VOICES IN TRANSITION
EXPLORING THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF NEWLY-ARRIVED LEARNERS IN MALTA

Phyllisienne Gauci and Sandro Caruana

In an era characterized by profound global transformations and migratory flux, the voices of newly-arrived secondary school students offer invaluable insights into the complexities of human experience amidst movement, escape, and expatriation. This paper, through a data-driven approach, presents the personal narratives of 47 secondary school students who have recently migrated to Malta from different countries and who are in transition as they do not yet attend mainstream classes. Through a qualitative exploration of their fears, hopes, and aspirations for the future, as well as their reflections on family, friendships, and language acquisition, we aim to illuminate the lived realities of these young migrants. Drawing upon narrative inquiry and participatory research methodologies, we engage directly with the voices of the students, through which they share their innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Their narratives not only serve as a testament to resilience in the face of adversity but also underscore the importance of empathy and understanding in fostering inclusive societies. Furthermore, we argue for the value of writing as a powerful tool for self-expression and communication, enabling students to assert agency over their own narratives, thereby providing readers with a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Through an analysis of these personal narratives, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of migration dynamics, highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity formation and cultural adaptation in a transnational context. Ultimately, it calls for greater recognition of the voices and experiences of young migrants in shaping policies and practices that promote social cohesion and inclusivity in host communities.

Keywords
Malta; Migrant learners; Linguistic diversity; Written narratives; Pluriculturalism; Education.

In un'epoca caratterizzata da profonde trasformazioni globali e flussi migratori, le voci degli studenti delle scuole secondarie appena migrati offrono spunti inestimabili sulle complessità dell'esperienza umana tra movimento, fuga ed espatrio. Questo documento, attraverso un approccio basato sui dati, presenta le narrazioni personali di 47 studenti delle scuole secondarie che sono recentemente emigrati a Malta da diversi paesi e che sono in transito, poiché non frequentano ancora le lezioni tradizionali. Attraverso un'analisi qualitativa delle loro paure, speranze e aspirazioni per il futuro, nonché delle loro riflessioni sulla famiglia, le amicizie e l'acquisizione della lingua, cerchiamo di comprendere meglio le realtà vissute da questi giovani migranti. Attingendo all'indagine narrativa e alle metodologie di ricerca partecipativa, l'intento è di relazionarsi direttamente con le voci degli studenti, attraverso le quali condividono i loro pensieri, sentimenti ed esperienze più intime. Le loro narrazioni non solo servono come testimonianza di resilienza di fronte alle avversità, ma sottolineano anche l'importanza dell'empatia e della comprensione nel promuovere società inclusive. Inoltre, tale lavoro mette in luce il valore della scrittura come potente strumento di autoespressione e comunicazione, che consente agli studenti di affermare l'agentività sulle proprie narrazioni, offrendo così ai lettori una comprensione più profonda delle loro esperienze vissute. Attraverso l'analisi di queste narrazioni personali, questo articolo vuole contribuire a una rappresentazione complessa delle dinamiche migratorie, evidenziando la natura multiforme della formazione dell'identità e dell'adattamento culturale in un contesto transnazionale. In conclusione, pensiamo sia necessario un maggiore riconoscimento delle voci e delle esperienze dei giovani migranti per dare forma a politiche e pratiche che promuovono la coesione sociale e l'inclusività nelle comunità ospitanti.

Parole chiave
Malta; Studenti migranti; Diversità linguistica; Pluriculturalismo; Educazione.

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Recent migration and its effect on Malta's demography

The geographical position of the island of Malta is often referred to as crossroads, due to its location in the centre of the Mediterranean Basin. Throughout history the island, in spite of its small physical size, has served as a significant point of convergence for various civilizations, a hub of cultural, economic and strategic importance. Recent developments, also spurred by a sustained economic growth, have brought about a situation whereby the island's population has grown exponentially. This growth rate is noteworthy, given Malta's size and limited natural resources, making it quite an exceptional case in the context of European population trends (Eurostat 2024).

Malta's 2021 census (NSO 2021) reports that the country's population now exceeds half a million persons (519,562), an increase of over 100,000 over the last ten years. This includes 115,449 individuals of non-Maltese nationality, meaning that more than one in five persons residing on the island today are non-Maltese, a figure which is by far higher than the EU average. Current trends also point to a substantial rise in the number of third country nationals, with Indians and Filipinos representing the largest communities in Malta (Vella 2023). Italians also represent a large group of foreign nationals and there are sizeable Albanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Syrian and Ukrainian communities too. The British, who historically were the most numerous non-nationals residing on the island, are still present in considerable numbers. These different countries of origin from which people converge to Malta represent one of the indicators of the highly diverse nature of this migration which includes, for example, the 'historical' migration of British nationals as an offshoot of Malta's colonial past, the recent arrival of many Sicilians who have found

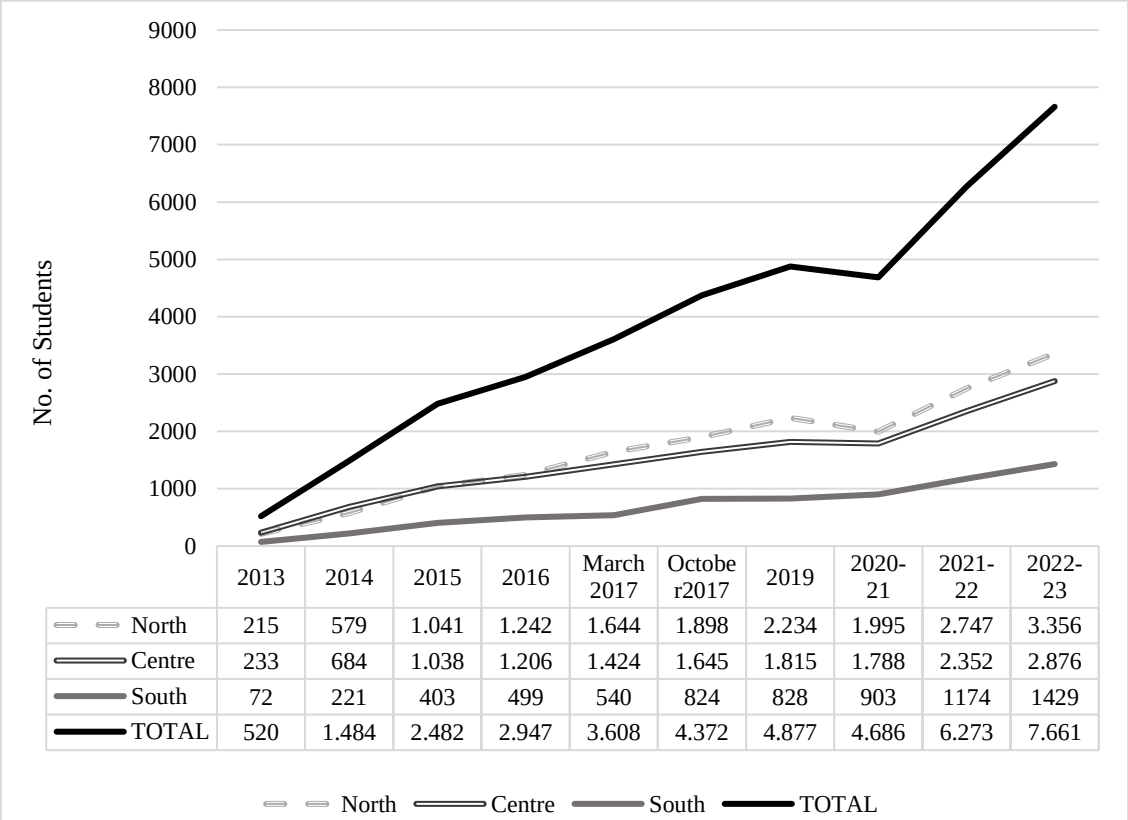
employment on the island and the current influx of Far East nationals, many of whom carry out services in the care of the elderly, as well as other jobs such as food delivery-persons and taxi drivers. The construction industry is also a sector which depends heavily on the involvement of foreign workers, including many who originate from Africa and from Eastern European countries. This extremely heterogenous scenario is unprecedented in the island's history and possibly quite unique in Europe because it is concentrated on a very small geographical mass with no physical borders with other countries.

This migration also has a significant impact on the linguistic situation of the island. Wherein Maltese is the L1 of the vast majority of locals (Marmarà 2024), interactions between persons of different nationalities occur, by and large, in English. In fact, while competence in English is generally better among Maltese of high socioeconomic status, by whom it is marked for in-groupness (Vella, 2012; Caruana, forthcoming), more recently it has become a lingua franca: it is used both by the Maltese to communicate with the many non-nationals who reside and work on the island and during interactions among immigrants of different nationalities. Malta's Anglophone setting constitutes an incentive for those who settle on the island permanently or for a long-term period, including those who relocate with young children (Gauci 2024). The opportunity to frequent schools where English is used extensively as a medium of instruction is generally viewed positively especially in instrumental terms, since competence in English is considered a richness which could lead to future opportunities, also beyond Malta's shores.

Having provided some information on the nature of recent immigration in Malta, we now turn our attention to schools which, as expected, have also become more multicultural and multilingual than they were in the past. Local schools represent the settings in which we carried out this research, based on writings of migrant learners who are currently pursuing their education in Malta.

Migration in Schools

For the purpose of this study, we define 'migrant learners' as persons born outside of the country who have relocated to Malta within the last year or so, under the responsibility of one or more adults, typically family members who migrated with them. In Figure 1 below, we present numbers pertaining to migrant learners in public (state) schools, on the basis of their distribution across three geographical areas of the island, and as a total. Over a span of ten years, between 2013 and 2023, the number of migrant learners in schools has increased more than tenfold:



	2013	2014	2015	2016	March 2017	October2017	2019	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
North	215	579	1.041	1.242	1.644	1.898	2.234	1.995	2.747	3.356
Centre	233	684	1.038	1.206	1.424	1.645	1.815	1.788	2.352	2.876
South	72	221	403	499	540	824	828	903	1174	1429
TOTAL	520	1.484	2.482	2.947	3.608	4.372	4.877	4.686	6.273	7.661

Figure 1: Migrant Learners in Maltese State Schools[1]

The trend documented above presents evidence of a steady increase, with a short plateau between 2019-21, which coincides with the Covid pandemic.

[1] The statistics reported in Figure 1 were compiled by one of the authors over the ten-year period they refer to. The raw data was provided by the Ministry of Education (Malta).

According to data published by the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2023) non-Maltese nationals account for 14.3 per cent of the total number of students enrolled from pre-primary to secondary education. Classes in Malta are therefore increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual and although English is often used as a lingua franca of communication (Caruana *et al.* 2019, 334), in schools one witnesses the presence of many different languages (and language varieties) which occasionally create boundaries between students of diverse nationalities as those who share the same or similar codes cluster together, for example during break time as happens with some Italian migrant learners (Baschiera and Caruana 2020).

These developments have been the catalyst for further changes, some of which had already started gaining ground prior to the increase in numbers of migrant learners documented in Figure 1. Traditionally schooling in Malta was based extensively on Catholic traditions and principles, also because the popularisation of schooling on the island was led and influenced by religious orders as providers for teacher education (Sultana *et al.* 2019). Today schooling is more secularised, also to accommodate the needs of migrant learners. An example of this is the introduction of Ethics as a school subject, alongside Religious Education, so as to allow learners to opt for lessons which are not solely based on traditional Catholic beliefs.

Data from the 2022-23 scholastic year, pertaining to Maltese state schools, show that most migrant learners hail from Italy (908 learners), followed by Syrians (625), Serbians (547) and British (467). The number of Indian, Libyan, Ukrainian and Bulgarian exceeds 300, and that of Albanian and Filipino students does not lag far behind. The highly diverse origins and backgrounds of these learners constitute a challenge for many teachers. One must also take into account the realities that these learners witnessed prior to arrival in Malta (as in the case of migrant learners from war-stricken countries), the physical and cultural distance that separates the two environments (as in the case of learners born in the Far East), as well as linguistic differences. For example, while speakers of Arabic varieties may be facilitated by their first language when they start learning Maltese, other nationals, including the British themselves, are at an advantage because of their knowledge of English. In

other cases – take Syrians, Libyans, Serbs and Bulgarians as examples – difficulties are encountered, especially in the case of young learners, in order to achieve writing competences as they must learn to use an alphabet script which they may be unfamiliar with. The picture we present here only represents a very schematic overview of migrant learners in Malta, whose experience is often characterised by intersectionality: their situation and background often give rise to conditions in which multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantage can compound and interconnect.

As hinted earlier, over the recent years some innovations have been introduced in the local educational system to facilitate the inclusion of migrant learners (Caruana *et al.* 2019) and recent policies have been drafted to this intent (Ministry for Education 2019a; 2019b). These include language policies, in which multilingual practices, such as translanguaging and language mediation are encouraged, as opposed to the compartmentalised views of language teaching and learning advocated in earlier policies. Capitalising on learners' different language competences and valuing their L1 and/or heritage language/s are therefore being encouraged although, in practice, this depends largely on individual schools and, at a micro-level, on teachers. Difficulties are often faced because cultural and linguistic mediators are by and large absent from the Maltese educational system and teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) often take on roles which could be assigned to these mediators. For example, while LSEs are professionally prepared to support children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, while assisting teachers to create an effective classroom experience for all students (Baschiera *et al.* 2016), they often also offer to support migrant learners, including those who face difficulties because of their limited competence of the language/s of instruction – Maltese and/or English.

Since 2013, a unit established by the Ministry for Education, the Migrant Learners Unit (MLU), is responsible, together with schools, for different initiatives geared towards the inclusion of migrant learners, especially non-EU citizen. The MLU is also responsible for so-called 'induction classes', wherein the needs of

newly-arrived learners who have limited competence of both Maltese and English are addressed, by providing them with tailor-made courses prior to entering mainstream schooling (Gauci 2017). These learners are therefore in transition, as they move into mainstream educational settings once they would have completed their induction.

The study

Our study employs a data-driven approach to present the personal narratives of secondary school students who have recently migrated to Malta. Through a qualitative exploration of their fears, hopes, and aspirations for the future, as well as their reflections on family, friendships, and language acquisition, we aim to illuminate the lived realities of these young migrants. Drawing upon narrative inquiry and participatory research methodologies, we engage directly with the voices of these students, through which they share their innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Our participants were all attending the aforementioned induction classes, in order to improve competence in Maltese and/or English before moving into mainstream schooling. Induction classes are usually attended by students during their first year of arrival in Malta and typically last for one scholastic year.

The initiative to encourage students to write their narratives was borne as part of a professional development course for educators. It originated from a series of Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions, organised as part of the School Development Plan in a secondary school serving as an induction hub for migrant students. In Malta, such sessions are mandatory for educators, aimed at enhancing their professional capabilities in alignment with the school's developmental objectives. One of the authors, who was responsible for delivering these sessions, proposed the idea of a writing project that would allow students to

express their migration stories through personal narratives[2]. The initiative was subsequently titled *Read Me, Know Me* and was held during two consecutive scholastic years, in May 2022 and in March 2023.

The objective of the initiative was to guide teachers in promoting the use of writing as a tool for self-expression, enabling students to articulate their feelings and experiences related to migration. It was anticipated that this process would not only help the students to understand and process their own experiences but also facilitate intercultural understanding among their peers by sharing their stories.

Participation in the writing initiative was voluntary for teachers and students alike. All students within the induction hub were invited to take part without discrimination based on their level of language proficiency or scholastic performance. The students involved had a diverse range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers were encouraged to adapt the project to suit the varying ages, language competencies, and educational levels of their students. This flexibility allowed the initiative to be accessible to a wide spectrum of learners, ensuring that each student could engage with it in a manner that was most comfortable and meaningful for them.

The instructional approach was designed to be both supportive and student-centred, recognizing the sensitivity of the subject matter and the varying levels of comfort students might have in discussing their migration experiences. Teachers introduced the topic of migration in diverse ways, tailored to the specific needs of their classes. Common strategies included:

i. Visual and Auditory Stimuli: teachers used videos featuring students narrating their migration stories or provided information about famous personalities who have experienced migration. These examples served as inspiration and provided students with a model of how they might structure their own narratives;

[2] The idea was inspired by a teacher in the US who participated in the Student Press Initiative (SPI) together with her class. The SPI encourages teachers to focus on reading and writing instruction, while bringing authentic student voices to life. https://cpet.tc.columbia.edu/student-press-initiative.html

ii. Guided Writing Prompts: teachers provided a set of guiding questions to assist students in organising their thoughts and structuring their narratives. These prompts were carefully designed to help students reflect on key aspects of their migration experiences, such as their reasons for migrating, the challenges they faced, and their feelings about living in Malta. The questions included: What motivated you/your parents' decision to migrate? Why Malta? Who accompanied you on your journey? What were the most difficult aspects of leaving your home country? How did you feel upon arriving in Malta? What significant challenges have you encountered? What are your biggest dreams? What aspects of Malta do you appreciate or dislike? What advice would you give to someone considering migration?

iii. Creative Flexibility: students were given the autonomy to present their narratives in a format that they found most expressive. This included writing in paragraphs, dialogue, or even poetry. Additionally, they were encouraged to include drawings, or use their native languages within their texts if it contributed to the authenticity of their narratives;

iv. Storyboarding: to further aid in the visualization and planning of their narratives, students were encouraged to create storyboards. This pre-writing activity helped students to conceptualize their stories before committing them to paper, providing a visual framework that could guide their writing process.

Throughout the project, teachers played a crucial role in providing continuous support and guidance. They worked closely with the students to ensure that they felt comfortable and confident in expressing their stories. Teachers also facilitated peer-sharing sessions, where students could share their narratives in a safe and supportive environment, fostering a sense of community and mutual understanding within the classroom.

The final narratives produced by the students varied widely in form and content, reflecting the diversity of their experiences and personal expression. The

initiative concluded with a showcase of the students' work, where they had the opportunity to present their stories to their peers, teachers, parents and the broader school community. A total of forty-seven students between the ages of eleven and sixteen from five different year groups submitted their narratives, as shown in Table 1.

Year Group	Age (in years)	Number of Students
Year 7	11-12	8
Year 8	12-13	5
Year 9	13-14	18
Year 10	14-15	12
Year 11	15-16	4
TOTAL		**47**

Table 1: Number of Participants According to Year Group

These students came from twenty different countries and most of them had been living in Malta for less than a year. Their legal status (EU national, asylum seeker, refugee, unaccompanied minor etc.) at the time of data collection was not disclosed to the authors but their countries of origin were indicated as being: Albania, Argentina, Brazil, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, Italy, Libya, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Serbia, Syria, Romania, Russia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela, Vietnam. Of the above locations, the ones from which a larger number of students originate are the Philippines, Ukraine and Albania.

The texts we analysed ranged from rather long accounts (approx. 600 words) to other shorter ones (approx. a hundred words). Most of them were largely based on personal information, expressed from the writer's point of view: in fact, in all texts the use of the first-person pronoun was pervasive. They were written in English and the overall proficiency of the writers was satisfactory, even though this language in an L2 for them.

Our analysis of these texts, which document, albeit briefly, the lived realities of these young migrants, draws upon narrative inquiry, inspired by participatory

research methodologies which prioritise the views of the group being studied, ensuring their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences shape the research outcomes. Participatory research methodologies on migration generally focus on the active involvement of migrants in the research process, enabling them to share their experiences, insights, and perspectives (e.g. Hanna 2018; Gunella and Rodrigo 2022). This approach aims to ensure that the voices of these learners are heard and considered in the development of policies and practices affecting them.

Results

The analysis of these personal narratives led to a classification of the data collected on the basis of the main four over-arching themes that we identified as we read the students' scripts. We therefore present our results on the basis of these themes, respectively entitled (1) the Western capitalist dream; (2) the family nucleus as central for well-being; (3) the openness to live in contexts other to that of one's origins; (4) the openness to different languages. This categorisation is mainly useful to present the results in an orderly manner, as we are fully aware that some of the extracts we present contain features that could indeed fit under more than one specific theme.

The Western capitalist dream

The writings of a number of our learners often present a rather idealised notion of prosperity and success that can be achieved through hard work, individualism, and economic freedom which we label as the 'Western capitalist dream'. They display a positive outlook of the economic model, sometimes by contrasting it to their bleaker past. Some express certainty that, regardless of their background, they can achieve success through hard work and innovation, as they develop a "capacity to aspire" (Vitus 2021). They generally speak of their experience

in Malta positively, and they consider their migration process as key in order to achieve their aspirations[3]:

(1) Marwa (Yr. 7, Libya): *When I was in Libya there was a time when I could not sleep because it was as if there was a person named (…) as if he was bombing in the North of Libya and the Capital and I lived in the Capital … I remember in Malta one day when I and my family we were going to Valletta, we went to a boat and everything was so beautiful … we went to a beautiful and big market …and it was like a very beautiful sunshine …*

(2) Mauricio (Yr. 8, Venezuela): *I come to Malta for a better economy*;

(3) Leandra (Yr.9, Albania): *He (my father) said "we will go to Malta to have a good life and there we can work and have money and better school";*

(4) Juan (Yr. 11, Colombia): *I have two ideas about my future, the first one is living in a house in the countryside, having a farm and live with animals, the second one is travelling in a van around the world*;

(5) Gabriel (Yr.10, Philippines): *I want to be matagumpay*[4] *when I grow up. I want to buy a car and a house so it will be easy for me to live*;

Whereas Mauricio, Leandra, Juan and Gabriel explain how their hopes for the future rely on a degree of economic success and a good quality of life, Marwa provides a short narration where her life in Libya, characterised by fear, is contrasted to her experience in Malta, described as 'beautiful' on three occasions. These aspirations are perfectly legitimate, especially in consideration of our learners young age, but utterances like '*better economy*', '*work and have money*', '*living in a house in*

[3] We use pseudonyms to protect our learners' identity. The narrations are reported verbatim, and since they are written productions some of them include some incorrect grammatical structures and language errors.

[4] *matagumpay* in Tagalog means 'successful' or 'victorious'.

the countryside' provide insights of the effects of the economy-driven society in which they are now immersed. There are, however, also instances where our learners engage more critically with this 'dream':

(6) Daryna (Yr. 8, Ukraine): *Mom and dad were not there because they worked. When you always need money you have to make sacrifices;*

(7) Daniela (Yr. 9, Venezuela): *I also miss mis amigos, mi familia, and my school. Sometimes I start to think "why didn't we stay there!?" and how I miss everything, and now I have a lot of memories, which maybe I will never see again*.

Whereas Daryna provides a deep reflection in a few words, lamenting the absence of her parents and the '*sacrifices*' required when one '*always needs money*', Daniela's words are characterised by melancholy. Her migration experience has clearly not allowed her to detach herself from the reality she left behind and her identity is also expressed by using words in her mother tongue, *mis amigos, mi familia.* Her final thought, that she may '*never*' see her family members and friends again is distressing, and she focusses more on what she has left behind her rather than expressing future hopes, dreams and prospects, as some other learners do.

We saw how a number of narratives carry a tone of resilience despite the harsh circumstances, showing that students confront these challenges with strength and a mature awareness of their cultural identity. The combination of empathy, critical thinking, and personal strength in the next two narratives is impressive for students of such a young age:

(8) Miguel (Yr. 8, Colombia): *My parents travelled to Malta because they could not find a job in Colombia. It is difficult to be far away from your family, to know that your country is bleeding and suffering because of a bad government. My family suffered because of a war that the government itself created, this is not a war that another country started!*;

(9) Diego (Yr.7, Argentina): *There is no good education and everything is very expensive, the inflation is very high, so my family decided to come to Malta. Now I can go alone or with my family to buy food without worrying about being robbed, here we can talk on the phone and nothing will happen to us. In Argentina you have to be very careful, only use it when there is an emergency. I want to stay in Malta because here I have the future that I don't have in Argentina.*

The narrative by twelve-year-old Miguel, demonstrates an exceptional level of emotional maturity and resilience, especially considering the complexity of the issues being addressed. The student clearly articulates the personal and national impact of Colombia's political and economic challenges, revealing a deep empathy for the suffering of others and a critical understanding of the situation. His narrative not only highlights the difficulty of being separated from family due to forced migration but also expresses a poignant sense of injustice, particularly in holding the government responsible for the conflict and turmoil within the country.

Eleven-year-old Diego, on the other hand, demonstrates a striking level of maturity and insight into the challenges his family faced. He articulates the impact of economic instability and safety concerns in his home country, contrasting it with the security he has found in Malta. His awareness of inflation, the cost of living, and personal safety is uncommon for his age. The narrative also reflects a strong sense of gratitude and hope for the future in Malta, revealing his understanding of the significant changes in his life and the opportunities they present.

The family nucleus

The pivotal role of the family, as well as the effects of the decision to migrate on children's agency, have been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g. Moskal and Tyrell 2016), also by taking into consideration migrants' relationships with 'stay-behind' family members (Bryceson 2019). Some of the extracts provided earlier already highlight the importance of the family nucleus as central for well-being and this is also present in the writings of several other learners, including the following two examples:

(10) Aharon (Yr. 9, Egypt): *And after my brother comes to Malta I say: "This is my favourite day because we are together".*

(11) Daniela (Yr. 9 Venezuela): *The day when we arrived in Malta, I was very nervous to see mi papa. I didn't know how to react, at last I saw him and I broke into tears and hugged him very tight. We went home and had a little party, and the next day we went to the beach. These were the most incredible days of my life*;

The importance of the family is also underlined when our learners write about other family members who are not with them in Malta, thereby providing an example of the complex relationships that develop in such circumstances, as illustrated in a number of contributions included in Bryceson and Vuorela (2002). This is especially the case of grandparents, whose physical presence is often missed. Interestingly, in some narrations this sense of nostalgia is associated with traditional food items, which bring memories of their life prior to migration exemplified through episodes shared with elderly members of their family:

(12) Denis (Yr. 9, Albania): *I remember the time I went to my grandparents in the village. I spend a lot of good time with them, how can I say that most of the time I stayed in Shqipria*[5]*, I stayed with them more, and when I went to my grandparents you culd fill the delicious aroma of the dishes that my grandmother pergatiste*[6] *evry morning*;

(13) Leandra (Yr. 9, Albania): *I miss the days when I went to my grandparents house in the summer and cooking byrek*[7] *with my grandma*;

(14) Artem (Year 10, Ukraine): *Almost all my life I was eating borshch*[8] *made by my grandma Olga, and fish soup which was made by my grandpa Volodymir.*

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[5] *Shqipria* is the Albanian nomenclature of the country.
[6] To prepare.
[7] *Byrek* is a meat or vegetable pie which is popular in the Balkans.

The narrations pertaining to the family nucleus convey a sense of identity and belonging, as having a shared history with others contributes to a stronger sense of self. Our learners write about the family as a unit that offers a safe environment, especially in a situation wherein migration brings about new challenges in an unfamiliar context. This collective strength is pivotal to most of our learners as the family members with whom they have migrated help them overcome difficult situations, while family members who are not physically present are associated with fond experiences that they shared with them.

Openness to live in contexts other to that of one's origins

Another major theme that emerges from our data-driven analysis is the itinerant nature of our students' lives as a result of their displacement, as shown in Marta's 'multinational' journey:

(15) Marta (Yr. 10, Poland): *Most of my life I lived in Poland. When I was four we moved with my mama, sister and my brother to Belgium. After a year and a half we went back to Poland and lived there till I was twelve. In 2020 we moved to Germany with my mum and my sister. After two years I moved again with my mom and sister to Malta.*

Some students see their experience in Malta as a possible stepping-stone towards other destinations:

(16) Mauricio (Yr. 8, Venezuela): *In my future I would like to life in Korea and life alone*[9]

(17) Marie (Yr. 9, France): *My biggest dream it's live in United States and devenir une actrice. I don't want to stay in Malta*;

[8] *Borshch* is a soup, recognized as a symbol of Ukrainian culinary tradition.
[9] The reason for this is because this student writes that he likes music, especially K-pop.

(18) Aleksandr (Yr. 10, Ukraine): *I do not plan to stay in Malta, but I have no desire to go to Ukraine either because of the war. I am waiting for my friends from Iceland*;

Aleksandr's extract is desolately conditioned by the ongoing war in his homeland, because of which he expresses his reluctance to return to Ukraine. Other students, on the other hand, express a desire to return to their country of origin, as in the case of Sofia who provides reasons for this which are related to her affective sphere, also associated to local food specialities (also see extracts 12-14, in Section 4.2):

(19) Sofia (Yr. 11, Serbia): *In the future I plan to live somewhere else. Most probablly Serbia. I want to live there because I feel like its my home and most of the people I care about are there. I will make sure my kids know how to make* сарма *and* бурек[10]

As documented (see, for example, Adamson *et al.* 2011) migration impacts one's sense of belonging, possibly causing identity shifts (Carr *et al.* 2021). This is exemplified from a linguistic point of view through the numerous instances of code-switching that appear in our learners' writings (see examples 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 17 and 19). The words of Liliana, who chose to write her narration mainly in Italian, explain perfectly how different contexts affect personality and shape identity:

(20) Liliana (Yr. 9, Romania): *Le mie due personalità culturali (ITALIA e ROMANIA). ITALIA città e ROMANIA campagna. Se penso Romania penso subito animali, natura e se penso Italia tutto città, centro commerciali. E se penso Malta non lo so ancora devo ancora scoprirlo in un certo senso (…) Stay in Romania give me a good vibes. I was Liliana at 100%, nothing for worry, I was spensierata.*

This insightful narrative shows that Liliana has yet to settle down in Malta, as she does not identify her personality traits with the host country, whereas she still feels strong ties with her Romanian origin and with Italy, where she spent a number of

[10] Eastern European dishes.

years. Her choice of the term *spensierata* 'care-free', expressed in Italian at the end of an utterance in English, shows that she can convey her feelings more accurately by using this language. This ties-in neatly with the final theme that we illustrate in the following paragraph, dedicated to language use.

Openness to different languages

Language use among migrants is a multifaceted matter, ranging as widely as the maintenance of heritage languages to attrition and language loss. Language proficiency, as illustrated in Isphording (2015) is a key driver for inclusion in a host community and helps develop a sense of belonging at school (Cassar and Attard Tonna 2018). The examples we discussed in section 4.3 are inherently tied to an openness that many of our learners demonstrate towards different languages which is a positive indicator of awareness and appreciation of linguistic diversity. This is a noteworthy feature of our data, especially since English is, by and large, their language of schooling, as we explain in Section 1, and that it is used as a lingua franca in order to communicate with local students and with those of different nationalities. In their narrations several students mention the languages they know, besides English:

(21) Amaris (Yr. 7, Albania): *I can speak English, Maltese, Italian and Albanian*;

(22) Mauricio (Yr. 8, Venezuela): *I'm learning English and Maltese, but actually I'm learning more languages by myself*;

(23) Khaled (Yr. 9 Libya): *I can talk in new languages, Maltese, English, Amazigh and I hope to learn other languages too*;

As expected, in some of the narrations, our learners also write about English in positive terms, mainly from an instrumental perspective, highlighting that learning this language and improving their competence in it can be conducive to better inclusion, among other benefits:

(24) Aharon (Yr. 9. Egypt): *And I go training football and I don't speak to anyone in the training because I can't speak English. And my brothers and my dad tell me: "You need to study English" and I spend all day to study English because I can't make a friend and I can't go on without it*;

(25) Hao (Yr. 9, China): *Before I came to Malta I'm very worry because my English is poor in the China. And the some common and basic English words I don't know … I came here a year ago. I studied some new English words. And my family also help me to study English … Then I have a lots of friends here. They help me learn English too*.

Some of our migrant learners demonstrate an interest both in maintaining their own language, as in the case of Marie (France), as well as in learning new ones, as Olga (Russia) writes:

(26) Marie (Yr. 9, France): *Yes, my language still more important for me. I am proud because know my anglaise is better*;

(27) Olga (Yr. 10, Russia): *I also started to learn Korean, because after college I want to go to Korea to study. There's very beautiful nature, and a very beautiful language, which I like. I think that the K-pop is also one of the reasons why I want to go there.*

Lastly, we provide the following extract from Amira (Tunisia) and Liem's (Vietnam) narration. Despite their young age they both provide some remarkable metalinguistic reflections on the three languages they know:

(28) Amira (Yr. 7, Tunisia): *I think in all countries the second language should be English because it can spread all over the world. When I came to Malta I don't speak Maltese and I speak a little bit of English. When I learned Maltese I found it easy because 60% looks like Arabic.*

Amira, in a similar manner to other extracts discussed above, shows awareness of the instrumental importance of English. Her observation that English should be a second language "all over the world" is certainly the result of the omnipresence of this language and because of the way its hegemonic role is endorsed through Western media. Amira also demonstrates a heightened metalinguistic awareness regarding the typological proximity between Maltese and Arabic - this could be the case because she is a Tunisian national, as Maltese shares many features with the Tunisian-Arabic Maghrebi variety.

(29) Liem (Yr. 9 Vietnam): *About Maltese, the language is not too hard, but there are a lot of exception words, the grammar a bit confusing and the adjective are interesting. English is one of the most spoken languages in the world and it helps get out of sticky situations. Vietnamese, to put it simply, is not useful, you can only speak to other Vietnamese and the pronunciation is extremely hard, but it's my native language, my culture and it's a part of me.*

Besides providing his thoughts about Maltese grammar, Liem's reflection on how English helps him get 'out of sticky situations' is quite astute, while it is also clear that his perception of his mother tongue, Vietnamese, is conflicting: while stating that it is 'not useful' he also writes that it is a part of him, and this shows that he associates his own identity to his mother tongue, despite being displaced from his distant country of origin.

Discussion and conclusion

Participant research methodologies are particularly valuable in addressing issues of social justice, community development, and empowerment and the *Read Me, Know Me* writing initiative provided a valuable platform for migrant students to narrate their migration stories, fostering both self-expression and intercultural dialogue within the school community. The methodological approach, characterized by its flexibility and sensitivity to the students' needs, ensured that the project was

inclusive and meaningful, allowing each student to engage with the writing process in a way that was personally resonant. Through our research, we argue for the value of writing as a powerful tool for self-expression and communication, enabling students to assert agency over their own narratives, thereby providing readers with a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. This was also important especially in view of the transiency of our learners educational situation wherein learning English, alongside Maltese, was an important step to help them be placed in mainstream classes. The value of the *Read Me, Know Me* writing initiative does not only lie in the outcomes that it yielded but in the process itself, through which learners were involved in writing their narrations as a means to express their feelings and thoughts, shaped by the identities that they are developing also as a result of their migration experiences. Ultimately, it calls for greater recognition of the voices and experiences of young migrants in shaping policies and practices that promote social cohesion and inclusivity in host communities.

Through the four themes that we identify from our students' writings, namely the Western capitalist dream, the family nucleus as central for well-being, the positive disposition towards the possibility to live in contexts other to that of one's origins and the openness to different languages, we can conclude that the prevailing sentiment of the migratory experience of our learners is one of hope. In many cases, this is also characterised by resilience and by an attachment to one's origins. We see this, for example in the use of their native language/s, sometimes also by reproducing the characters of the alphabet, such as Cyrillic and Arabic, as well as through the terms of endearment used to refer to members of family and friends who they left behind. Our narratives therefore also provide evidence of an identity shift triggered by life events, personal growth and external influences. In a few cases there is also evidence that this is the result of trauma or crisis which produces an identity shift as the person reassesses their life and priorities in the aftermath (see extract 1, Marwa, and extract 18, Aleksandr).

Understanding and navigating these identity shifts can thus be crucial to maintain a sense of well-being and this, of course, is where schooling and education

have a crucial role (Baker and Fox 2020; Navas and Rojas 2021; Baraldi 2023). Whilst one of the major aims of education is to equip students with academic knowledge and life skills essential to aid their adaptation and to boost their confidence and sense of agency, schools also serve as a bridge between different cultures, helping migrant learners connect with their new environment while valuing their heritage. An education that acknowledges and respects diverse identities must empower students with programs that celebrate multiculturalism, that help learners feel valued and understood, reinforcing their sense of self. In this aspect, culturally responsive teaching practices can foster an inclusive atmosphere and classrooms which offer safe environments where students can express their feelings and experiences related to their identities. Such classrooms encourage open discussions about cultural differences and can enhance understanding and acceptance.

From a comparative perspective, while other studies on student narratives are available (Arnot *et al.* 2019; Clark and Kehler 2021; Yau and Cheng 2020; Baraldi 2023), they are still uncommon in comparison to other studies within the larger context of multicultural education policies and practices. Such studies often present quantitative data and general trends and focus on structural factors affecting immigrant children's education, such as institutional frameworks. In this respect, although our study has been carried out in Malta, we augur that it is relevant to other geographical and socio-cultural settings involving migrant learners.

As a follow-up to the *Read Me, Know Me* writing initiative, students were also given the opportunity to engage in a series of "literary chats" with locally established authors. These sessions aimed to inspire students by exposing them to the writing process through direct interaction with experienced writers. Local authors visited the school, reading excerpts from their works and discussing the significance of writing in their lives. Despite their developing English proficiency, students participated eagerly, asking questions and reflecting on the authors' insights. The literary chats served to broaden the students' exposure to diverse narratives and writing practices, thereby complementing the personal narrative work they were undertaking. This holistic approach to the writing project aimed to cultivate a

deeper appreciation for language and literature and to empower students to see themselves as part of a larger literary community, both within the school and beyond. Finally, the initiative came to an end with an evening event whereby members of the school community and parents were invited to attend and listen to their children read out excerpts from their writings, and recite some poems they had written on the theme of migration. One such poem is *Happiness* written by Eva Markov (real name), Yr. 8, from Macedonia. In her poem the young author expresses joy, optimism, and determination as she embraces life's challenges, patiently works towards her dreams, and ultimately finds fulfilment in success. Eva gladly accepted to have her poem included in this contribution and some of her other writings may be viewed in the Appendix.

Happiness – by Eva Markov

Let it rain, let it drizzle.
Let the wind blow, let it carry away.
Let's run barefoot across the meadow.
The sun shares smiles
with all of us.
And it tells us joyful news.
Fulfill your dreams!
I impatiently count my days every day.
I weave new plans.
And I achieve my goals
drop by drop.
In the end
I reach success.

Среќа

Нека врне, нека роси.
Нека дува, нека носи.
По ливада да трчаме боси.
Сонцето насмевки ни дели
И весело ни вели
Исполнет ги својте цели.
Нетрпеливо деновите ги бројам
Секој ден нови планови кројам.
И своите цели чекор по чекор ги исполнувам.

На крајот успех
постигнувам.

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