatively contributing factors. Whilst young children have the potential to gain early literacy and language skills from within EY settings, parents are highly influential on this developmental process, both in terms of their behaviours, as well as their beliefs. The literature suggests that EY practitioners and parents focus more on providing young children with opportunities to acquire constrained early literacy skills, that many parents are unaware of the broader reach of early literacy, and that because of this, children's learning opportunities may be limited. Indeed, the significance and positive impact of wide-ranging unconstrained skills on young children's early literacy and language acquisition is such that researchers advocate caution in ensuring that they are not overshadowed. This highlights the importance of ensuring that parents are just as aware of unconstrained skills as they are of constrained skills, and that they are supported in transmitting them to their children within the home learning environment. When examined through a social constructivist lens, and with Vygotsky's theories of mediation and internalization in mind, young children's early literacy and language development take on enhanced significance. His concepts of the MKO and of the ZPD serve as clear guidelines that can lead young children towards achieving their full cognitive and linguistic potential.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research approach adopted for this study, and outlines the research schedule, aims, questions and rationale, and my positionality as a researcher. The qualitative methodology espoused is justified in terms of its relevance to this research, as is the main research tool implemented, namely that of informal, semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews. I then describe the sampling procedure, and the methods used for data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes with an account of the ethical considerations and limitations inherent in this study.

3.1 Research Schedule

The table below illustrates the timeline depicting the different stages of this study and provides a clear visual representation of the restricted time windows available for participant recruitment and data collection. Both of these are key points in the research activity that will be explained in detail further on in this chapter.

Year and Month	2022		2023						2024			
	Aug-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug
Literature Review												
Ethics Approval												
Sampling												
Data Collection												
Data Analysis												
Writing												

Table 1: Research Timeline

3.2 Research Aims and Research Questions

The literature review clearly highlights that early literacy is not simply about reading or writing, but that it includes aspects such as singing, vocabulary and general knowledge, rhyme, high-quality verbal interaction, play, phonological awareness and print awareness. It also uncovers the narrow understanding of early literacy among parents and a lack of awareness as to their own role in their children's cognitive and linguistic development. This research aims to identify how Maltese parents of kindergartners perceive early literacy and language development, their understanding of it, their needs in this area, and challenges they experience. It further aims to explore their awareness, knowledge, and recognition of their own role in their child's early literacy and language acquisition. Wood and Hedges (2016) argue that "guiding development is not the same as guiding learning" (p. 46), and this research aims to identify the extent to which Maltese parents are aware of this difference. This latter awareness is crucial, and research suggests that unless parents understand the importance of their role in their child's early literacy and language development, the possibility of their children acquiring essential, unconstrained literacy skills is negatively impacted.

One overarching research question was broken down into three separate supplementary questions, as follows:

How do parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, and what awareness do they have of their own role in it?

1. What knowledge and awareness do parents of kindergartners have of early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and of their own role in it?
2. What home literacy practices do they engage in with their children?

3. What challenges, if any, do parents face in promoting early literacy, language learning, and high-quality verbal interaction at home, and what do they feel would be helpful in this regard?

3.3 Research Rationale and Researcher Positionality

The idea for this study took root, in part, as a result of my own parenting journey, but largely as a consequence of personal reflections on my teaching experience, and on the myriad students and parents I encountered throughout that time. I noticed what I perceived to be a dearth of general knowledge among students in the primary school, a lack of vocabulary, and a strong association among parents and teachers in the EY between early literacy and constrained literacy skills, with a concomitant failure to distinguish between the wide range of the former, and the narrower scope of the latter. Learning has always been an important aspect of my life, providing me with much understanding, personal validation, enjoyment, and satisfaction from an early age and throughout the years. The potential for learning inherent in the first few years of a child's life is too important and too significant to ignore, and a lack of parental awareness will, in my opinion, lead to lost learning opportunities for children that may hinder their enjoyment and inclusion in schooling. This research is therefore my attempt to bring such awareness to the fore, and to identify parental perceptions of early literacy and language development and how these influence their home literacy practices. Parents are children's primary caregivers and first teachers, and I argue that their understanding of the early literacy and language learning that goes on as from a child's birth is a crucial factor in enabling a child's integration and sense of belonging in his or her scholastic journey, and in decreasing the academic difficulties, poor academic performance and social exclusion that are among the hallmarks of the complex and evolving trend of early school leaving (Council of the European Union, 2015). Unlike 18 other European countries

that have managed to reduce their rate of early school leavers to under 9%, in accordance with Europe's 2030 target in the field of education, Malta still has some way to go to reach Europe's prior target of under 10% by 2020 (Eurostat, 2023).

3.4 Research Methodology and Research Methods

This research is set within a social constructivist, interpretivist framework (Yin, 2003) where knowledge and social interaction are intertwined, and where rather than being a solely individual experience, knowledge is socially, culturally, and contextually constructed and shared through human interaction. According to Crotty (1998), social constructivism is the epistemological "view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed, and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). This approach is itself a learning process, but I have found it to be a reciprocal one that allows the researcher to understand participants' subjective realities and generates rich data to inform or ameliorate participants' situations whilst at the same time providing participants with a space to reflect on what they say and to construct new thoughts through our interaction. This latter point was very evident during the data collection phase and will be expanded on within the next chapter.

In light of this study's epistemological stance, a qualitative methodology was adopted that allowed for its exploratory research questions and its orientation to social context and to the meaning people attach to events and to their lives (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Relevant to this research, a qualitative methodology also enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of differences in people's perceptions (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016) and supports close collaboration between myself and participants, allowing them to "tell their stories" (Baxter &

Jack, 2008, p. 545) and thus enabling me to understand them better. To this end, semi-structured, in-depth, photo-elicitation interviews were chosen as the tool with which to gather data. I fully agree with Cohen et al. (2013), who claim that the semi-structured interview allows the researcher flexibility to reorder the interview schedule, to expand on what participants say, explore further, include new avenues and probe, as necessary. In my experience, this flexibility strengthens the interview process by enabling the discussion to flow seamlessly, rather than be structured into rigid segments, so that participants have the space not only to voice their thoughts, but also to reflect upon them, and use the researcher as a sounding-board. Kvale's (1996) interpretation of an interview as "an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 506) resonated with my intent for the interviews to be casual social encounters which both the researcher and participants would benefit from.

Copes and Ragland (2022) strongly argue that interview methods can be improved upon by engaging other senses, and in this study, the semi-structured in-depth interview as a research tool was further buttressed by incorporating photographs (Harper, 2002) taken by participants – a technique known as auto-driven or reflexive photography (Epstein, 2006 in Ford et al., 2017). This photo-elicitation method allows participants shared power (Banks, 2001) by giving them a more active role in the interview process and offering unique opportunities for data collection unlike traditional interviewing (Copes & Ragland, 2022). There is much research highlighting a range of advantages to photo-elicitation interviews, such as allowing a stronger rapport between researcher and participants (Copes & Ragland, 2022), encouraging recall, and stimulating conversation and reflection (Ford et al. 2017). There is also the potential for more information (Mandleco, 2013) where photographs are used to *collect* data rather than *be* the data (Copes & Ragland, 2022), and of deeper understanding (Harper, 2002)

as the images serve to "bridge the gap between the two worlds of researcher and participant" (Ford et al., 2017). The photographs provide both with a shared focus, and reticent respondents may perceive less attention focused on them, enabling them to feel more at ease (Bugos et al., 2014; Rollins, 2005). Powell and Serriere (2013) also argue that it is easier and more interesting for respondents to talk about visual representations rather than simply having a verbal dialogue. In addition, research supports the view that visual methods like photo-elicitation can open up a "different way of knowing and telling" (Prosser & Loxley, 2007, p. 63).

3.5 Sampling

Once ethical approval for this study was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A), permission to carry out this research was also sought and obtained from the relevant school authorities (Appendix B). In Malta, there are two concurrent years of kindergarten (KG1 and KG2) before children start compulsory, formal schooling in Year 1. Whilst these are not obligatory, more than 97% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attend kindergarten (Eurydice, 2019), which can be found in all educational sectors in Malta, namely in State, Church and Independent schools. I have been employed in a Church school for girls for the past eighteen years, and I was keen to carry out this project from amongst its parent cohort using purposive sampling. Research highlights a number of factors that influence the recruitment of participants to qualitative research. Among them are incentives, whether monetary or otherwise (Ferguson & Wynne, 2021), passive or active methods of recruitment (Fleming et al., 2015), participant motivation (Coyne et al., 2016), developing a rapport with potential participants, and establishing credibility (Negrin et al., 2022). As I will outline in detail further below, purposive sampling was an important cog in this study since it specifically opened up the possibility of early access to these parents, both via email and in

person, at least four months ahead of the beginning of a new scholastic year, the specific time-window available for data collection. This was a highly significant aspect of sourcing participants because, within a rather limited timeframe, it allowed them to see me as researcher, enabled the building of an initial rapport, and provided them the opportunity to ask questions in person before deciding whether to participate or not. All these factors are valuable in their potential to positively impact the recruitment of participants (Coyne et al., 2016).

Although, as mentioned above, State, Church and Independent schools all provide kindergartens, Church school student entry is determined by ballot. Thus, parents who would like their child to start attending a Church school at the end of September, submit their child's name in an application to the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE) during the preceding January and wait until May for a ballot to be carried out. This first ballot is rather generic and ensures a student's place in a Church school, but parents must then await a second ballot in June to determine which Church school their child will go to. It is only after this that the school receives contact information and other relevant details of their new cohort. Once the cohort becomes known, there is thus only a time-window of between 3 and 4 months in which participant criteria will be valid and in which to fully carry out all data collection. Within this 4-month timeframe, however, the actual period of time between first obtaining cohort information and initially meeting potential participants to personally introduce the study is restricted to less than one month, since the school holds a meeting for newcomer parents within two to three weeks of the cohort becoming known. Thus, purposive sampling very effectively provided me both with timely access to a pool of potential participants who fit the research criteria, and with the chance to carry out all the preliminary indirect introductory contacts and the face-to-face meeting within the limited time available.

The annual kindergarten cohort in this school numbers a total of seventy-two children, and the specific criteria required of parent participants was their being Maltese and having their first child soon starting KG2 there. Participants were in a strong position to inform the issue being explored (Stroh, 2000), since as parents, they would soon be experiencing KG2 within a formal learning environment for the first time and may thus not yet have been exposed to the more academic focus on early literacy inherent in formal educational institutions. This latter point is important in terms of parental perceptions and understandings of early literacy. In addition, by choosing this sampling method, data collection could be finalized during the summer months preceding the beginning of the school year, in line with participant criteria. As the new cohort became known in June, I obtained parent contact details from the school administration and sent an email to all prospective kindergarten parents in which I introduced myself, my role at school and the study in question, describing what it was about and providing as much information as possible through a detailed information sheet (Appendix C). I made it clear that the research had nothing to do with the school, and that their participation was entirely voluntary. I also informed them that I would be talking about the study during the upcoming open day that the school routinely holds towards mid-June, where they would have the opportunity to meet me and clarify any queries that they may have had. This gave parents the possibility of knowing about the study ahead of time and thinking about whether they would be interested in participating. Along with the emailed information sent earlier on, this aligns with a multi-modal approach to participant recruitment through the use of both passive and active strategies (McCormack, 2014). All potential participants were also sent a copy of the consent form (Appendix D) so that they could read through it and understand what they would be consenting to on participation.

During said open day, all new kindergarten parents were welcomed and given the opportunity to see the school, the facilities, the kindergarten classrooms, and meet the EY staff and each other. Before that, the Head of School held an informal meeting in which parents were given an overview as to what to expect in kindergarten, and encouraged to ask questions if they needed clarification on anything. Towards the end of the meeting, once parents had settled their queries, I introduced myself and outlined the study, its focus, and its importance locally. By showing a simple, and very visual PowerPoint presentation (Appendix E), I explained the research and provided a general overview of the research design, the research questions to be addressed during data collection, and what participation entailed so that parents were well informed before deciding on whether to participate or not. I made it clear that they could refuse to take part and that, should they decide to participate, they would still have the right to withdraw from the study without explanation. In this case, the data they may have already given would be destroyed. If this occurred after the data collection phase, however, namely the end of September 2023, the data would still be kept for analysis as part of this research study, since by then, the data would have been anonymized on transcription. Furthermore, I referred to the participant information sheet that I had sent a copy of along with the introductory email, and which included the names and contact numbers of both my supervisors, myself, and of the key designated contact person independent of the research team. I explained who they would be able to contact should they have any concerns or issues about the way the research was carried out. I reiterated that the study had nothing to do with the school, that their participation or otherwise was entirely voluntary and would only be known to myself as the researcher and my research supervisors, and that the school would not be given any information. Confidentiality and anonymity were explained, in line with Bell's (2018) suggestion that clarifying both is important since they may be perceived differently by participants.

Parents were then asked whether they wanted to clarify any queries, and to let me know via return email by the end of the week if they wanted to participate in the study. Recruitment is influenced by participant motivation (Negrin et al., 2022). Factors such as altruism, and the perceived importance of the study or an interest in it, could aid recruitment, whilst perceptions of not having the time or not having anything significant to contribute could dissuade potential participants (Coyne et al., 2016; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). Whilst the total KG2 parent cohort included 72 parents, this number was significantly narrowed down as a result of participant criteria requirements, namely being Maltese and having the eldest child about to start KG2. Twelve parents (one parent from twelve different families) sent me an email confirming their participation. Although the above-mentioned meeting was attended by both mothers and fathers, and though I made it clear that any parent could participate, only mothers were voluntarily recruited. This could indicate that the traditional view of the maternal figure as having a central role in a child's physical and educational wellbeing is still very much ingrained in Maltese society, and indeed aligns with recent research highlighting the prevalence of traditional gender role stereotypes in Malta (Cutajar et al., 2023), where feminist ideologies, although present, do not translate into the family's day-to-day reality (Grixti, 2022). In Malta, mothers still shoulder the larger proportion of responsibility when it comes to the care and education of young children (Cutajar et al., 2023). This notion is also highly evident within the EY sector in general, which is viewed as a highly feminized educational context (McDonald et al., 2024). In tandem, these factors may have contributed towards the non-recruitment of fathers as research participants. Whilst highlighting the importance of continuing to target mothers when implementing educational initiatives, the need for greater awareness amongst fathers as to their role in their child's linguistic and early literacy development is evidently clear.

3.6 Data Collection

All twelve participants were sent a follow-up email in which I thanked them for their interest in participating and reiterated the steps they were to take before interviews could be set up. This is in line with Copes and Ragland (2022), who emphasize the importance of providing participants with clear and simple instructions regarding what is expected of them. They were to earmark a particular week in which to document any home literacy activities that they carried out with their daughter through photographs. The period of one week was chosen since it allows time for a cycle of activities and is often recommended in participant-driven photography (McAllister et al., 2005; Miller, 2016). Participants were urged to opt for a typical week, rather than one in which there may have been an unusual event ongoing, such as a family wedding or travel abroad. To this end, they were allowed a two-month period to schedule what they believed would be a typical week. Participants were asked to use their own mobile phone cameras for ease of access and use (Copes et al., 2018) and since providing participants with cameras would be too expensive. Participants were informed that the photographs would not be used as data per se but rather as a stimulus for dialogue in the interviews to follow (Copes & Ragland, 2022; Harper, 2002) – a qualitative interview technique referred to as photo-elicitation, or photo interviewing (Miller, 2016). They were urged to photograph the activity per se, such as a book, or a recipe, or a picture illustrating a topic of conversation rather than their child, so that no person would be identifiable in the photographs. As suggested by Miller (2016), clear instructions were provided as to how participants could send me their photographs, however they were left free to decide whether to do so ahead of our interview or else show them to me from their own mobile phone on the day. Approximately half the respondents opted for the latter. No photographs were printed.

One week after sending the follow-up email, all participants were contacted telephonically and appointments for the interviews were fixed, according to when each individual participant envisaged being ready from documenting a week's home literacy activities. Although participants were informed that interviews could be held at any time during July, August, or September, they were all available during the month of July and data collection was finalized then through photo-elicitation interviews. Since I had sent out consent forms in my initial email introducing the study, four participants sent me a signed soft copy via email. The remaining eight were asked to sign a hard copy of the consent form just prior to commencing their interview.

Within the context of qualitative interviews, Gagnon et al. (2015) argue for researcher reflexivity in choice of location, and Kaaristo (2022) claims that the creation of 'spaces of inclusion' are important. Whilst interview location is often considered a practical issue in terms of convenience for interviewee and researcher, and a place that may provide minimal interruptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), this simplistic view does not take into account potential power dynamics (Bjørvik et al., 2023; Kaaristo, 2022). Thus, so as to create this inclusive space and empower participants (Elwood & Martin, 2000), they were asked to choose the interview location. Furthermore, in line with Elwood and Martin's (2000) contention that to make an informed choice about their preferred interview location, participants must first be aware of the content of the interview to be held, I had previously outlined the research questions and explained what the interview would be about during our preliminary introductory meeting.

Individual semi-structured in-depth photo interviews were thus conducted with twelve parents of kindergartners, at a location of their choice. Research indicates that participants may feel

more in control within their own homes, and that this contributes towards more balanced power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, and facilitates trust-based conversation (Bjørvik et al., 2023; Elwood & Martin, 2000). At the same time, I wanted participants to know that they were also welcome within my own home, and openly suggested it as a possible location, as well as others like parks, coffee shops and at school, which I felt was a common link to both since that was where we initially met. One participant preferred to meet me at my residence, three at theirs, and the remaining eight opted to meet me in my private office at school, during the school holidays.

Permission to audio-record these interviews was solicited and obtained from each participant. This was important to allow me to focus on respondents, both in terms of their facial expressions and non-verbal behaviour, as well as on what they were saying. In addition, it eliminated the need for note taking, which Gottlieb (2006) argues may suggest unequal power relations, and which Schutt (2006) suggests may prevent appropriate displays of interest and appreciation on the part of the researcher, and hinder concentration. This is important since, whether real or perceived, power dynamics can significantly influence participant-researcher interactions (McGarry, 2016). The interviews were very informal, purposeful social conversations rather than formal interviews, allowing parents to feel at ease, and sought to identify participants' perceptions of their own role in early literacy, quality interaction and language development. Photo-elicitation interviews have the potential to aid recall and encourage conversation and reflection (Ford et al., 2107). By adopting this research tool and using open-ended questions with simple vocabulary (Cohen et al., 2018), I could engage participants in a dialogue about the meanings behind their comments, allowing depth, richness of response and comprehensiveness of data (Turner, 2010). This enabled me to gain a more complete picture of participants' perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. It also

provided me with the opportunity to clarify and expand on participants' comments (Cohen et al., 2018; Jamshed, 2014), as necessary. In addition, research (Bugos et al., 2014; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) indicates that incorporating the visual component of photographs within the interviews is a factor that may lead to richer responses and heightened participant engagement, allowing me the chance for deeper discussions with them, and providing a more diverse data collection than traditional forms of interviewing allow (Copes & Ragland, 2022). This is because images "mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews" (Harper, 2002, p. 23) since different parts of the brain are used in visual and verbal processing (Pain, 2011). In addition, this research tool allowed parents to spend a week documenting their home literacy activities, potentially enabling them to reflect upon them and think about early literacy and their interaction with their child ahead of our meeting, rather than relying solely on a one-time interview for data collection (Miller, 2016).

3.7 Piloting the Study

A pilot interview was held prior to carrying out the actual research interviews with participants. To this end, I recruited a parent who fit participant criteria in terms of being Maltese and having her first child about to start KG2. What set her apart from research participants in terms of participant criteria was that her daughter was enrolled in a State school instead, and so her data would not be used for data analysis purposes. By holding a pilot interview, I primarily wanted to ensure that participants would understand the guideline interview questions prepared (Appendix F), and that the interview schedule would be effective in collecting relevant data (Bell, 2018). The pilot participant was very candid and enabled me to streamline the interview questions, rearrange their order, and simplify language for it to be more accessible and easily understood. I also had a better idea as to the approximate length of time the interview would take and discussed whether the pilot

participant would have preferred to know the main research questions ahead of time, and why. In response to this, I decided to inform participants about the three supplementary research questions during the introductory meeting held at school, to reduce any potential anxiety amongst them and give them the opportunity to reflect on their home literacy practices before the interviews.

3.8 Data Organization and Processing

The qualitative research tool chosen for data collection, namely the in-depth, semi-structured, photo-elicitation interviews, generated a large amount of data that first needed to be transcribed. Since Malta is a bilingual country, eight interviews were held in Maltese and four in English, according to participants' preferences. With the purpose of facilitating thematic analysis, however, I transcribed all interviews directly into English. Participant interviews lasted for an average of just over an hour each. Certain issues were considered a priori in terms of audio-recording, namely opting for a digital recorder rather than a mobile phone to facilitate the transfer of audio files to my computer for transcription, ensuring a quiet environment without background noise and interruptions, and positioning the audio-recorder close to participants to pick up their voice clearly (Da Silva, 2021; McMullin, 2021). Transcription is a long and time-consuming task (McMullin, 2021), and standard practice in qualitative research (Tracy, 2019). It was important for me to retain as much detail as possible, so I transcribed all interviews fully verbatim (Bucholtz, 2000). I view this primarily as being aligned to the social constructivist nature of this study, but it was also done in a conscious effort to avoid any biases on the transcriber's part that could lead to Jaffe's (2007) notion of transcribing as a political and interpretative act, where the transcriber decides what value to place on collected data. Having myself, as researcher, transcribe the data within three weeks of each interview enabled greater coherence between my research approach and

my approach to transcription (McMullin, 2021). I thus also felt confident that each transcript was an accurate record of each interview, and that this added to the overall trustworthiness of this study. Once transcripts were finalized, the data was analysed as indicated below.

3.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis "is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data" (Bernard, 2000, p. 177), and this was done using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Categories were generated from the data via thematic coding, which involves "identifying a corpus of 'instances' of the phenomenon that you are interested in, and then selecting those out" (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 206). This provided a framework for analysis, classification and interpretation. Researcher reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative methodology (Dean, 2017) and I made a concerted effort to keep this foremost. Being reflexive meant that I was aware of my own subjective positionality and how it could shape my data analysis. I listened to the audio-recordings multiple times and once they were transcribed, I listened to them again with the hard copy of the transcription in front of me. This was done to ensure that my transcriptions were faithful to participants and that their reality was documented, not mine. Through this process, I felt immersed in the data, and this propelled me towards analysing the data for core concepts, also referred to as central organizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These concepts were initially guided by the study's research questions, until themes within each of those were identified according to participant responses. It was important that I understood and interpreted the data to find meaning, rather than simply stating it at face value, and I did this by keeping myself immersed in the data, actively moving from the transcripts to the concepts and themes, then back again throughout. I then compiled all the information pertaining to each of these themes separately, to facilitate my access to the data during the writing phase. I found this approach

organized yet flexible, as it allowed me to consciously reflect on the data as I moved through the coding process. The main themes coded were:

1. Sociodemographic and cultural factors informing the data,
2. Parental understanding of early literacy,
3. Sociocultural factors influencing parents' perceptions of early literacy,
4. Parental understanding of language development,
5. Factors influencing parents' perceptions of language development,
6. The home literacy environment,
7. Perceived challenges to early literacy and language development,
8. Perceived needs of new parents.

As outlined in the table below, the first five themes coded were directly related to the first supplementary research question, and aimed at identifying what parents of kindergartners understand by early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and how they perceive the parental role in this regard. The next theme focused on the second supplementary question investigating the home literacy practices parents engage in with their children, while the final two themes were related to the third supplementary question which sought to uncover any challenges parents face in promoting early literacy, language learning, and high-quality verbal interaction at home, and their needs in this regard.

Supplementary Research Question	Coded Themes
1. What knowledge and awareness do parents of kindergartners have of early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and of their own role in it?	1. Sociodemographic and cultural factors informing the data, 2. Parental understanding of early literacy 3. Sociocultural factors influencing parents' perceptions of early literacy, 4. Parental understanding of language development, 5. Factors influencing parents' perceptions of language development.
2. What early literacy practices do parents of kindergartners engage in with their children within the home environment?	6. The home learning environment.
3. What challenges, if any, do parents face in promoting early literacy and language learning at home, and what do they feel would be helpful in this regard?	7. Perceived challenges to early literacy and language development, 8. Perceived needs of new parents.

Table 2: Themes Coded in Relation to Supplementary Research Questions

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important throughout the research process (Cohen et al., 2007), and ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee. Social research is messy (Tagg et al., 2017), requiring researchers to be reflexive and flexible in responding to micro ethical issues as they arise, and that may require daily negotiation (Banks et al., 2013; Kubanyiova, 2008). Research is not a neutral undertaking (Cohen et al., 2007), and my positionality, beliefs, values and biases, as well as my accountability as a researcher (Walliman, 2005) were kept in mind. The onus is on

researchers to ensure the willing participation of respondents, and the gathering of data that is salient and relevant. Burton (2000) refers to this as veracity and fidelity, whereby the researcher is truthful about all aspects of the study and keeps promises of anonymity. Also of primary concern are participant privacy, confidentiality, written informed consent and voluntariness (Schutt, 2006). To this end, I explained that participant consent must be given freely and voluntarily. To clarify matters, I first explained the research and research methods fully, outlining step-by-step how it was going to be carried out, when, and where. I made clear during both the introductory meeting, and again in my follow-up email what would be expected of participants in terms of time and what in-depth photo interviews entailed. The content of the photographs, and the reason behind their use in this research was explained and justified, and participants were assured as to how their photographs and data would be stored, who would have access and why, as well as how and when this data would be destroyed. I also discussed issues pertaining to privacy, anonymity, and consent. Participants were assured that their data would be anonymized when writing up the research project, and that once consent was given, it could still be retracted at any time and without explanation, in which case they would be free to leave the study by simply saying so, and all relative data would be destroyed. It was also made clear, however, that this would only be possible until the end of September 2023, after which time their data would already have been anonymized on transcription and would thus be kept for data analysis.

Prosser (1998) argues that the use of images in research is viewed negatively in terms of the potential ethical ramifications this poses, so the use of visual methods must be justified (Miller, 2015). As mentioned earlier, visual methods are significantly advantageous: allowing participants greater control, enabling a stronger rapport between them and the researcher, providing opportunities for deeper conversations, richer responses, and data

collection different to that obtained through traditional, words-alone interviews (Bugos et al., 2014; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Pain, 2011). Ford et al. (2017) argue that it is important that participants are wholly informed as to how their photographs will be used and stored, so all of this was fully explained to participants before soliciting their consent to participate in this study. In this research, focusing on the early literacy practices of Maltese families, photograph content was benign and nonthreatening. Participants were urged to photograph solely what they perceived to be literacy activities held with their child. They were urged to exclude their child from the photo and simply photograph the activity itself (for example, the book they were reading, or what they were cooking, or something they were talking about), and to avoid photographing non-participants if or when taking photographs outside the home. Participants took the photographs themselves and were in full control of which photographs to present me with. They were also given the option to keep their photographs on their own mobile phone and show them to me during the interview, rather than sending them ahead of time. This is a non-invasive method, as opposed to researcher-driven photo-elicitation, where photographs are taken by the researcher. If, during the literacy activity, their child insisted on being photographed, participants were urged to also ask their child whether she would like to take some photographs herself (with assistance, if necessary), thus obtaining the child's consent to participate. Participants would then vet the photographs and send me only those the child herself had taken. This would significantly minimize the chance of any child featuring in one of the photographs. In addition, the photographs were only used as prompts and not as research data. This means that only the family members, my research supervisors, examiners, and I have access to view the images that were sent to me. No photographs were printed. All data obtained during interviews, namely the interview audio-recordings, were anonymized and then transcribed for analysis. The transcripts, photos and audio-recordings were stored on the University of Sheffield's Google Drive which follows EU data protection

legislation. Signed consent forms were digitized, and the hard copies shredded. Hard copies of the anonymized transcripts required for data analysis were kept securely locked in a small safe box and in a locked cupboard at home, which only I had access to. Participants were informed that all data would be kept for a maximum of five years (2023-2028), until the research was finished, and allowing for the possibility of publishing research data, after which time all data would be destroyed, either deleted or shredded. Before this time, any other researchers wanting to research this area further would only have access to the anonymized data with participant consent, but neither the photos, nor the original audio-recordings. The University of Sheffield acted as the Data Controller for this study, and as main researcher, I hold responsibility for data protection and storage.

Throughout the photo-elicitation interviews, I was careful to observe participants' non-verbal behaviour for any indication of discomfort or reluctance to continue (Kubanyiova, 2008). The interviews were so casual, however, that all respondents appeared open, willing to participate and quick to relax once they were underway.

I also reflected upon my positionality and the drivers of this study (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012), namely the high value I place on education in general, and the importance of early literacy and language acquisition in the early years as a catalyst for social inclusion. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) agree with Stanley and Wise (1993), who argue that "personhood cannot be left behind" and that "hygienic research is a…mythology which presents an over-simplified account of research" (p. 161). Adopting a reflexive approach reminded me to be more critical and not to take things at face value, in line with Reissman's (2008) assertion that "narratives don't speak for themselves" and need thorough analysis.

3.11 Limitations

Potential limitations of this research could be its small scale and particular demographic, namely the fact that all participants were female career professionals who value education (Johnsen et al., 2019), both their own and their daughters', highly. These participants also have their daughters starting KG2 in a Church school and although, as mentioned earlier, entrance to Church schools is decided by ballot, one cannot disregard the fact that there is a substantial disparity between the cultural, social, and economic status of the three school sectors in Malta (DGII Council of Europe, 2015), namely the State, Church, and Independent sectors. In terms of student academic achievement, the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] reports (2009, 2015, 2018) consistently show that students attending Church and Independent schools score higher than those in State schools in Mathematics, Science and Reading (Conneely, 2020). These are important points since the degree of match between parental beliefs and values for education and the values of the schooling system can influence parents' choice of school (Barbarin et al., 2010). In addition, considering the financial resources required to enroll in and attend Independent schools, it is not inconceivable that parents who value education will opt to apply for a place in the Church school ballot.

Participants were informed of the study's research questions during the preliminary introductory meeting, so some may have sought relevant information prior to their individual interview. They may also have been influenced by my role as researcher (Kuper et al., 2008), and documented early literacy activities that are not a part of their normal routine (Miller, 2016), simply to have photos to discuss during the interview, or to be viewed positively. Miller (2016) and Rose (2011) argue that there is always the risk that research participants may alter their behaviour or provide responses influenced by social desirability. However,

during the photo-elicitation interviews, participants were asked about their home literacy practices over and above the photographs shown since the photographs were meant to be used as prompts, rather than data per se, and because participants' interpretation and explanation of the meaning and importance of the activities photographed is more telling (Rose, 2011). Furthermore, Schutt (2006) argues that "those whom we study can evaluate us, even as we study them" (p. 10). Researcher self-presentation is therefore important but remains subjective even after considering such factors as adequate dress code, denigrating any perceived power differences between myself and the participants, and adopting a friendly and open demeanour. I believe that the cooperative activity (Copes & Ragland, 2022) involved in participants documenting their home literacy activities through photographs and discussing them with me may have served to minimize any limitation potentially related to perceived power differences. The photographs also contributed towards an easier and lighter flow to the interviews, and respondents appeared keen to explain their content.

In terms of research authenticity, whilst generalizability, validity and reliability are commonly viewed as "the holy trinity" (Kvale, 1996, p. 229), Rose and Johnson (2020) argue that a shift has occurred that distinguishes between these standards in quantitative versus qualitative research, and that aligns with epistemological notions of interpretive paradigms. They advocate for a broader concept of trustworthiness as the aim for qualitative inquiry, referring to the meticulousness of the research design, researcher integrity and credibility of the research findings (Johnson & Parry, 2015). A sound justification of research methods used, clear analytical processes, researcher subjectivity and reflexivity are principal factors contributing to a qualitative study's reliability and trustworthiness (Johnson & Parry, 2015; Rose & Johnson, 2020), addressing the "truth value" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312) of its analyses and findings.

3.12 Conclusion

A sound methodology that does justice to the issue under study is a vital aspect of any successful research. Where central importance is given to participants' beliefs, perceptions and behaviour, qualitative methods are highly relevant, since they are geared towards uncovering "the nature of the social world through an interpretive and empathetic understanding of how people act and give meaning to their own lives" (Stroh, 2000, p. 202). This chapter has provided detailed information as to the methodological process undertaken, describing the methodology and research methods adopted, the research design, sampling procedure and methods used for data collection and data analysis. Ethical considerations and potential limitations of this study were also discussed.

Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

4.0 Introduction

Earlier on in this thesis, I outlined the importance of viewing early literacy and language development through a wider lens that allows a greater understanding of the broad range of experiences inherent in both. This chapter addresses the study's overarching research question, namely how do parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, and what awareness do they have of their own role in it? The main themes coded and analysed are:

1. Sociodemographic and cultural factors informing the data,
2. Parental understanding of early literacy,
3. Sociocultural factors influencing parents' perceptions of early literacy,
4. Parental understanding of language development,
5. Factors influencing parents' perceptions of language development,
6. The home literacy environment,
7. Perceived challenges to early literacy and language development,
8. Perceived needs of new parents.

Through these main themes, this chapter identifies what participants understand by early literacy and language development in the early years, how they come by this understanding, and what they do about it. The home literacy environment is investigated, and challenges experienced by these parents in terms of their child's early literacy and language development are analysed. The chapter concludes with parents' own thoughts about the sort of information that would help new parents better enable their child's cognitive and linguistic development

from an early age. Throughout this chapter, participants have been quoted directly within inverted commas. It is pertinent to point out that at times, these direct participant citations have been included within the narrative itself. In such cases, personal pronouns have been changed within brackets so as to enhance the narrative flow.

4.1 Situating the Data

4.1.1 Sociodemographic and Cultural Factors

Participants hailed from all areas of the Maltese Islands, namely the Northern, Northern Harbour, Western, Southern Harbour, South-Eastern Districts and Gozo. All were between 31 and 39 years of age, and all bar one in this study were professional graduates, situating the study within a particular white-collar socio-demographic.

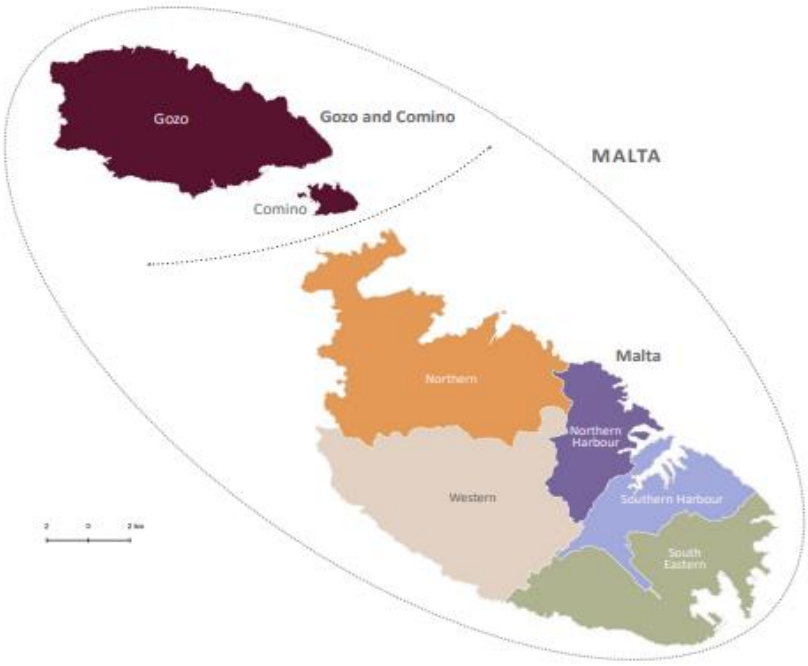

Image 1: Map of the Maltese Islands According to District (NSO, 2023)

At the outset, it is important to point out that whilst this research study was open to both male and female parents, and even though both fathers and mothers were present at the initial presentation I carried out to introduce this study to potential participants, only females volunteered to participate. This study's cohort were thus all mothers. Whilst it could well be that the female parents felt more comfortable interacting with a female researcher than their male counterparts, no parents asked to be included as a pair (mother and father), so that both could participate together. This may suggest that despite the decrease in Malta's gender gap cited in the EU's Gender Equality Index 2019, Malta remains traditional at heart and struggles to combat patriarchal ways and discriminatory gender roles, with the educational aspect of children's early development still very much the woman's domain. All this finds credence in participants' own views:

> "It's true that we say there is equality nowadays but one of the partners must make a sacrifice. I gave up my dream job." (Martina)
>
> "Sometimes I feel as though I'm raising our child alone." (Diane)
>
> "My husband is better at playing with her. Everything else is up to me… school, health, everything." (Ella)

This latter quote aligns with Newland et al. (2013), who found fathers to be more involved in play and exploration. Indeed, it is evident that in Malta, as in most EU countries, mothers carry a significantly heavier, disproportionate weight where their children's education is involved (Azzopardi et al., 2021; Calleja, 2020; Estrada Tanck et al., 2023). Considering that early literacy and language development are fundamental building blocks in a child's education, this is a relevant factor with the potential to inform future policy development and early educational interventions locally.

In addition, all participants valued education highly, both their own and that of their daughters. Whilst for some of these women the term *education* elicited notions of the

academic being “a top priority” (Lara), and kindergarten as being the place to “have fun but *learn* something” (Justine), others held a broader and more holistic view of education as forming “the whole person – character, behaviour, non-verbals” (Anne), being evident in the “way you relate to others” (Esther) and making one “richer as a person” (Valerie), enabling “children to reach their dreams” (Pia) and “opening up their future” (Bridget). This appreciation of the value of education is important. Whilst parents’ level of education, in conjunction with other socio-demographic factors such as income, may likely but not necessarily positively influence a child’s educational achievement (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010), a high value placed on education increases parental involvement in their child’s education (Agupusi, 2018; Sengonul, 2022), which in turn positively influences academic achievement and social competences (McDowell et al., 2018).

4.2 Parental Understanding of Early Literacy

Despite the holistic view of education held by most participants, parental understanding of early literacy strongly revolved around reading and writing, with the learning of a specific set of constrained skills taking precedence over a more social orientation to learning. Parents appeared to equate *early* literacy with literacy, defined in a dictionary as the ability to read and write. This came across clearly when participants spoke about their understanding of the term *early literacy*:

> “I think that early literacy has to do with phonics and sounds, when they get to the point where they start to read.” (Bridget)
>
> “I link early literacy to reading - that she reads and recognises words and numbers. I think numbers come before letters. I think they’re used earlier, like when we count her fingers or the number of stairs we climb. The alphabet is started later, like in KG1.” (Anne)
>
> “I think it refers to the basis, that there are first letters, then words, then sentences. Numbers too.” (Martina)

Esther candidly told me:

> "I had to Google it because I wasn't sure whether it was something to do with the alphabet or numbers. It's about reading and writing – at least that's what I found online."

This finding aligns with the literature identifying a narrow understanding of early literacy among parents (Farrugia & Gatt, 2015; Leech et al., 2022; Sollars, 2020). It is important to consider, however, that parental beliefs shape their decision-making and influence opportunities afforded to children for learning and development (Makovichuk at al., 2014). Thus, whilst not exclusively barring their unconscious participation in more unconstrained literacy learning with their children, this restricted view of early literacy among parents may result in untapped learning opportunities, negatively impinging on children's early literacy development. The importance of parents understanding that early literacy is a much broader concept than just phonics, reading and writing (Hesterman, 2013) is thus highlighted.

4.3 Socio-cultural Factors Influencing Parental Perceptions of Early Literacy

4.3.1 The Family and Peers

Socio-cultural factors clearly contributed to parental understandings of early literacy, among them female family members and peers. Martina was quick to cite her mother and a close female co-worker as having given her "good guidelines to work with" and as having "made a difference" to her understanding of early literacy. She also underlined how she was influenced by what other mothers thought during random social encounters, such as when she met a woman at the playground one day:

> "Initially I wasn't thinking about it but then I went to the swings and one mother told me that she was going to start KG2 material with her son ahead of the school year. I told her to let him enjoy the summer, but then back at home I thought, 'Let me see what she was talking about'. I think it makes a difference." (Martina)

Anne was also similarly influenced by her own mother, who was all for letting children "try things out", and she too emphasized the importance of meeting other mothers "who are going through the same things". One such encounter moved Anne to change the way she spoke to her own child:

> "Once I met someone whose child had an excellent command of language and was just a year older than my daughter. Her mother told me that she spoke to her as she would an adult, so I thought, 'Why not?'"

The strength of local cultural and family ties was also evident in Lara, who found herself encouraging her daughter to read "just like (her) mother used to do with (her)", and in Valerie, who gleaned much information from her sister, who already had a young child. Bridget believed that she learnt most from her friends who had babies before her, and Esther said:

> "You know us Maltese – everyone must have their say. Of course, my mum had advice for me. Advice is ample and I also learnt through friends. I like to talk to mothers whose children are a bit older than mine because I remember things they said and think, 'She was right to mention this.'"

Participants' acquisition of knowledge about early literacy thus draws upon the social constructivist perspective informing this study and is clearly influenced and constructed socially, culturally, linguistically, and contextually through their interactions with others (Bastalich, 2020). As I will continue to outline within this section that focuses on the factors influencing parental perceptions of early literacy, parents were heavily influenced both socially and culturally. A greater social awareness of the broader understanding of early literacy is thus important and would be conducive to the social and cultural dissemination of correct and useful information, as opposed to ingrained myths and the narrow view of early literacy that limit potential opportunities for young children's cognitive and linguistic development.

4.3.2 The Role of Social Media

Social media plays a big part in a society's popular culture, which itself influences cultural and social identity. As a cultural socialization agent social media is significant, and its influence on participants' perceptions of early literacy is evident, with platforms like Facebook and influencers perceived as being particularly informative. Several participants claimed to follow influencers with young children to learn from other parents of young children. For example, Justine and Sarah said:

> "I followed an influencer whose son is one year younger than my daughter. I could see that he could hold a pencil very well and started writing 1, 2, 3. I thought, if he can do it, so can she." (Justine)

> "They used to help me because I could learn from parents with children similar in age to mine, and I used to think, 'Yes, that makes a lot of sense.'" (Sarah)

On first learning of their pregnancy, several participants automatically turned to social media for information. Ella "read a lot", while Jenna and Valerie said:

> "I used to read stuff on social media and of the National Literacy Agency, where you go once a week to read. Sometimes adverts came up, so I used to see those and sometimes I Googled information." (Jenna)

> "Obviously, I started joining a lot of parent groups on Facebook, and so on." (Valerie)

In addition to parent groups, participants also followed posts by early childhood educators. In terms of her awareness of early literacy, for example, Martina felt as though she were thrown a lifeline when she discovered "on Facebook… a kindergarten teacher who sold workbooks". These parents were significantly influenced by social media, and this highlights its potential as an important conduit for raising awareness of early literacy among new parents. It provides a platform for their further learning in this area and is an important reference point at a time when new parents are eager for information.

Having said that, however, the information and courses that are more readily available to parents appear to focus substantially on the child's physical development, and on parenting skills. Participants explained:

> "Today there are many apps to use and every now and then I would receive a blog about milestones or how to deal with tantrums." (Anne)
>
> "The only courses I did were about potty training and first aid." (Sarah)
>
> "I used apps to follow what a child should eat and so on. I was also on the My Toddler app and I would read about different milestones on Facebook – what children should be doing at 3 months, at 6 months, and so on." (Esther)
>
> "We attended the basic parental skills course focusing on children from birth to six years." (Pia)

Participants did not remember any similarly readily available information about early literacy and language development on social media, other than hearing about the reading sessions carried out by Malta's National Literacy Agency [NLA]. Whilst these reading sessions will be addressed in greater detail later in this chapter when I discuss challenges parents perceive due to a lack of information, at this point it is pertinent to highlight the lack of awareness among participants in terms of early literacy and language acquisition, as well as the perceived dearth of information readily available to them. Parental awareness is a key factor in moving parents towards a broader vision of early literacy (Moffitt et al., 2019). I argue that in the absence of a clear understanding among parents about the importance of early literacy within the first few years of life (Thordardottir, 2017), and that from birth, child development incorporates the cognitive and linguistic, as well as the physical (Bailey et al., 2023), the opportunities for early literacy and language development available to young children will remain limited.

4.3.3 Early Childhood Educators as Influencers

The influence of EC educators is not limited to their reach on social media but extends further and deeper by directly touching the family on a more personal level. In the following section, I discuss the sway they hold, which is evident in the way participants relied on them for their children's learning and involvement in EY settings, and in the way they unquestioningly emulated and followed up on activities held there.

4.3.3.1 Parental Reliance on EC Educators

Participants perceived childcare / KG1 as a place where their child would learn, and through which they themselves would be guided:

> "When they are in a place where they can actually learn, that caters for that, not like us, it makes a difference." (Ella)
>
> "I think it's a time where you can engage the child with learning." (Jenna)

Parents appeared to be heavily influenced by their children's EC educators and their reliance on them was evident:

> "As soon as she started school, I stopped inventing things myself and started to see what she was doing at school and building on it." (Bridget)
>
> "The teacher used to give us a short summary of what they did so I knew what activities were going on at school and if I needed to do an activity, I could pick up something they did at school and carry it on at home. It was easy." (Lara)
>
> "I try to include things they've done at school, like comparing height or size, for example small, medium and large." (Anne)

EC settings are places of learning, so such parental reliance on EC educators for guidance in education is understandable. It is arguably also commendable, considering the amount of research advocating the importance of parental involvement in children's learning (OECD, 2024; Sengonul, 2022). However, for it to be truly beneficial in terms of children's early

literacy and language development, I contend that parents must be guided appropriately and in entirety, and given the skills to promote their children's cognitive and linguistic learning holistically rather than specifically repeating literacy activities done at school. This brings two points to the fore – the importance of parents becoming more consciously aware and critical of their children's learning experiences, and the importance of having a well-trained and reflexive EY workforce to guide them. As discussed in Chapter Three, however, Malta's EY sector is a work in progress, and despite a concerted push towards the implementation of an emergent curriculum in ECEC, local kindergartens still apply traditional teaching methods (Mifsud & Vella, 2020), and children continue to receive literacy instruction from a very early age and before formal schooling begins (Muscat, 2022). In addition, research suggests a lack of adequately qualified and reflexive EY practitioners (Borg, 2015; Sollars, 2018), so all this highlights the importance of the home literacy environment in mitigating these challenges, and the value of the parental role in young children's early literacy and language learning. I concur with Snow and Matthews (2016), who claim that no matter how well-planned, instruction in EY settings "cannot compare to the accumulated advantages that accrue to children who have been exposed to rich language and content from birth" (p. 72). It is thus important that parents are made aware of their significant role in their children's cognitive and linguistic growth.

4.3.3.2 Reinforcing a Narrow View of Early Literacy

EC educators themselves appeared to reinforce the notion that early literacy is highly associated with letters and numbers, and this was corroborated by several participants. Pia said:

> "My sister and sister-in-law are teachers, and they exposed her to a lot of material… a lot of visuals, a lot of flashcards, and even things they used in their classrooms. I think that helped."

When referring to educators in KG1, Jenna said:

> "The teachers use an app and tell us what the children are doing so that we can continue the same thing at home. Maybe we use playdough or card play – relating to literacy and numeracy. Sometimes they give us PowerPoints so that we can help with numbers and letters. They used to help us quite a lot."

Three participants are themselves educators who cited their initial teacher training as having played a significant role in their own approach to early literacy. Valerie, for example, emphasized that she was influenced "by (her) studies, mainly" and, referring to letter sounds and phonics, Diane said:

> "Due to my own work and training I'm a bit fixated and work a lot with my daughter in this regard."

Bridget also recognised the influence of her training on her perception of early literacy, and stated:

> "Since I'm a teacher, academically I paid more attention, so much so that my husband used to tell me, 'This girl is going straight to University.'"

This heavy focus on letters and phonics locally aligns with a considerable amount of research (Casbergue, 2017; Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Muscat, 2022). Whilst constrained literacy skills such as numerical and alphabetical knowledge are an important part of early literacy (Leech et al., 2022), the clear emphasis on these skills alone may contribute to the general lack of awareness about unconstrained literacy skills, potentially limiting the learning opportunities available to very young children (Paris & Luo, 2010). When trusted EC educators themselves emphasize letters and numbers over vocabulary, general knowledge and high-quality verbal interaction, the importance of raising awareness as to the broad scope of early literacy

(Hesterman, 2013) and parents' own role in their children's early literacy development (Sollars, 2020) is brought to the fore. In addition, considering the substantial influence that EC educators have had on participants' perceptions of early literacy, the importance of their pedagogical and reflective practice is paramount. For example, whilst discussing the early literacy practices she came across, Lara said:

> "At childcare, they used to prepare the children, say they used to spend a week talking about a particular letter. They used to do 'P' for Pink October, for example."

Considering that Pink October is a global initiative aimed at raising awareness of breast cancer, the relevance to children under 3 years of age is moot. Parents' experiences of EC education imbued with a targeted focus on the uncritical learning of specific skills and on a perceived deficit when these are not learned at such a tender age, as I will discuss hereunder, take on heightened significance. This is because such practices contribute to the general narrow view of early literacy among parents, influencing their perceptions of early learning, and their own home learning activities, since parental beliefs shape and influence opportunities for children's learning (Makovichuk, 2014).

4.3.3.3 Transmitting Notions of Deficit

Through their experiences of childcare/ KG1, participants not only recognised a strong focus on constrained literacy skills, elucidated by Ella, who said, "My goodness, school has just become ABC, 123", but also a concomitant notion of deficit when these are not quickly learned. Having just turned 3 years of age, Jenna's daughter started attending KG1. Jenna explained how her daughter's lack of letter knowledge was quickly highlighted:

> "They started learning letters and numbers, and they told me she needed help with her letters. So, we started practising them."

Esther and Anne faced a similar experience:

> "In KG1 they did shapes and colours. At one point, they told me, 'We have a problem with rectangles.'" (Esther)
>
> "During Parents Day, her teacher told me to work on revising the numbers." (Anne)

The benefits of such a targeted focus on identifying and pointing out deficits in barely 3-year-old children because they have not yet mastered letters and shapes is questionable. Notions of deficit may be unwittingly transmitted to the child herself, such as in the case of Esther, who said:

> "A short while ago, I found her crying in bed. When I asked her what was wrong, she said that she was worried because she doesn't know how to read. We've stopped asking her to read at home because I don't want to make her conscious about it. She was worried about not being up to scratch."

In reality, young children's early literacy and language gains during shared reading are linked to the quality of adult-child talk surrounding it (Torr, 2020), and to their close proximity, joint attention and social interaction (Murray et al., 2022), rather than to the reading of the book per se. A greater awareness among parents about shared reading practices that focus on the enjoyment of reading and on extra-textual talk may shift parental focus on the learning of general knowledge and vocabulary, rather than on a perceived deficit when young children are not yet ready to read. Similarly to Esther, Justine said that at one point she "had to stop persisting" when she realised that her daughter "wasn't ready yet", whilst Valerie and Jenna also explained:

> "It took her long to learn the colours and I used to repeat, and repeat, and repeat. We used to think she may be colourblind. Maybe I expected her to know them a bit too early." (Valerie)
>
> "In the beginning, when she started doing these letters and the writing and the circling, she was interested because they were new, but now, at the end of the year, she doesn't want to do them anymore. She says, 'Only three pages, mummy. Only three.'" (Jenna)

The above quotes elucidate how putting excessive emphasis on letters and numbers from an early age may negatively impact a child's self-esteem and lead to the child becoming disengaged (Sharp, 2002). In addition, perceptions of deficit linked to a young child's lack of mastery at such a tender age is concerning and must be addressed. Although these parents are very interested in, and attentive to their children's education, and plainly place their trust in EC educators, it is clear that they would benefit from a greater awareness as to what early literacy is in broad terms and how to go about it. Parents are central to young children's early literacy and language development (Butler, 2020; Head Zauche et al., 2017), and such an awareness would enable them to better evaluate learning activities, and to question unjustified notions of deficit that filter into their perceptions and influence their own home literacy activities.

4.3.3.4 Perceptions of School Readiness

Participants' expectations for KG2, which is the final year of informal EC education in Malta, also heavily revolved around the learning of finite skills. Pia hoped that by the end of KG2, her daughter would "recognize letters and numbers and be more confident in what she knows". Martina cited "proper guidance in letter formation" as the basis her daughter needs, and Bridget said:

> "I think that the basics of reading and writing are the most important because that will help her progress in primary school."

Likewise, Lara hoped that in KG2, her child would "add on to the letters and numbers", however she also mentioned that she would like her daughter "to enjoy herself" and "make friends". This latter focus on friendships and socio-emotional learning (SEL) was strong among all participants, who want their children to "get along with others" (Ella), "be happy in a community and belong" (Valerie). This is positive in that children's enhanced emotion

skills and socio-emotional learning enable their engagement in the learning process, and provide a solid base for emerging cognitive abilities (CDC, 2019; Curby et al., 2015). Indeed, Eaude (2021) argues that education is more than schooling. Having said that, however, ahead of KG2, the focus on letters and numbers is so pervasive, that notions of future potential struggles abound and are tackled in advance. Esther, for example, said that "knowing letters and numbers is important", and that she was trying to teach them to her daughter "because she doesn't know them yet". She went on to say:

> "We first worked on numbers and now on letters. I think letters are important so that she will be able to blend words."

Justine and Valerie similarly intended to use the summer months to "start off with things" and "do some foundational work", respectively. They explained:

> "Yesterday, I bought her schoolbooks. To be honest, I was flipping through them and thinking she can do them now. So, I'm going to make a couple of copies so that during summer she can start off with things." (Justine)

> "Once I saw that they will be exposed to certain material, in summer I'll be doing some foundation work. I don't want to teach her because I want her to learn at school, as I don't want her to get bored. But still, I want to do some foundation work… to be at par with her peers." (Valerie)

This notion of potential future struggle was evident at an even earlier stage. Prior to KG1, Martina worried that her child would fall behind, arguing that:

> "Since many children would have already attended childcare before KG1, they would have covered the material… then your child won't know anything when she goes."

Similarly, Bridget and Ella also prepared their daughters for KG1. They said:

> "I was doing stuff with her myself so that when she got into KG1, she wouldn't have anything missing when compared to other children who went to childcare." (Bridget)

> "If you can teach her things before she actually needs to know them in school, she'll be prepared." (Ella)

This once again aligns with Muscat's (2022) claims that in Malta, children receive literacy instruction from a very young age and before formal schooling begins, and highlights the pervasive social perception of ECE settings as a foundation for formal schooling (Gauci, 2019). In addition, parental perceptions of childcare settings (for children under 3 years of age) as already having given young children an advantage in terms of letter and number knowledge underscores the socially perceived centrality of constrained literacy skills locally, and I argue that it is not surprising therefore, that parents now expect kindergarten practitioners to teach academic skills in preparation for formal education (Sollars, 2017a). At the same time, this heavily suggests a concomitant lack of opportunities available to young children within EY settings for more exploratory learning, and strongly points to the need for greater emphasis on unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005). This is especially salient for parents since such skills are more difficult to shape through classroom instruction (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Knowing the names of letters in kindergarten will not facilitate reading comprehension in later grades and fail to transfer to more sophisticated reading skills and general knowledge (Paris, 2005). The importance of generating greater awareness among parents as to the value of unconstrained skills in their children's early literacy and language learning is thus highlighted.

4.3.4 Vocabulary and General Knowledge

Broader aspects of early literacy, such as vocabulary and general knowledge, were conspicuous in their absence, suggesting a lack of awareness among participants. Despite ample literature (Möwisch et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2020; Torr, 2020) highlighting the importance of vocabulary in the early years for cognitive and linguistic development, for the acquisition of general knowledge and for later school success, only one participant felt that having a wide vocabulary enables the child to communicate and express herself well and

facilitates further learning. Most participants did not recognize the value of vocabulary. They said:

> "No, I don't think it matters." (Diane)
>
> "I don't know. Everyone will learn to talk from school, and everyone will be the same." (Jenna)
>
> "I don't really look at how much she knows in terms of vocabulary. I don't think it's bad not to have a wide vocabulary." (Martina)
>
> "Learning isn't only language, and a child's capabilities are important. Being observant is important, so if a child is observant, vocabulary won't have much of an impact." (Anne)

It thus appears evident that the role of a wide vocabulary in early literacy and language development and in the first few years of primary school is not fully understood. Lara was hesitant in expressing her opinion about the importance of a wide vocabulary or otherwise in the early years, replying:

> "Possibly? What was important to me was that she could communicate with me if something was wrong at school when I wasn't with her, and that maybe if something *was* wrong, she could explain to the teacher or carer."

She went on to say that vocabulary would "level out" among children once in primary school. Like Lara, Ella also viewed a wider vocabulary as positively influencing a child's communication with her teacher. She explained:

> "I imagine that the child who knows more would be at an advantage. If a girl knows more words, then she'll be able to better understand what the teacher is saying, but in the end, I don't think that will impact their future academic trajectory."

In general, participants thus appeared unaware of the value of a wide vocabulary on further learning. This is concerning when vocabulary plays such a key role in general knowledge, and in a child's cognitive and linguistic development (Möwisch et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2020). The value of a wide vocabulary is further heightened in its links to children's social and emotional development (Arnold et al., 2012; Volodina et al., 2020), in their ability to

engage in new concepts (State Government of Victoria, 2022), and in predicting later literacy outcomes (Gunter & Koenig, 2010; Torr, 2020). Limitations in vocabulary play a big part in the achievement gap (Cappelloni, 2017). Research indicates that EY settings are lacking in vocabulary learning opportunities (Cabell et al., 2015; Skibbe et al., 2011), and this further highlights the importance of parental awareness of the wider definition of early literacy and of their own role in promoting their children's vocabulary acquisition at home.

4.4 Parental Understanding of Language Development

Whilst analysing the data, I believed that parental perceptions regarding early language development required careful consideration. Participants described the first year of their child's life as one during which they spoke with their child very often. These children were born during the Covid pandemic, at a time when most households were under lockdown. Valerie claimed to have taken "advantage of that", spending a lot of time with her daughter and enjoying major milestones, whilst Lara "read more books" and would speak to her child often, explaining whatever they were doing. Sarah and Ester also said:

> "I used to speak to her about everything." (Sarah)

> "We spent a lot of time indoors. It was just me and her, and I used to speak with her all the time." (Esther)

Despite the level of talk, however, parents did not consciously perceive this period as a time of learning in terms of language. Rather, some participants viewed the first few years of a child's life in terms of physical development, such as Anne and Lara, who said:

> "Although a baby is very demanding, parenting is limited and you focus more on her physical needs, like feeding and changing… and on motor skills and crawling." (Anne)

> "Before there was less communication with the baby and you would just have to change and feed, but then as she grows up you have to give more input." (Lara)

These participants appeared unaware of the early potential for language learning in the first few of years of a child's life and equated language development with the actual onset of speech. Jenna, for example, said:

> "When she was a baby, you had to tend to her physical needs and basically that was it. Her language developed between 2 to 3 years of age."

Esther also felt the same way about a child's early basic needs, and cited language as developing "between 2 to 4 years of age". On the other hand, two participants who now feel that early language development is important, do so in hindsight. They explained:

> "I think that the way I spoke to her must have made a difference. I notice that now." (Sarah)

> "Looking back… from 6 months onwards, because I remember her observing my mouth when I would sing and talk to her. I know that maybe it doesn't make sense, six months, but I think that it's very important to look after these details at an early age." (Pia)

Other participants, particularly those who are themselves educators, also cited the importance of language learning from a very early age. Among them were Diane and Valerie who read to their daughters whilst still pregnant, aware that the unborn child is responsive to voice and touch whilst in utero (Marx & Nagy, 2015), and can distinguish native sounds (Moon et al., 2013). Valerie explained:

> "I was very conscious of the fact that it's important to be exposed to language. I used to speak as much as possible, especially when we were home alone. At times it was a bit discouraging… you know, talking and not getting any feedback is not easy. But it was always there, knowing that the more exposure, the better it is."

However, barring Valerie, who had previously linked language development to further learning, parents mainly appeared to value language development in terms of a child's ability to talk. Bridget and Lara both elucidated this succinctly when they said:

> "The first 3 years of age are the most important to help children learn how to speak." (Bridget)
>
> "My aim was to get her to talk as early as possible so that she could tell me what she needed, so that I wouldn't have to guess." (Lara)

When considering the low importance participants placed on vocabulary learning, as mentioned earlier, this suggests that they equate language development with the pragmatics of speech, or rather the use of language within a social context, but not with semantics, namely vocabulary, word, and world knowledge. This indicates that participants do not perceive talk as the basis for learning and do not understand the value of high-quality verbal interaction, which has a stronger influence on a child's early literacy and language development than socio-economic status and parental education (Head Zauche et al., 2017; Rowe, 2012). High-quality verbal interaction is key in a child's holistic growth (Sylva et al., 2004), promoting socio-emotional learning and higher order thinking skills (Yin et al., 2019). Baldacchino (2020) cites high-quality verbal interaction as a focus on the quality and quantity of speech, including a wide vocabulary. Participant responses indicate that this is lacking at home. I will expand further on this when I discuss the home literacy environment, however, in conjunction with research also indicating a lack of high-quality verbal interaction within EY settings (Cash et al., 2019; Gauci, 2019), this finding suggests that young children need to be given more opportunities for cognitively stimulating dialogue, whether at home or at school. The importance of generating greater awareness among parents, as well as EY educators, of the significance of high-quality verbal interaction and a wide vocabulary in early literacy and language learning is thus highlighted.

In addition, whilst most parents noted that early language development is important, a deeper examination suggests a limited understanding of a child's potential for language acquisition. Ella, for example, said:

> "There's a boy in her class who's trilingual. I was really impressed that *a child who knows nothing* can learn so many languages." (my emphasis)

Martina also claimed to have been "astounded by how much (her) daughter absorbed English… like an adult", and Lara recounted:

> "When she was about 6 months old, I used to say, 'Up, up, up the stairs,' every time we climbed them. I had stopped doing that but maybe a year later, she said it herself. Their brain is amazing!"

All this implies that participants were not fully aware, at an early stage, of a child's ability to understand and learn language, and that although they spoke with their children often during the first year of life, the importance of this was seen in terms of physical growth and development, rather than the potential to learn. This echoes Wood and Hedges (2006) who suggest that parents may not be aware of the difference between guiding development and guiding learning. Since parental understandings directly influence their attempts at communication (Rowe, 2008), a lack of awareness as to the importance of high-quality verbal interaction in terms of diverse language (Möwisch et al., 2023), cognitively stimulating talk (Suskind et al., 2016) and explaining (Knight, 2017), may negatively impinge on children's opportunities for cognitive and linguistic growth.

4.4.1 Bilingualism and Code-switching

4.4.1.1 Parental Perceptions of Bilingualism

As outlined earlier on in Chapter Three, Malta is a bilingual country. The issue of bilingualism is important since respondents said that as new parents, they were unsure as to which language to use when speaking to their daughter, particularly during the first year or two of her life. Whilst most participants speak Maltese at home amongst themselves, more than half stated that when their child was younger, they spoke to her in English. Parents explained their reasons for this decision in different ways, but whilst the main reason appeared to be the greater universality of the language, perceived issues of social status also arose. Ella said:

> "I liked the idea that my daughter speaks English. When you hear English, it sounds more cultured, like the person is better educated. It may be a silly thing for me to say but it has to do with class. It was partly snobbery on my part."

Anne spoke in a similar vein:

> "I believe that you're looked down upon if you don't know English and speak only Maltese."

These participants thus perceived one's ability to speak English as a marker of one's social status (Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Panzavecchia, 2020). On the other hand, Lara chose to initially speak only English so as to avoid confusing her daughter with two languages, even though the brain is proficient in acquiring two languages at once (Ferjan-Ramirez & Kuhl, 2020). She explained:

> "In the beginning, we spoke in English mostly – obviously not to get her mixed-up – but once she started communicating well in English, we made it a point that my husband speaks to her in Maltese, whilst I speak to her in English."

Several participants went about their child's language learning in the same manner. As the child grew older, parents introduced the second language, usually with one parent speaking to the child in English and the other in Maltese, to aid her familiarization with both languages. As Pia said:

> "To be bilingual and confident, to be able to express herself in both languages is really important."

She went on to add, however, that "That awareness came late". Esther also said:

> "If I could go back, I would include English straight away in her daily life."

This highlights a grey area in participants' knowledge of bilingual language development that may limit the potential for child bilingualism, even though parents, like Ella, were cognizant that "both languages are important". Although Panzavecchia (2020) argues that Maltese children are "crib bilinguals", my findings suggest that during infancy they are first largely exposed to one language, before the other is more tentatively introduced in toddlerhood. Bilingual development in the EY enables children's mental flexibility, critical thinking and metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to access a wide-range of cultural resources for thinking (Moll, 2014; Serratrice, 2013). A greater awareness among Maltese parents as to a young child's ability to learn more than one language simultaneously (Ferjan-Ramirez & Kuhl, 2020) could dispel any fears they may have of confusing their children, and positively influence their use of both Maltese and English as from birth, rather than using only one language and then introducing the other a year or so later.

4.4.1.2 Parental Perceptions of Code-switching

Code-switching, or translanguaging, refers to the ability of language users to switch fluidly between languages, both in thought and in speech, so as to navigate communication and make meaning (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). Young children can benefit from translanguaging even in their play (Bengochea & Gort, 2020) as it supports social and cultural connections, creativity and self-regulation (Moses & Torrejon Capurro, 2024). Parents may not be aware of the benefits associated with translanguaging, such as a larger and more available repertoire (Macrory, 2020), and easier connections between the social and literate worlds of both languages (Moll, 2014), so it remains a misunderstood concept, with participants believing that the two languages should not be mixed, so as to prevent the child getting confused. They said:

> "I wish I knew about code-switching earlier. If I'd had that awareness, I would have been more firm with her grandparents about them speaking to her only in Maltese." (Justine)

> "I try not to code-switch but I can see that she has difficulties to stick to either Maltese or English." (Pia)

> "We used to say, '*Ara l*-car!' (Look at the car!) when we could just as easily have said, '*Ara l-karozza!'*. I'm very proud of my language so it's ironic that until she was 2 years of age I had only ever used the word *car* rather than the Maltese word." (Martina)

It is possible that the participants quoted above confuse code-switching with code-mixing, which lacks grammatical accuracy and is not conducive to proper language learning (Gatt et al., 2016), as Valerie noted:

> "When Grandpa comes over, I find it difficult to accept the way he speaks to her - a phrase in Maltese, the last word in English, not grammatically correct. I hate that."

While Valerie's example of code-mixing highlights the presence of grammatical inaccuracy and is not conducive to proper language development (Gatt et al., 2016), it differs to code-switching, which still upholds grammatical and sequential rules, and which Moll (2014) describes as the "power of biliteracy". The distinction between the two, however, appears to be misunderstood by parents. Indeed, the benefits of code-switching may not be clear to EY educators either, who do not approve of it (Mifsud & Vella, 2018), and there is the tendency for schools to uphold traditional notions of bilingualism as two separate languages rather than one single semiotic system (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). This stems from the traditional separation of languages under the Separate Underlying Proficiency model which espoused notions of less proficiency if both languages were used simultaneously due to the brain's limited linguistic capacity, and where an increase in proficiency in one language would result in a decrease in the other (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). So, although exposure to both languages at a very early age is important to bilingual language acquisition (Baldacchino, 2020; De Houwer, 2020), and although varied models of bilingual education are being promoted in more recent policy documents, it appears that educators would gain from support in translating theory into practice, so as to shift away from traditional notions of bilingual learning based on language separation (Mifsud & Vella, 2022; Panzavecchia, 2020). Furthermore, it is important that this revised awareness also reaches parents, who would benefit from having updated information about bilingualism and concepts such as translanguaging, since home language use enhances the development of both languages (Muscat, 2022). Indeed, post-interview, Bridget mentioned that as a relatively new parent she "would like to know how language is best used and the optimal set-up for language learning". This underscores the importance of parents being better informed as to early language learning, bilingualism, and translanguaging, so that they will be more knowledgeable and confident in supporting their children's early language acquisition.

4.5 Factors Influencing Parental Perceptions of Early Language Development

4.5.1 The Nuclear Family and Close Relatives

Several participants believed that they themselves, as parents, played a role in their child's language development, whether through direct speech with the child, or indirect adult speech in the child's presence. The positive influence of close relatives on the child's language acquisition was also mentioned. Justine cited herself, her husband, and her parents as primary influences, while others, such as Diane, extended this further to "the whole family… grandparents, aunts, uncles and her cousin". Furthermore, like Esther and Anne, Martina also believed that her daughter picked up language "by listening to others talking because she repeats what someone else says". This aligns with De Houwer's (2009) claim that parents think children simply pick-up language. Studies indicate, however, that overheard speech does not support early lexical development (Paavola-Ruotsalainen et al., 2018), so it is important that parents are aware of the value of talk and adult-child verbal interaction in very young children's linguistic and cognitive development (Butler, 2020).

In addition to their influence on parents' perceptions of early literacy, as outlined earlier in this chapter, older female relatives had a similar marked influence where early language development was concerned. Justine said:

> "I used to speak to her a lot and tried not to use baby words. My aunt used to be a childminder, and she told me how she used to teach the children. I use the same concept, 'Listen, say it properly: ba-na-na.'"

Lara expressed similar views when she tentatively said:

> "This may sound stupid but when my daughter was born, my mother told me to talk to her and tell her what I'm doing as if talking to any other person, and not to use baby talk."

Young children's vocabulary and language development depend on parental language input (Hoff, 2013), but in line with Macrory (2020), this finding suggests that without input from family and peers, new parents may be unaware that talking and interacting with their child can positively influence early literacy and language development. The need to generate greater awareness in this regard is thus highlighted. Parents become more pro-active when they become aware of, and understand, the importance of their role in child development (Mifsud & Vella, 2020; Suskind et al., 2016), so a clear understanding among parents is highly significant.

4.5.2 The Perceived Impact of ECE Contexts on Language Acquisition

Childcare, KG1, and other ECE contexts were perceived by parents as having had a significant influence on their children's language development. Although, as mentioned above, parents did realise that they themselves played a role in their child's language acquisition, this was seen as negligible when compared to the impact of ECE settings. Jenna mirrored this when she said:

> "She used to speak only a few words because she just had us, but then she started childcare and she just flourished."

Valerie claimed that everyone noticed "an explosion" in her daughter's use of Maltese. Sarah similarly saw "a big change in the way (her) daughter was speaking", and Justine laughingly exclaimed:

> "When she started childcare, she started telling me colours and shapes, and I was like, 'Hexagon!' You know what I mean?"

Martina was surprised at the increase in her daughter's English vocabulary, which she also attributed to the ECE context. She said that although her daughter had only spent an hour a day at childcare during her first week there, when she went to pick her up on the 3rd day:

> "The teacher told her, 'Pick up your cloth', and I said, 'She doesn't know what that is. We call it *biċċa*.' But my daughter looked at me like, *I know what it is*, and did as she was told. She was only 1 year and 4 months old."

Participants also noted the positive impact on language of peer socialisation within ECE settings. Pia, for example, noticed an increase in her daughter's vocabulary "when she was exposed to children older than her at childcare" and said that her mixing with children of different ages and nationalities helped. Martina agreed, and Jenna said:

> "We used to talk to her but, I don't know. I think she learnt more from the other children when she started nursery. We used to talk to her all the time, but... I don't know. It could be an age thing because she turned two then, but we saw the difference mainly when she started nursery."

Participants thus attributed most language learning to children's interactions within ECE settings, whether with educators or peers. Parental input was devalued in comparison and perceived as minimal (Macrory, 2020). Early literacy and language learning, however, begin at birth (Bailey et al., 2023) through children's interactions with their primary caregivers in everyday activities. The role of the parent is thus highlighted and this finding confirms the need for greater parental awareness of child language development (MEDE, 2014), and strengthens Sollars' (2020) claim that parents need to be more conscious of their own role in children's quality experiences.

4.5.3 The Influence of Media

Media, both print and digital, was also perceived by participants as having played an overall positive role in their child's language acquisition. Bridget's daughter "absorbed so much from television in terms of language", and Ella said:

> "She has a lot of learning apps on the mobile… and she picks up words through these apps, like *dollars*, for example. We don't use that word."

Some respondents were initially unaware of the language learning potential of digital media and recognised its impact in hindsight. Esther, Anne, and Bridget, who all spoke Maltese at home, said:

> "We would often think, 'Look at her! Where did she learn that from? Did we say it ourselves?'" (Esther)

> "When she was 2 years old, she started to speak only in English, with just that half an hour a day of TV, and I would say to myself, 'How is this girl speaking only in English?'" (Bridget)

> "I know she gained English from media exposure because once she told me something that showed me this. That's when I realised that she was being exposed to English too." (Anne)

Lara cited print media as most influential because she often "traces what (her) daughter says back to the books". Having said that, Lara was not too keen on her child's use of digital technology and claimed to only recently having bought a television. Ironically, despite the digital age we live in, and the fact that all participants are Generation Y digital natives, "very much digitally empowered and advanced in readiness to use new technologies" (Ghoorah, 2017, p. 7), most expressed wariness and a reluctance to allow their child's use of digital media. So, although many participants are presently aware of the language learning potential of digital media, they actively try to limit their child's use of it. Esther and Jenna said:

> "We're trying to avoid it because she just seems hypnotized by it. Screen time must be limited, otherwise they seem to be locked in their own world." (Esther)
>
> "She would use the tablet but then, when I'd take it away, she would throw bad tantrums, so we stopped giving it to her." (Jenna)

Pia monitored her daughter's screen time to under 45 minutes per day and "finds something educational to watch", and both Bridget and Justine perceived digital technology as strongly alienating. They stated:

> "She started using the tablet only recently. Sometimes I find her a game and she plays, but it bothers me because they become fixated on it. It's the easiest choice because you sit there doing your own thing and you won't hear a peep from them as soon as they switch on that blessed tablet." (Bridget)
>
> "I think she is too young to start engaging with technology. I'm afraid of her being isolated and in her own world. I want to postpone that for as long as possible." (Justine)

Participants thus recognised the learning potential of digital technology but were wary of their children's possible dependence on it. This supports local research by Mifsud and Petrova (2017) highlighting parents' careful supervision of their children's use of technology, and their concern about their children's potential over-reliance on digital technologies. This embodies the empowering versus protectionist perspectives present in literature and policy, and the need to find a balance between the two (Nascimbeni & Vosloo, 2019). In today's world, digital technologies allow society myriad ways of communicating, and mobile phones, tablets, digital games, and video are part of society's popular culture (Buckingham, 2010). Knowing how to navigate these technologies responsibly and effectively forms part and parcel of the digital competencies required to participate meaningfully in today's digital environments (Avsar, 2024; Nascimbeni & Vosloo, 2019). Parental awareness of digital literacy as a key skill that encompasses problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity

(Avsar, 2024), may enable them to view digital literacy in a more positive light and move away from the idea that its major contribution is alienation. It may also empower them to be more critical and supportive in their children's use of digital technologies and digital content.

4.6 The Home Learning Environment

In Malta, ECE settings (whether childcare, KG1 or Summer School during the summer months) have become part and parcel of many young children's lives, and participants stated that their daughters have been attending such EC centres until approximately 1pm from Monday to Friday since they were between 1 year 2 months and 2 years of age. A typical day for these children includes this informal schooling, followed by time spent at home and/or outdoors, then dinner, bath-time, and bedtime. In terms of time spent at home, this varies but may include a nap, play, watching television, and carrying out an activity with a parent. The home learning environment is significant, and children's early literacy acquisition depends on their language and literacy experiences at home in the preschool years (Butler, 2020; Weigel et al., 2010). In preparation for our interview, participants were asked to allocate a week in which to photograph any activities carried out at home that they considered early literacy learning. They were urged to avoid opting for a week involving atypical events which could potentially impact the literacy activities carried out within the home, such as preparations for a family event, trips abroad, or having a family member falling ill. In this way, the week chosen would be more typical of any normal week within the family household. As outlined in Chapter Four, the aim behind these photographs was the eliciting of further information rather than their strict use as data per se. To this end, participants' verbal responses during our individual interviews were collated alongside the photographs themselves, and the full range of early literacy activities discussed included:

- fiction books in both English and Maltese,
- digital fiction books in English,
- a portable speaker and podcasts in English,
- a game on a tablet,
- colouring books and colouring by numbers,
- drawing,
- writing,
- playdough,
- magnetic letters,
- letter puzzles,
- animal, opposites, and letter flashcards,
- whiteboard and markers,
- instances of role-play,
- art and crafts,
- toys,
- worksheets and booklets relating to letter formation, beginning and final letter sounds, phonics, high-frequency words, and upper- and lower-case letters.

Upon detailed analysis, I was able to categorise this range of activities further. Thus, to clarify and aid better visualisation of the early literacy activities normally held within each household, I condensed the data into four main categories, as can be seen on the following bar chart:

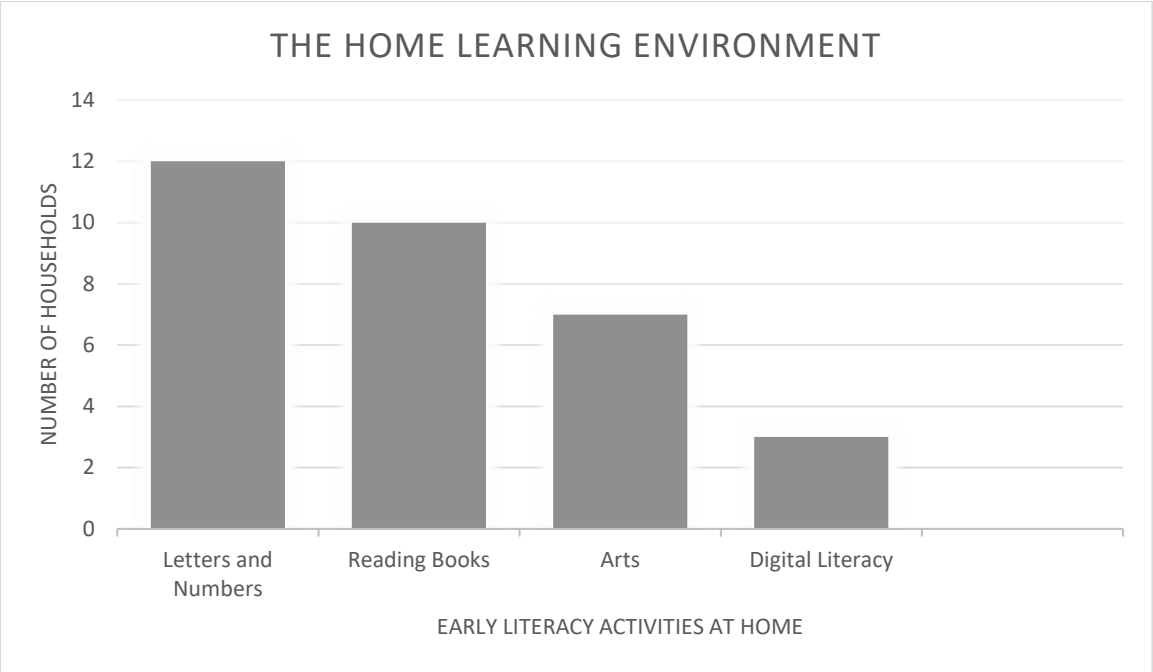

Table 3: The Home Learning Environment

In this way, the collated data provides a clear picture as to participants' perceptions of what counts as early literacy learning within the home, and the main activities carried out. Before going on to discuss these categories in detail below, I shall briefly outline the subject matter included in each. The category *Letters and Numbers* prevailed in all households, and comprises any activity related to the alphabet and numeracy. These activities were carried out using various resources, namely worksheets, flashcards, writing on a small whiteboard with markers, magnetic letters, letter beads, and colouring. The category *Reading Books* was also prevalent in all households, with just a couple preferring the use of digital storybooks. It is pertinent to point out that whilst regularly reading books with young children within the home environment is very positive in itself, further discussion with participants suggested that they would benefit significantly from a greater awareness of the advantages of shared reading, extra textual talk, and book genres. The *Arts* category includes activities pertaining to the Arts, such as drawing, colouring, painting, crafts, role playing, and playdough, while

the category *Digital Literacy* incorporates participant references to the use of digital technology in their early literacy activities at home.

4.6.1 Category 1: Letters and Numbers

In accordance with parental perceptions of early literacy identified and discussed earlier, the home learning environment provided by participants was very much structured around traditional notions of early literacy and the learning of letters and numbers. Resources utilised during letter and number activities included worksheets, flashcards, 2- or 3-piece jigsaw puzzles, whiteboard and markers, colours, magnetic letters, and letter beads. This ties in with White (2016), who highlighted parents' use of didactic commercial materials in their home literacy activities. Although worksheets were commonly used, parents also realised that teaching through play is more conducive to learning. Pia and Anne said:

> "If I tell her to sit down and do something, she doesn't like it, but once I introduce something through play, then she's okay." (Pia)

> "I noticed that if you tell her, 'Come, let's revise the numbers,' her attention span will be very short. She loses interest very quickly. So, instead I try to include numbers when we go out, for example, when shopping or in a lift. She learns better that way." (Anne)

This is compatible with Casha's (2015) contention that hands-on activities are more mentally engaging for children, and with Eaude (2021) who states that children under five years of age generally do not have the cognitive skills to benefit from formal instruction. Indeed, some parents ensured the use of more interactive activities rather than simply writing on worksheets. Diane and Lara explained:

> "I show her the letter A, she finds the letter A and goes to stick it on the fridge. Something simple but at least she's moving around and matching the letters indirectly through play." (Diane)

> "I tell her what letter and she finds it, then she tells me a letter and I find it. Then we say /p/ for pizza or /m/ for mummy." (Lara)

Esther also practised numeracy with her daughter in different ways:

> "We have a rubber mat with lots of numbers on it. I tell her to find the number 2, and she pretends that her doll is the one finding the number 2. Then (showing me a photo of number puzzle cards), she counts the ants on the card and finds the correct number card to match it. So, she also practices numbers through the puzzle."

Other activities included fishing magnetic letters out of a bucket, matching cards, threading beads with letters on them to spell out the child's name, cutting out letter shapes and colouring them in, using playdough to form letters and numbers, or designing and writing a birthday card for a family member, as Justine outlined:

> "First, I write it on a piece of paper. She copies it once or twice on the paper and then I let her copy it straight onto the card."

The above quotes suggest that for participants, *learning through play* equates with *learning about letters, numbers and shapes through play*. Although parents' recognition of the value of play in the learning process is important, the distinct overemphasis on the learning of constrained skills over unconstrained early literacy skills (Campbell, 2021; Deshmukh et al., 2022) is brought to the fore and highlights the narrow view participants hold of what activities comprise the home learning environment (Leech et al., 2022). In this regard, rather than resembling the ripple effect caused by a pebble thrown into a pond, with learning expanding further and outwards, I liken early literacy learning at home to a stalagmite that continuously receives droplets from above that simply build up more of the same, so that early literacy learning is unintentionally restricted. A greater awareness among parents as to the broader parameters of early literacy that are so very important in a child's cognitive and linguistic development may play a significant role in motivating them to expand the range of early literacy activities within the home, and to consider all the varied opportunities for early literacy and language development inherent in the basic habitual routines of daily living (Elliot et al., 2023).

4.6.2 Category 2: Reading Books

Shared reading is very beneficial to young children (Mifsud et al., 2021), and indeed, all parents perceived reading with their child as important, whether this stemmed from their own love of reading, such as in the case of Jenna and Justine, or a result of socio-cultural influences mentioned earlier. Despite this uniform perception, however, some respondents did not include reading in their home literacy activities:

> "Sometimes I just won't feel like reading and these days I'm very busy finishing things off at work. We've let reading slide quite a lot, to be honest." (Ella)

Sarah perceived a resistance in her daughter where reading was involved. She said that her child doesn't like it, doesn't pay attention, and doesn't want to sit down. She candidly explained:

> "Reading is a problem. We aren't the biggest fans of reading, and she isn't best of friends with books, but I think it's a mistake on my part that I don't push her as much as I should."

Martina was also very conscious about the dearth of reading within the home environment. She said:

> "We're lacking in reading. She doesn't have much patience for it. She's different at my mum's because for her, that's a fun time. There she opens a book, and my mum starts asking her questions like, 'Is that book about a girl? What's she doing? Where is she going?', so that she entices her to read. When *we* read, she starts asking things straight away, like, 'What's he going to do next?'. I tell her, 'Let's read it first so that we can discover', but she doesn't seem very interested in reading. She just wants me to tell her what's happening. She would expect me to know what the book is about before we read anything."

The latter quotes support research suggesting that certain child characteristics may negatively impact reading at home (Zibulsky et al., 2019), and that parental perceptions of what reading should look like are also highly influential (Preece & Levy, 2020). For example, parents who believe that a child should sit still and focus on the book during shared reading may

misinterpret the child's behaviours, movements, and questions as disinterest (Lin et al., 2015), leading to discontinued shared reading practices due to a perceived lack of enjoyment on the part of the child (Preece & Levy, 2020). Shared reading, however, has strong potential to positively influence children's language development and cognition (Dowdall et al., 2020), and is highly effective in promoting early literacy and later school success (Flack & Horst, 2018). Thus, it is vital that parents are aware of its importance and that they understand the negative impact of fixed, stereotypical ideas as to the correct way of reading (Lin et al., 2015).

In terms of genres, this study found that books read at home were overwhelmingly fiction picture books, mainly portraying fantasy in terms of princesses, magic, unicorns, and the like. Valerie and Pia said:

> "At the moment, she only chooses books that have glitter on them, so lots of fairies and such." (Valerie)
>
> "She chooses the books at the library, and they are full of colours, with a lot of pink and princesses and Peppa Pig." (Pia)

Some, like Martina's daughter, enjoyed "old fairytales". Indeed, participants' photographs showed several traditional fairy tales, such as Rapunzel, and The Elves and the Shoemaker, as well as Disney books, whether revised versions of fairy tales like Frozen, or scripts written specifically for Disney, such as The Lion King. Illustrated picture books depicting child-relatable events such as Maisy Goes to Nursery or *Mal-Mejda tal-Ikel* (At the Dinner Table) also featured in the photographs. It is important to note, however, that whilst picture books are powerful tools in language learning (Murray, 2004), book choice is also very relevant (Torr, 2020) and determines opportunities for children's exposure to different linguistic and orthographic patterns and unusual vocabulary (Rawlings & Invernizzi, 2019). Non-fiction

books, for example, have the potential to increase child participation by allowing for more discourse and increased opportunities for questions and interactions that involve reasoning and are more cognitively demanding (Sun et al., 2020). On the other hand, graded readers aimed at inspiring confidence and control in beginning readers are substantially lacking in vocabulary and content, making them less interesting and providing less space for crucial extra-textual talk, particularly if parents are not aware of its importance. Besides opting for fiction over non-fiction, respondents also tended to read books with simple text. They said:

> "As such, the books are very short, with limited words since those are suitable for her age." (Anne)
>
> "She has a lot of fairytales, like The Three Little Pigs and Jack and the Beanstalk. We also have these (showing a photograph of graded readers with colourful pictures and few words). She loves them." (Esther)
>
> "She has a library in her room. Some are a bit too difficult for her, so we haven't started them yet because they would be a bit too long. Now, there are some books for children that I would like to buy, like Great Women in Science, but I feel that she may be too young to understand what they're about." (Bridget)

Much research highlights that children's language and early literacy gains in shared reading are linked to the quality of adult-child interaction surrounding it, and specifically to the extra-textual talk that goes beyond the reading of the book itself (Torr, 2020), which has strong links to a child's vocabulary development (Blewitt & Langan, 2016). Parents may benefit from a greater understanding of shared reading, extra-textual talk, and appropriate book choice. For example, when the child is still too young to read, parents need not limit themselves to graded readers because of misplaced notions of age-appropriate books. Nor should they avoid varied and interesting content that would allow the space for diverse topics of conversation (Rowe & Snow, 2020), and the acquisition of general knowledge and a wide vocabulary. The need for enhanced awareness among parents in this regard is even more salient in light of research indicating that within EY settings, quality literature is being

sidelined by a phonics first approach (Campbell, 2021; Farrugia & Gatt, 2015), and that the interactions necessary for quality shared reading do not occur (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Torr, 2020).

When asked to talk about how they read with their daughters, parents mentioned exploring the book cover, tracking words with their index finger, and asking questions to ensure comprehension. Pia explained:

> "We read and I ask her questions to make sure she understands. So, for example, when Peppa was injured, she had a plaster on and I asked, 'Do you know what a plaster is?'. I ask her as we go along. 'Do you know what food they gave her friend at hospital?', and she remembered that it wasn't pasta but chocolate pudding."

The use of certain strategies during shared reading enables children's learning. Among these are making text-to-life connections, and the use of questioning on the part of adults (Davis & Torr, 2015). In terms of questioning, *how* and *why* questions are cited as highly influential in promoting extended adult-child verbal interaction (Deshmukh et al., 2019), which in turn supports the development of vocabulary, and thus general knowledge and cognitive and linguistic growth (Möwisch et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2020). Such open-ended questioning provides a platform for extended dialogue, as opposed to closed-ended questions like Pia's above, that simply require a one-word answer. Whilst it is evident that participants did use some of these strategies during shared reading, it is questionable whether the potential for deep verbal interaction was tapped. Rather, participant responses suggest that most talk during shared reading remained limited to the scope of the book and revolved around the acquisition of finite skills outlined earlier. For example, Diane said:

> "When I start reading, I don't just stop there. I ask her a few questions. There's a book that she really likes about Christmas and snowmen, and I ask her, 'How many snowmen have green scarves?' and she counts. So, I'm also including counting, colour recognition. Or I ask, 'Which is the smallest or biggest?' In this way, through storytelling, she learns other things indirectly."

So, although Diane actively creates important opportunities for her child's involvement during shared reading, I argue that such interaction just skims the surface of potential learning, which remains inhibited by ingrained notions of the importance of constrained literacy skills. Opportunities for the building-up of vocabulary and general knowledge are under-utilised so that extension of learning is minimal. It is thus important to identify whether parents are aware of these potential opportunities at all, and what they understand by the term 'extension of learning'. This will be discussed further on, under the subtitle 'Parental Perceptions of Extending Learning', but here it is important to consider the value of the home learning environment and the parental role, particularly when EY settings do not manage to provide young children with adequate communicative space (Vezzani, 2019), a language-rich environment (Salaman & Stratigos, 2019), and high cognitive level questioning (Goh et al., 2012).

4.6.3 Category 3: Arts

The creative, experimental, and hands-on characteristics of the Arts make these popular activities among young children with substantial learning potential, and promote a wide range of skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and visual-spatial skills, as well as fostering socio-emotional learning and communication (Olaoye & Samon, 2024). This category includes all the perceived early literacy activities carried out within the home, and pertaining to the Arts, namely drawing, colouring, painting, crafts, role play, and the use of playdough. Participants mainly perceived these activities as something their child enjoys:

> "She loves drawing and what not. Anything that involves drawing, she will be up for." (Diane)
>
> "When it comes to role playing, she loves it." (Ella)
>
> "Drawing is fun for her." (Pia)
>
> "Here she's painting, which she loves doing, and using sponges to paint." (Anne)

Besides being a fun activity to do with their child, at times parents also used these activities to promote the child's socio-emotional learning, and the learning of letters and numbers. They explained:

> "Colouring is for fun mainly, but we also started to do these (drawing by numbers), because she doesn't like to follow rules and so I'm trying to teach her that sometimes there are rules that must be followed, for example, the number one has to be coloured in yellow." (Bridget)

> "Her friends celebrated their birthdays before she did. So, she's had a lot of birthday parties and can't understand why she can't have one of her own yet. She doesn't yet know the months of the year. So, we created the cake with playdough, and I tried to explain this to her during the activity. I think it helped. Then she made one for her younger sister. She finds sharing difficult, so I try to help her think about her sister." (Pia)

> "I told her, 'Do your name in playdough again,' and she stayed doing that and following her finger along the letters." (Diane)

Parents also found different uses for role play. Ella used it to act out known fairytales with her daughter:

> "This is a photo of the props we use when we role play Little Red Riding Hood, and that's the basket used for the apple. This photo of beans in a plate is for Jack and the Beanstalk." (Ella)

Other parents used role play to prepare their child for school routines and to identify some of their experiences within EY settings. They explained:

> "We pretend that the bell rings, then she brings her bag, opens it, and gets her lunch out. I used to teach her how to open the lunch box, fold the napkin and open the bottle." (Diane)

> "She role plays and talks, and talks, and talks, which is a big plus because while she's playing, and repeating what they do at school, I get to know what went on through her play." (Valerie)

> "I always know what happens at childcare or school through her role play. She doesn't tell me, for example, that the teacher yelled, but with her dolls or soft toys, she starts shouting, 'Line up!' and 'By the wall!'" (Pia)

In terms of early literacy and language learning, the arts have been described as first literacies with numerous links to learning (Dinham & Chalk, 2018), and "as children's 'first languages' – their primary way of seeing and knowing the self in the world" (McArdle and Wright, 2014, p. 22). Young children's art evolves in stages (Lowenfeld & Brittian, 1982), with the first Scribbling stage involving random marks and scribbles. In the EY, young children use art as a means of communication, particularly when they have not yet mastered a wide vocabulary (Adu & Kissiedu, 2017), and they are open to discussing their art with adults (Grandstaff, 2012). Studies indicate, however, that rather than being seen as a representation of the child's experiences, adults tend to focus on the artistic quality of children's drawings and do not use these instances as a platform for language development (Adu & Kissiedu, 2017; Pressat, 2018). This is mirrored in Anne's experiences with her daughter's art. She said:

> "We made up a story scene and spoke about it as we worked, according to the sponge shapes we had – flowers, stars, and fish. I noticed that, because she has a limited vocabulary, if I don't lead her, she just scribbles or draws without any meaning. So, I try to organise her a bit and tell her how she can play better. Or I tell her, 'Let's create a story with these,' rather than just printing a flower here and there. We speak about the colours too, and when I feel limited, with nothing else to talk about, I tell her the colours in Maltese and English." (Anne)

This supports studies indicating that adults may be unsure of how to extend children's learning and development in visual art contexts (Traunter & Traunter, 2021), that they underestimate children's art in the EY and undervalue the role of art in language learning (Adu & Kissiedu, 2017; Pressat, 2018). A greater awareness among parents of the arts as playful but serious learning (Dinham & Chalk, 2018), and of the huge potential for children's linguistic growth inherent in simple activities such as drawing or colouring, would enable parents to better support their children's early literacy and language development within the home learning environment. Anderson (2017) advocates art as the scaffolding for language. Parents would benefit from an understanding of the ways in which language and the arts can

intertwine, such as through opportunities for extended adult-child dialogue and conversational turns (Rowe & Snow, 2020), the use of a wider vocabulary, more descriptive language, and correct syntax and grammar (Cleave et al., 2015), opportunities for recasting, expanding, and questioning (Fleta, 2018; Möwisch et al., 2023) and greater responsiveness (Brodie, 2014). Even more importantly, however, I argue that besides knowing the *how* of language use during such activities, parents must primarily understand the *why*, namely the weighty positive impact of high-quality adult-child verbal interactions, not only on their children's overall linguistic development but also on their cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition (Rowe & Snow, 2020).

4.6.4 Category 4: Digital Literacy

This category incorporates participant references to the use of digital technology in their early literacy activities at home. As outlined earlier within this chapter, participant responses indicated that they were somewhat uncomfortable with their children's use of digital technology, and that most of them actively limited the time their children spent watching television or playing games on a smartphone or tablet. As discussed earlier, during our interviews several parents mentioned that they realised their children learnt language from television. Despite this, however, only three of them consciously presented photographs depicting the use of digital technologies as part of early literacy within the home, and all these were specifically related to traditional notions of early literacy in terms of storytelling and letters. Justine's daughter made use of her mother's smartphone and her father's portable wireless speaker to listen to podcasts on Spotify. Justine explained:

> "She switches it on and adjusts the volume. There are some really good podcasts where the podcaster first reads the story, then asks questions about it and pauses to allow time for my daughter to answer. Like that it's interactive, not boring."

Ella showed me photographs of animated bedtime stories on YouTube, while Sarah referred to educational videos for children on YouTube when she said:

> "This week she was watching Blippi's show about letters."

Participants' use of digital technologies within the home environment mirrors local research identifying the television, smartphone, and tablet as the three most popular digital technologies used (Mifsud & Petrova, 2017). My findings indicate that participants consciously made use of technology to promote their child's more traditional literacy learning but not their language development. In other words, whilst parents realised that watching television had positively impacted their children's use of language, it appears to be a happy by-product of the child's time spent on technology use for leisure. Indeed, in support of Mifsud and Petrova (2017), digital devices were mentioned more in terms of entertaining time-fillers or periods of relaxation for the child. For example:

> "While I'm cooking, she watches television." (Justine)
>
> "I used to say that I wouldn't show her the TV, but in real life, it's impossible. So, TV had to happen. I need to cook, wash the clothes, clean the floor." (Diane)
>
> "Our main routine is that in the evening, she eats, bathes, and uses her tablet." (Anne)
>
> "She doesn't watch much TV, but I let her watch a programme here and there. For example, now she's watching Peppa Pig. I also give her the tablet in the mornings after I've gotten her ready and while we're getting ready for work." (Esther)

I thus argue that a greater awareness among parents as to the potential impact of technology on early literacy and language learning is needed, so that parents can be better informed and more reflective in their choice of programmes, allowing children greater opportunities for the acquisition of diverse language and a wide general knowledge. In addition, parents would also benefit from an understanding of the impact of digital technologies on children according

to age, for example the need for adult interaction during media exposure with children under the age of 3 for quality learning to occur (Roseberry et al., 2009). Parents may also benefit from information as to good e-books and apps to use with their children (Mifsud & Petrova, 2017).

4.7 Challenges to Early Literacy and Language Development

Within this chapter, I have discussed parental understandings of early literacy and language development, the factors that have influenced these perceptions, and the home learning environment, which is largely based on the learning of letters and numbers, on reading books and on arts-based activities. Notwithstanding participants' evident active interest in their children's learning, this study identifies a number of challenges to young children's early literacy and language learning within the home that must be addressed. For this to happen, it is paramount that parents become aware of the broader definition of early literacy, and more mindful of their role in their children's learning and in building their children's intelligence (Suskind et al., 2016).

4.7.1 Quality and Quantity of Talk at Home

Literature shows that when parents are aware of their role in their child's early literacy and language learning, they are more agentive themselves (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Seen this way, parental understanding might thus translate into an enhanced quality of interactive talk, with a wide range of vocabulary and general knowledge. When discussing verbal interaction with their children, participants understood the importance of not using baby talk, but the quality of talk appeared to be somewhat limited. Jenna said:

> "We use simple words. We talk about her food, where we would be going, what our next activity would be. Otherwise, it's mostly directive talk."

Bridget and Anne also perceived their approach as largely directive but allowing the space for choice on the part of the child. They explained:

> "I give her a lot of options too. For example, if we have an event and she needs to wear something smart, I tell her, 'Come to choose what to wear, but it must be a dress'. Today, I told her, 'We are going to drama, so pick a shorts and t-shirt.'" (Bridget)

> "Since she understands more now, I can ask her what she wants to watch on TV, for example." (Anne)

Besides the talk mentioned above, most participants felt that on a day-to-day basis, there was not much time for conversation with their children. Justine, for example, valued their daily commute home as it gave her the opportunity to converse with her daughter whilst sitting in traffic. She said:

> "I don't have time to stay with her. The questions that I ask her are during our commute home after work. 'What did you do at school today?'"

When asked to outline daily opportunities for conversation with her daughter, Bridget said:

> "I try to do that a lot, especially in summer when I am more available. When she returns from an activity, I ask her, 'What did you do today?' or 'Who did you play with?'. I try to leave those 10 – 15 minutes to sit down and speak about what she did. Then there are situations where if, for example, she was disobedient when we were out, on our return home I'd ask her, 'Why did you do that?'. So, there will also be that type of discussion."

Valerie stated that the nature of her job negatively impinges on quality talk time, and explained:

> "I return home, and the mobile is still ringing, and the emails are pinging, and it's always a rush. Luckily, she is now able to play alone."

Some participants involved their children in daily housework "such as cooking" (Anne), "cleaning or doing other chores" (Esther) in an active effort to spend more time with them. Whilst participating in household chores may provide children with opportunities to develop unconstrained literacy skills though conversations and exposure to diverse vocabulary (Elliot et al., 2023; Leech et al., 2022), the struggle is real:

> "I struggle to find time. There are days when I say to myself, 'My goodness! I've hardly taken any notice of her today.' These days, when I clean the house, for example, I ask her whether she'll help me because for her it's an activity and giving her a cloth to clean with is like a toy to her". (Ella)

It is plausible that such a lack of time may negatively affect opportunities for adult-child conversations (Makovichuk et al., 2014), or at the least impinge on possibilities for depth, resulting in adult-child conversations that are limited to the more superficial routines of daily living. I argue that this constitutes a substantial barrier to a young child's early literacy and language development since high-quality adult-child verbal interaction is *the* fundamental building block that provides young children with the greatest benefit (Torr, 2020). The primacy of quality talk has been underscored time and again (Butler, 2020; Caruso, 2013; Tunnicliffe & Ueckert, 2011), but at the same time, many parents are unaware of the importance of talking with their young child (Suskind et al., 2016). The strong link between high-quality adult-child verbal interaction and the acquisition of unconstrained literacy skills that appear to be lacking within local homes and EY settings, such as a focus on general knowledge and vocabulary, make this a highly significant challenge, but one that may be overcome through greater parental awareness. For example, an understanding of the myriad opportunities for extended adult-child talk on a wide range of topics provided by quality shared reading and appropriate book choice (Davis & Torr, 2015; Deshmukh et al., 2019) may enable parents to make the most of their shared reading sessions. An understanding of

the importance of explaining things to young children (Knight, 2017) rather than giving pat answers would enable parents to reflect on their responsivity to their child. An understanding of the importance of conversational turns (Romeo et al., 2018) and of open-ended questioning (Möwisch et al., 2023) may enable parents to extend dialogue further. For this to happen, however, they must first gain a greater awareness of the wider scope of early literacy and language development and become more critical in debunking myths that continue to restrict participants' perceptions of what early literacy and language learning is in the EY.

4.7.2 Parental Perceptions of Extending Learning

Parental understanding as to how to facilitate and extend their children's learning is important (Nutbrown & Morgan, 2020). In addition, our own understanding of how parents scaffold learning and the learning experiences they present is similarly valuable (Yu et al., 2019). Whilst discussing their home literacy activities, I asked participants to explain why they chose to photograph a particular activity, such as a book or a drawing, as something they considered an early literacy activity, and to outline any way in which they use these given activities to extend learning further. Participant perceptions of extending learning largely equated to what is commonly known as revision, potentially limiting new learning and opportunities for extending general knowledge. They said:

> "I always try to choose the activities that she can get the most out of and learn from. She likes to draw as well, but when we sit down to do something, I often use a website called Twinkl where I find a lot of resources, and we do the numbers and counting." (Bridget)

> "I always thought it's good that she likes to play with things related to school because indirectly, we can do revision through play." (Diane)

Anne showed me a photograph of a colouring activity her daughter "did at summer school depicting musical instruments", explaining that she gave her daughter more information about them once she saw that they had touched upon that subject. She said:

> "My way of extending learning is linking what she's doing to something she knows, not something she doesn't already know about, because then she asks why, and I won't always know how to respond."

This latter quote supports Suskind et al. (2016), who claim that parents may be unaware as to the best way to talk to their child. It is also in direct contrast to Vygotsky's notion of the MKO who extends a child's current knowledge and skills, by offering an appropriate challenge for the child's developmental level (Rowe & Snow, 2020). When asked specifically about any general knowledge her daughter is exposed to, Jenna said:

> "She helps me to clean up, she can set the table, and knows where to put her clothes. Otherwise, she doesn't really gather any general knowledge."

Two participants, themselves teachers, explained that they extend learning at times by looking up pictures of unfamiliar words. For example, when reading a book about Winnie the Pooh, Bridget's daughter asked what a forest is, and this led to an online search of forest images. Similarly, Valerie said:

> "If we come across an animal that she's not yet aware of, we look it up."

To ensure that participants understood what I meant by the term 'extending learning', I explained how a book or a colouring activity, for example, can be used to expand the child's general knowledge and enhance adult-child verbal interaction. I also outlined how, in terms of shared reading, non-fiction books may provide a broader general knowledge (Sun et al., 2020). The quotes below are a clear indication of a lack of awareness among these parents

not only of the importance of the above-mentioned aspects of early literacy and language, but also of how to go about it. Participants' words are quoted in full for emphasis:

> "You know, we've never tried that, no. You've given me a good idea there. We usually talk about the picture itself, but we've never taken it further than that, no, whether with books or colouring books. So, thanks for that because it's a really good idea." (Esther, smiling)
>
> "No, we don't do that because we are always pressed for time." (Lara)
>
> "The way you're explaining things now… it never crossed my mind that I can talk to her about the circus or Carnival while she's colouring in a picture of a clown, for example, or that they make children laugh. That's true." (Sarah, sounding surprised)
>
> "No, not in terms of general knowledge... not topic-wise but more to do with literacy and numeracy." (Diane)
>
> "The books we read are fiction… now you've gone and given me an idea!" (Justine, laughing)
>
> "No, we don't read non-fiction… not yet anyway." (Jenna, smiling)
>
> "No, I've never done that. Sometimes I ask her things like, 'Where does the fish live?' Basic things, but I never searched more about it. That is actually very interesting." (Bridget, smiling)

It is therefore evident that participants were not aware of the importance of extending learning in the first place, and in line with Pentimonti and Justice (2010), did not adequately build on their children's current understanding by extending their knowledge further through talk. Nor were they aware of the simple and yet valuable ways in which this can be done during activities that they already carry out with their children. This is concerning when general knowledge and vocabulary are key predictors of literacy attainment (Snow & Matthews, 2016). These parents are highly interested in their children's learning and make it a point to regularly carry out literacy activities with them within the home. Paradoxically, and unbeknownst to them, the extent of their children's learning is restricted because of a lack of societal awareness as to the broader vision of early literacy and language learning in the

first few years of life. Perhaps a change in the terminology of *early literacy* would help to deflect focus from traditional notions of literacy and allow the wider view that is so essential to quality literacy in the EY.

4.7.3 Work-Life Balance

Earlier on in the previous section, I briefly touched upon challenges to early literacy and language acquisition that participants perceived, resulting from their employment. On the Internet, the key words 'Work-Life Balance' result in a plethora of information regarding parental leave, parental rights during that time, availability of childcare, and opportunities for flexible or reduced working hours. Of course, these are all very important aspects for families today, perhaps particularly so when "it has become impossible for most women to stop working after giving birth" (Zammit, 2022), if they would like to do so. Participants concurred with this latter point. Whilst Diane stated that, "Nowadays, it's impossible not to work", Ella claimed:

> "If I really could afford to work on reduced hours, it would be like winning the lottery."

It seems that work-life balance is not as clinical and clear-cut as the legislation makes it out to be, and indeed Zammit (2022) argues that the work-life balance laws introduced locally in line with an overhaul of EU legislation in 2019 "are half-baked, ineffective, and will increase frustration among working families and widen the gender inequality gap" (no page number). Participants were very much aware of the ways in which their employment impinged on time spent with their children in home activities. Martina, who works on reduced hours, candidly said:

> "When I have a tough day at work, mentally and physically demanding, the reality is that I won't feel like doing anything with her at home. I won't have the energy she requires. I don't know how people who work full-time with office hours till 5pm manage to give children the time they need."

Justine regretfully admitted:

> "We arrive home at about 6.30pm. To be honest, that's where my flaws are. I start cooking straight away. I don't have time to stay with her."

Other participants also found difficulty in achieving a healthy work-life balance. Anne felt overwhelmed, and Ella explained that a lack of time also impacted her parenting. They said:

> "She just wants me all the time and it gets overwhelming for me as a fulltime mum, employee, and having to do chores at home." (Anne)

> "We're so alienated with work, the mobile ringing, and coping with chores, you just give in to whatever it is they want because you think it will keep them quiet. I make these mistakes daily because I just can't stand her whining." (Ella)

When participants were asked whether they plan any early literacy activities with the specific intention of promoting their child's general knowledge, Diane, an EY educator herself, stated:

> "Hmmm, I don't know. Believe me, that is my line of work. So, I do that at work – having an aim and making sure that the learning outcomes are achieved. You would have a goal or scope for your actions. But I will be so tired when I get home that I don't do it with her, unless for example, if she was with her cousin and took something from him, I would use a social story to tackle that type of behaviour. But normally I wouldn't, unless it's something to do with numbers, because that I would do. I would say, 'This year, I want her to learn the numbers from 1 to 10.'"

Work-life balance is a major challenge for parents today (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020), and participants clearly recognise that their employment detracts from the amount of time they spend on activities with their children at home (Justice et al., 2020; Makovichuk et al., 2014). Their responses suggest that they have not managed to strike a happy balance between work and home life, and it is unsurprising that they feel tired after work with several things still left to do at home. Considering this, it is important to note that parenting stressors, such as a felt struggle between the demands of the parenting role and managing careers, have implications

for healthy child development (Mackler et al., 2015; Orgad, 2019), and that mothers' happiness is specifically influenced by this particular conflict (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Parents may perceive feelings of guilt or shortcomings on their part for not spending more quality time with their child, and indeed, participants spoke about making mistakes, having flaws, and feeling overwhelmed, suggesting a certain amount of parenting role overload (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016). These feelings are influenced by the prevalent cultural notion of intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2014) that places high demand on parents' time and emotional investment in their children's upbringing, and by the belief that the amount of time parents, especially mothers, spend with their children positively impacts their academic future (Meehan, 2022).

On a routine, day-to-day basis, therefore, parents may be left with the perception that there is a very limited time slot in which to carry out early literacy activities at home, and the strong view among participants of early literacy as traditional, constrained literacy skills leads them to regularly emphasize those in the perceived limited time available. Research suggests that the quality of parent-child time spent together far outweighs quantity in terms of positively influencing the child's emotional, behavioural, and academic wellbeing (Meehan, 2022). All this highlights the critical importance of parents gaining a greater awareness and being truly knowledgeable about what early literacy and language learning is in the EY, and the crucial influence of quality parent-child interactions on cognitive and linguistic growth (Baldacchino, 2020). This may enable them to understand that language and early literacy are socially and culturally constructed within the routines of everyday life, and that whilst short periods of free time are useful to engage in activities such as shared reading, for example, there is still much space for early literacy and language learning within the home, even without the pressure of having to plan specific activities. Introducing conversations about different

topics (Rowe & Snow, 2020), using diverse language (Möwisch et al., 2023), encouraging the child to participate in household chores such as cooking or gardening and holding dialogues with them during such times (Elliot et al., 2023), and being tuned-in and responsive to what they say (Fisher, 2016), are simple ways in which to open up opportunities for young children's acquisition of a wider vocabulary and general knowledge within the home learning environment. Such an awareness may also serve as a parental resource by increasing parents' confidence and enabling them to better cope with the stresses and demands of modern parenting (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013), while altering draining notions of time deficits with their children.

4.7.4 Perceptions of Inability and a Lack of Information about Early Literacy

With their children on the cusp of KG2, participants were concerned about their own perceived inability to support them in terms of numeracy and literacy, including phonics, due to a lack of information. Martina said:

> "I didn't manage to find what it was that she was supposed to know anywhere. I mean, you can look up milestones but there aren't any guidelines in terms of early schooling."

Participants exhibited an uneasy relationship with phonics, which in their eyes constituted "a fear of the unknown" (Diane), and "panic" (Justine). This perception resulted in a lack of confidence among parents as to the best way to support their child. Diane, herself an EY educator, explained:

> "I'm worried about phonics because I never learnt anything about it. So, I'm quite wary of the fact that I'm in unchartered waters. I don't know how I can support and help her at home."

Bridget felt uncertain too. She said:

> "I never learnt phonics so I searched them on YouTube. The way they say certain letters is a bit awkward for someone who never learnt them before. She asked me how to write certain letters and I was thinking to myself, 'How am I supposed to deal with it?', because I'm not an EY educator. That's my biggest worry – that I teach her something and then she goes to school, hears it in a different way, and gets confused. Literacy and numeracy are my biggest worry."

Justine stated:

> "I just recently learnt that we have to say /s/ instead of S. Now, I never learnt phonics so it's like... should I wait so that she learns these things at school or should I try now?"

Valerie, who also works in the EY sector, understands the confusion experienced by parents.

She explained:

> "They always teach us to use only the letter sounds... but then we come to the letter U that says /u/ but has other sounds like urchin, unicorn, and umbrella. So then I don't emphasize the sounds. I get confused as to how to expose a young child who's still learning to that sort of thing. I find it so bewildering! That's why I put the game aside. It's very confusing, especially for parents who are not in education, like me. Even for me it's not easy and I get stuck sometimes."

Parents thus appeared to be particularly concerned about the appropriate way of teaching so as to be in line with the school's methods and avoid confusing their child. Esther outlined this clearly when she said:

> "I worry that the school teaches in a certain way that's different to how I try to teach her here, and that really scares me as I'm very afraid of mixing her up. I worry about teaching her the letters, for example, and I leave it in my husband's hands."

In line with Hayes et al. (2017), Bridget stated that having "a clearer idea of *how* they are learning rather than just *what* they are learning" would be very helpful. Several other participants felt the same way:

> "I really appreciate the fact that the new school is planning courses for us parents in phonics and numeracy, because they will really help me. Schools preparing parents in terms of what to expect and how to go about things really helps. I will feel more confident and sure of myself knowing that I'll be using the same teaching methods that the teacher uses at school." (Esther)
>
> "The school sent me a note mentioning workshops in literacy and numeracy that are to be carried out with parents at the beginning of the school year. I'm sure we have a lot to gain from those." (Anne)
>
> "We attended a talk about the early years, about how children learn in kindergarten. It was just an hour long but very useful." (Pia)

Throughout each interview, it was evident that these first-time parents were eager to support their children's development and learning, and towards the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the ways in which participants actively sought out information via their social and cultural context. In addition to these, whilst pregnant, all respondents attended a course by Parentcraft Services, a Primary Healthcare service advocating education and support. This course is provided by the local health authorities and focuses mainly on issues pertaining to childbirth, lactation, taking care of an infant, and child-rearing. Post-natally, however, Parentcraft Services also offers sessions about Standards in Childcare Centres, and Speech and Language Development, among others. Most participants also mentioned attending *Aqra Miegħi* (Read With Me) sessions organised by Malta's National Literacy Agency [NLA]. These sessions aim to promote a love of books and target children up to 3 years of age and their parents or caregivers. They each feature an hour of storytelling, nursery rhymes and fun activities, are free of charge, and held in over fifty localities across the Maltese Islands. Both the above-mentioned programmes are well known to all respondents, and such initiatives creating an awareness of the importance of reading and language are to be commended. Participant responses, however, indicate that as new parents they needed more guidance and more information. In terms of reading, for example, the above programmes created an

awareness among respondents about reading with their children. Parents thus got to know *what* they should do and gained some idea as to *how* they should do it, but not *why* they should be doing it. Jenna explained:

> "I used to watch some videos on the NLA website to see how she should be reading and engage her better. I used to go to their sessions at the local council and I think those helped me, in a way, to try to engage her in reading, but I don't know what else."

So, whilst Jenna found these sessions helpful in terms of engaging her daughter in reading, she remained unaware of the importance of vocabulary, of extra-textual talk, and of extending learning beyond the book. Bridget had a similar experience:

> "I heard about the Read With Me initiative from the Parentcraft course at hospital. From when you're pregnant, they tell you to start reading to your child. That's it, really."

Without knowing the *why*, parents may not be able to see the value of what they are doing and may not be able to do it properly. In addition, whilst some parents will still take this valuable information on board, others, like Ella, will not. She said:

> "When she was born, I had heard that it's good to read to the baby because she'd be listening to your voice and your words... but I had thought, 'How silly, she's just a baby.' I'm sorry now that I didn't believe it. I used to feel like an idiot. It's good to read to little babies even though it may not make sense to you."

A lack of direct feedback from the baby may result in parents not placing any value on reading at a very young age (Preece & Levy, 2020), so it is important for parents to understand *why* they should read. Indeed, participants did not feel that they gleaned an awareness of the wider understanding of early literacy and language development. Justine, for example, stated:

> "I wasn't aware that my responsivity to her, or how conversant I am with her and the quality of language that I use can make a positive difference. It would have been good to know."

Participant responses indicated that a deeper understanding of early literacy and language development would be appreciated by new parents, and Lara suggested:

> "Parentcraft courses would be the ideal place since they probably see all new parents. It wouldn't take much for them to create awareness there."

Considering the importance of the first few years of life in children's early literacy and language learning, this lack of awareness among these parents is concerning and highlights a gap that must be addressed, and that is strongly felt by participants themselves. Martina said:

> "I think that there is a need to educate parents. There needs to be more awareness, on television and social media."

The extent of awareness needed was further summed up by Ella, who said:

> "I never came across anything. I don't think there was any awareness out in the open. Perhaps it was there and I never noticed it, but for example, today we hear so much about mental health. It's everywhere and you can't help but notice it and become aware of it. There was never anything like that in terms of children's early literacy. Both are important in different ways."

Parents are pivotal to young children's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional proficiency (Kostelnik et al., 2015). This study finds that without adequate information, however, they may not have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide optimal early literacy and language learning opportunities for their children in the first few years of their lives. A more informative and widespread awareness about children's cognitive and linguistic development in the EY, and of the parental role in this is thus essential, and should be an indispensable part of initiatives targeting new parents locally. I argue that the importance of quality early literacy and language development is such that all stakeholders should seriously work towards generating a widespread awareness that will reach all new and expectant parents.

Furthermore, if Malta is to reach the societal, educational, and inclusive gains, competences and skills aspired to in accordance with Europe's 2030 target in the field of education (Eurostat, 2023), this must include a concerted focus on generating and cultivating this awareness and knowledge among all stakeholders in the EY.

4.8 Perceived Important Information for New Parents

Based on participant responses, as researcher I believe that our individual discussions created the time and space for parents to consciously consider the home learning environment and the early literacy experiences they provide. Valerie said:

> "This interview gave me time to reflect. I realised how much more I used to do with my daughter before I returned to work and changed job."

Later that day, I also received a message from her that read:

> "Following our conversation today, I spent much more time with my daughter and invested in a lot of conversation during role play. It is always good to remind oneself, so thank you."

As part of this opportunity for reflection, at the end of each interview, participants were asked to consider their own early experiences in terms of their children's early literacy and language development, and to voice anything they felt would be useful for new parents to know. Their responses, as outlined in the following table, clearly touched upon three areas, namely promoting adult-child communication, the need for clarity about bilingualism, and enhancing societal awareness and skills about early literacy.

Participants' View as to Important Information for New Parents	
Area 1: Promoting adult-child communication	• Talk to your child from the very beginning, • Do not use baby talk, • Communicate with your child often, • Expose your child to books frequently.
Area 2: The need for clarity about bilingualism	• Speak to your child in both Maltese and English, • A better understanding of bilingualism and related factors such as code-switching is needed.
Area 3: Enhancing societal awareness and skills about early literacy	• Creating awareness for new parents and grandparents about what early literacy and language development means in the early years, • Generating greater awareness through television and on social media, • Increased educational and training opportunities for parents and grandparents in this area.

Table 4: Important Information for New Parents According to Participants

4.8.1 Area 1: Promoting Adult-Child Communication

Participants believed that new parents should be made aware of the importance of adult-child communication from day one, and advocated:

> "They shouldn't use baby talk at all, and should start talking straight away, not think that the child is too young." (Martina)
>
> "I would definitely encourage lots of exposure to books, a lot of communication." (Valerie)
>
> "The fact that you are sitting with your children and opening a book, doing an activity with them and showing interest in the things that they are doing... I think that that is enough, honestly, to be able to give them a good chance." (Bridget)

It is pertinent to point out that, as previously outlined within this chapter, many respondents have gained a certain amount of awareness as a result of their own parenting journey to date. Their responses suggested that at this point, they are more aware of the importance of talk and interaction with their children. This may positively influence the present home learning environment, and allow the provision of earlier opportunities for any further children they may have. However, it is important to consider the period of time before this awareness was gained, and the missed opportunities that result from a lack of parental awareness, and from the prevalent narrow understanding of early literacy in the EY. This highlights the importance of actively addressing the issue of a lack of information within society in general, but especially with expectant and new parents, so as to maximize opportunities for children's cognitive and linguistic development within the home.

4.8.2 Area 2: The Need for Clarity about Bilingualism

As new parents themselves, participants perceived a lack of information in terms of the best way to go about enabling their child's acquisition of both Maltese and English. Several of them believed that code-switching between languages would confuse their child, and was best avoided. Indeed, many decided to opt for one language over the other in an effort to enable their child's grasp of that language first, before then moving on to the other language at a later age. These parents now look back on their choice of language use with a certain amount of regret:

> "I recently became very conscious about it, thinking that I made a mistake speaking to her only in English early on. Both languages are important." (Ella)
>
> "If I could go back, I would start Maltese earlier." (Justine)
>
> "At home we speak Maltese, but I was worried about that because I thought that she wouldn't understand what was going on at school, that her teacher would give her instructions in English that she wouldn't be able to follow. If I had to go back, I'd include English straight away in her daily life." (Esther)

This initial either / or approach to language acquisition in a country where bilingualism is inherent and widespread (Mifsud & Vella, 2020) suggests a lack of awareness among participants, and possibly the wider society, about children's ability to learn language, and the benefits of translanguaging (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). It also identifies the presence of myths regarding language acquisition that promulgate parents' fear of confusing their child by using two languages simultaneously within the home learning environment. Once again, this underscores the importance of greater parental awareness on local issues pertaining to early literacy and language learning, such as bilingualism.

4.8.3 Area 3: Enhancing Societal Awareness and Skills about Early Literacy

As outlined earlier on in this chapter, participants equated early literacy with traditional notions of literacy revolving around alphabet knowledge, reading and writing. I believe that this creates a perceived distinction among parents between a child's physical and cognitive development so that their idea of learning is intertwined with traditional notions of literacy and with the start of schooling (Tussey & Haas, 2021). Considering this, during each interview, I asked participants whether or not they agree with the following statement, and why: "Preschool is where child-rearing meets learning" (adapted from Tobin et al., 2009, p. 2). All but one response was in the affirmative, and an analysis of the responses clearly highlights a lacuna in parental perceptions of what constitutes early literacy and indicates that for participants, learning is strongly tied to reading and writing, and begins at school. Esther said:

> "I agree. At home, we prepare her for school, such as telling her that she should colour within the lines, be neater... preparing her mindset in a way, so that she'll be better prepared in terms of what to expect when she starts school."

Justine believed that learning begins at preschool, and Sarah concurred, adding that preschool provides parents with tools to promote children's development. Jenna said:

> "I think so, yes. There they learn through different things, not just books. They're learning letters, pictures and stuff like that. I think that it's a time where you can engage the child with learning."

Diane explained:

> "The school is there to provide opportunities to the children, and education is always advancing. We learn more about what the children need and the school is teaching them with clear learning intentions. Meaning that they know the goal and how to get there, and this process is always age appropriate."

Only Valerie reacted differently to the quote, but at the same time perceived a certain amount of truth in it, being an educator herself. She said:

> "Not necessarily, because learning can happen at home too I think, but for some children it's definitely the place where child-rearing meets learning."

Participants clearly expressed the need for greater awareness about early literacy, not just for themselves as parents, but also for the wider society. They said:

> "If there were simple courses to show simple ways to start or improve the early literacy of children, for sure they would have been beneficial." (Justine)

> "Today I look back and think that I used to read up a lot about milestones and so on, but I never looked up information about literacy." (Ella)

> "I used to tell her grandparents that she was beyond the stage of baby talk, that they should speak to her normally. No matter how often I tell them, however, they don't seem to understand. I think it would be good for grandparents to be better informed." (Anne)

The importance of greater parental awareness about early literacy, when it starts, and how and why to promote it within the home learning environment is thus highlighted. Besides benefitting society at large, enhanced awareness could help parents better understand the wider scope of early literacy and their own role in their children's early literacy and language learning, so that they are better equipped and empowered to tackle this within the home environment long before their children start attending an ECE context, whether childcare, kindergarten or compulsory schooling. It may also enable parents to become more self-reliant in promoting their children's early literacy and language learning and in reducing their unquestioning dependence on EY educators.

4.9 Conclusion

This study has enabled an important and valuable understanding of how a group of Maltese parents perceives early literacy and language development, the sociocultural factors influencing these beliefs, their home literacy practices, and the challenges they experience in promoting their children's cognitive and linguistic growth within the home environment. In light of substantial upheavals within the local EY sector outlined earlier on, the importance of the parental role in early literacy and language development takes on heightened significance. The findings of this study uncover a significant gap in the early literacy and language learning of children locally, exposing areas in need of attention and action, and providing significant data that can be used to ameliorate the EY sector, and enhance young children's opportunities for quality early literacy and language development.

Chapter Five

Recommendations and Conclusions

5.0 Introduction

This concluding chapter provides the space for a summary of my research findings, which are both relevant and significant within the local EY context. Parents are a child's primary caregivers and first teachers, with an important and hefty role to play in their child's early literacy and language development (Fuertes et al., 2018). To do this effectively, however, parents must not only be aware of this role, but also of what early literacy and language development means in the first few years of a child's life, how they themselves fit into it, how they can go about it, and its continued, ongoing significance. Parental awareness and knowledge in this regard has important consequences for each and every child, so it is vital that such information is readily available, easily understood, and accessible to all.

This study's key findings suggest that participants hold a narrow view of early literacy that has been socioculturally circumscribed, and that constrains their own home literacy activities, in turn. Local and international literature (Snow & Matthews, 2016; Sollars, 2020) indicates that this narrow view of early literacy is also held within EC settings, painting a clear picture of limitations on the broad learning potential within the EY. In addition to this narrow view of early literacy held by respondents, the capacity for language learning in the first few years of a child's life is not fully grasped, and this continues to detract from the possible benefits to young children in bilingual contexts, such as Malta. Furthermore, the findings suggest that participants are strongly interested and invested in their child's early literacy learning and that their being better informed may positively influence adult-child verbal interactions within the home environment. This is highly significant considering the myriad benefits to early literacy

and language development associated with high-quality adult-child conversations (Möwish et al., 2023; Thordardottir, 2014; Yin et al., 2019), which Torr (2020) describes as *the* fundamental building block that provides children with the greatest benefit.

This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings below. I then go on to discuss their broader implications and how they contribute to a wider understanding of this field. The limitations of the study and recommendations for further research then conclude the chapter.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The overarching research question addressed by this study is: How do Maltese parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, and what awareness do they have of their own role in it? For clarity and better organisation, this question was broken down into three supplementary research questions, the findings of which are summarised below.

5.1.1 Question 1: What knowledge and awareness do parents of kindergartners have of early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and of their own role in it?

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that education was highly valued by participants, and that they were very interested in supporting and enabling their child to learn. Many viewed education through a holistic lens and dedicated time to building their child's socioemotional growth by talking about emotions, feelings, manners, and also about transitions between childcare and KG1/KG2. This is significant, considering the key role parents play in enabling their children's social and emotional proficiency (Kostelnik et al., 2015), which is an important aspect of early literacy. Having said that, however, for participants, the term 'early literacy' strongly elicited notions of reading and writing skills. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this is a markedly narrow view of early

literacy that focuses heavily on the learning of letters and numbers, and on reading, but ignores important aspects like vocabulary learning, general knowledge and high-quality verbal interaction that are pivotal for young children's linguistic and cognitive development (Butler, 2020). As explained in the previous chapter, this understanding of early literacy was largely acquired as a result of the sociocultural context these families inhabit, which is infused with notions of reading, and of alphabetical and numerical knowledge being foremost from a very early age. Thus, within the local context, participants were socioculturally conditioned to equate early literacy and language learning to traditional literacy, with a dedicated focus on letters, numbers and reading. As new parents, for example, they were advised ante-natally of the importance of reading to children from infancy, and Parentcraft Services and the National Literacy Agency are to be commended for their efforts and initiatives in this regard. Social media, family, peers and EY educators reinforced this message, alongside another highlighting the importance of young children learning letters and numbers. Whilst all these skills are indeed important, they alone fall short of the wide range of learning that early literacy comprises, and this may lead to reduced learning opportunities for young children. Clearly evident in this study's findings, this is what led to my likening early literacy learning to a stalagmite continuously being built upon by much of the same information, rather than it taking on the ripple effect of a pebble thrown into a pond, with learning leading to more learning in an outwardly expanding trajectory. In addition, findings indicate that the concentrated focus on these constrained skills from a very early age may lead to premature notions of deficit, lack of self-efficacy and disengagement on the part of children. Where early literacy is concerned, parent participants took their role very seriously but lacked awareness as to the extent of it. They were also largely unaware of important unconstrained aspects of early literacy. Considering the substantial influence of social media, family members, peers, and specifically EY educators on parental perceptions of early

literacy, a greater awareness of what early literacy means in a child's first few years of life is necessary on a widespread sociocultural level. Targeting parental awareness alone will not suffice in bringing about the essential, conceptual change simultaneously needed within all other influencing social contexts.

This diminished awareness was also evident when it came to child language development, and although participants recognised that they themselves, and to some extent digital media, played a part in their child's language learning, most of them believed that the bulk of their child's language acquisition occurred after the age of two and within ECE settings. This indicates that they equated language development with the onset of speech itself and that parents found it an important developmental milestone in terms of the child's ability to express herself. While the latter is true, in line with the social constructivist theory guiding this research, language development begins at birth (Bailey et al., 2023) through adult-child interactions (Shanty et al., 2019), so this suggests that these parents did not recognise the full gamut of the parental role in child language development, or the value of high-quality verbal interaction in a child's first years of life. In other words, participants were largely unaware that enhanced responsivity on their part, and cognitive stimulation through high-quality verbal interaction with their child not only promotes the development of oral language itself, but also of higher order thinking skills, vocabulary and general knowledge (Möwish et al., 2023; O'Toole & Hickey, 2017; Rowe & Snow, 2020; Yin et al., 2019), as well as children's meta-cognition (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Nor were they aware of the long-term influence of high-quality adult-child verbal interaction on children's later reading comprehension (Torr, 2020) and academic language skills in adolescence (Uccelli et al., 2019). This finds further support in the lack of importance participants attached to vocabulary learning and to general knowledge, and implies that they did not link early language learning to their child's

cognitive reasoning skills. In addition, findings indicate a grey area in parental knowledge of bilingual language development that may limit the potential for child bilingualism within the local bilingual context. Although respondents advocated the importance of both languages, they were largely uncertain as to how to go about bilingual language use with their children in the first few years of their life. They tended to first use only one language, then introduce the other at a later time, so as not to confuse the child, despite the brain being proficient in acquiring two languages at once (Ferjan-Ramirez & Kuhl, 2020), and despite the potential benefits associated with translanguaging (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). This suggests that bilingual development in the EY, which has the capacity to enable children's mental flexibility, critical thinking and metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to access a wide-range of cultural resources for thinking (Moll, 2014; Serratrice, 2013), is being restricted.

5.1.2 Question 2: What early literacy practices do parents of kindergartners engage in with their children within the home environment?

As explained in the previous chapter, activities perceived by participants as early literacy learning within the home learning environment were classified into four main categories, namely *Letters and Numbers, Reading Books, Arts,* and *Digital Literacy*.

In terms of *Letters and Numbers*, this study's findings suggest that the narrow view of early literacy held by parents highly impacts the home learning environment, which was heavily structured around traditional notions of early literacy. Indeed, the learning of letters and numbers was prevalent in all households, and on a conscious level, participants primarily engaged their children in early literacy activities geared towards preparing them to read and write, with a dedicated focus on alphabetical and numerical knowledge, and the learning of colours and shapes. They often made use of didactic commercial resources (White, 2016),

such as worksheets, flashcards, 2- or 3-piece jigsaw puzzles, magnetic letters, playdough, and letter beads in their home literacy activities, however they also taught interactively through play in recognition of play as more conducive to learning. Whilst parental understanding of the value of play in the learning process is important, the distinct overemphasis on the learning of constrained skills over unconstrained early literacy skills (Deshmukh et al., 2022) indicates that the opportunities available to young children within the home learning environment for wider cognitive and linguistic development are being restricted. A greater awareness among parents as to the broader parameters of early literacy that are so very important in a child's cognitive and linguistic development may play a significant role in motivating them to expand the range of early literacy activities within the home, and to consider all the varied opportunities for early literacy and language development inherent in the basic everyday routines of daily living (Elliot et al., 2023).

Findings discussed within the category *Reading Books*, indicate that all participants perceived reading with their child as important. Despite this uniform perception, however, some respondents did not include reading in their home literacy activities, mainly due to perceptions of a lack of interest or enjoyment on the part of the child (Preece & Levy, 2020; Zibulsky et al., 2019). Whilst shared reading is very conducive to young children's linguistic and cognitive development (Mifsud et al., 2021), the findings suggest that minimal expansion of learning took place beyond the scope of the book itself, and that even within shared reading, there was a focus on the acquisition of constrained over unconstrained skills. Parents were unaware of significant reading strategies, such as extra-textual talk and open-ended questioning techniques. Indeed, the findings indicate that their shared reading practices would benefit from the inclusion of different genres (Sun et al., 2020), a more critical choice of books (Torr, 2020) with diverse vocabulary (Rawlings & Invernizzi, 2019), and a greater

awareness of child characteristics that may cause parents to perceive shared reading in a negative light (Lin et al., 2015). Thus, this study suggests that locally, young children may not have access to the optimal opportunities for vocabulary and general knowledge acquisition (Deshmukh et al., 2019) that quality shared reading within the home learning environment can provide. Shared reading has strong potential to positively influence children's language development and cognition (Dowdall et al., 2020), and is highly effective in promoting early literacy and later school success (Flack & Horst, 2018). A greater understanding of these myriad benefits and of the different strategies that can be used during shared reading within the home is needed to enable parents to make the most of their shared reading sessions, which are already in place. Such an understanding would also enable them to be more confident in expanding on strategies they already use, and including others, to meaningfully extend their child's vocabulary and general knowledge.

The *Arts* category included all the perceived early literacy activities carried out within the home pertaining to the Arts, namely drawing, colouring, painting, crafts, role play, and the use of playdough. These activities can promote the development of a wide range of skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and socio-emotional learning (Olaoye & Samon, 2024), and their creative, experimental, and hands-on characteristics make them popular with young children. Indeed, participants perceived the arts as something their children enjoyed, and used painting, role play or playdough to support their child's socio-emotional learning. In the EY, young children use art as a means of communication, particularly when they have not yet mastered a wide vocabulary (Adu & Kissiedu, 2017), however this study finds that respondents underestimated the potential for language learning inherent in these activities. For example, activities such as painting or colouring were perceived in terms of artistic quality, knowledge of colours, and knowing how to colour-in

neatly, but not in terms of art "as children's 'first languages' – their primary way of seeing and knowing the self in the world" (McArdle & Wright, 2014, p. 22). A greater awareness among parents of the arts as playful but serious learning (Dinham & Chalk, 2018), and of the huge potential for children's linguistic growth inherent in simple activities such as drawing or colouring, would enable parents to better support their children's early literacy and language development within the home learning environment. Findings suggest that besides knowing the *how* of language use during such activities, parents need to know the *why*, namely the positive impact of high-quality adult-child verbal interactions, not only on their children's overall linguistic development but also on their cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition (Rowe & Snow, 2020).

Respondent references to the use of digital technology in their early literacy activities at home were classified within the *Digital Literacy* category. Participants felt somewhat uncomfortable about their children's use of digital technology, which was perceived as largely alienating, and most of them actively limited the time their children spent watching television or playing games on a smartphone or tablet. In line with Mifsud and Petrova (2017), their children's use of digital devices was mainly perceived as leisure time, and although participants recognised the part that television played in their child's language learning, only three of them consciously mentioned the use of digital technologies as part of early literacy within the home. These were once again specifically related to traditional notions of early literacy in terms of storytelling and letters. This study's findings thus indicate that some participants consciously made use of technology to promote their child's more traditional literacy learning but not their language development. Children's acquisition of language through digital means was a passive by-product of the child's time spent on technology use for leisure. The findings indicate that a greater awareness among these

parents as to the potential impact of technology on young children's early literacy and language learning is needed, so that they can be better informed and more reflective in their choice of programmes, e-books, and apps, allowing children greater opportunities for the acquisition of diverse language and a wide general knowledge.

5.1.3 Question 3: What challenges, if any, do parents face in promoting early literacy and language learning at home, and what do they feel would be helpful in this regard?

Participants actively perceived certain challenges to promoting early literacy and language learning at home, namely work-life balance, a perceived inability to support their child's early literacy learning adequately, and a lack of readily available information about children's early literacy and language acquisition. Besides these, however, there were also challenges which parents did not consciously perceive. Among these was a lack of awareness as to how to extend learning, a near-dedicated focus on reading fantasy fiction, a lack of high-quality verbal interaction, and the socioculturally-constructed narrow view of early literacy and language development outlined earlier on. These perceived and unperceived challenges are addressed separately hereunder.

5.1.3.1 Perceived Challenges

In line with Nomaguchi and Milkie (2020), participants found it difficult to strike a happy balance between work and home life, and clearly recognised that their employment detracted from the amount of time they spent on activities with their children at home (Justice et al., 2020; Makovichuk et al., 2014). Such parenting stressors have implications for healthy child development (Mackler et al., 2015; Orgad, 2019), and some participants carried a certain sense of guilt and felt overwhelmed (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016) because of the work-parenting struggle. On a routine day-to-day basis, they believed that there was limited time in which to

carry out early literacy activities at home. Considering this, parents would benefit from an understanding of two main points. Primarily, and more importantly, parents require a strong awareness of the broader vision of early literacy and language learning in the EY, and that this develops socially and culturally within the routines of everyday life. Secondly, quality of parent-child time spent together far outweighs quantity in terms of positively influencing the child's emotional, behavioural, and academic wellbeing (Meehan, 2022). This twofold awareness may serve as a strong parental resource by increasing parents' knowledge and confidence in terms of early literacy and language development in the EY, and how to go about it in their daily living. It may also enable them to better cope with the weighty stressors and demands of modern parenting (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013), while altering enervating notions of time deficits with their children.

Participants perceived a lack of readily available information about early literacy and language learning in the first years of their child's life. They believed that it was easy to find information related to the child's physical development and major milestones, such as weaning, crawling, and the child's first steps, but perceived a lack of information in terms of the child's cognitive development, except for the emphasis on traditional notions of early literacy permeating the local sociocultural context. This initially moved parents towards their own targeted focus on reading with their children, and on the teaching of letters and numbers. Once children started attending EY settings, this focus was further reinforced, to the detriment of unconstrained skills, which were not similarly emphasized. This led to a cyclical pattern in which the child experienced the teaching of a given set of skills over and over, and within both the home learning environment as well as EY settings. In addition to this cyclical pattern, extension of learning through high-quality adult-child verbal interaction was lacking. This points to a substantial restriction on young children's wider early literacy

and language learning locally, with significant broad and long-lasting implications for young children's cognitive and linguistic development.

At the same time, participants claimed a limited understanding of phonics and of teaching methods, and this generated a lack of confidence as to how best to tackle early literacy learning. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that despite parents' high interest in their children's learning, without adequate information, they will not have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide optimal early literacy and language learning opportunities for their children in the first few years of their lives. A more informative and widespread awareness about children's cognitive and linguistic development in the EY, and of the parental role in this is thus essential, and should be an indispensable part of initiatives targeting new parents locally.

5.1.3.2 Unperceived Challenges

Whilst none of the parents specifically and consciously mentioned talk as a home literacy activity, indicating a lack of awareness of the importance of high-quality parent-child verbal interaction (Suskind et al., 2016), a certain amount of talk was still inherently part and parcel of the home literacy activities mentioned earlier, such as shared reading and role play. When parents were specifically asked to discuss talk within the home, they understood the importance of not using baby-talk, and perceived good verbal interaction with their child in the first year of life, whilst on maternity leave, when they would speak with their child about anything and everything. During the present daily routine, however, talk beyond the above-mentioned home literacy activities appeared to be somewhat limited and mainly revolved around the child's school day and family activities. Only one respondent specifically mentioned that on Saturday mornings her daughter learns diverse vocabulary on outings with

her father, whether related to their errands at the butcher or greengrocer, or to other interests, such as being able to name different trucks, tools, and animals. This hints at the possibility that male parents may tackle their child's early literacy and language development differently to female parents, through the use of more complex words (Liu et al., 2022), and through play and exploration (Newland et al., 2013). High-quality adult-child verbal interaction is a crucial element in young children's linguistic and cognitive growth (Torr, 2020), with strong links to the acquisition of unconstrained literacy skills (Paris, 2005), so its lack within the home learning environment constitutes a substantial barrier to a young child's early literacy and language development. This again underscores the importance of parents understanding the value of high-quality adult-child verbal interaction, and their own role in this.

Participants were highly interested in their children's learning and made it a point to regularly carry out literacy activities with them within the home. However, they did not appear aware of the importance of extending learning or how to do so, and thus did not adequately build on their children's current understanding by extending their knowledge further through talk, and by providing enhanced opportunities for the learning of vocabulary and general knowledge, which are key predictors of literacy attainment (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Participants largely equated extending learning to what is commonly known as revision, potentially limiting new learning opportunities whilst reinforcing what has already been taught. They were not aware of the simple and yet valuable ways in which learning can be extended during activities that they already carry out with their children. Parental understanding as to how to facilitate and extend their children's learning is important (Hannon et al., 2020), and this lack of awareness may restrict the learning opportunities available to young children within the home learning environment, highlighting the need for a broader societal vision of what early literacy and language learning is in the first few years of a child's life.

5.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this research study provide important insight into participants' perceptions of early literacy and language learning within the local context, the home learning environment they provide for their young children, and the challenges they face in this area. Parents navigate the world of early literacy and language learning within the local sociocultural context, which is made up of diverse settings. This data thus has implications for local policy and practice which do not solely address the micro family context itself but diffuse further to society in general, and to local educational institutions and stakeholders. It is pertinent to keep in mind that this in-depth study draws on a small-scale and particular demographic, and therefore the following implications may be buttressed by further research in this field.

5.2.1 Implications for Parents

A number of implications for parents in the EY arise from the findings of this study. Primarily, considering the narrow view of early literacy held by participants, parents and other primary caregivers such as grandparents would benefit substantially from a greater awareness of what early literacy and language learning means in the first few years of life, as well as the recognition of its inherent place in everyday living as from birth. This would enable a broader understanding of this concept and potentially widen the range of early literacy and language learning within the home. Nationwide campaigns to educate the general public about early literacy and language development in the EY are thus needed. These should tackle cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional, as well as physical aspects of child development, and promote a concerted shift towards the recognition of unconstrained literacy skills as a highly valuable component of early literacy. In addition, high-quality adult-child verbal interaction must be paid the attention it deserves. Besides a heightened awareness, however, parents need to be empowered with the knowledge and skills necessary

for them to enhance their home learning environment and provide adequate opportunities for children's cognitive and linguistic growth. To this end, readily available support, training and seminars for parents about early literacy, language development, and their role in it are required. Parents need to know the *what*, *how* and *why*, namely what early literacy and language learning in the EY is, how to tackle it, and why it should be tackled within the home environment. Training for parents in bilingual language development and the use of code-switching would benefit the linguistic development of young children and promote it within the home from birth.

Some parents believe that once a child starts attending an EY setting, education is the educators' responsibility (Fatonah, 2019), so a clear understanding of the ongoing and continued significance of the parental role is important. Parents need to be more questioning and critical in their approach to their children's early literacy learning and decrease their dependence on EY educators. This can be addressed through the afore-mentioned training, whereby parents' enhanced knowedge and understanding may provide them with the confidence necessary to tackle broad aspects of early literacy within the home.

In addition to the learning itself, parents may benefit substantially from the opportunity to meet and socialise with other parents within such learning groups (Abela et al., 2013). Parents are highly influenced by the sociocultural context, and the setting-up of specific adult-child early literacy and language groups in different localities may serve as a hub for accurate and readily available information for parents. Furthermore, such hubs would create a space where parents can learn simple ways in which to increase early literacy and language learning within the home, and to participate in organised but less traditional early literacy and language learning activities for, and with, their young children.

5.2.2 Implications for the EY Sector

Although the EY Sector in Malta is continuously evolving and has made significant positive strides within the last decade, it continues to face a number of challenges, as outlined earlier on in Chapter Three. One significant challenge is an EY workforce lacking in reflexivity, autonomy, qualifications, training and pedagogical skills (Farrugia & Gatt, 2015; Schembri, 2014; Sollars, 2018). I argue that this is not a result of inadequate training programmes by local institutions, but rather due to an allowed range of eligibility requirements for the post. With reference to the Malta Qualifications Framework [MQF], which is consistent with the European Qualifications Framework, for example, teachers in charge of local kindergarten classrooms, referred to as Kindergarten Educators (KGEs), may be recruited at local MQF Level 6 (equivalent to a Bachelor degree), but this requirement is downgraded to MQF Level 4 (equivalent to a Certificate level) or even lower in the absence of eligible candidates (Borg 2015; Servizz Pubbliku, 2024; Sollars, 2018). With reference to educators within childcare centres for children up to 3 years of age, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [DQSE] (2021) issued an information booklet for parents stating that "all staff is required to have basic qualification in childcare" (p. 15), and that these centres "help the child develop independence and social skills through play" (p. 12). The promotion of early literacy and language acquisition is not mentioned, suggesting a view of child development in these formative years as limited to the physical and social. All this contributes towards KGEs and childcare educators who may be unprepared for the extent of their role and inadequately skilled in theory, pedagogy and practice. Parents, however, see them as their child's teacher, namely in the full role of KGE, with all the knowledge and training that implies. This study found that participants were heavily reliant on EY educators but at the same time held a narrow view of early literacy and language development. This suggests that particularly in the continued absence of upheld eligibility requirements and adequately qualified staff, there

is a significant need for on-going training in early literacy and language development for EY educators. Such training should underscore the importance of adequate space for unconstrained literacy within EY classrooms. This means a reduced emphasis on constrained literacy skills and the promotion of a broader and more well-rounded platform for early literacy and language learning that includes greater opportunities for a focus on vocabulary, general knowledge and high-quality adult-child verbal interaction. Whilst this shift has already been put in motion with the introduction of the emergent curriculum, this study and others (Baldacchino, 2021; Gauci, 2019; Mifsud & Vella, 2020) suggest that its desired outcomes have not yet been reached. In addition, in order to promote early language acquisition within the local context, educators in the EY should be adequately supported in the use of code-switching, with a shift away from traditional notions of bilingual learning based on language separation (Mifsud &Vella, 2022; Panzavecchia, 2020). Educational policy and practice in the EY should mirror each other closely if Malta is to enhance young children's cognitive and linguistic development. This means greater accountability in terms of ensuring that policy proposals in the EY sector are both understood and adopted by all stakeholders involved.

5.2.3 Implications for Policy and Service Development

In addition to the implications for parents and the EY sector outlined above, the following implications for policy and service development are put forward. Established organizations such as Parentcraft and Positive Parenting Malta (within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights) may expand their services with a focus on child cognitive and linguistic development, and on creating greater awareness as to the parental role in this regard, alongside their already established focus on positive parenting. Within local parenting skills courses, a concerted effort is needed to expand traditional course content, such as stages of

child development, socio-emotional learning, and dealing with misbehaviour, to include cognitive and intellectual development within the home learning environment. The recent *Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030* (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2024, p. 54) states that "investing in parenting skills is expected to ameliorate parents' abilities in providing care, protection and psychological support to their child according to the age and stage of development." I argue that such an investment should also positively impact parents' knowledge and understanding of the potential for young children's early literacy and language learning at home. Whilst the introduction of a parental training programme with the child's holistic development in mind is also mentioned in this policy, its success criteria is based on an increase in parenting skills, confidence and capacity, a reduction of parental stress and the improvement of child wellbeing and behaviour. A specific focus on the intellectual and cognitive stimulation of children is lacking. Furthermore, considering this study's finding that social media played a substantial role in participants' understandings of early literacy and language development, the provision of on-going and regularly updated online blogs, vlogs, and informational articles by these organizations may serve to reach a wider audience (Morawska et al., 2011).

The National Literacy Agency (NLA), which works tirelessly to promote literacy and social inclusion within communities, may expand its well-known and popular services by including specific information about the *what*, *how* and *why* of early literacy and language learning. Although participants were well aware of their services, they perceived a lack of depth in the information provided. Widespread media programmes aimed at disseminating the importance of parent-child high-quality verbal interaction from a very early age are strongly suggested. These should include information about a young child's ability to learn language, how

language develops, and bilingualism. Such societal awareness may significantly increase opportunities for children's early literacy and language learning within the home.

This study also finds that measures promoting a healthy work-life balance should consider the child in conjunction with the parent. Some family-friendly measures may uphold economic agendas that display limited consideration for the wellbeing of children. The *Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030* (Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights, 2024) aims to supports parents within the workplace by promoting programmes wherein "parents can bring their children to work every day and care for them while doing their jobs" (p. 59). Parental care in such scenarios is unlikely to go beyond basic supervision. So, whilst such measures may positively impact the female employment rate, they will not necessarily have a concomitant positive impact on child development.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This study aimed to identify how Maltese parents of kindergarten children perceive and experience their child's early literacy and language acquisition, what awareness they have of their own role in this, the home learning environment they provide, and challenges they face in this regard. Upon detailed analysis and interpretation, the research data collected has provided important findings that depict a clear picture of limitations on young children's early literacy and language development within the local context. The study is not without its limitations, and indeed, one potential limitation is its small scale, with a total of twelve parents interviewed. Although this means that generalisations cannot be drawn from this study, it nonetheless provides rich insight into the perceptions these twelve parents hold of early literacy and language development in the first few years of a child's life. Another limitation is the study's particular demographic, namely that participants were female career

professionals who valued both their own, and their daughters' education highly. This high value placed on education could have positively impacted their choice of school, as well as the home learning environment they provided their children with (Barbarin et al., 2010).

During the initial preliminary meeting I held with all potential participants to introduce myself and the study, I informed participants as to the study's research questions. Participants may have been influenced by my role as researcher (Kuper et al., 2008), and may either have researched the topic prior to their interview with me, or documented activities that they did not normally carry out (Miller, 2016). In addition, they may also have provided responses influenced by social desirability (Rose, 2011). On the other hand, "those whom we study can evaluate us, even as we study them" (Schutt, 2006, p. 10), and although I made a conscious effort to place the interviews on a casual footing, there is always the possibility that some participants may have perceived a power difference in the interview relationship. I do believe, however, that the photographs presented and discussed during the interviews contributed towards an easy, informal narrative and that the cooperative activity (Copes & Ragland, 2022) involved in participants documenting their home literacy activities through photographs and discussing them with me may have served to minimize any potential limitation related to perceived power differences.

My own personal bias and positionality may also have unwittingly shaped my analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Dean et al., 2017). Like participants, I too value education highly, and that is why I was concerned to note a lack of general knowledge and vocabulary among primary school students, and a strong association among parents and teachers in the EY between early literacy and constrained literacy skills, with a concurrent failure to distinguish between the wide range of the former, and the narrower scope of the

latter. To me, the potential for learning inherent in the first few years of a child's life is highly important, and the possibility that a lack of parental awareness could lead to lost learning opportunities for children that may hinder their enjoyment and inclusion in schooling is too significant to ignore. This research is therefore my attempt to bring such awareness to the fore; a way to provide the necessary research-based data that could bring about positive change within the local EY context. Thus, I immersed myself in the research data (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and returned to it meticulously and reflexively time and again over several months. This enabled a more active and generative process that allowed me to be more faithful, not only to the data collected, but also to the depth of interpretation it deserved. I believe that this helped me to address the "truth value" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312) in the research findings and contributed towards the study's reliability and trustworthiness (Johnson & Parry, 2015; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

This study has provided important insights into the perceptions, understanding and awareness of early literacy and language development held by a group of twelve Maltese mothers, and a window into the home learning environment that they provide for their young children. These mothers belong to a particular demographic as professional career women with a high interest in their children's early literacy learning. Whilst this means that findings cannot be generalized to the wider population, nor conclusions drawn for it, they nonetheless contribute towards our understanding of parental awareness of early literacy and language development in Malta and clearly highlight areas for further research. Primarily, studies undertaken with a wider socio-demographic sample would enable a broader understanding of parental perceptions of early literacy and language acquisition throughout the Maltese Islands, which in turn influence child outcomes. The literature underscores the importance of the home

learning environment for child cognitive and linguistic development as from the earliest years, and evidences its strength as the foundation that supports later learning. It is thus vital to gain a wider perspective of this field so as to develop robust and informed ways to support parents in their children's learning from birth till they start school, and beyond. To further enable this larger picture, there is the need of research studies that explore the perceptions of fathers. Such research in the area of paternal understandings of early literacy and language learning has substantial potential to fill important gaps in Malta's EY literature, which lacks the paternal perspective.

In addition, this study found that the impact of social media on parents' perceptions of early literacy and language learning is significant, and that parents follow diverse influencers, as well as established organisations such as the NLA. Further studies into the different types of media used by expectant and new parents to inform themselves about child development may provide important insights as to the most far-reaching and influential platforms on which to generate a greater awareness of the broad definition of early literacy in the EY.

Besides social media, EY educators were also found to be very influential on parental behaviour in terms of their children's early literacy and language learning. Further research into the perceptions educators hold of early literacy and language development, and what importance they place on the development of unconstrained literacy skills is forefront. Studies into the activities they provide within the EY, and their rationale behind these may allow us an important understanding of how and why EY educators still focus on traditional notions of early literacy within the local context, despite the relatively recent emphasis on the emergent curriculum, and of potentially invisible barriers to the broader implementation of unconstrained literacy skills.

Further research is highly recommended in the area of adult-child high-quality verbal interaction, the type of talk used, parental responsiveness, and the real warm and meaningful opportunities for talk open to young children, both within the home environment, as well as within EY settings. Such research could provide valuable information with the potential to bring about positive change within the local EY context.

My final recommendation is for further research into the impact of intervention programmes aimed at empowering parents with the confidence, skills and knowledge necessary to provide a quality home learning environment that includes quality shared reading, verbal interaction, extension of learning, and the acquisition of diverse vocabulary and general knowledge. This would provide valuable insight as to the type and amount of support new parents require, as well as identifying the more successful intervention strategies.

5.5 Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis brings the cyclical process (Cresswell, 2002) of this research study to its culmination. Educational research aims to improve practice, address existing gaps in our understandings, expand knowledge, and inform policy and service development. This study is an investment in the development of Malta's EY sector, and thus an investment in its people, and in its present and future well-being and sustainability. The findings have provided important insights into a key aspect in the EY, namely early literacy and language development. Parents play a crucial role in their children's cognitive and linguistic growth, so it is essential that they understand the broad scope of early literacy and language development, and their own role in it. This study has identified a clear lacuna in this crucial area, expanding our knowledge and making it highly relevant within the local EY sector. The findings may thus be useful in informing educational programmes and local policy, and in

addressing social exclusion issues, such as limited opportunities for cognitive and linguistic growth within the first few years of a child's life. Vygotsky believed that learning leads development and emphasized the value of learning within daily living (Hedges, 2021). Drawing on social constructivist theory, this research advocates for practical learning in the EY that is authentically embedded within our community, our society, and our culture, so that early literacy and language learning takes on a deeper and broader meaning for the benefit of all very young children.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

The University Of Sheffield.

Downloaded: 04/05/2023
Approved: 04/05/2023

Stephanie Borg
Registration number: 200196574
School of Education
Programme: Doctorate of Education

Dear Stephanie

PROJECT TITLE: Early Literacy and Language Development: Parental Understanding and Awareness
APPLICATION: Reference Number 051083

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 04/05/2023 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 051083 (form submission date: 19/04/2023); (expected project end date: 01/09/2024).
- Participant information sheet 1116157 version 4 (17/04/2023).
- Participant consent form 1116158 version 4 (17/04/2023).

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.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

James Bradbury
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix B: Approval from the Secretariat for Catholic Education

SECRETARIAT FOR
CATHOLIC EDUCATION

16, The Mall, Floriana FRN1472, Malta
Tel. +356 27790060
www.csm.edu.mt

The Head
[redacted]

30th May 2023

Ms Stephanie Borg, currently reading for a Doctorate in Education at the University of Sheffield, England, requests permission to conduct audio-recorded interviews with parents of 4 to 5 years old at the above mentioned school. Parents will also be asked to present pictures of literacy activities carried out at home in order to be discussed during the interview.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Ms Stephanie Borg, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the school concerned.

Dr Ian Mifsud
Director for Curriculum & Standard
Secretariat for Catholic Education

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Version 4, 10th April 2023

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

---

1) Research Project Title

Early Literacy and Language Development: Parental Understanding and Awareness

2) What is the project's purpose?

The early years are a main time for learning, and this project explores what parents of 4 to 5-year-olds think about their children's early literacy and language development, what their family literacy practices are, and the challenges they may encounter. This research is part of my Doctoral studies at the University of Sheffield.

3) Why have I been chosen?

Eight participants are needed for this study. You have been asked to participate because your first child is between 4 to 5 years old and soon starting kindergarten. This means that you match the requirements for participation.

4) Do I have to participate?

It is completely up to you whether to participate or not. If you decide not to participate, there will be no negative consequences. If you do want to participate, you will be given a consent form to sign but you will still be free to leave the study by simply telling me so, and without giving any reason. In this case, the data you would have given will be destroyed. This can be

done until the end of September 2023, after which time, your anonymized data will be kept for the sole purpose of the writing of this research study. Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

5) What do I have to do to take part?

To participate, first read this information sheet through. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign and return a consent form. This research will then be carried out within the next few months, and your participation will involve a short interview with me. Before the interview, you will first be asked to take a few photographs of any literacy practices that you presently carry out at home with your child. Your child should not be visible in the photographs. These photographs will only be used for our interview and will not be published. They will thus only be seen by yourselves, me, my two research supervisors and my examiners, should they request it. The interview will be an informal discussion held at a time and place of your choosing and is expected to last for about half an hour. During the interview, no personal or sensitive data will be asked for, and we will discuss what you think about early literacy, any literacy activities you may carry out at home, and any challenges you may experience.

6) Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interview will be audio recorded, should you allow it. This recording will then be transcribed and used only for analysis in this research project. No other use will be made of it without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recording.

7) What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no known risks to you if you participate in this research, which has been ethically approved by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences.

8) What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you either, I hope that this work will provide an understanding of parents' thoughts about early literacy and language development. This data may inform educational practice and policy, and address issues of social exclusion.

9) Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information you give me will be kept strictly confidential and made anonymous when writing the dissertation. This means that you will not be able to be identified. Only my

supervisors will be able to see your data and it will be used only for this study. The interview audio-recordings will be anonymized and then transcribed for analysis. Digital transcripts, photos and audio-recordings will be stored on the University of Sheffield's Google Drive which follows EU data protection legislation. All printed material will be stored in a locked cabinet which only I will have access to. Once the research is finished, and by the end of 2028 to allow for publication of research findings, your data will be destroyed. If, before this time, any other researchers would like to research this area further, they will only have access to the anonymized data, and not the original audio-recordings. Still, your consent will be asked for. Both myself as researcher, and the University of Sheffield are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

10) What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

11) Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. Details are as follows:
Data Controller: The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN, England.
Data Protection Officer: Luke Thompson (luke.thompson@sheffield.ac.uk)
Supervisory Authority: The Information Commissioner, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF, England. Tel: 0044 0303 123 1113

12) Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This research project has been ethically approved by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences.

13) What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If during participation you have any complaints or queries about the way the study is being carried out you can contact myself, my supervisors or an independent designated key person as shown hereunder:

- Lead Researcher: Stephanie Borg, Address [redacted] Tel. [redacted] email sborg1@sheffield.ac.uk

- Supervisor: Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk
- Independent Designated Key Contact: [redacted] Head of School, [redacted] email [redacted]

You can find information about how to raise a complaint by following this link: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

14) Contact for further information

Further information about this project may be obtained from my supervisors:

- Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk

Should you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for your consideration,
Stephanie Borg

Formola ta’ Informazzjoni għall-Parteċipant

Verżjoni 4, 10 t’ April 2023

Inti qed tiġi mistieden biex tieħu sehem fi proġett ta’ riċerka. Qabel tiddeċiedi tridx tieħu sehem, huwa importanti li wieħed jifhem l-iskop ta’ din ir-riċerka u x’tinvolvi. Jekk jogħġbok, ħu l-ħin li għandek bżonn biex taqra din l-informazzjoni sew u jekk tixtieq tista’ tiddiskutiha ma’ ħaddieħor. Jekk xi ħaġa mhix ċara jew tixtieq iktar informazzjoni tista’ tikkuntatjani fuq in-numru pprovdut fit-tmiem ta’ din il-formola. Ħu l-ħin tiegħek biex tiddeċiedi jekk tridx tipparteċipa. Grazzi tal-ħin tiegħek.

---

1) Titlu tal-proġett

Il-Litteriżmu Bikri u l-Iżvilupp tal-Lingwa: Fehmiet u Perċezzjonijiet tal-Ġenituri.

2) X’inhu l-għan ta’ dan il-proġett?

Dan il-proġett jittratta l-perjodu tas-snin bikrin u l-għan ewlieni tiegħu hu li jesplora x’jifhmu l-ġenituri ta’ tfal bejn l-4 u 5 snin dwar il-litteriżmu u l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa, il-prattiċi tagħhom fejn jidħol il-litteriżmu u d-diffikultajiet li jaffaċċaw. Din ir-riċerka hija parti mill-istudji Dottorali tiegħi ġewwa l-Università ta’ Sheffield.

3) Għaliex intagħżilt?

Dan l-istudju jirrikjedi tmien parteċipanti. Inti ntagħżilt għax inti Malti/ja, u l-ewwel wild tiegħek għandha bejn 4 u 5 snin u dieħla fil-kindergarten ġewwa din l-iskola. Dan ifisser li tidħol taħt il-parametri għal parteċipazzjoni f’dan l-istudju.

4) Irrid nipparteċipa bilfors?

Inti biss tista’ tiddeċiedi tipparteċipax jew le. Jekk ma tridx, ma jkun hemm ebda konsegwenza negattiva għalik. Jekk tixtieq tipparteċipa, tingħata formola ta’ kunsens biex tiffirma. Xorta waħda, iżda, tkun tista’ twaqqaf u toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka meta trid inti u mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. F’dan il-każ, l-informazzjoni li tkun tajtni titħassar. Dan jista’ isir sal-aħħar ta’

Settembru. Wara din id-data, l-informazzjoni li tkun tajtni tkun ġiet anonimizzata u għalhekk tinżamm għall-kitba ta' dan l-istudju. Importanti tkun taf li, bħala parteċipant, m'għandek ebda obbligu legali lejn, jew impjieg, mal-Università ta' Sheffield.

5) X'irrid nagħmel biex nipparteċipa?

Biex tipparteċipa, l-ewwel aqra din il-formola ta' informazzjoni sew. Jekk tiddeċiedi li tipparteċipa, tingħata formola ta' kunsens biex tiffirma. Din ir-riċerka se ssir fix-xhur li ġejjin u inti jkollok intervista miegħi. Qabel dan, tkun trid tieħu ftit ritratti ta' attivitajiet li tagħmel ma' bintek id-dar li għandhom x'jaqsmu ma' litteriżmu fis-snin bikrin. Importanti tkun taf li bintek mhux se tiġi tidher f'dawn ir-ritratti, li se jintużaw biss waqt l-intervista li jkollna flimkien, u li mhumiex se jiġu ppublikati. L-uniċi persuni li jistgħu jarawhom huma int, jiena, iż-żewġ supervisors tiegħi, u l-eżaminaturi jekk jistaqsu għalihom. L-intervista, li tkun twila bejn nofs siegħa u siegħa, tkun diskussjoni informali bejnek u bejni u ssir f'ħin u post li tixtieq inti. Waqt l-intervista, mhinix se nistaqsik informazzjoni personali jew sensittiva. Minflok, se niddiskutu x'taħseb inti dwar il-litteriżmu fis-snin bikrin, l-attivitajiet li tagħmel d-dar ma' bintek, u xi diffikultajiet li jista' jkun taffaċċja.

6) Se niġi rrekordjat/a?

Jekk tagħti l-kunsens tiegħek, l-intervista tiġi awdja rrekordjata. Dan ir-rekording jiġi traskritt u jintuża biss għall-analiżi f'din ir-riċerka. Ħadd minn barra dan il-proġett ma jkollu aċċess għalih.

7) Hemm xi żvantaġġi jew riskji assoċjati mal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi?

M'hemm ebda żvantaġġ jew riskju assoċjat mal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'din ir-riċerka, li ġiet approvata mill-Università ta' Sheffield.

8) Jekk nipparteċipa, hemm xi benefiċċji?

Għalkemm m'hemm ebda benefiċċju assoċjat mal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek, nispera li din ir-riċerka twassal għal fehma iktar wiesgħa fuq dak li jaħsbu l-ġenituri dwar il-litteriżmu u l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa fis-snin bikrin. Din l-informazzjoni tista' tintuża sabiex taġġorna u ttejjeb il-politika u l-prattiċi edukattivi ġewwa Malta, kif ukoll tindirizza argumenti importanti dwar l-esklużjoni soċjali.

9) Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi tinżamm kunfidenzjali?

Kull informazzjoni li tagħtini ser tinżamm kunfidenzjali u anonima fil-kitba tad-dissertazzjoni. Dan ifisser li ħadd ma jkun jista' jidentifikak. Is-supervisors tiegħi biss ikunu jistgħu jaraw l-informazzjoni tiegħek u din tintuża biss għall-iskop ta' din ir-riċerka. L-awdjorekordjar jinżamm

anonimu anki meta jiġi traskritt. Ir-ritratti, awdjorekordjar u traskrizzjonijiet jinżammu fuq il-Google Drive tal-Università ta' Sheffield li ssegwi l-istess kontrolli legali fuq ħarsien tad-dejta bħall-EU. Meta jiġu pprintjati t-traskrizzjonijiet, dawn il-kopji jissakkru ġewwa kexxun li jiena biss ikolli aċċess għalih. Meta titlesta r-riċerka, u sal-aħħar tal-2028 sabiex ikun hemm opportunità ta'publikazzjoni tar-riċerka, id-dejta tiegħek tiġi mħassra. Jekk, qabel dan iż-żmien, ikun hemm xi riċerkaturi oħrajn li jkunu jridu jagħmlu iktar riċerka f'dan il-qasam, ikollhom aċċess biss għad-dejta anonimu, u mhux għall-awdjorekordjar oriġinali. Xorta waħda, iżda, ikollhom isaqsuk għall-kunsens tiegħek l-ewwel. Jiena u l-Università ta' Sheffield it-tnejn risponsabbli tal-ħarsien tad-dejta tiegħek u li din tintuża biss għall-iskop ta' dan il-proġett.

10) X'inhi l-bażi legali għall-ipproċessar tad-dejta personali tiegħi?

Skont il-leġizlazzjoni tal-ħarsien tad-dejta, l-ipproċessar tad-dejta personali tiegħi hija fuq bażi ta' neċessità biex titwettaq riċerka fl-interess pubbliku (Artiklu 6(1)(e)). Għal iktar informazzjoni, ikklikkja hawn: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

11) Min jikkontrolla d-dejta?

L-Università ta' Sheffield tikkontrolla d-dejta għal dan l-istudju. Dettalji hawn:
Data Controller: The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN, England.
Data Protection Officer: Luke Thompson (luke.thompson@sheffield.ac.uk)
Supervisory Authority: The Information Commissioner, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF, England. Tel: 0044 0303 123 1113

12) Min irriċensjona dan il-proġett mill-aspett ta' etika?

Din ir-riċerka ġiet ikkunsidrata u approvata skont il-proċedura ta' riċensjoni etika tal-Università ta' Sheffield, amministrata mill-Iskola tal-Edukazzjoni, Fakultà tax-Xjenzi Soċjali.

13) X'jiġri jekk inkun nixtieq ngħaddi lment dwar din ir-riċerka?

Jekk matul il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek ikollok xi lment jew mistoqsija dwar il-mod li qed issir ir-riċerka, tista' tikkuntattja lili, s-supervisors tiegħi jew persuna maħtura bħala kuntatt indipendenti kif jidher hawn taħt:

- Ricerkatriċi: Stephanie Borg, tel: [redacted] email: sborg1@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk

- Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk
- Persuna maħtura bħala kuntatt indipendenti: [redacted] Head of School, [redacted], email: [redacted]

Tista' ssib informazzjoni dwar kif tista' tgħaddi lment billi tikklikkja fuq dan il-link: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

14) Dettalji dwar min tista' tikkuntattja għal iktar informazzjoni dwar dan il-proġett:

- Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk

Jekk tiddeċiedi li tipparteċipa, tingħata kopja ta' din il-formola, kif ukoll tal-formula ta' kunsens.

Grazzi ħafna,
Stephanie Borg

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

University of Sheffield

Consent Form Version 4, 10th April 2023		
Title of Project: Early Literacy and Language Development: Parental Understanding and Awareness.		
Name of Researcher: Stephanie Borg	Participant Identification Number for this Project:	
Please tick the appropriate boxes	***Yes***	***No***
Taking part in the project		
I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (Version 3, 10th April 2023) and the project has been fully explained to me. (If you answer No to this statement, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking a few photographs of what I consider to be early literacy activities and being interviewed.		
I agree that whilst I am participating in this interview, audio recordings will be made. I agree to being audio recorded and for transcripts of these anonymised audio recordings to be used in the research.		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time until the end of September 2023; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number and email address will not be revealed to anyone other than the research supervisors.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in this project's final dissertation and in any publication that may arise from the dissertation. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this and that the quotes will be anonymised.		

I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for the photos and audio recordings that I provide during the interview, and their related transcripts, to be deposited in the University of Sheffield's Google Drive until the end of 2028, after which they will be permanently deleted.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researcher		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of Participant:_____ Signature_____ Date_____

Name of Researcher: Stephanie Borg Signature_____ Date_____

Project contact details for further information:

- Lead Researcher: Stephanie Borg, tel:[redacted] email: sborg1@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk
- Independent Designated Key Contact: [redacted] Head of School, [redacted] email: [redacted]

University of Sheffield

Formola ta’ Kunsens

Verżjoni 4, 10 ta’ April 2023

Titlu tal-Proġett: Il-Litteriżmu Bikri u l-Iżvilupp tal-Lingwa: Fehmiet u Perċezzjonijiet tal-Ġenituri.	
Isem ir-Riċerkatriċi: Stephanie Borg	Numru ta’ Identifikazzjoni tal-Parteċipant għal dan il-Proġett:

Jekk jogħġbok ittikkja l-kaxex skont fehmtek	***Iva***	***Le***
Parteċipazzjoni fil-proġett		
Jien/a qrajt u fhimt l-Ittra ta’ Informazzjoni dwar dan il-proġett (Verżjoni 3, 10 ta’ April 2023) u l-proġett ġie spjegat lili. (Jekk tirrispondi le, jekk jogħġbok ieqaf hawn sakemm tħossok infurmata biżżejjed dwar x’tinvolvi l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek).		
Jien/a ngħatajt l-opportunità li nistaqsi dwar dan il-proġett.		
Jien/a nikkonferma l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f’dan il-proġett. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi tinkludi t-teħid ta’ ftit ritratti li juru attivitajiet ġewwa d-dar li għandhom x’jaqsmu mall-litteriżmu bikri, u li niġi intervistat/a.		
Nagħti kunsens li din l-intervista tiġi awdjo rrekordjata u traskritta b’mod anonimu għal użu f’din ir-riċerka.		
Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni volontarja tiegħi ma ġġibx magħha ebda ftehim legali jew xogħol mal-Università ta’ Sheffield.		
Jiena nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi hija volontarja u li nista’ nwaqqaf u noħroġ minn dan il-proġett meta rrid mingħajr raġuni u bla konsegwenzi sal-aħħar ta’ Settembru 2023.		
Kif se tintuża l-informazzjoni li nagħti		
Nifhem li ħadd ħlief is-supervisors ta’ din ir-riċerka se jkollhom aċċess għad-dettalji personali tiegħi, bħal ismi, in-numru tat-telefown u l-indirizz elettroniku.		
Nifhem u naqbel li kliemi jistgħu jintużaw anonimament biss fid-dissertazzjoni miktuba mir-ricerkatriċi, u f’xi publikazzjoni li tirriżulta minn din ir-riċerka. Nifhem li ismi mhu se jidher imkien.		
Nifhem u naqbel li riċerkaturi oħrajn ikollhom aċċess għal kliemi anonimament biss jekk iwegħdu li jżommu l-kunfidenzjalità tal-informazzjoni hekk kif huwa stipulat f’din il-formola.		

Nagħti permess sabiex ir-ritratti, awdjorekordjar u traskrizzjonijiet hawn fuq imsemmija jiġu ddepożitati fil-Google Drive tal-Università ta' Sheffield sal-aħħar ta' 2028, u li wara dawn jiġu mħassra.		
Sabiex l-informazzjoni li tagħti tista' tintuża legalment mir-riċerkaturi		
Naqbel li l-Università ta' Sheffield ikollha l-kopirat tal-kontenut ta' din ir-riċerka.		

Isem il-Parteċipant:_____ Firma_____ Data_____

Isem ir-Ricerkatriċi: Stephanie Borg Firma_____ Data_____

Dettalji dwar min tista' tikkuntattja għal iktar informazzjoni dwar dan il-proġett:

- Ricerkatriċi: Stephanie Borg, tel: [redacted] email: sborg1@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email: e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk
- Persuna maħtura bħala kuntatt indipendenti: [redacted], Head of School, [redacted], email: [redacted]

Appendix E: PowerPoint Presentation for Potential Participants

During the interview, **no personal or sensitive data will be asked for. There are no wrong or right answers**, and we will discuss what you think about early learning, any literacy activities you may carry out at home, and any challenges you may experience.

Research Question 1:

How do kindergarten parents view early literacy learning, language development, quality interaction, and their own role in it?

Research Question 2:

What home literacy learning practices do kindergarten parents engage in with their children?

Research Question 3:

What challenges, if any, do kindergarten parents face in promoting early literacy, language learning and high-quality verbal interaction at home, and what do they feel would be helpful in this regard?

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Before the interview, you will first be asked to take a few photographs of any literacy practices that you presently carry out at home with your child over the period of one week. Your child should not show in the photographs. These photographs will only be used for our interview and will not be published.

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6) Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interview will be audio recorded, should you allow it. This recording will then be transcribed and used only for analysis in this research project. No other use will be made of it without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recording.

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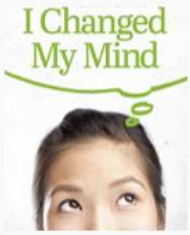

7) What if I change my mind?

You will be free to leave the study by simply telling me so, and without giving any reason. In this case, the data you would have given will be destroyed. This can be done until the end of September 2023, after which time, your anonymized data will be kept for the sole purpose of the writing of this research study.

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8) What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no known risks to you if you participate in this research, which has been ethically approved by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences.

9) What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you either, I hope that this work will provide an understanding of parents' thoughts about early literacy and language development. This data may inform educational practice and policy, and address issues of social exclusion.

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10) Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information you give me will be kept strictly confidential and made anonymous when writing the dissertation. This means that you will not be able to be identified. Only my supervisors will be able to see your data and it will be used only for this study. The interview audio-recordings will be anonymized and then transcribed for analysis. Digital transcripts, photos and audio-recordings will be stored on the University of Sheffield's Google Drive which follows EU data protection legislation.

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11) What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

If during participation you have any complaints or queries about the way the study is being carried out you can contact myself, my supervisors or an independent designated key person as shown hereunder:

- Lead Researcher: Stephanie Borg, [redacted] email sborg1@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Louise Kay, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email louise.kay@sheffield.ac.uk
- Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Chesworth, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, email e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk
- Independent Designated Key Contact: [redacted] Head of School, [redacted] email [redacted]

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12) What should I do if I want to participate?

Simply let me know:

By return email

By telephone

By sending a message

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Appendix F: Guideline Interview Questions

Basic Demographic Questions:

How old are you and where do you live? Have you always lived in this locality?
What is your occupation, and do you work full-time or part-time? Is your husband / wife / partner Maltese too?

Research Question 1:

What knowledge and awareness do kindergarten parents have of early literacy, language development and quality interaction, and of their own role in it?

i) Parental motivation and influencing factors

a) Can you tell me what your parenting experience has been like?
b) How does the role of parent change from parenting a baby to parenting a kindergartner?

ii) Parental views on child language development

a) What do you feel is the most important period of time in a child's language development, and why?
b) Can you tell me a bit about your child's language development?

iii) Adult-child conversations

a) What do you think about adult-child conversations?

iv) Parental views on child early literacy / learning development

a) What do you understand by the term 'early literacy'/ 'early learning' and when does it start?
b) From what/where have you gained this information about early literacy?
c) What early literacy / learning do you think may be important before kindergarten?
d) 'Preschool is where child-rearing meets learning' – What do you think about this quote?
e) Does/did your child attend nursery/playschool, and if yes, what are your views about this?
f) In your opinion, what and who is most influential on a child's early literacy development?

v) Parental views on education

a) What is your view on education in general?
b) How important is a wide vocabulary for a child entering kindergarten?
c) In your opinion, what factors strongly influence how well a young child will do in primary school?
d) In your opinion, what are the most important things your child can learn in the coming year?

Research Question 2:
What home literacy practices do parents engage in with their children?

i**) Describe your child's typical day.**

ii) Home literacy practices

a) Can you tell me about the activities and pictures you have taken?
b) Why did you choose these particular activities?
c) What home literacy activities do you think contribute most to your child's learning?
d) What sort of activities do you carry out to enhance your child's general knowledge?

iii) Home language use

a) Language use at home
b) How do you actively support / stimulate your child's language development?
c) What sort of activities do you engage in at home that offer you the opportunity for extended conversations with your child?

iv) Reading

a) What are your views about reading in general?
b) What are your shared reading practices, if any?
c) How does your child behave during shared reading and how do you respond?
d) What genres do you read?
e) How do you go about reading a book?

v) Home literacy resources

a) What sort of literacy resources can be found around the home?

Research Question 3:
What challenges, if any, do parents face in promoting early literacy, language learning and high-quality verbal interaction at home, and what do they feel would be helpful?

i) Challenges to engaging in literacy practices at home

a) What challenges do you experience in carrying out literacy activities at home?
b) As a regular part of the home routine, what can you do to extend/increase your child's learning at home?

ii) Perceived needs

a) What outside factors would help you to promote literacy, language learning and high-quality verbal interaction at home, if any?
b) What advice would you give to new parents in terms of early literacy and language development?

Linji Gwida għall-Intervisti mal-Parteċipanti

Mistoqsijiet Demografiċi Bażiċi:
Kemm għandek żmien u fejn toqgħod? Minn dejjem toqgħod f'din il-lokalità? X'inhu l-impjieg tiegħek, u fuq bażi part-time jew full-time? Ir-raġel / il-mara tiegħek Malti/ja?

L-Ewwel Mistoqsija:
X'għarfien u fehem għandhom ġenituri ta' tfal fil-kindergarten dwar il-litteriżmu, l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa u interazzjoni ta' kwalità fis-snin bikrin, u tar-rwol tagħhom f'dan?

i) Motivazzjoni tal-ġenituri u fatturi oħra
a) Tista' tgħidli dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek tat-trobbija tat-tifla?
b) Kif jinbidel ir-rwol tal-ġenitur mit-trobbija ta' tarbija għat-trobbija ta' tifla t'erba' snin?

ii) Kif tħares lejn l-iżvilupp tat-tfal mit-twelid sal-età ta' erba' snin?
a) Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, liema hu l-iktar żmien importanti fl-iżvilupp tal-lingwa fit-tfal, u għaliex?
b) Tista' tgħidli dwar l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa ta' bintek?
ċ) Min kellu, jew liema fatturi kellhom, impatt pożittiv fuq il-lingwa ta' bintek?

iii) Konverżazzjonijiet bejn adulti u tfal - x'taħseb dwar dan?

iv) Fehmiet tal-ġenituri dwar il-litteriżmu fis-snin bikrin
a) X'tifhem bil-frażi 'litteriżmu bikri'?
b) Minn fejn jew mingħand min akkwistajt informazzjoni dwar il-litteriżmu fis-snin bikrin?
ċ) Liema aspetti ta' litteriżmu huma importanti qabel il-kindergarten?
d) 'Il-preschool/childcare/kindergarten huwa l-post fejn it-trobbija tiltaqa' mal-edukazzjoni' – X'taħseb dwar din il-kwotazzjoni?
e) It-tifla tiegħek attendiet childcare jew Kinder 1, u jekk iva, x'taħseb dwar it-tagħlim f'dawn il-postijiet?
f) X'inhuma dawk il-fatturi li l-iktar kellhom effett pożittiv fuq il-litteriżmu ta' bintek?

v) Il-fehmiet tal-ġenituri dwar l-edukazzjoni
a) X'taħseb dwar l-edukazzjoni in ġenerali?
b) Kemm hu importanti vokabolarju wiesgħa qabel il-kindergarten?
c) Liema huma dawk il-fatturi li jista' jkollhom effett pożittiv fuq il-ħajja skolastika fil-primarja?
d) X'tixtieq li titgħallem bintek f'din is-sena skolastika l-ġdida ta' Kinder 2?

It-Tieni Mistoqsija:
Fejn jidħlu l-litteriżmu u l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa, x'inhuma dawk il-prattiċi li jużaw il-ġenituri mat-tfal tagħhom?

i) Iddiskrivi ġurnata tipika ta' bintek.

ii) Prattiċi tal-litteriżmu fid-dar
a) Spjegali dwar ir-ritratti li ħadt.
b) Għaliex għażilt dawn l-attivitajiet?
ċ) Liema huma dawk l-attivitajiet li l-iktar kellhom impatt fuq it-tagħlim ta' bintek?
d) X'tip ta' attivitajiet tagħmlu d-dar biex tkabbar l-għarfien ġenerali ta' bintek?

iii) L-użu tal-lingwa ġewwa d-dar
a) Tista' tispjegali x'tip ta' lingwa tuża ma' bintek ġewwa d-dar?
b) B'liema mod issostni u tkattar l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa ta' bintek?
ċ) Liema attivitajiet li tagħmlu d-dar joffru opportunitajiet għal-konverżazzjonijiet ma' bintek?

iv) Il-qari
a) Kif taħsibha inti dwar il-qari in ġenerali?
b) X'inhuma l-prattiċi tal-qari ma' bintek ġewwa d-dar?
ċ) Kif iġġib ruħha bintek waqt li taqraw, u kif tirrispondi inti għal din l-imġiba?
d) X'tip ta' kotba taqraw?
e) Spjegali kif tagħmlu meta tkunu qed taqraw.

v) Riżorsi tal-litteriżmu li jinstabu ġewwa d-dar.

It-Tielet Mistoqsija:
X'diffikultajiet jaffaċċaw il-ġenituri biex ikattru l-litteriżmu u l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa ġewwa d-dar, u x'inhuma dawk il-fatturi li jkunu ta' għajnuna għalihom?

i) Sfidi għal-litteriżmu ġewwa d-dar
a) Tista' tgħidli dwar diffikultajiet li ssib biex issostni u testendi l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa u l-litteriżmu meta tkun id-dar?
b) Bħala parti mir-rutina tad-dar, x'tista' tagħmel inti sabiex testendi t-tagħlim ta' bintek?

ii) Xi tħoss li jkun ta' għajnuna għalik sabiex tkun tista' tkabbar it-tagħlim tal-lingwa, l-litteriżmu u l-interazzjoni mitkellma fid-dar?

iii) Kieku kellek tagħti parir lill-ġenituri ġodda dwar il-litteriżmu u l-iżvilupp tal-lingwa fis-snin bikrin, xi jkun?