

## Chapter 1: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Maltese Society

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# Educators' Constructions of Maltese Society

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## Abstract

In the span of a few decades, Maltese society witnessed rapid social, cultural and political changes, transforming itself from a primarily monocultural society into a multicultural one. The introduction of progressive civil rights legislation brought forth new understandings of gender, gender identity and family constructs. The Catholic Church is slowly losing its potential to influence its followers. These changes might be seen as a threat to the moral fibre of Maltese society, or an opportunity to see beyond the insularity of an island state. The aim of this paper is to explore the yet largely uncharted waters of how Maltese educators construct Maltese society and social diversity, which ultimately influence their practices in school. The study draws on social constructionism as a theoretical framework. I argue that teachers' constructions of, and attitudes towards social diversity in Maltese society cannot be taken out of the context in which these have been socialised, nurtured, and perhaps sustained or otherwise challenged. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 19 participants hailing from State, Church and Independent schools. Critical Discourse Analysis was applied to analyse the data gathered. Educators' constructions of Maltese society and the social diversity within it reflected their location as citizens of an island nation, with some of the participants seeking to preserve their visions and traditions of an imagined community, while others looked outward and embraced change as something positive. They provided multiple constructions of Maltese society and social diversity, reflecting the geopolitics, history, religion and size of the island.

## Keywords:

educators, Maltese society, social diversity, constructions



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### Introduction

Through the course of human history, Malta's location in the middle of the Mediterranean has made it attractive and accessible to the various rulers who occupied the country. As such, this could be considered an early form of the globalisation process that left an impact on Maltese language, culture and worldviews. Until the 1980s Maltese society was still generally insular, not only due to the fact that living on an island is bound to foster an introverted perspective (Smith and Ebejer 2012), but also due to having limited access to information and worldviews. Then, from the 1990s, the proliferation of mass media made it possible to observe different lifestyles and worldviews and increased the possibility for emergent movements to engage with the public sphere (Falzon & Micallef 2008).

The new millennium seems to have been a truly catalyst of change in Maltese society. Many Maltese acquired more liberal views regarding social norms and no longer felt shackled by the dogma of the Catholic Church (Pace 2012). The illusion of homogeneity that had permeated Maltese society was being slowly but steadily shattered as more minority groups started to make claims for equal rights. Moreover, immigration, demand for separation between Church and State, more civil rights with the introduction of divorce and civil union and later marriage between people of the same sex, as well as adoption, and a Gender Identity, Gender Expression And Sex Characteristics Act have all left their mark on society. All of these changes have compelled the Maltese to re-examine and reconsider who they are – as a nation and as individuals.

Within this context of social change, educators had to contend with a myriad of educational reforms<sup>1</sup> which left them suffering from reform fatigue besides never being adequately prepared for all that was expected of them. In the meantime, the number of non-Maltese students started to increase dramatically. Students hailed from all over the world, many knew neither English nor Maltese – the languages of instruction – and educators were expected to deal with all the challenges presented by the new realities without at least basic pedagogical and intercultural training. Consequently,

<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2006, when the School Networks, known as Colleges, were set up, students who attended state schools would need to pass the 11+ exam to attend Junior Lyceums. Those who failed attended Secondary Schools. and those who received very low marks would attend Opportunity Centres. From 2006 onwards, students attended the same Middle and Secondary schools. At first students were streamed, then streaming was abolished, only for setting to be introduced a little while later. Sometime later co-education was introduced.

educators found themselves inundated with constant challenges which they barely could address, and found little support from the Directorate.

This paper explores how the experience of social change mediates educators' constructions of society and social diversity. More specifically, I examine how educators forge the boundaries of national collectivity within this context of change, since social constructions do not happen in a vacuum but are the product of people's thinking.

## Methodology

This study formed part of a doctoral project in which educators' constructions of social diversity, their positioning in society and their practices in school were explored. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 educators – 11 females and 8 males – who were teachers and School Management Team (SMT) members in Middle or Secondary State, Church or Independent schools. Participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique. The participants were of different political persuasions; while most were Catholic, although not necessarily practicing, there were three who were atheists, and one was Christian. Two participants were lesbian, two were cohabitating, and most were married. One participant was a returned migrant, one was a parent of a gay child and one was a parent of a child with a disability. Some of the participants were involved in religious activities, members of band clubs, active within political parties, and one was a member of a far-right group.

This paper is based mainly on the participants' response to the question, "If you had to draw a picture of Maltese society, how would you do it?" and to the questions asked for clarification and elaboration that followed the participants' replies. Most interviews were conducted in Maltese, and translated into English. However, I analysed the texts in their original version as a translated text can never be a perfect replica of the original (Kearney 2007). Moreover, idiom and contextual comments could be better captured in the original language. In order to understand the participants' constructions of Maltese society and discuss the complexity and hybridity of identification

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(Bhabha 1988) this paper is anchored in postcolonial theory (Said 1979). I also took a social constructionist approach (Hjelm 2014), and applied Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse the data (Fairclough 2003).

As a teacher myself, I have experienced school life, had to contend with and mediate school and national education policies, and in general lived many of the same experiences that other educators have gone through. This is not to say that all educators read school life as I do, but I can consider myself an 'insider'. However, as a researcher, and at present not occupying a teaching post, I am also able to look at educators from the 'outside'. This dual perspective leaves me well placed to recognise the underlying assumptions educators may have of society and social diversity. Simultaneously, my profession as an educator provides me with a critical frame of reference derived from my own experiences within schools, school policies and practices and the discourse emanating from both the educational field, as well as from the public sphere in general. Such a process demands that I apply reflexivity in order to ensure authenticity.

### Findings

Educators' constructions of Maltese society varied significantly, with a notable distinction among the participants, created by their intellectual engagement with discourses that are floated in the public sphere. These constructions varied on political and ethical matters, but not on the environment, which educators considered as an apolitical field. Conversely educators' positions became more widely distributed from left to right of the political spectrum, where the realm of the social was concerned.

Educators provided different standpoints, rooted in the various histories and experiences of each, thus providing a variety of constructions of the society in which they live. These standpoints further suggested that educators do not represent a homogenous public. On the contrary, the data show that they reflect competing locations according to social class, gender and sexual orientation, ideology, and cultural background, to name a few intersections.

## 1. A Divided Maltese Society

Maltese people are generally divided on many issues (Boissevain 1965; Mitchell 2002). This division often locates people on one side or another. For example, one is either Labour or Nationalist, pro-choice or pro-life, *hamallu* or *tal-pepé*<sup>2</sup>, and no grey areas are allowed. These labels are used to essentialise those who sport them, but more than that, they depict a society whose primary characteristic is division. This division is strongest in the political sphere, where criticizing one party automatically renders one as supporter of the other party. Consequently, one's thoughts and actions can be conditioned by one's concern regarding how these may be interpreted and how one would be positioned on one side or another. Moreover, the smallness of the island, its density and proximity of family, friends and neighbours, at times make it difficult to think outside the set parameters of 'us' and 'them'. Therefore, alterity is constructed primarily from within Maltese society, a remnant of colonialism, "which seriously affected the attitude of Maltese toward fellow Maltese" (Frendo 1977: 22).

The participants did not fail to mention this division prominently, referring especially to party politics and how allegiance to one party or another renders most people unable "to think in a critical manner". So much so that David, a social studies teacher, captures people's adulation of their party leader and this inability to think for themselves in this way by a picture of people chanting "Hail Joseph! Hail Simon"<sup>3</sup> Together for sainthood". David uses the metaphor of the patron saint to illustrate the kind of adulation that the Maltese reserve for their leaders. He refers to the entrenched cultural practice of chanting in front of the statue of the patron saint to emphasise the extent of the veneration and sacrality of patron saints that is transposed on to the party leaders (Boissevain 1965), who are idealised but not held accountable. Party allegiance has resulted in extreme polarization (Cini 2002) and this is further illustrated by Claudine, who describes the Maltese as not being able to see beyond red or blue<sup>4</sup>, constantly antagonistic towards each other. She argues that this "affects all society, everything". Claudine speaks of the primacy of tradition, which makes it difficult for many Maltese to support a different party than that traditionally supported by the family and thus to

<sup>2</sup> The most precise translation of *hamallu* would be *chav*, which the Cambridge online dictionary defines as "an insulting word for someone, usually a young person, whose way of dressing, speaking and behaving is thought to show their lack of education and low social class". *Tal-pepé* refers to people of the upper classes, who use English instead of Maltese as a sign of their social standing and privilege.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph (Muscat) was the leader of the Labour Party and Simon (Busuttill) was the leader of the Nationalist Party when the interview took place.

<sup>4</sup> Red representing the Labour Party and Blue the Nationalist Party.

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break rank and challenge the hegemonic thinking. She claims that many Maltese accept ideas passively, giving political groups their consent and thus the power to control their (the people's) actions. Therefore, she sees the division in Maltese society as benefitting only the privileged groups – the political class, an account Vercellono (2009) reiterates. Gramsci's concept of hegemony cannot be more evident than in such narrations. The ruling class have made it their mission that the nation remain divided, feeding on the consent granted by their respective supporters.

While many of the educators criticised Maltese society for the division that has been created within it due to party politics, they did not challenge it but contributed to its continuation. Ruth, a Maths teacher, illustrates the reluctance of teachers to address the political divide, ingrained as it is in the Maltese psyche. She blames the scarcity of critical education and argues that most of the Maltese are unable to discuss politics in an objective manner. According to her, "we weren't taught what Malta had gone through, as if we never existed ... mentioning Mintoff<sup>5</sup>, for example, was taboo ..." Therefore, even the education system itself, through the curriculum, contributes to the construction of division which, at times, educators feel that they are bound to perpetuate, either because they fear the repercussions that would ensue if they had to engage in a critical discussion about these constructions, or else because they prefer the 'safety' of not challenging the status quo. Ruth's comment can be considered a self-critical comment on the role of teachers in such matters.

## 2. A Divided Maltese Society

In their constructions of Maltese society, educators focused heavily on issues of social change in Malta, regarding social change from two focal points: either as a threat to Maltese society and tradition or as a breath of fresh air, which is removing the stifling, conservative ideas and providing a more progressive shift in thought. The radical conditions of change, especially, but not only, in terms of new constructs of family and a more secular society have confused some of the educators and caused them anxiety and despair, as they lacked the ability to find adequate language to express the

<sup>5</sup> Dom Mintoff (1916–2012), Labour Party Leader (1948–1984), Prime Minister (1955–1958, 1971–1984).

feelings aroused by these changes.

One participant captures the struggle of negotiating between 'old' and 'new' ways of thinking. Nadia forms part of the Senior Management Team (SMT) of a school and in the description of Maltese society, she applies a metaphor from mythology and compares the Maltese to Janus, some looking at the future, some sitting firmly looking at the past and then some who are in between, "who are trying to understand the new and integrate it with their reality, with their way of learning."

Nadia's description illustrates a struggle which goes beyond the 'us and them' discourse of other participants. The division is not absent, but the split she describes is one of struggle between the past and the present. Nadia speaks of the divisive nature of Maltese society in terms of culture and change. Social reforms, coming in rapid succession, have instigated those deemed more conservative to insist on tradition as a response to the anxieties brought about by the threats of change (Boissevain 1992). Nadia's metaphor of Maltese society is a perfect illustration of Mitchell's (2002) description of the Maltese. He says that the ambivalence and anxiety shown by the Maltese were common manifestations of modernity and these were "reflected in the idea of Europe, which was seen as both a promise and a threat – a promise of increased security, affluence, democracy, modernity, but a threat to family, morality, community and tradition" (242). Moreover, Mitchell claims that, "This ambivalence – and consequent anxiety about present and future – are particularly acute at the edges of Europe, in marginal places such as Malta", further adding that the dilemmas of European integration are "morally charged dilemmas which go to the heart of what people regard as their identities, their cultures and their traditions" (242).

Another teacher, Fabienne, constructs Maltese society as "frivolous" and "unconscious". For her, the struggle between the traditional and modern is one in which in their quest for material acquisitions the Maltese have lost sight of respectful behaviour, tenderness and being in touch with what really matters. The drive towards an individualistic culture, has brought about a change in their behaviour towards others. Fabienne's words have captured the idea of Janus in a totally



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different way from Nadia. She describes how the Maltese wish to emulate the 'European' way of life but are finding challenges on how to relate to being European as intimately they still prefer their traditional practices. For Fabienne, Janus represents the long-established behaviour of general indiscipline and disregard for rules, the noise the Maltese generate and the chaotic atmosphere in which they live, as contrasting with the Maltese people's constructions of a European way of living and behaving.

Steve described Maltese society as both insular and outward-looking, a 'porous cell', whose outside membrane simultaneously contains it, but allows both inward and outward movement. He argues that as a small island state, Malta, through its geographical location, projects a sense of "claustrophobia" and "protection", as well as a sense of isolation that cannot be ignored. At the same time, globalisation has made it impossible for the Maltese to remain as isolated and inward-looking as before. The size of the island makes it more susceptible to outside influences, but within its walls, a lot of change goes on, instigated by internal activity. Thus, Steve sees Maltese society as fluid, whose internal movements can at times influence what happens outside of it, but its size and location allow for greater 'foreign' stimuli to affect it. Steve sees the inside – outside dichotomy as expressed through the metaphor of the cell – as something to be expected, and in itself not problematic.

### 3. Cultural Catholicism and Maltese Identity

The Catholic religion, like party politics, is another taxonomy of Maltese identity and affiliation, and one cannot operate outside of it. All educators mentioned religion, most of them according to its hegemonic status. The ways in which educators spoke of the Catholic religion and its rituals show that these practices are ingrained in their constructions of society. Being Maltese translated automatically to one being Catholic and if one is not Catholic, then one is considered different, an outsider. Indeed, Frank observes that "We use it [Catholic religion] to distinguish the 'us' from the 'them'". This is a particularly significant observation on Frank's part, as religion is often used by some Maltese, social groups, and even educators to

sanction discrimination and cultural racism.

Some of the participants felt that a Catholic identity constitutes a more deserving status, especially, but not solely when compared to those who are Muslim. For instance, Gary implies that Muslims should not expect to enjoy the same rights as Catholics. Referring to the crosses in classrooms, he argues that Muslims should not “‘interfere’ with what we do in our schools”, even though Muslims have never requested the removal of crosses. Words such as “interfere” and “our” locates non-Catholics, and Muslims particularly, as marginal to the collective Maltese identity. Moreover, by depicting all Maltese people as one homogenous group in terms of religious belief, he confirms another participant’s observation that the Catholic religion is considered as part of the cultural identity of the Maltese.

Religious diversity in Maltese society is a cause for concern for many educators. David’s picture of the village church pushed to the background, dwarfed by skyscrapers and flats, shows a Church that is losing its privileged position. David voiced this apprehension which I understood as being provoked by Islam’s increased presence in Maltese society. I could feel he was perturbed by the increase of Muslims in Malta, because, while he did not admit to it point blank, he referred to them constantly throughout the interview. He mentioned his neighbour’s noisy Iftar and Eid celebrations; how they allegedly want to impose what parents give their children for their school lunch (no ham sandwiches); how Muslim men gather in the village squares and how they look at young girls and women. His comments about Muslims are always given a negative slant. He seems unable to conceptualise a Maltese society in which it is possible for Muslims and Christians to live together, where Muslims’ right to belong is not being constantly questioned.

The majority of the participants depicted the Maltese as one homogenous group in terms of religious belief, positioning those who are not Catholics as “foreigners”. While Fabienne, an atheist, acknowledges this depiction, she objects to the homogenising discourse of those who claim that the Maltese are all Catholic. Discussing the presence of the Church in the educational institution where she works, her displeasure is

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evident, and she sees it as an imposition. Fabienne challenges the idea of religious homogeneity, which many Maltese “ignore”, and calls for a more just representation of Maltese society.

### 4. New Constructions of the Family

The family was by far one of the participants’ greatest concerns. Those who spoke of the family felt that this institution is being threatened by the changes in Maltese society, clearly inferring to divorce legislation, same-sex civil unions<sup>6</sup> and the possibility of same-sex couples to adopt. One participant, focused on the ‘death’ of the extended family and the flourishing of small, nuclear ones. The possibility of same-sex families were considered as being a “pseudo-reality”, that is, we pretend these families work, but in reality the civil rights accorded to them were simply a political gimmick to show how “avant-garde” Maltese society is.

Paul described Maltese society as “a sinking ship” due to what he perceived as loss of tradition and values. His idea of the family is the traditional one of mother, father and children, which in his own words is “the backbone” of society. According to him, secularisation and the Church’s loss of power and control resulted in the disintegration of society, especially if one accepts any other family construct outside the perceived norm. This idea of the ‘normality’ of the traditional family was voiced by other participants, who seem to paint a picture of opposites where a mum and dad meant a stable and well-to-do family, while single parents, reconstituted families and gay parents were considered to be a problem and often dysfunctional. Paul portrays a bleak picture of families and his is more of a stereotyped, sweeping statement than a realistic illustration. He associates the traditional family with sound values that will automatically transform the children within it into exemplary citizens. On the other hand, those children whose parents have separated or have other partners will effectively become troubled and troublesome. He pathologised the non-traditional families, marking them at risk and stigmatising both parents and children (Nelson 2006; Swadener, 2010; Usdansky 2009; Zartler 2014).

<sup>6</sup> At the time the interview was held, the Marriage Equality Act had not yet been approved by parliament, only civil union.

## 5. A Contested 'Whiteness'

The ambivalence of living on the fringe of Europe (Mitchell 2002) – wanting to be European but being culturally Mediterranean and North African – to an extent has composed a Maltese identity that is ambiguous. This desire to be European (Chircop 2008, 2010) could be the result of a colonial mentality, because as Said (1979) writes in *Orientalism*, the coloniser, referred to as 'hegemonic power', persuaded the colonised that 'the idea of a European identity was a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures' (7). Thus, the tensions between a European and a Mediterranean identity often conflate with a North African one. Ruth captures this tension in her use of physical attributes as means of identification and attests that

*if you look at our hair, how is it for the majority of the Maltese? Curly, verging on the frizzy, you see? If you look at our skin colour, normally it is a little dark, most eyes are dark. We are Mediterranean North African, our language is Semitic. When I go abroad, people think I'm Lebanese, they think I'm Moroccan ... No one ever thought I'm from England or Germany for example. So I cannot understand how the Maltese can associate themselves with these WASPs [White Anglo Saxon Protestants]...*

The perceived superior European identity has encouraged the Maltese to claim a national-European identity (Abela 2005–6). Frenco (1994) also argues that the Maltese have always felt 'European' to some extent. This contrasts with Sultana (2009) who paints a different picture of the Maltese who are 'linguistically, culturally, genetically and even religiously' (15) too similar to Arabs to deny these roots. Ruth embodies this ambiguity as she considers herself Mediterranean/North African, when many assert that the Maltese are European.

Malta's geographical location has been the main contributor to an ethnically diverse population that inhabits the island. Some of the participants agree wholeheartedly, and as Maria said, "A pure Maltese does not exist". However, others had specific characteristics of who is *not* Maltese, as when David described a student of his, "... a black girl, an Arab, Muslim...

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she had everything typically not Maltese.” He constructs the Maltese as being essentially white, not Muslim (presumably Catholic), and certainly not like an ‘Arab’. David essentialises both Arabs and Maltese in his description of the student, as he seems to think that there is one way of being Maltese, and another way of being Arab, and such characteristics are cast in stone.

Ruth contests David’s assertion and points out to the diversity that exists among the Maltese themselves. She spoke about mixed marriages, which are becoming more frequent in Malta, and how migration has created a more multi-faceted society. She further explains, “I see a black person and he speaks in Maltese, it really pleases me, because I think that finally in Malta one must not be white-skinned ... I’m hoping that Malta is changing, because after all what is society? What is Maltese?”

In contrast with the other educators, Ruth does not consider the changes in society as threatening, but as positive and healthy. That is why she is pleased to hear black persons speaking in Maltese. This leads her to question what entails for one to be Maltese. The overdetermined physical identification of the ‘black man’ does not represent a random choice of words. She chose the image of a black man, because black men are generally taken to be African immigrants, referred to in the vernacular as ‘illegals’, a misnomer which constructs them as outsiders and certainly not part of the citizenry. Thus, she is challenging the stereotypical notion that being a Maltese citizen requires one to be ‘white’.

While the participants could not find common ground for what it means to ‘be Maltese’, constructing the migrants as the different Other was quite effortless. Sandra explained that the Maltese are quite “suspicious” of everybody who is a stranger, who does not “have roots”. As did several participants, when Gary was asked to say how he would draw Maltese society, his picture contained only Maltese people, even though throughout the interview he mentioned migrants often. The suppression of migrants is an indication of how he does not consider them to be members of society. More precisely, he does not consider black migrants as part of Maltese society, since “they transform properties into dumps” unlike the “super-rich migrants from the north” who buy property and enrich the pockets of the Maltese.

## 6. The Dominant and the Undesirables – a Socially Stratified Maltese Society

Social class is another category which featured in educators' constructions of Maltese identity. On issues of poverty and social class teachers positioned themselves in two constructs. There were those who pathologised those living in poverty and who politicised the choices made by working-class people, attributing them as being done consciously and systematically. The other group of teachers looked at the structural aspects that create those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, looking through the lens of social justice.

Michael, a school leader and a political party activist, described Maltese society as being made up of different layers, but spoke only of "the most disadvantaged, those who perhaps are coming from problems of poverty ... intellectual and material". He does not pathologise those living in poverty, indicating that the problem is not the person but the situation s/he is in. For Michael marginalising the poor would only create more social problems. He acknowledges that structures and policies outside of the situations of those who are living in poverty need to be addressed in order for the latter to break the poverty cycle.

Frank also referred to social class when he chose Bormla, one of the Three Cities, as a backdrop for a photograph in which he would want to be. His reason for such a choice was due to the

*history which has to do with the Workers' Movement ... it is an environment which is not straightforward. There are a lot of tensions ... it could be that the bourgeoisie is taking over everything ... I mean, tastes, if your tastes are not similar to those of the public sphere, the bourgeoisie, you are a chav, so to speak. Therefore, to an extent, the beauty of Bormla, perhaps more than others, is that it is still somewhat 'savage' (in a good sense). In this sense, that there are people who are still working class or underclass, and you see them, they [the bourgeoisie] have not yet hidden them well enough.*

Frank gives recognition and acknowledgement to the working-class people in this particular area, an area which has been

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stigmatised due to social issues that have resulted in social exclusion. He refers to the 'savage' atmosphere, or the feel of the place, because the inhabitants are raw and crude and have not acquired the habitus of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie has defined these people as 'chavs', because they have not acquired the tastes of the middle class, irrespective of the fact that they have neither the social, nor the economic and cultural capital to do so. Thus, Frank links the social-class struggle with the Three Cities. A significant concern that Frank brought up is the power of the middle class in the public sphere and how those who do not conform to the ideals of the powerful are located as the powerless 'other'. These people rarely have a voice, as explained by Steve, who also refers to power and domination in the public sphere. He concedes that there could be many voices in the public sphere, as technically, not one citizen is banned from participating, giving one the impression of a flourishing democracy. Who actually participates, and whose voice is given due attention, is another matter altogether.

Mark takes another position, where he sees the middle class as victims of the "handful of people who have taken hold of Malta ... and those at the bottom, who are reaping fruit without having done any work." Mark's position contrasts sharply with Michael's worried concern about how economic inequality impacts those on the poverty line. Reflecting his own class position, Mark depicts the middle class as almost a victim, toiling at work for the benefit of those who either evade taxes or else those who allegedly usurp the hard-earned money the middle class pay in taxes. Gary is of the same opinion with regard to those living in poverty. These educators consent that Maltese society is host to the 'haves' and 'have nots'; however, some put the blame on those who are socio-economically disadvantaged for the precarious situation they are in. They do not take into account the different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) that sustain successful people. On the other hand, Michael acknowledges that economic structures and policies, among other issues, need to be addressed if the cycle of poverty and welfare dependence is to be broken. He puts the onus on the state to rectify the unjust practices that eventually keep most welfare recipients on the poverty line.

## Discussion

This paper has highlighted the importance of understanding how educators conceive the context in which they live and work. Maltese educators are not disconnected from the political and social realm and thus are a living embodiment of the tensions radical change creates. Moreover, students are also living in this society which is going through a transformation, and thus they also bring this change with them into the classroom as migrants, students of diverse faiths and cultures, and as children coming from alternative family structures.

Within this context of sweeping social change, educators identified various social groups whose difference was attributed to their faith, migrant status, skin colour, sexual orientation and social class. Overall, differences challenge educators' value systems and worldviews. The different other is perceived by educators as "that which disrupts its coherency", thus the educator "tumbles into uncertainty, [their] past strategies for living challenged by the very strangeness of difference itself" (Todd 2003: 11). Educators felt that the social changes were making the different other more visible, shattering their myths of sameness in an essentialised Maltese identity. Their reactions to the other were thus of confusion, because they did not know what to say and do; of fear, because they felt threatened by their presence; of curiosity, as they were interested in what the other had to offer. Perhaps as a result of the social upheaval and ensuing confusion, educators spoke of some of those they identified as other, as if they did not deserve to form part of Maltese society because they did not live up to their expectations in terms of prestige and reputability. For instance, black immigrants were regarded as polluting the place where they live; Muslims were seen as not being eligible to voice their views and "interfere" with local norms; the socio-economically disadvantaged and working class were blamed for their predicament and also considered unworthy due to how they choose to present themselves. Butler (2015), argues that when the others are not given due recognition because of their difference, they are being "regulated in such a way that only certain kinds of beings can appear as recognisable subjects" (35). Applying her argument to educators' constructions of social diversity, their claim that the others' presence is not desirable due to their difference



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denies them due recognition and further marginalises them, because they can only be participants in society if they embody the norms of the hegemonic group.

A further point which is of significance is how educators identified the other from within the Maltese themselves first and foremost. This finding challenges the normative construction of Maltese as being homogenous, and in turn illustrates the fear of loss of identity some of the educators expressed.

As could be seen, the educators interviewed held a diverse range of understandings of what it means to be Maltese. However, few acknowledged and articulated the notion that discourses in the public sphere, and which they reproduced – such as those referring to social class, educational achievement and migration – are created to reinforce particular images which influence and produce particular knowledge “that fulfils certain political and ideological purposes and to exert, maintain or resist power” (Kubota 2004: 22). Consequently, most did not problematize how power functions through discourse and how it normalises injustice. Evidence to that effect was found in their views on migrants, for example. Thus, educators explored very little of the inter-related contexts which cause inequality, mainly, the socio-economic, the political, the affective and the socio-cultural. This was the rule, rather than the exception as the instances of injurious speech, openly racist comments and displays of minimalist tolerance attest.

Educators, with the exception of a few, were selective in who, in their views, deserved to belong in Maltese society and in schools, and they did not seem to question the implications on the notion of justice their views had. What is even more significant is that they essentialised and stereotyped the many different others they created, leaving little possibility for a counter-narrative that could challenge their perceptions. Moreover, they took an assimilationist stance in most instances, further engaging in oppression of the groups which they considered as different. This position in favour of assimilation puts those who are unassimilated at a disadvantage, unless they are prepared to take on an identity which is acceptable to the hegemonic group. Moreover, “placing a normative value on homogeneity ... gives members of the dominant groups reason to adopt a stance of self-righteous intractability” (Young 1990: 179). The clearest example that can be elicited from this study

is the issue of the Catholic religion as a state religion, and how educators used it in society in general, as well as in schools, to suppress any form of religious difference and marginalise those of other faiths.

The findings also show that educators' dispositions towards diversity are central in understanding how they subsequently view it in the classroom. Garmon (2005) claims that student teachers enter the course with different dispositions towards diversity, shaped by different prior experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers react differently to difference. For instance, if one takes educators' othering of the working class, one would distinguish the contrasting attitude of the participants. Some, informed as they were by left-wing politics, deconstructed the neo-liberal discourse surrounding issues of social class. In contrast, others endorsed these discourses, pathologising the working class, very similar to the conceptualisation of some pre-service teachers in Allard and Santoro's (2006) study, where pre-service teachers considered those on welfare as 'bludgers' (123), or their working-class students' experiences as 'lacking' when compared to theirs (124).

## Conclusion

Educators' constructions of social diversity cannot be taken out of the context in which educators' worldviews are shaped, the ways in which they engage with difference, their fears and their understanding of the world around them. Consequently, these constructions are intensely diverse. It is significant that educators' constructions of social diversity are not consensual, but constantly contested by other educators. They attempted to establish who belongs to Maltese society along racial, linguistic, religious, cultural and social class lines, but the lines of demarcation were constantly being redrawn by other educators.

Clearly educators are finding it difficult and stressful to engage with social diversity in school. They feel that they are ill-equipped to teach in an environment which is constantly challenging their beliefs and ideals, as well as their practices. Thus, educators' professional training should be on two fronts. Educators need training in intercultural competences and pedagogies that enable them to meet the demands of

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a diverse class, thus making sure that they are conversant with teaching strategies that provide for the entitlement of all students in their care. In addition, professional development should target the intellectual growth of educators. Becoming more exposed to sociological and philosophical theories might induce educators to be more aware of the political implications of their actions, and strive to create a more equitable educational experience for their students.

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