A NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY FOR ALL
IN MALTA AND GOZO

2021 - 2030

A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

Foreword by the Minister for Education

It is the role of Government to provide current and future generations with the necessary knowledge, skills, and talents to succeed in society and in employment.

As the Minister responsible for Education, I am committed to provide students and prospective students with opportunities to develop the necessary values, skills and attitudes for active citizenship and employability in the 21st century and close the gap between the world of education and the world of employment.

The exercise carried out in these last few months, was to ensure further alignment of policies with current realities and to be in line with this Government's Economic Vision, launched in August 2020, which considers education as one of the five pillars and the success factor contributing to its accomplishment.

The policies, goals and targets are in line with the European Commission's European Education Area initiatives and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially those concerning education and employment.

While consolidating and building on the past successful actions, the National Literacy Strategy (2021-2030) recognises the challenges of an ever-evolving world, and it addresses ways in which these can be overcome.

I am confident that with the adoption of the National Literacy Strategy, not only we will continue to reduce the number of individuals who are socially excluded, because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills, but we will be making sure that all children, young people and adults, are given the opportunity to obtain the necessary literacy skills to be active citizens and to succeed at work and in society.

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1 Introduction

Literacy is viewed as a human right, essential for survival and social change. Literacy is not simply learned in school through specific reading and writing instruction but is first developed at home and in the communities when children acquire and develop language (Liebeskind et al., 2014). Consequently, literacy development is a social responsibility, where all stakeholders need to work together to bring about equity and social justice through literacy. Better literacy skills contribute to a more just and equitable society. Mastering literacy skills brings with it many social, economic and health benefits for the individual and society as a whole. As the world around us changes, and with it the way information can become available to anyone with access and the ability to read and understand it, a potentially revolutionary leap forward becomes possible for the citizens of our world, wherever and whoever they are (Wolf et al., 2014).

A strong foundation for the raising literacy levels is based on:

- Building strong foundations through early childhood care and education
- Providing quality basic education for all children
- Scaling up functional literacy levels for youth and adults who lack basic literacy skills
- Developing literate environments (United Nations, 2015).

The ultimate goal for all children is to enable them to move along a continuum of literacy development so that they are able to learn to read, so that they can "read to learn" (Chall, 1983). In this way, they are introduced to a whole world of learning across multiple domains.

The National Literacy Strategy (2021–2030) consolidates and extends further the strategic goals and actions of the 2014 Strategy. It is committed to consolidating and building on the successful actions, recognises the challenges of an ever-evolving world, and addresses ways in which these can be overcome. The NLS continues to seek to reduce the number of individuals who are socially excluded because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills. All children, young people and adults are to be given the opportunity to obtain the necessary literacy skills to be active citizens and to succeed in society and at work.

2 Defining Literacy

The UNESCO defines literacy as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. This goes beyond its traditional conception as a set of reading and writing skills. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.

Children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively are more likely to leave school early, and in later life to be unemployed or in low skilled jobs, to have poorer emotional and physical health, to have limited earning power (UNESCO, n.d.). The European Commission (2018) reports that education is one of the main tools to combat child poverty. The PISA (2018) Malta report (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2018) reports that the mean reading score of socio-economically advantaged students is significantly higher than that of socio-economically disadvantaged students. There is a significant positive relationship between attainment in reading and socio-economic and cultural status. This shows that a higher level of social, economic and cultural status implies better attainment in reading skills.

3 Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy is a curricular methodology that integrates various modalities of literacy instruction. Assessment-based planning is at the core of this model. The balanced literacy approach is characterized by explicit skill instruction and the use of authentic texts. Through various modalities, the teacher implements a well-planned comprehensive literacy programme that reflects a gradual release of control (Tompkins, 2021) whereby learning evolves from a teacher-led to a child-driven mode (Wolf et al., 2014). Listening and speaking skills, such as storytelling and debate, are woven throughout this programme; and reading and writing can be extended to other modes of text analysis and composing, such as reading a visual image.

Fig. 1: A Balanced Literacy Model

4 Multiliteracies in the Digital Age

Globalisation and advancements in digital technologies have both altered the tools for literacy and transformed literacies to be more collaborative and participatory (Wager & Enriquez, 2020). Digital media forms part of everyday literacy practices through the addition of visuals and animations, as well as through the increased amount of information made available via electronic devices. Young children are exposed to digital media from a very young age. Children brought up in such digital environments often explore the functions of technology without being explicitly taught to use them (Mifsud & Petrova, 2018). When using digital media, users transfer and process information through various multimodal modes (textual, visual, audio, etc.). It is necessary that effective digital users are able to evaluate and manipulate the multimodal means to generate meaning (Wiegel, James, & Gardner, 2009).

Parents, caregivers and educators can at times find the integration of digital and print literacy into children's early reading experiences quite complex (Mifsud & Petrova, 2018). There are also key differences between the two modes, such as the increased multimodality of digital books, which makes reading a far less linear experience. More research in the dynamics of technology-enhanced classrooms is needed to fully understand these strategies and build upon them to ensure that all students are included.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital technologies in their various forms and how these can supplement and support teaching and learning. The digital divide that exists when children and adults do not have access to digital resources to support their education was also made more evident (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

Digital technologies can support students to become independent and critical learners but also to narrow the gap between children's lived experiences inside and outside of school (Mifsud & Petrova, 2018). Although we cannot and should not overlook the inequalities that still exist in the access to digital technology and the internet, digital media is now a central aspect of most people's lives, whatever their age. Children are exposed to digital technologies from a very young age (Mifsud & Petrova, 2018) and at times they navigate digital platforms and texts before learning how to read and write in the traditional sense. Children and young people are to be supported to take advantage of the opportunities

presented to them by new and emerging digital technologies. However, they are to be guided as they navigate the various challenges presented to them by such technologies.

5 Multilingual Classrooms

The linguistic situation in Malta is characterised by societal bilingualism and there is a strong political and societal desire to maintain balanced bilingualism. Bilingualism manifests itself to varying degrees (Council of Europe, 2015).

The increase in migration (National Statistics Office Malta, 2017) in the last few years in Malta has led to a proliferation of other languages in the sociolinguistic landscape. Children are exposed to Maltese and English to various extent from a very young age in childcare centres (Baldacchino, 2018) and kindergarten education (Mifsud & Vella, 2018a, 2018b; Vella, Mifsud & Muscat, 2019). Students need to develop literacy skills in both Maltese and English to be able to master the curriculum effectively. All students are to be given the opportunities to develop their competences in Maltese English and other languages.

Malta has become increasingly multicultural, and in this respect we must recognise the presence of multilingual literacies of children and their parents. There are cases where children and adults with a migrant background lack the literacy skills in English and Maltese to be able to participate fully in society. These individuals are to be empowered through the acquisition and development of the required literacy skills in Maltese and English. As a result of trends in migration, schools are becoming increasingly heterogeneous in learners' linguistic backgrounds (Mifsud at al., 2021). Children may already be literate in the home language when they start mainstream education. In line with the Council of Europe's recommendations, educators are to acknowledge the whole literacy repertoire of these children and use these literacy skills as a bridge to help the child acquire literacy in Maltese and English. Utilising students' home literacies and languages in school as a learning and teaching tool can create access and accelerate both content area and basic literacy skills, supporting cognitive development and academic achievement (Wager & Enriquez, 2020). Parents are to be encouraged to promote and foster reading in their children in their home languages (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016).

The European Union emphasises the role of language learning to enhance employability and mobility. It has set the improvement of language teaching and learning as a priority. Therefore, all learners are to be given the opportunity to develop their literacy skills in different languages from an early age.

6 Language in Education Policies and Studies

The *Language Policies for the Early Years* (2016) and for the Junior Years (2021) were drawn up following the recommendations outlined in the *National Curriculum Framework* (2012) and the *National Literacy Strategy for All* (2014). These policy documents outline strategies for parents, educators, senior management teams and teacher educators to ensure that all children are provided with opportunities to develop bilingualism in Maltese and English.

Educators can adopt strategies that favour the separation of languages in their classroom. English and Maltese are used in specific subjects, or by specific educators, or at specific times. Educators can also adopt a degree of flexibility where they switch from one language to another through the process of translanguaging, which refers to instances when educators switch from one language to another for pedagogical reasons (García, 2009). Beyond the academic and linguistic benefits, translanguaging in the classroom is an important way to validate who students are and what they bring to the classroom (Vella, Mifsud & Muscat, 2020).

Children are viewed as agents of their own bilingual learning opportunities (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016; Ministry for Education, 2021; Mifsud & Vella, 2018). Successful bilingual development can only take place with the child's willingness and positive attitude towards this process. They are to be given the necessary skills to analyse their own language abilities in relation to age-appropriate outcomes and to visualise themselves as future bilingual selves. Teachers are viewed as professional agents as they are the ultimate decision-makers in the classroom context on the use of strategies to promote bilingualism and in determining whether the child has reached specific learning outcomes. Teachers are to be empowered to use their professional experiences and knowledge to formulate their strategies according to the child's individual needs. This can only take place through on-going professional education and support.

The *Language Policy for the Middle and Secondary Years* is being drawn up by the Language Policy in Education ministerial committee.

7 The Effects of COVID-19 on the Teaching and Learning of Literacy

The UNESCO has declared the COVID-19 pandemic as the most severe disruption to global education systems in history, forcing more than 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries out of school at the peak of the crisis. It threatens the future of a generation with 24 million children and youth at risk of dropping out (UNESCO, 2020).

Schools in Malta discontinued in-person teaching and moved to remote learning from March to September 2020 and then again from March to April 2021. Although the adoption of distance learning was key to ensure the continuity of education following the physical closure of schools, students were likely to experience some form of learning loss. The switch from offline to online learning caused by COVID-19 exacerbated existing educational inequalities (for instance Bao et al, 2020, Kuhfeld et al, 2020, Maldonado & De Witte, 2020). More vulnerable students, such as for instance those from less advantaged backgrounds, were especially likely to fall behind during this emergency period. These students are less likely to have access to relevant learning digital resources (e.g. laptop/computer, broadband internet connection) and less likely to have a suitable home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study or their own desk). Additionally, they may not receive as much (direct or indirect) support from their parents as their more advantaged counterparts do (Di Pietro et al, 2020). Inequalities were also created across schools and classrooms.

The pandemic has also affected students' wellbeing which in turn can influence their performance at school. Cefai et al. (2021) in their study on the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of Maltese 11-16-year-old school children report that 11% of the participants reported problems in their wellbeing. While numbers were small, student wellbeing decreased across year levels (Year 7 to Year 10), with the lowest level of wellbeing reported in Year 10.

In terms of literacy development, Kuhfeld et al. (2020) predict that 3rd-7th grade students (ages 8 to 12) in the USA will lose approximately 35% of reading learning gains compared to what they would have had gained in a typical school year. They suggested that the loss in reading ability took place more in those students who had prior difficulties in reading and

writing. Similarly, Bao et al.'s (2020) study predicted that kindergarten children (ages 3-5) would generally have had 32% loss of literacy ability gain from January to September 2020. Their study also provided evidence that reading daily to young children may have helped to mitigate literacy loss during the COVID-19 school closures.

During the closure of schools in Malta, students who came from vulnerable families and who lacked internet access at home, were provided with free internet and laptops to be able to follow online schooling. The Ministry for Education and Employment set up a website (https://teleskola.mt/) with a bank of resources, lesson plans and recorded lessons for parents, learners and educators.

The National Literacy Agency transferred its provision of services to online environments in March 2020. Live, interactive reading for pleasure and storytelling sessions were held online and recordings of reading sessions were broadcast on social media platforms. Information sessions for parents and educators were also held online. The Agency also set up the *Aqra d-Dar/ Read at Home* initiative where all Primary, Middle and Secondary school students had the opportunity to borrow reading books. These books were delivered free of charge to homes. The *Qari għal Qalbi/ I love Reading* initiative offered students over 300 free digital books in Maltese through the Octavo's collection. The Agency broadcasted the educational programme *Naqraw Flimkien/ Let's Read Together* on the state television channel on a daily basis.

Schools in Malta reopened from September/ October 2020 to March 2021 and from April 2021 to June 2021 and measures were taken to control the spread of COVID-19. Primary, Middle and Secondary virtual schools for students who are vulnerable or who have parents/ guardians who are vulnerable was set up by the Ministry for Education and Employment.

7.1 Recommendations to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on literacy development

The economic and health impacts of the pandemic will likely create newly vulnerable children (OECD, 2020). The increased disparity in both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities that is likely to emerge during COVID-19 pandemic may have important consequences not only in the short -term, but also in the long-term. Even as educational institutions reopen, equity challenges persist. Policy measures should seek to mitigate the effects of the inequalities caused by COVID-19.

To target the effects of COVID-19 on the teaching and learning of literacy and to address the priorities outlined in the NLS (2021-2030), the following Framework for Responsiveness and Resilience is to be implemented:

MAIN AREAS OF POLICY ACTION FOR STRENGTHENED RESPONSIVENESS TO ADDRESS LEARNING LOSS IN LITERACY DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

THE SYSTEM LEVEL — Collecting, disseminating and improving use of information about students

THE BROADER LEARNING ENVIRONMENT LEVEL — Optimising wider engagement and collaboration within and beyond the education institution. Strengthening institutional capacity to address needs

THE LEARNER LEVEL — Understanding and strengthening students' needs. Providing targeted support and interventions
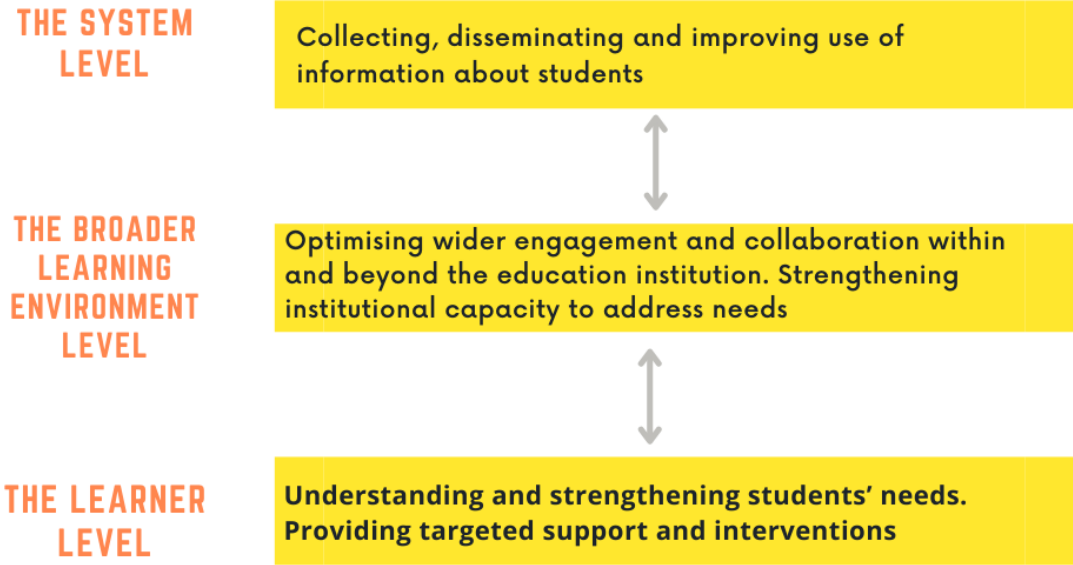
Fig. 2: Framework for Responsiveness and Resilience to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on the teaching and learning of literacy (adapted from OECD, 2020)

The following are recommended actions for schools and communities to counteract the challenges in the teaching and learning of literacy caused by COVID-19:

1. Educators and school leadership teams are to carry out **literacy assessments** and evaluations to determine possible learning loss in all learners during the pandemic. Emphasis should be placed on early identification of literacy difficulties to determine which students are at risk.

2. **Schools are to be guided by the outcomes of these literacy assessments and absenteeism records** to plan recovery actions to target learning loss. Through parental meetings and parent involvement initiatives, they are to provide outreach to parents to promote the importance and impact of school attendance and parental support on the development and learning of literacy.

3. **Literacy catch-up programmes** are to be organised throughout the school year and in summer, for students who for various reasons did not attend in-person schooling and for students who were previously identified as having literacy difficulties and need remedial programmes. These programmes will serve as a bridge for students to help them to reengage in mainstream schools and to catch-up with their peers in terms of literacy development, once the new scholastic year kicks off.

4. Students, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds and who were struggling academically even before the COVID-19 crisis, will are to continue to be supported to make up for literacy learning loss they experienced through **literacy intervention** and catch-up programmes such as *Reading Recovery, Klabb Naħla* and *NWAR*.

5. Educators are to be provided with **professional development** in targeted literacy support and intervention, like that currently offered by the *Reading Recovery* programme. It is envisaged that such a programme is extended to Complementary and other Literacy Support Teachers.

6. The teaching and learning of literacy should be framed within a **pedagogy** that addresses the wellbeing, needs, likes and aspirations of students. Research shows that student engagement is linked exponentially to student progress. Educators are to address the holistic needs of learners who might have experienced stress, loss and a disengagement during the pandemic.

7. **Reading time**, involving shared, guided and independent reading activities, is to be prioritised across the curriculum in all year groups. All children are to be given opportunities to borrow, handle and read books from classroom, school, public, and virtual libraries.

8. Children might have experienced lack of social interactions, feelings of isolation and declining social skills. Children are to be given opportunities for **daily independent reading of texts that correspond to their interests and heroes and heroines who have persevered in difficult times.** They are to be encouraged to use these texts as a springboard for communication and discussion in class.

9. **At-risk parents are to continue to be provided with reading books** to support their children. Reading materials are to be distributed through initiatives like *Read at Home/ Aqra id-Dar* to support families to counteract the impact of the pandemic.

10. **Campaigns and programmes** are to continue to be organised to emphasise the role of parents and guardians in the promotion of literacy at home from birth. For example, through the programme *Aqra Miegħi/ Read with Me,* parents/ guardians are shown the positive effect of early reading on later literacy attainment.

11. **Research** is to be carried out to understand further the impact of the pandemic on student achievement and on the literacy development of different groups of learners.

It is vital that the disruptions experienced by students in their literacy development due to the COVID-19 pandemic are mitigated by a collective action in pursuit of equity and a means of social justice, for all students.

8 International Studies of Literacy Performance

The PIRLS (2016) Malta report indicates that Malta's mean reading score was significantly lower than the international average. In terms of home reading resources, Malta's mean scale score was significantly higher than the international average and exceeds the corresponding 2011 scale score, indicating that home reading resources have increased in the last five years, according to parents. Students' reading attainment is positively and significantly related to home resources for reading (PIRLS, 2016).

The PISA (2018) Malta report (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2018) shows that the reading average score for Maltese students was significantly lower than the international average. The following graph shows the PISA reading average scores for Malta in 2009, 2015, 2018:
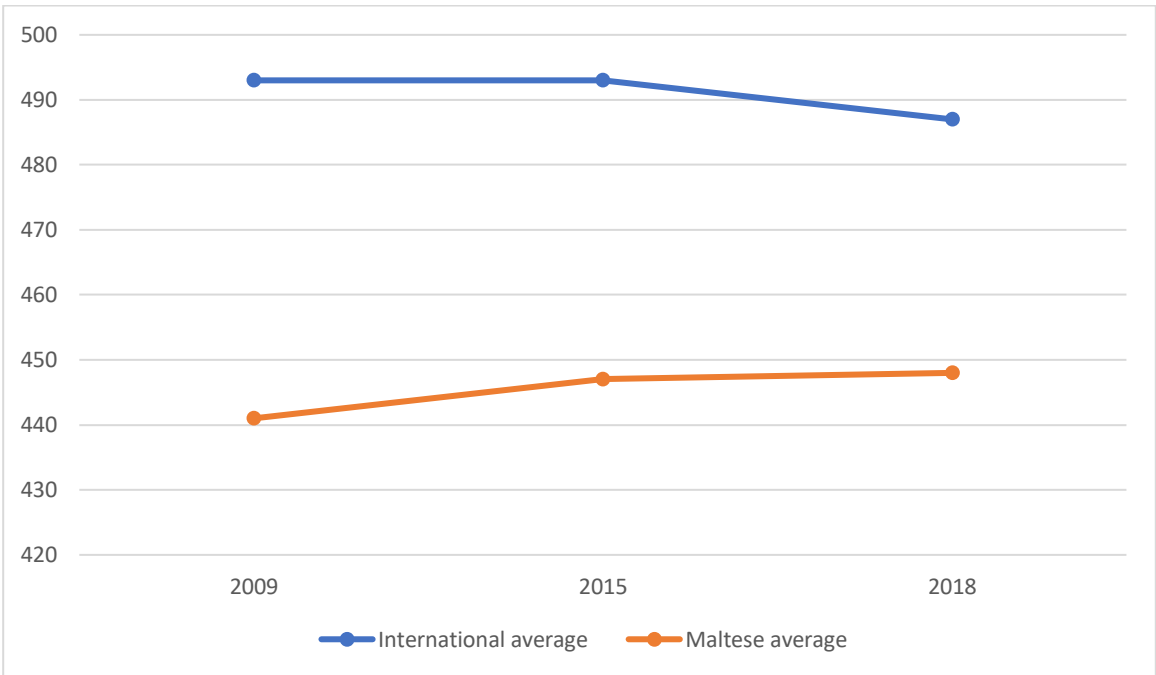

Fig. 3: PISA reading average scores for Malta compared to international average scores

8.1 School Sectors

The PISA (2018) report shows differences between the school sectors in reading scores that merit further consideration (Council of Europe, 2015). Since the launch of the 2014 National Literacy Strategy, there has been an increase in Reading scores (with the exception of Church Schools in 2018), as shown in the following diagram:
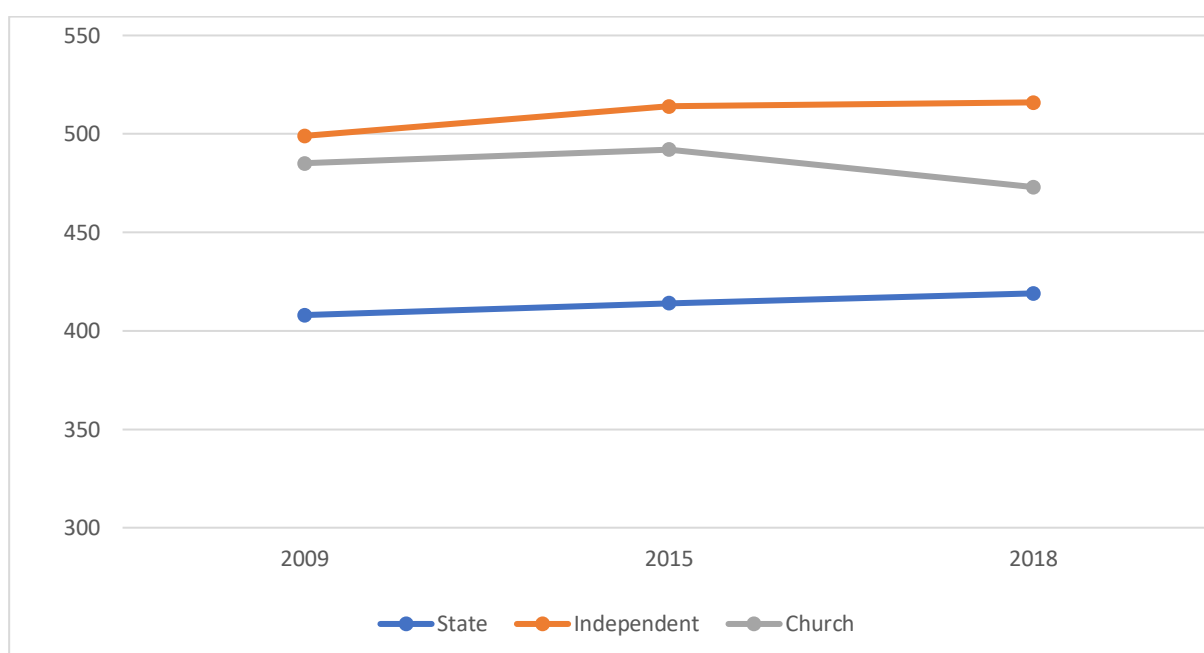
Fig. 4: PISA average scores by school sector

8.2 Gender

In the PISA 2018 study, all participating countries registered higher scores for girls than boys in reading. These trends are also evident in the results for Malta where the proportion of Maltese female high achievers in reading (6.3%) exceeds the proportion of males (4.4%). The proportion of Maltese male low achievers in reading (44.9%) exceeds by a large margin the proportion of female ones (26.0%). These results were already evident in PIRLS (2016), where in all countries female students scored higher in reading literacy than males. In Malta, female students scored 21 scale points more than males in PIRLS (2016).

This strategy aims to address this gender gap. The gender mainstreaming of such a strategy is important to ensure equity and increased effectiveness. Data about gender differences could allow us to identify the different issues boys and girls contend with in the field of literacy. Interventions are to be targeted accordingly.

9 Implemented Actions from *The National Literacy Strategy for All* (2014)

In 2014, *The National Literacy Strategy for All* was launched with the main aim to "promote and enhance lifelong and lifewide, high quality literacy practices among children, youths, adults, third country nationals and persons with learning difficulties" (p. 8). The National Literacy Agency (NLA) was founded in 2015 to implement the recommendations outlined in the Strategy document. The NLA's main milestones since 2015 have been fostering a literate community through reading for enjoyment programmes, establishing reading intervention programmes in the Early Years, building classroom libraries in primary classrooms and the promotion of a balanced literacy approach through the College Literacy Teams in schools.

A SNAPSHOT OF MAJOR MILESTONES

CLASSROOM LIBRARIES

109,303 fiction and non-fiction books in Maltese and English in 68 primary state schools were distributed reaching 17,804 students as part of the Aqra Kemm Tiflaħ Scheme.

READING SESSIONS

Number of reading sessions in 2019
4,434 Aqra Miegħi Sessions (ages 0-3)
3,162 Seħer L-Istejjer Sessions (ages 4-7)
1,009 Gost il-Qari Sessions (ages 7-11)

INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

Since 2018, 208 students have benefitted from the Reading Recovery Programme

DISTRIBUTION OF BOOKS

Since 2019 1,824 books were distributed to 79 families considered at-risk

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The Learning Outcomes Framework
Emergent Curriculum for the Early Years
The Promotion of a Balanced Literacy Approach

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Research on language use in the early and junior years to inform policy

AND MUCH MORE

9.1 Literacy in the Community 2014–2020

In its commitment to promote literacy in the community across all ages, the NLA launched nationwide campaigns and reading programmes, guided by the philosophy that parents and guardians should read to children from birth. These reading sessions are held in over 70 localities and are free of charge, to ensure that they are accessible to families coming from all socioeconomic backgrounds:

- Reading for Pleasure Programmes: *Aqra Miegħi / Read with Me* (0–3 yrs), *Seħer l-Istejjer / The Magic of Stories* (4–7 yrs) and *Gost il-Qari / The Pleasure of Reading* (8–11 yrs);

- National Campaigns: *Aqra fis-Sajf / Summer Reading Campaign, Reading Ambassadors, Qaritona / Readathon, Naqraw Flimkien / Let's Read Together* TV programme;

- Awarding gifted children: *Brillantini tal-Qari / Reading Stars, Brillantini tal-Kitba / Writing Stars, Reading Champions, Book Champions*;

- Storytelling programmes: *Storytelling Schools Malta, Għidli Storja / Tell Me a Story* and *The Symbol Literacy Project*;

- *The Malta Writing Programme* including family writing for fun activities and writing clubs.

9.2 Literacy in Education 2014–2020

The National Literacy Agency's main contributions to the teaching and learning of literacy are aimed at supporting existing practices, guided by the College Literacy Teams. Reading intervention programmes were established in primary schools to complement the teaching and learning of literacy in mainstream education. These actions were:

- *Reading Recovery* in collaboration with University College London;

- *Bil-Qari u l-Kitba Niskorja / Footballers' Read and Write Programme*;

- The *Nwar* Family Literacy Programme*;*

- *Klabb Naħla* before- and after-school literacy intervention programme;

- The establishment of College Literacy Teams.

9.3 Literacy Resources 2014–2020

Children who have reading books and materials that are readily available at home are more likely to become good readers and writers as adults. Malta has registered a significant increase in home reading resources in the last five years, according to parents. This reflects the important efforts in recent years on the part of schools and the Ministry for Education, through the National Literacy Agency, to ensure better provision of reading resources in the home and in the Early Years of schooling. Classroom libraries were set up in the *Aqra Kemm Tiflaħ / Enriching Classroom Libraries* programme where each classroom in state Primary classrooms was provided with 50 books in Maltese and 50 in English. Other initiatives were:

- Book gifting schemes: *Aqra Kemm Tiflaħ / Enriching Classroom Libraries*, dyslexia-friendly toolboxes and resources programme, *Home Libraries through Children in Social Difficulties - Scheme 9, Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived* (FEAD) and *State Funded Food Distribution* (SFFD) schemes, *Little Stars Library, L-Għodda f'Idejk*;

- Production and/or distribution of innovative resources: *Bil-Ħila Tagħkom, Bis-Sehem Tagħkom / Promoting Good Practice, Qari għal Qalbi - ebooks in Maltese, Rakkonti project, Ismagħni Naqra / Listen to Me Read;*

- *Libreriji fl-Apert / Libraries in the community*: Mobile Library at Mater Dei Hospital, *Literacy Resource Centres*, Libraries in residential homes for disadvantaged children and youths.

9.4 Professional Development and Research 2014–2020

The NLA is committed to providing training to educators on the promotion of literacy in the curriculum and awareness-raising sessions to parents on the importance of literacy development from birth. The NLA carries out research projects to better inform its programmes and policies:

- Professional Development courses and sessions for educators: Reading for Pleasure; Methodology of the *NWAR* Literacy Programme; Writing Skills; Reading Recovery; Storytelling; Guided Reading and in Bilingual development and Bilingual Education;

- College Literacy Teams and support given to educators;

- Information sessions for Parents/Caregivers about Early Literacy in schools: Parentcraft courses, Well Baby Clinics, in LEAP centres, local councils and public libraries, etc.;

- *The Language Policy for the Early Years*, *The Language Policy for* the Junior Years, and related studies.

Research projects and internal evaluation research reports have been carried out to support the NLA's work and identify areas which need further attention (refer to Appendix 2).

The main points for further reflection and action identified by these projects were:

- The way languages are used in Early Years settings and in the teaching of Mathematics in the Junior Years.

- The importance of the father's role and other significant males in the promotion of literacy. In this regard the Agency launched the *Footballers' Read and Write Programme* and included more male personalities in the *Ambaxxaturi tal-Qari / Reading Ambassadors* initiative to make literacy more appealing to boys.

- The role of *Reading Recovery* in improving struggling readers' literacy levels.

- The inclusion of families coming from low socioeconomic status. The Agency has distributed books to low-income families for children to have their own home library. Research also recommends that home visits are adopted as an effective outreach for families of low SE status.

- More visibility and information about the Agency programmes. The NLA has invested in media campaigns and visibility in television programmes and on designated Facebook pages.

- More longitudinal studies to assess the impact of the NLA programmes on children, parents and others.

These research recommendations and the needs to an ever-changing society will inform the recommendations outlined in the NLS 2021–2030.

10 Contextualising the NLS (2021–2030)

The National Curriculum Framework defines literacy as a cross-curricular theme and as essential for the education of all students and for achieving the aims of education, since learning takes place through language and literacy in its various forms (p. 37). It highlights the importance of parents and the local community in the promotion of literacy with children.

The NLS (2021–2030) aligns with policy and curricular documents launched since 2014 that highlight the importance of literacy:

- The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024
- The Learning Outcomes Framework (2016)
- The National Lifelong Learning Strategy for Malta for 2014–2020
- Education for All. Special Needs Education in Malta (2014)
- The Implementation of the Emergent Curriculum in the Early Years (2016)
- The National Policy of the Teaching of Maltese as a Foreign Language within the Framework of Bilingualism and Plurilingualism (2019)
- A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion – A National Inclusive Education Framework (2019)
- The Language Policies for the Early (2016) and the Junior Years (2021)
- The Language in Education Profile by the Council of Europe (2015)
- Equitable Education for All: My Journey. Achieving through different paths (2016)
- National Youth Policy – Towards 2030 – Reaching out to, working with and supporting young people
- National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2020–2030)
- A Holistic and Inclusive Approach to Tackle Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELELT) in Malta (2020–2030)
- The Digital Literacy Strategy (2020–2030)

11 The National Literacy Strategy (2021-2030)

The NLS (2021–2030) has the following eight goals and four pillars to ensure that all reach their full potential in literacy.

The eight broad goals of the Strategy are the following:

1 Consider literacy as an important element in the field of social inclusion with concrete measures to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to obtain the skills required for them to participate fully in society, while supporting the literacy development of children and adults from low socio-economic status.

2 Raise levels of literacy by fostering a literate community which provides opportunities for learners to make sense of their experiences and to make connections with their histories, cultures and communities.

3 Empower schools to make decisions about the most appropriate literacy strategies and actions based on results from national benchmarking exercises, PIRLS and PISA, and provide increased opportunities for Reading Time in Maltese and English at home and throughout the curriculum.

4 Promote balanced literacy teaching and learning that facilitates the integration of the skills of oracy, reading and writing.

5 Promote digital and multilingual literacies for all.

6 Facilitate the distribution and creation of literacy resources to ensure that all children have access to good quality reading materials in Maltese, English and other languages.

7 Promote research studies that provide a better understanding of literacy practices in Malta and Gozo.

8 Ensure that all educators at different levels have access to professional development opportunities in literacy learning and teaching.

The four interdependent pillars of the Strategy are shown in the following diagram:

Fig. 5: The Strategic Pillars of the National Literacy Strategy (2021–2030)

11.1 Pillar 1: Literacy in the Community

Literacy practices are to be promoted from birth and sustained throughout life (Niklas, Cohrssen, & Tayler, 2016). What children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write and vice versa. Parents, carers and significant others are to be empowered with the skills and knowledge to be able to help children develop a solid foundation in early language and literacy, also by providing a literacy-rich home environment. Children brought up in families where parents provide rich language and literacy support do better in school than those whose parents do not (Lawson, 2021). Children whose parents read to them on a regular basis from birth are exposed to more than a million words more before they start kindergarten than children who are not read to (Logan et al., 2019). Home-based shared book reading represents an important resource for ensuring equitable educational opportunities. This has to be sustained throughout the school years, especially since research shows that children's interest in reading can decrease with age.

The collective effort of the wider community has the potential to bring greater coherence and an integrated approach to the national effort to improve learning experiences and outcomes in literacy.

The NLS (2021–2030) puts emphasis on the important role that parents and the home-learning environment play in supporting the development of early literacy skills. This has to be sustained throughout the school years, especially since research shows that children's interest in reading can decrease with age (Locher et al., 2019).

Pillar 1 Objectives:

Objective 1: To enable parents and communities to support children's literacy development from birth

Strategic Actions:

1. Review the current provision of storytelling programmes and their reach;
2. Consolidate programmes like *Aqra Miegħi / Read with me* and *Seħer l-Istejjer / The Magic of Stories* which promote storytelling and reading for pleasure;
3. Sustain the emphasis on adult/child meaningful dialogue;
4. Promote the continuation of Reading for Pleasure sessions for children in the Junior and the Secondary Years.

Objective 2: To empower vulnerable parents and families

Strategic Actions:

1. Partner with different Ministries to create outreach activities focusing on vulnerable families;
2. Provide easier accessibility to vulnerable families to be able to participate in reading for pleasure programmes.

Objective 3: To tackle the gender gap through reading for pleasure programmes

Strategic Actions:

1. Provide both male and female role models in literacy within the family context in view of the gender gap in reading attainment;
2. Encourage more males to act as reading animators in reading for pleasure programmes;
3. Promote more male local and international celebrities to act as reading models;

4. Consolidate and develop more reading programmes where literacy is linked to sports and performing arts, such as *The Footballers' Read and Write Programme.*

Objective 4: To address diversity in the promotion of literacy in families

Strategic Actions:

1. Support families and communities in their quest to maintain their first languages which are not the languages of schooling;

2. Create outreach activities focusing on multilingual families to increase awareness of the importance of children's home languages in the development of literacy in other languages;

3. Collaborate with other entities in the provision of reading sessions for children with specific learning difficulties;

4. Organise multisensory reading for pleasure sessions for children with specific learning difficulties.

11.2 Pillar 2: Literacy in Education

Schools and educational contexts are vital in the promotion of literacy. This process extends from when babies and toddlers attend childcare centres to when they complete their studies at various stages. Literacy in education has to work hand-in-hand with literacy in the community in the promotion of a holistic vision of literacy for the child, the young person and the adult.

The NLS promotes a Balanced literacy teaching and learning approach where the technical aspects of reading and writing are taught in the context of making meaning through text. The assessment of literacy should also be balanced. Standardized literacy tests provide useful information in their own right. However, they give information only about one facet of children's literacy, limiting the accuracy of resulting data about students' literacy abilities (Wagner & Enriques, 2020).

The importance of the digital aspect of literacy has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Classrooms and learning environments were suddenly transferred to online platforms, where students had to negotiate online texts, online lessons and more media content. This has brought to the fore the need for further research on the way children negotiate digital texts in their multimodal nature, and training for educators on the best ways to deliver lessons and support learners online.

In light of the premise that parents should be encouraged to support their children's literacy development, they should also receive support and instruction to be able to do so. Family literacy programmes are effective in improving both child literacy and parental support skills. Such programmes are to support and complement school literacy activities.

Children who fall behind in oral language and literacy development in the years before formal schooling are less likely to be successful beginning readers; and their achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond. Children who have not mastered the required literacy skills by the age of 7 are to be given specialist intervention. In this way the attainment gap for disadvantaged children is closed and such children can progress in mainstream education.

11.2.1   Literacy Development in Schools

The NLS highlights the important role that the College Literacy Team has in coordinating the literacy strategy of the College to ensure that all learners involved are receiving the required literacy provision.

The College Literacy Team is usually composed of the:

- Head of Department for Literacy (coordinator)
- Education Officer for Curriculum
- Heads of Department for Specific Learning Difficulties, Digital Literacy and Assessment for Learning.
- Inclusion Coordinator
- Literacy Support Teacher
- Complementary Teacher

The College Literacy Team shall engage with State primary schools to ensure that there are frequent and systematic opportunities for Shared and Guided reading, as well as a Reading Recovery programme, a bilingual policy, and the Storytelling Methodology as part of the mainstream teaching and learning process. It is expected that these opportunities feature in the School Initiated Action Plans (SIAPs). The Literacy Teams shall also engage with staff in the various peripatetic curricular services giving provision in their College. This is to enhance mutual understanding of the literacy challenges faced by that College and to seek to achieve a common purpose. Through the development of the College Literacy Teams, the literacy support teachers can redefine their role so as to champion the lifewide aspect of the Literacy Strategy for All through greater liaison between the school and families and the local community.

The foundations for the teaching and learning of literacy across the curriculum should be to empower students in their learning, so that they become lifelong learners. Each school is to have a Literacy Link person. The Head of Department is to liaise with the Literacy Link person.

Decisions about the most appropriate literacy strategies are to be taken at the class and school levels, that is, by those who have the best knowledge about and are closest to the learners. In this regard classes and schools are to receive support from the central services.

11.2.2 Literacy in the Early Years

Parents, child carers and educators play a crucial role in fostering oral language development in children from birth. Children who engage in oral conversations are placed at an advantage in reading and writing development in the later years. Parents and early childhood educators need to surround their children with enriched learning environments where literacy exposure is promoted and broadened.

In the Early Years (ages 0–7), the acquisition and development of oral language plays a crucial role in the development of literacy skills at a later stage. Children in the Early Years acquire both language and literacy development simultaneously as well as develop their ability to communicate effectively through various modes including oral and written language, image and gesture (multimodality). Early experiences that support the development of children's communication skills (such as their awareness of verbal and non-verbal communication; their knowledge of sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition; their awareness of symbols such as print and pictures; the opportunities that they have to become familiar with and enjoy print in a meaningful way; and the opportunities that they have to use mark-making materials) play a key role in the development of their literacy skills.

Childcare and school settings need to foster a language environment that promotes opportunities for extended conversations and cognitively challenging conversation opportunities during both child-led and adult-led playful early learning experiences, guided by the implementation of the emergent curriculum (Stacey, 2011) and the Learning Outcomes Framework (2016). Early literacy learning should be built on an active and playful approach that allows all children to increase their level of participation and develop at their own pace within an environment where educators support and scaffold their learning in meaningful ways. Literacy in the Early Years should be contextualised in playful, meaningful

and purposeful early literacy learning rather than be the sole emphasis on the learning of decontextualized letters of the alphabet and words.

11.2.3   Literacy in the Junior Years

In the Junior Years, specific areas of literacy learning are introduced. The ability to acquire basic literacy skills in the Junior Years generates opportunities for the mastering of learning in the Secondary Years. Children in the Junior Years also deal with multimodal texts in different subjects. Primary schools should guarantee that all students make the necessary progress by screening and supporting those who are at risk of falling behind. It is critical that all teachers in the Junior Years are trained in literacy so as to be able to obtain an essential insight into students' competences, learning styles, interests, and learning requirements (Louden et al., 2005).

For effective literacy learning to take place, school standards and policies for literacy need to be planned and implemented. The accomplishment of specific targets, appropriate resource allocation, specialised staff, curriculum content, and professional development should be priorities. There is also a need to promote a team effort, requiring the support of educators at all grade levels, school management, support and complementary staff, parents, and members of the wider community.

11.2.4   Literacy in the Middle and the Secondary Years

Knowledge of unique skills in the middle and secondary schools are provided to gain a deeper understanding of specific learning subjects (Ministry for Education, 2012). Demands in language use increase and these developments in school-age language knowledge go hand-in-hand with increased metalinguistic abilities and access to higher, nonliteral language. Students are expected to deal with academic language across the curriculum. Academic language is more complex in its syntax, semantics and morphology than the language used in everyday communication. Failure to understand academic language can affect the student's educational opportunities.

In the Secondary school years there may be a decline in levels of literacy (Merga, 2020). Literacy skill level is closely related to an individual's academic, social and vocational prospects in life beyond school (Merga, 2019). The PISA (2018) Malta report illustrates how some secondary students in Malta have been found to have low levels of literacy as they perform below the expected levels (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2018).

The overriding objective of this Strategy for the secondary school years is to seek to increase student motivation to literacy learning through dedicated teaching and learning, peer collaboration, media usage and technology. It recommends that the methods and materials used for teaching and learning are relevant and appealing for the adolescent years. It seeks also to strengthen the literacy programmes within and outside school settings and calls for the increased role of libraries, more focused professional development, smoother transitions from primary to secondary for students and increased research.

11.2.5   Literacy Development in Youths

Further education and employment demand high levels of literacy skills from youths. Sociological reasons (such as family issues, absenteeism), or learning difficulties may disrupt the progress of literacy acquisition among young people (Borg et al., 2015). Appropriate levels of literacy are necessary for an individual to function in society at large, where the use of digital technologies has gained importance.

Nygaard (2009) points out that there are strong associations between early school-leaving, school drop-outs, antisocial behaviour and literacy difficulties. The Strategy *A Holistic and inclusive approach to tackle early leaving from education and training (ELET) in Malta* (Ministry for Education, 2020) aims to tackle early school-leaving in Malta. The NLS aligns with the ELET to raise the bars in youth literacy and to ensure that youths have access to books and literacy resources.

Youths in Malta are offered a number of programmes for the improvement of literacy levels beyond compulsory education by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability and the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST). These programmes target youth and adult learners (16+ years). Individual support and group

courses are run in core competences such as language skills and digital literacy. Programmes for the improvement of youth literacy skills should seek to strengthen existing provisions or introduce new ones. The pooling of established service providers' knowledge and resources should lead to more successful literacy initiatives involving vulnerable youths. Networking opportunities are to be geared towards collaborating on projects in partnership with initiatives by young people themselves.

11.2.6   Literacy Development in Adults

The NLS (2021–2030) aligns with the National Lifelong Learning Strategy (Ministry for Education, 2020) in its effort to improve literacy levels among adults. The mastery of literacy skills is important for leading fulfilling lives at the personal, social and economic levels. According to the European Commission (2016), 70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills, and even more have poor numeracy and digital skills, putting them at risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

The European Commission's Skills Agenda delivers on the European Pillar of Social Rights and notably highlights the importance of quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning (European Commission, 2020). One of the recommendations of the Agenda was the Upskilling Pathways (2016) aimed at helping adults acquire a minimum level of literacy and digital skills. It seeks to empower at least 70% of 16–74-year olds to have basic digital skills by 2025.

There have been a number of initiatives and programmes to improve literacy levels amongst adults in Malta by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, MCAST, and Jobsplus. Such programmes are offered in the community, in adult learning centres and at the workplace by a number of organisations.

The Strategy promotes the enhancement of the learning experience of adults and the provision of further learning opportunities through increased funding, resources, and employer and organisational support.

11.2.7 Provision for Children with Learning Difficulties

Literacy plays a central role in our lives and yet so many young people and adults appear to encounter difficulty in developing sufficient literacy skills. The reasons for learning difficulties are multifaceted, among which are literacy difficulties (Collins & Ferri, 2016).

It has been shown that individuals with learning difficulties struggle to find stable employment, with many either being unemployed, working for longer hours or working for lower wages compared to individuals without a learning difficulty or disability (European Commission, 2021). According to the European Commission (2021), more persons with disabilities are at risk of poverty and social exclusion than persons without disabilities. One of the fundamental reasons for this is lack of fluency in reading and writing, and other challenges faced in education (Bezzina, 2018).

In the Primary and Secondary school years, the majority of students gain literacy skills without any effort and without the need for any additional intervention. However, some students require professional identification of their specific needs and specialist individual support. Early observation and monitoring should lead to the identification of literacy difficulties. Multisensory intervention which focuses on the individual abilities of students with literacy difficulties can be effective in supporting students. The input of professionals, who have training in the assessment and intervention of literacy difficulties is central to empower other educators to act as learning scaffolds for those who require further support. Furthermore, clear support needs to be available in the use of assistive technology or adaptive apparatus for programmes, training, and material that is specific to literacy acquisition.

In Malta a number of services for children with learning difficulties are offered at school and within the community. These take the form of multidisciplinary assessment, statementing, complementary education, literacy enhancement programmes, and counselling. The Strategy aligns with the existing *The Malta National Disability Strategy* (2015) to ensure that

children with specific learning needs are catered for in their literacy development and to ensure a better integration and further development of the existing programmes.

11.2.8 Multilingual Learners

An increasing number of foreign nationals set up residence each year in Malta for various reasons. These individuals are often literate in their home language/s. They are to be supported to develop their literacy skills in Maltese and English to be able to communicate their needs better, to seek to fulfil their rights and to realise their present and future aspirations. Proficiency in one or more languages used in their wider community increases their chances for better education and employment.

The number of migrant children in all schools in Malta, but especially in state schools, has increased significantly. Although multilingual children are expected to master Maltese and English to be able to follow the curriculum in schools, a number of them do not have the literacy levels expected to be able to cope effectively with the curriculum.

Children who are not proficient in Maltese and English follow a year-long induction course in one of the Migrant Learners Units. In most state primary schools, complementary education and literacy support teachers are asked to support the language acquisition of such learners so as to facilitate their social, cultural and educational integration. In the secondary sector some of these learners are provided with Maltese as a second or additional language programme or assigned to a Core Curriculum Programme.

The NLS (2021–2030) acknowledges the unique position of such groups and recommends that schools and other educational institutions are to celebrate cultural diversity and encourage children and their families to promote their first languages. For this reason, there is a need for a provision and strategies that are directed specifically towards multilingual learners.

Pillar 2 Objectives:

Objective 1: Schools are to prioritise literacy in their School Development Plans

Strategic Actions:

1. Schools are to have School Initiated Action Plans (SIAPs) or equivalents that will include the following components:

- measures to assess literacy needs as early as possible;
- reading and writing strategies and related resources to ensure the expected literacy competences for all learners;
- strategies to include families and local communities in literacy programmes;
- plans to ensure the frequent and systematic use of these reading and writing strategies;
- expected literacy attainment improvement targets;
- actions that promote inclusion practices in schools (e.g., dyslexia-friendly measures);
- plans for literacy-related Continuing Professional Development for school staff.

2. Schools shall also compile the following data pertaining to literacy, as applicable, and use it to make data-informed decisions:

- learner-by-learner data;
- school-level data;
- aggregated averages of 'school families'. School families are composed of schools that are comparable on a number of factors, including gender, school size and socioeconomic background, so that schools within the same 'family' can compare their results with the aggregated average of their 'family' and so compare like with like.

3. State schools shall have available the following data sources with respect to literacy performance so as to inform their School Development Plan process:

- the yearly Year 3 Literacy Competence Assessment;

- annual results for Maltese and English for Years 4 and 5;

- the End of Primary Benchmark results for Maltese and English;

- results from the consecutive cycles of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS);

- where applicable, information derived from the Core Competences Checklists and reading/spelling tests on an annual basis.

4. Schools that are models of excellence in the development and implementation of such plans, and who are demonstrating proven success as a result, shall be identified and celebrated as Literacy Beacon Schools. There should be opportunities for the sharing of good practices so that other schools can understand their success better and to emulate them wherever possible;

5. In the state sector, College Literacy Teams are to be strengthened;

6. The Literacy Team shall engage with State primary schools to ensure that there are frequent and systematic opportunities for Shared and Guided reading as part of the mainstream teaching and learning process. These opportunities are to be featured in the School Initiated Action Plans (SIAPs) and are implemented at the school level, based on each school's needs;

7. The Literacy Teams shall also engage with staff in the various peripatetic curricular services giving provision in their College. This is to enhance mutual understanding of the literacy challenges faced by that College and to seek to achieve a common purpose;

8. Each school should establish clear policies for the teaching of literacy for Maltese and English through the support of Literacy Support Teachers, Heads of Department of Literacy, Maltese and English, and Education Officers for the Early Years, Curriculum, Literacy, Maltese and English;

9. Schools are to identify students who have missed out on education during the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver catch-up plans for them;

10. Schools that are models of excellence in the development and implementation of such plans, and who are demonstrating proven success as a result, shall be identified and celebrated as Champion Schools. Resources shall be made available so that other schools in state and non-state sectors can seek to understand better their success, and to emulate them as applicable;

11. Each College should draw up a Language Policy based on the recommendations outlined in the Language Policies for the Early and the Junior Years which reflects the need of the students in that college. On this basis each school is to introduce and implement a Language in Education Policy;

12. Parents are to be better informed about the systems prevailing in schools. Parents are to be briefed about the teaching and learning strategies adopted in schools in order to strengthen school-home links and allow them to play a larger role in the education of their children.

Objective 2: Support educators on the best practices that can help children to develop their literacy skills

Strategic Actions – the Early Years:

1. Consolidate the promotion of Balanced Literacy teaching and learning, starting from the Early Years, across all school years;

2. Emphasise the importance of oracy as a precursor to literacy;

3. Emphasise the role of play in the development of oracy and as a means of language development;

4. Consolidate the integration of the skills of oracy, reading and writing starting from the Early Years and moving on across the school years;

5. Emphasise increased opportunities for Reading Time in Maltese and English throughout the curriculum;

6. Disseminate Shared and Guided reading strategies.

Strategic Actions – the Junior Years:

7. Consolidate the actions proposed for the Early Years in the use of a Balanced Literacy approach, the importance of oracy, Shared and Guided reading and of reading time;

8. The Year 3 Literacy Competences Test or equivalent shall be administered to all Year 3 learners in primary schools.

9. Particular attention, through designated programmes, is paid to gifted students.

Strategic Actions – the Middle and the Secondary Years:

10. Emphasise the role of development of oracy skills in the learning of languages and in content subjects, the importance of reading time and the development of literacy embedded in meaningful context;

11. Emphasise the move from a fragmented approach where school subjects are viewed in isolation to a collaboration between teachers and different subjects to ensure that literacy aspects of each school subject are tackled and reinforced throughout the curriculum, in line with the LOFs;

12. In the first year of secondary school, each student is to have a portfolio or cumulative assessment cards from their primary school years. This should provide learners, teachers and parents with an opportunity to discuss the learning progress of the students, plan how to meet targets and encourage learners to assume responsibility for their learning. This could feature:

- evidence of pieces of writing from different subjects;
- student retellings to assess construction of meaning;
- continuous records of independent reading, self-evaluations;
- goal-setting checklists that will help in self-assessment, and anecdotal notes explaining achievement over time.

13. Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can be used to promote language development. This may involve teaching some non-language subjects exclusively through English or Maltese;

14. Schools are to establish plans to target those students who show poor interest in reading for pleasure.

Objective 3: Consolidate and develop literacy intervention programmes

Strategic Actions:

1. Learners with literacy difficulties are to be identified by the end of Year 3 at the latest by the schools. Plans to address this situation effectively as a matter of priority are to be made explicit and should form part of the School Development Plan (SDP). Screening and profiling procedures to ensure appropriate intervention by class and complementary teachers and other support specialists are to be developed further;

2. The Literacy Team of each College is to assess the situation of literacy in their respective schools and draw up action plans to address the needs of struggling readers;

3. There should be information about each student's literacy profile to ensure continuity and appropriate intervention as they progress from year to year;

4. Small group language and literacy support classes where students can receive literacy interventions on a daily basis are to be promoted. Such programmes, like Reading Recovery, are based on a systematic programme that is tailored for learners' needs and built on data about learners' performance and desired targets;

5. It should be ensured that prevention and intervention measures, like those which pertain to Speech and Language Pathology, are to be offered within settings that are familiar for the child like the school and College premises. This would also ensure their timely provision.

Objective 4: Consolidate practices to support children with learning difficulties

Strategic Actions:

1. Consolidate and develop further screening and profiling procedures to ensure timely intervention;

2. Consolidate and disseminate literacy practices (e.g., dyslexia-friendly schools) to promote inclusion in schools;

3. Reinforce the three-tiered referral system, involving the class teacher, school-based, and external professionals to cater for children with learning difficulties, and the promotion of multisensory teaching in the different school subject areas;

4. Reinforce and make known a clear chain of responsibility in order to ensure that learners who are assessed for specific learning difficulties are provided with the required intervention;

5. Strengthen the services for children with Specific Learning Difficulties and extend them to include a wider range of learning difficulties and multisensory teaching in relation to the different subject areas. Specific learning difficulties staff could serve as multipliers for other teachers;

6. Classroom assistants who have received basic training in literacy are engaged. They are to provide support to students who are struggling with literacy under the guidance of literacy specialists;

7. Family-friendly measures, like those recently given increased importance in the time of COVID-19, are to be consolidated and extended further to enable families to be included in the support and intervention process of children with learning difficulties.

Objective 5: Support multilingual learners to develop their literacy skills

Strategic Actions:

1. When enrolling into school, schools are to set up links with translators or mediators who speak the same language as the new entrants to ensure a smooth transition into the educational system;

2. Promote the use of a range of assessment tools to assess children with different language and literacy abilities and backgrounds;

3. Develop further guidelines and materials for the teaching of Maltese as a foreign language;

4. Literacy teaching should be interdisciplinary, multicultural, and interactive, and linked to past experiences;

5. The literacy practices of learners' families and communities should be fostered so that the school can provide the best educational experience for all learners. There is to be awareness that conventional school literacy practices may serve as instruments of control and disempowerment which supersede and displace those existing within families;

6. Develop further collaboration with other Ministries, government agencies and NGOs to reach out to migrants and foreign nationals living in the community to help them access literacy courses.

Objective 6: Consolidate the use of digital technologies in the teaching and learning of literacy

Strategic Actions:

1. Review the platforms used in online teaching and digital resources to support the promotion of oracy and literacy skills;

2. Review the best practices that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in online teaching and in the use of digital resources for teaching;

3. Develop and reinforce online resources and activities created during the COVID-19 pandemic;

4. All stakeholders are to have a shared vision regarding the objectives for the development of language and literacy abilities through digital technologies;

5. Increase opportunities for the development of embedded learning programmes and other innovative methodologies;

6. Colleges and schools are to be supported to adapt the relevant eContent to the literacy needs of their learners;

7. Increase opportunities for the development of multimodal learning and immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented realities, embedded learning programmes, and other innovative technologies like VR and AI for all learners;

8. Digital technologies and social networks are to be used effectively in the teaching of literacy to young people;

9. The use of online and offline resources will further enhance and provide for an effective and efficient way of assessment with regards to literacy;

10. The eContent made available to schools is adapted to and graded according to the language and literacy needs of different learners. This can be achieved by offering tracking facilities and monitoring progress through online portfolios.

Objective 7: Support the literacy development of Youths and Adults

Strategic Actions:

1. Consolidate and extend further current programmes in Basic Skills intended for young people;

2. Promote and sustain the accreditation of basic skills programmes to ensure their wider recognition for further studies and by employers;

3. Reinforce the provision for Literacy for Employment programmes for unemployed and low-skilled adults;

4. Ensure that appropriate networking mechanisms between different entities and agencies are set up in order to implement the Strategy;

5. Carry out a review of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 1 and Level 2 accredited programmes provided by different entities;

6. The Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) is to design a Framework for Entry Levels below Level 1; this is especially relevant to initiatives such as the Pathway to Independent Living Programme at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST);

7. Adaptations are to be made that reflect the needs of vocational education and training programmes with specific adaptations to Key Skills components;

8. Set up an inter-entity network in which formal and non-formal entities can collaborate on development and research projects like living libraries within both formal and non-formal settings;

9. Courses in Information Literacy Skills are to be held for youth workers and youth mentors;

10. Youth mentors are to be trained to establish the buddy system in formal and non-formal settings. Mentors can also serve as an important link between education professionals and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) and youth workers within non-formal contexts;

11. There is to be an efficient and reliable accreditation system for adult literacy programmes. Service providers are made aware of the benefits of the accreditation of literacy courses;

12. Local Councils are urged to liaise with Government entities, Non-Government Organisations (NGO) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in order to respond to the needs of the local community for easily accessible adult literacy programmes in an inclusive and organised manner;

13. Local and EU Funds are to be sought to develop tools and materials for the teaching of literacy to adults in Maltese and English;

14. Provide and further consolidate Basic Skills and literacy programmes for inmates of correctional facilities for better reintegration in society. These may be linked to the parole system in order to encourage participation.

11.3 Pillar 3: Literacy Resources

The promotion of literacy across different groups can only take place through the provision of appropriate resources. Literacy resources refer to the physical resources such as print and digital books and other educational resources. Children who do not have books at home are missing out on the vital benefits of book ownership for the development of their reading skills, reading for pleasure and mental wellbeing. On the other hand, research shows that children who have books at home are more likely to read above the level expected for their age and to enjoy reading.

Libraries are an important resource in supporting children's literacy. Children who use the school library are more likely to enjoy reading, see themselves as good readers and think more positively about reading. Those who use school libraries appear to have higher reading levels (Clark, 2010; Teravainen & Clark, 2017; Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018), academic attainment, and writing skills, as well as transferable skills in other academic areas, than those who do not use the school library (Teravainen & Clark, 2017). School and classroom libraries will fill in gaps in those cases where children do not have access to books at home.

There should be further opportunities for educators to develop print and digital resources in the Maltese language to ensure that a wide variety of materials is available. In this way children can nurture further their love for reading in Maltese.

Pillar 3 Objectives:

Objective 1: Ensure that all children have access to book-rich environments

Strategic Actions:

1. Promote book-rich environments, especially with learners and families who lack literacy materials at home;

2. Extend further class and school libraries with books that cover a vast array of topics and for all reading levels. In view of the gender divide in reading for pleasure, attention should be given to books that appeal to boys;

3. Distribute books to vulnerable families to help them establish a home library while sharing with them home practices in shared reading.

Objective 2: Develop resources to cater for ALL children's literacy development

Strategic Actions:

1. Support teachers to co-develop resources that are tailored for their learners' needs in Maltese and English;

2. Support teachers to co-create resources that foster children's bilingual development in Maltese and in English;

3. Strengthen the work of the Literacy Resource Centres in Malta and Gozo, which provide teachers, parents and students with high quality materials and resources in Maltese and English;

4. Libraries are to offer reading materials and software that are appropriate for learners with reading difficulties;

5. Develop literacy materials to cater for multilingual learners learning Maltese and English;

6. Develop teaching and assessment resources that support the multilingual development of all children.

Objective 3: Develop and provide digital resources for literacy development

Strategic Actions:

1. Continue to develop online resources and activities which were embarked upon during the COVID-19 pandemic period;
2. Develop appealing apps and digital story books in the Maltese language;
3. Develop a resource bank of successful digital practices and resources.

Objective 4: Develop and provide resources for the literacy development of adults

Strategic Actions:

1. Promote the development of tools and materials for the teaching of literacy to adults in Maltese and English;
2. Involve local libraries in local community-based strategies for adult literacy. Efforts are to be made to 'move out the library into the community' and to 'move the community into the library'.

11.4   Pillar 4: Professional Development and Research

The NLS promotes professional development opportunities for educators at different levels in literacy learning and teaching. Parents and guardians are also to be supported to help children to develop their literacy skills, for instance, through programmes like *Aqra Mieghi/Read with Me, Il-Genituri l-Ewwel Ghalliema/ Parents are the first teachers*, *Nwar*, etc. The role of research is vital to identify good practices in various contexts, needs, lacunae and recommendations for future practice.

Newly qualified teachers should be given the opportunity for further professional development in literacy to ensure that they enact pedagogically sound literacy practices in their classrooms. Professional development should be grounded in current scientific knowledge about how children learn to read and write, and the best instructional practices to help them learn. The College Literacy Support Teams should also perform a pivotal role in providing continuing support and guidance to classroom teachers to improve classroom instruction. In this way, teacher education is viewed as an ongoing process involving rigorous pre-service and continued professional development.

Research initiatives should focus on the evaluation of the post-COVID-19 situation. Such research projects can focus on the effects of COVID on children's reading for pleasure, access to books and the acquisition and learning of literacy in the Early and School years and how to overcome such effects.

Pillar 4 Objectives:

Objective 1: Consolidate and promote professional development opportunities for educators at different levels in literacy learning and teaching.

Strategic Actions:

1. Continuing professional development shall be provided to teachers, child carers, Kindergarten educators, Learning Support Educators and Senior Management Team members to enhance their capacity to plan, deliver effectively and review the implementation of school-based literacy Strategies. Such Continuing Professional Development programmes shall be offered to the Colleges and to non-state schools. The Curriculum Department shall also consider specific requests made for targeted training;

2. Complementary Education and Learning Support teachers are to extend their literacy expertise;

3. The pre-service training of teachers is to ensure that newly qualified teachers have the necessary skills to meet the literacy challenges in their classrooms;

4. Develop further online courses that educators can follow to further their professional knowledge. Pilot the online courses, improve and accredit these online courses;

5. Promote further continuing professional development for teaching and support staff in the development of literacy skills for children with special needs;

6. Ensure that there are increased opportunities for the professional development of adult literacy educators for Maltese and English at the certificate, diploma and degree levels.

7. Train adult literacy educators working with migrants in targeted programmes or in mainstream provision to deal with multicultural settings in their classrooms;

8. Make provision for training courses for parents/caregivers to enable them to support the literacy development of their children;

9. Provide and consolidate the training for teachers to support learners in online environments;

10. Cater for children with specific difficulties; continuing professional development for educators should be consolidated to be able to refer and support children with learning difficulties;

11. Secondary teachers are to be able to support the development of literacy through their subject area and to appreciate the importance of literacy skills across the curriculum;

12. Provide training to teaching and support staff in the development of literacy skills for children with mild, moderate and profound learning difficulties.

Objective 2: Promote research studies that provide a better understanding of literacy practices in Malta and Gozo.

Strategic Actions:

1. There needs to be a deepening understanding of the acquisition processes for Maltese and English and the teaching of and learning strategies for the two languages in the Early Years. There are to be increased opportunities for research in these areas to guide relevant policies;

2. Collect and analyse longitudinal data on literacy development in Malta. Liaise with schools and other stakeholders to ensure that measures are taken based on this longitudinal data;

3. Review the effects of COVID-19 on the literacy development of children;

4. Carry out and review research on the development of biliteracy skills to inform classroom practices;

5. Create opportunities for educators to share success stories and examples of good practice;

6. Carry out research on the impact of online provision with an emphasis on examples of good practices to promote literacy, and on the challenges faced by teachers, parents and children;

7. Provide increased opportunities for empirical research related to adult literacy in Malta;

8. Implement and review pilot projects involving one to one technologies and AI. Based on the outcomes of the pilot projects, set up the relevant pedagogical, technical and administrative support systems.

12 Conclusion

The successful implementation of the *National Literacy Strategy for All* (2021–2030) relies heavily on the active engagement of everyone. All stakeholders are invited to engage in a constructive dialogue on the challenges and opportunities, and a plan of action to ensure that all children, youths and adults achieve their full potential in literacy.

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14 Appendix 1

Feedback was provided by the following (in alphabetical order):

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15 Appendix 2

List of local studies instigated by the work of the National Literacy Agency:

Cristina, J. (2020). *Exploring Pathways of Development in Early Children's Writing.* Unpublished Master's Dissertation in Reading Recovery and Literacy Leadership, Institute of Education, University of London.

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