

Chapter 17

Exploring the Assessment Experiences of Eight Teenage Maltese Boys

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ABSTRACT

Teaching, learning, and assessment are not silos. Instead, they are the pillars that should be connected by meaningful assessment practices for effective educational gains. Assessment can be meaningful to its users—educators and students—only if they can make sense of what, and why, they are employing certain strategies and techniques. In the intent to contribute to this lacuna, eight 12-year-old male voices attending the same non-state school were captured. A narrative methodological approach has been adopted to provide an enriched understanding of the learners’ life experiences of their educational assessment. Virtual interviews were the source of data collection. Findings show different degrees of understanding—narrow, moderate, and broad—and a relationship with the preferred modalities of assessment. Despite the lack of uniformity in the formative assessment (FA) practices adopted by their educators, all the boys see benefits in the use of FA strategies, yet assessment is regarded as a teacher thing rather than a shared partnership between them.

INTRODUCTION

Malta, a small island state in the centre of the Mediterranean geographical region, has very limited natural resources. Consequently, its human resource is its major asset which needs to be capitalized for a strong economic growth. In line with this, the MEYR¹ aims at ‘...providing present and future generations with the necessary skills and talents for citizenship and employability in the 21st century and beyond’ (par. 1). Implementation of this aim has been possible through the current National Curriculum Framework for ALL (NCF), (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012), which for the first time has asserted that Assessment for Learning or, as it is interchangeably known, Formative assessment (FA), is one of

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the student-centred pedagogies that could assist educators to reach MEYR's objective and the NCF's aims of inclusivity, active citizenship and lifelong learning. It is to be noted that the NCF is binding for the three educational sectors – state (amounting to 60%), non-state Church (30%), and the private independent (10%). Since then, several state and non-state schools have requested support through the AfL Malta Team to introduce and sustain AfL practices. In the last six years, a few local studies by Satariano (2015), Said Pace (2017, 2018, 2020) and Giordimaina (2020) investigated this area from the teachers' perceptions about AfL – the first study focused on teachers teaching a group of 8-year-olds, the second investigated implementation, the effect of beliefs and the influence of a collaborative action research approach on the use of AfL by prospective users, and the third study focused on the influence of school leaders in supporting the implementation of AfL in schools – all being carried out in the state sector. Despite the diverse foci, all the studies were consistent in that, in principle, teachers believe in AfL, however, when they come to define it in practical terms, that is not reciting a definition, limited understanding is evident. Unpublished data by the Working Group for Learning Loss and Assessment (WGLLA) carried out in 2021, after a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, reaffirmed this level of understanding while revealing that the state school's educators still confused techniques with strategies and viewed continuous assessment mostly as mini-summative frequent continuous assessment. As much as research data is limited for the state, it is far scarcer in the non-state. Hence, we need more publishable work from this Maltese educational sector accounting for more than a third of the compulsory student population.

It is this context of mini-summative continuous assessments that triggered constructive discussions with a relative boy of mine who attends a non-state school. Usually these talks were initiated by the boy's frustration to the unfair use of the success criteria (SC) as a measure of the teacher's judgement on the student's work during presentations – one of the new modalities of continuous assessment as part of the learning outcomes framework system. While I tried keeping a neutral position, a self-reflection on the boy's observations on the award of the same marks to students, one who observed the SC and one who did not, ignited the curiosity to learn more about the learners' experiences as the boy's remarks that SC are useless if they are not adhered to by the teacher were justified.

These boys were in Year 8 or Form 2 of compulsory education, from one particular sector and one particular school in a small island state like Malta with a history of a culture of testing (Gipps, 1994); These boys were in Year 8 or Form 2 of compulsory education, from one particular sector and one particular school in a small island state like Malta with a history of a culture of testing (Gipps, 1994). In response to this, the Ministry for Education and Employment (2015) launched a learning outcomes framework to shift the emphasis from a culture of testing to a culture of learning. Consequently, in 2018, there was the gradual introduction of these outcomes in specific year groups with the scholastic year 2021-2022 should have completed all the groups operating with such a framework. However, the pandemic has shifted this and scholastic year 2022-2023 will be the year where all the compulsory education would be operating with a learning outcomes approach.

The current chapter will explore the views of 12-year-old learners about their educational assessment experiences with the intent to understand their level of assessment literacy for then to be able to examine whether they can be effective users of AfL and if not, propose suggestions on how the situation can be possibly ameliorated. Additionally, the learners' views on the multi-modal assessment will be unraveled, and analysed to identify their positionality about the current modalities of assessment.

The relevant literature on the Maltese educational reforms leading to the development of AfL in Malta, the differences between the three educational sectors, and the current state of Malta's education in the

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