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**Conceptualizing School Based Occupational Therapy for Malta:
Enabling Children's Participation in School Occupations through
Collaboration in Early Years Settings.**

Thesis presented by

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For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Occupational Science

University College Cork

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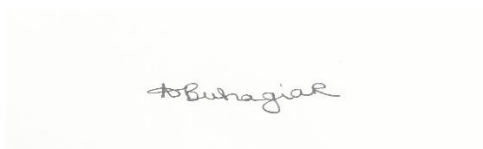
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Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism.”

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature appears to read "N. Buhagiar" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Nathalie Buhagiar

ID: 10067(m)

Date: 10th October 2021

Abstract

This thesis explores occupation, participation and occupational therapy school-based practice in an early years school setting. It adopts a rights-based approach that acknowledges the human and moral rights of all children to be educated; a strengths-based philosophy that moves away from an impairment focus, recognising the centrality of children, their occupations and the transactions between the stakeholders within the school environment. The main research questions were: What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in? What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations in Maltese early-years classrooms? How can occupational therapy involvement in early-years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations? The arena was investigated through a qualitative paradigm, a longitudinal instrumental case study with elements of action theory. It was carried out in one selected primary mainstream state school and involved the participation of children and parents, with the educators being the main focus of this study

This was a two-phased study with participation at the core of the conceptual framework underpinned by Occupational Science and had 3 pillars: The first exploratory part of the study was underpinned by concepts from Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2007). The second intervention part of the study was framed within the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1998), and the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance – Engagement (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). The data was analysed for its content and through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The data were collected over a period of one school year through the researcher's weekly presence in the school. Methods used to obtain data included observation, interviews, focus groups. Such data was supplemented with other documentary evidence: intervention logs, a reflective journal and research diary, and discussions with critical friends, children's photos, school development plans, e mail correspondence and other recorded feedback.

The findings of this study identified the social environment as key to supporting young children's occupations through connectedness, regular, consistent presence and involvement of occupational therapy in the school, the building of relationships and trust, attitudinal factors and knowledge translation between adults: therapist and educators. The importance of play especially physical play, choice, fun and movement in daily routines and children's engagement with peers and educators were also outcomes of the study. The centrality of educator and parental involvement through active engagement, were additional significant findings. The importance of Tier 1 intervention to build educators resilience in delivering their curriculum was identified whilst Tier 2 intervention provided a way forward in supporting children with "hidden" needs. The uniqueness of Tier 3 was namely the collaboration between the occupational therapist and class teacher in the education of students with a statement of needs. The primary importance of working with school leadership was a novel and important finding in this study. Inter-professional working and education, as well as student education and training, were also identified as essential for collaborative consultation to be effective in early years settings.

This research contributes to the international body of evidence on collaborative consultation and also provides recommendations as to how a model of school-based occupational therapy tiered intervention for Malta, can be implemented in Maltese schools, specifically in the early years. In this respect it is also unique as no other projects or studies have ever addressed this topic in Malta. Finally, this study suggests the way forward in developing school - centred practice to support the participation and inclusion for all children in school and society.

(Key words: children, early years, participation, occupation, educators, collaboration, school-based occupational therapy tiered intervention, inclusion,).

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Dedication

To the memory of my dear dad, Joseph, and my uncle, Charles.
The support to continue my studies after graduating as an Occupational Therapist
started with them. I am forever grateful for their love and support.

To all the children, families, educators I have met along these past 35 years and
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Acronyms

ACTU	Access to Communication and Technology Unit
AOTA	American Association of Occupational Therapists
CDAU	Child Development Assessment Unit
CYPS	Child and Youth Psychiatric Service
ICF	International classification of functioning, disability and health
ICY-CY	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health- Children and Youth
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IPE	Inter-professional Education
MNHS	Malta National Health Service- MNHS
NSSS	National School Support Services
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OS	Occupational Science
OT	Occupational Therapy
PPCT	Process-Person-Context-Time Model.
P4C	Partnering for Change
RTI	Response to Intervention
SBOT	School-based Occupational Therapy
SBOTTI	School-based Occupational Therapy Tiered Intervention
SBOTTI-M	School-based Occupational Therapy Tiered Intervention- Malta
SDP	School Development Plan
SMT	Senior Management Team
USA	United States of America

UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund UK
UNCRC	United Nations Charter for the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Charter for the Rights of Persons with Disability
UNESCO	United Nations Education and Scientific Committee
WFOT	World Federation of Occupational Therapists
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This work is about a journey of discovery and exploration into occupation and participation in early-years school settings and school-based occupational therapy practice. This two -phase study involved the participation of children, parents and educators from a selected case study: a primary mainstream school in which I was present for one whole scholastic year from October 2017 to June 2018 collecting data primarily by means of interviews, focus groups, observation and keeping a research and reflective diary throughout the whole research process. The data collected had a twofold purpose: firstly, it allowed me to understand the children's occupations, and the enablers and the barriers to their participation in these; secondly, it aided the understanding of how school-based occupational therapy (SBOT) could support the children's participation in the school setting.

At the start of the study I set out to answer the following research questions. What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in? What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations in Maltese early-years classrooms? How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations? The ultimate aim of these questions was to set a baseline for developing SBOTTI-M with an occupation-centred philosophy, and to gain a deeper understanding of how occupational therapy involvement in Maltese early years classrooms can contribute to children's participation in their school occupations.

This introductory chapter will start with an overview of the context background and motivation for this study. It will continue by explaining Occupational Science (OS) as a foundation for childhood occupations followed by core concepts of participation. An overview on the scope for this study, and the significance of such a study for Malta will be the penultimate section. Finally, the chapter will highlight the main research gaps and questions and will end by mapping out how the rest of the dissertation will be organised.

1.1 Context, Background and Motivation for This Study

In this section, the context of how occupational therapy services for children in Malta have evolved and are currently provided will be outlined. I will then give my own story as a background to explain how I came to the topic of the thesis, and why it became important to me.

Malta is one of the two inhabited islands in the Maltese Archipelago, covering an area of 316 km² and is situated in the very centre of the Mediterranean Sea. It comprises five small islands of which only Malta and Gozo are inhabited, with populations of around 443,000 and just over 33,000 respectively. The small size and the culture of these islands still cultivate the family as a closely knit unit, and the sense of community, especially in the villages, is still strongly felt. Family in Malta is still a stronghold, maintaining the long-standing support network much needed, especially where children, disabled and elderly persons are concerned. (Abela et al., 2005).

Malta's school system houses a school population of around 55,000 students, out of which 160 students attend resource centres¹ (Rieser, 2020). In 2017, the European Agency for Special and Inclusive Education (2017a, 2017b) stated that only 0.12 % of children were being educated outside the regular school system. The figure for 2020 stands a bit higher at 0.29% (Rieser, 2020). Maltese schools² are divided into three main types: state, catholic and independent schools, and in principle all embrace inclusive education³. At the time of writing, fifty percent of children were educated in state schools, with 40% in catholic schools and the remaining 10% in the independent sector. This study is set within regular education in the state school system. State schools are divided into a college system in Malta,

¹ Resource centers were formerly special schools, and now provide schooling to the most vulnerable students using highly adapted curricula.

² State and catholic schools are funded by the state, whereas independent schools are fee paying. The curriculum followed, The National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012), is the same for all.

³ <http://worldofinclusion.com/inclusive-education-in-malta/>

which comprises 9 colleges. Each college covers a specific geographic area of the island and consists of a cluster of primary (4 to 6), middle and secondary schools (2 to 3). Maltese schools all follow an inclusive education policy and frameworks for practice. Inclusive education is based on the belief that every child has the right to receive the education they need and deserve (United Nations, 2006).

The history of Occupational Therapy on the island of Malta is recent dating to the 1970's where services were established and delivered by a single British national. Three Maltese occupational therapists, who had trained in the UK, joined the team in the early 80's; the Department of Health instituted a local occupational therapy training course in the late 80's (Busuttil, 1986). The inception of the first Paediatric Occupational Therapy Services within the Department of Health was in 1990, with myself as the first therapist, soon after my graduation.

In these past 25 years, the number of occupational therapists working in paediatrics with the Malta National Health Service (MNHS), in non-governmental organisations as well as in private practice has increased from 1 to around 30 therapists. Most of these paediatric therapists have continued post-graduate training up to Master level with two others than myself, currently reading for a doctorate in Occupational Therapy (Cutajar & Mizzi, 2020, personal communication).

Occupational therapy services within the Malta National Health Service (MNHS) for children aged 0 to 16 are largely provided in out-patient clinics across the island. These services, offered to the whole of Malta, consist mainly of three modes of operating. The first service is an outpatient occupational therapy clinic-based service provided by occupational therapists working at the Child Development Assessment Unit (CDAU), where children are assessed and given intervention in a clinical environment. The second service is part of a Child and Youth Psychiatric Service (CYPS), which involves assessment and intervention in out-patient clinics based within health centres around the Island. The third one, which provides Ayres

Sensory Integration Intervention (Lane et al., 2019), is a clinic that is also part of the National Health Service.

Another national agency called SAPPORT houses the Access to Communication and Technology Unit (ACTU)⁴, employs occupational therapists who support communication & technology. The National School Support Services (NSSS), a branch of the Education Services, employ another two occupational therapists who currently support the resource centres and are also in the process of developing their role in mainstream education, namely the state schools. Occupational therapists also work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One of the largest and most frequented NGO is called “Inspire”. This NGO provides therapeutic programmes for children with disability that are subsidised by the state. In the past five years, the private practice settings have thrived, and two main OT paediatric practices in the north and centre of Malta employ full-time as well as part-time therapists. One occupational therapist has been employed with the Secretariat for Catholic Education⁵ over the past year. In summary, the main occupational therapy services in Malta are provided by the MNHS together with the NSSS, NGOs and private practice settings.

One important point worth mentioning is that the professionals working with the above entities provide support to schools mostly in the form of consultation, but are not based in the schools. Although *Inspire* offers what they call the *School Outreach Programme*, therapy takes place in their therapeutic facilities located in the southern harbour region of Malta, so the therapists do not work with the children in the school setting. Therapists working at the ACTU⁶ visit the schools to observe the children’s communication-related needs and provide intervention, which is

⁴ The mission of this service is to support the individual’s communication, independence, quality of life and participation in society. This service is provided by a team of speech & language and occupational Therapists.

⁵ The Secretariat for Catholic Education encompasses all the catholic schools (17 kindergarten and 22 primary schools) on the island.

⁶ Access to Communication and Technology Unit

mostly related to assistive technology. In these state-subsidised services offered by NGO's, as well as in private practice therapists are primarily visitors to the school rather than part of the "school family".

In 1996, my completion of a Master (MSc) degree in Paediatric Occupational Therapy allowed me to delve into school-based practice, mostly from a theoretical perspective. In 2001, I lived and studied in California, USA, whilst attending an intensive four-month Sensory Integration Module at the University of Southern California. It was there that I had the first opportunity to work in the school system and apply the knowledge that I had gained in my MSc course. I was interested in the way school-based services offered a different therapy experience to the children and their families, given that the context was more immediate and relevant. The school represented the everyday context and environment of the child. When I returned to Malta, I was still leading the Paediatric Occupational Therapy Services at The Child Development Assessment Unit (CDAU), and decided to use this prior experience to pilot a school-based project.

I set out to develop this project in 2008, after a career break taken to be with my three children. Motivated by what I perceived was a dire need for children to be supported in the natural context of the school. The project meant that therapists would assess and provide OT intervention to any child referred to the out-patient clinic-based service within their respective school. I apprised myself of best practice guidelines in school-based OT and acquainted myself with various literature sources (Case Smith, 1997; 2000). These, coupled with my own experience of working in schools in the USA, informed my practice. Therapists were assigned one college each. Each college team consisted of one principal for the whole college and the heads and assistant heads of the respective schools. These were given a presentation on this new proposed OT service and a set of operational guidelines that included the resources that would be needed for such a service to take place in the respective schools. Most of the college principals welcomed the initiative. The

occupational therapists received some mentoring and support but they received no formal training.

The pilot project continued running for 9 months after my resignation from my role as Principal Occupational Therapist at the CDAU, hence in total it ran for 1 year 9 months. A comprehensive report on the pilot project by my successor (Vella Vidal, 2010) documented limitations and strengths of the project from the perspectives of the occupational therapists who were part of it. On a positive note, they perceived that most schools welcomed the service and educators developed an increased awareness of the role of OT in schools; there was good liaison with teaching teams and learning support staff. Some of the therapists felt satisfied and self-confident, and they valued the teamwork. They felt that they developed personally and that the quality of service provision was good. On a more negative note, there were some stumbling blocks cited by participating therapists, on the provision of these services: ineffective communication between occupational therapists and educational leaders in the schools; a lack of resources; an increased amount of administration; too much travelling time; lack of acceptance by school staff; and difficulty adjusting to a workload model⁷.

My perceptions were that the therapists, having had no prior experience of SBOT, felt overwhelmed and unprepared for this change. There was a lack of conformity between therapists as to what the actual intervention should consist of, as well as poor leadership skills and training; estranged relationships between the therapists; insecurity of working in an educational environment; the fear of the unknown; and also a shortage of human and non-human resources. In short, the way the service was introduced had a number of shortcomings that could have been

⁷ Workload approaches consider all the activities that therapists engage in. They look at the overall time spent by a therapist engaged in a variety of therapeutic activities including travelling; documentation; meetings; and liaison with teachers; using therapeutic strategies with children; assistive technology; and access arrangements (Polichino & Jackson, 2014)

addressed had the factors necessary for the success of this service been studied in greater depth.

In January 2010, I decided to take up the challenge: I took up a full-time post as an Inclusion Coordinator⁸ in a mainstream primary school. This was my opportunity to experience being in a school, albeit not as an occupational therapist, but as an educational leader. Thanks to this post, I spent five years immersed in the school system. Throughout this period, I reflected on my own occupational therapy knowledge and skills and pondered how these could be used to support children in school. My role as an educator, bolstered with my background in OT, not only enabled me to better understand the challenges and needs of educators, but also afforded me constant reflection on how I could integrate my skills to support educational pedagogy and hence children's inclusion.

This experience coupled, with that as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2013, where I was able to immerse myself in the North Carolina School System, rekindled my interest and reinforced my belief in the need to advocate for school-based occupational therapy in Malta. I decided to pick up the gauntlet and commenced my doctoral degree. I wanted to use my experience gained from working in a school as an educator; I wanted to explore the possibility to develop school-based services in line with the Maltese education system's priorities and culture. My years of working in the school, albeit as an educational leader, allowed me to explore and learn how OT involvement could contribute to school life for pupils and educators: but even here, many questions arose along the way. The main ones that kept recurring were: What is the best way to get educational leaders and educators on board in understanding and improving occupational engagement of children? How can occupational therapists really make a difference in children's

⁸ An Inclusion Coordinator in the Maltese school system is a member of the senior management team and coordinates any needs related to students with additional needs.

school life in addition to the good work many educators are doing? Can occupational therapists offer something new to schools?

In summary, the years I spent immersed in the school system reinforced my belief that occupational therapy can make a significant contribution to children's school life, and I wanted to explore whether or not (and hopefully affirm that) my belief was rooted in reality. What follows is my endeavour to understand the challenges and needs faced by Maltese children, their families and educators in participating, thriving and enjoying their early years at school, while aiming to achieve the targeted educational outcomes and successfully fulfilling their occupational roles as children and students within the school system. It is also an exploration of how therapeutic practices can be embedded in the Maltese education system. The next section will briefly outline how culture and educational traditions in the Maltese context are reflected in educational practices.

1.2 Culture and Educational Traditions in the Maltese Context

Studies have identified that although cultural traditions in Maltese families have changed, especially in the last decade (Abela 2016), there are still strong family ties in contemporary Maltese society. Parents are still authoritative figures over their young and not so young children (Cassar, 2016; Abela, 2013). The close knit nature of Maltese society may also mean that children mostly live with and often depend on their families for a long period of time into their young adulthood and beyond. Statistics in 2015 showed (Eurostat, 2015) that Maltese young people scored the highest average age in Europe for leaving home (31.8 years) with the UK average. For instance being 24.3 years.

More recently, a study by Callus and colleagues (2019) has identified similar trends of overprotection in the parents of young persons with intellectual disabilities. According to Muscat (2017), Maltese parents are considered to be still quite overprotective of their children. This overprotection is present in daily living chores and spans across childhood. It is significant even in early childhood when although

capable, significant adult family members, namely parents and grandparents, tend to do too much for their children, thus stifling their independence in daily occupations and curtailing their autonomy.

My personal perspective from my own experience of working in the school system in Malta as well as that of a mother is that an analogous situation has existed from an educational perspective. The Maltese education system has been strongly influenced by the British system since Malta was under British rule until 1979, and its focus was largely very academic oriented (Bartolo, 2010). This meant that there was more of a focus on rote learning and “spoon feeding” rather than active learning. In 2006, Malta started the process to be more holistic in educating students, whereby a proposed reform in the curriculum was carried out. A timeline of Maltese educational attainments along the years can be viewed in Appendix B. In spite of this reform, Maltese curricula are still heavily encumbered with information and with a focus on knowledge acquisition rather than holistic learning (Calleja, 2021). A more detailed critique on the Maltese education system follows later on in this chapter. In summary the Maltese culture of overprotection coupled with a long standing tradition of rote learning did not over the years support the development of independent learners and critical thinkers in the Maltese education system. This culture may still be somewhat reflected even in early years education hence the urgent need for consideration of contemporary approaches in education which will be discussed later in this chapter..I am confident that my study may be an example that encompasses such approaches. I will present a detailed overview of early years education in Malta later on in this chapter in section 1.6 .The following section now gives an overview of OS and its relevance to childhood occupations for this study.

1.3 Core Concepts for this Study

1.3.1 Occupational Science and Childhood Occupations

This section will start by defining childhood occupations and OS then move on to discuss them in more depth. Occupations have been defined as “specific chunks of activity” (Yerxa, 1990 p.1) that promote good physical and psychological health through engagement in a well-balanced range of activities that are purposeful and meaningful to a person’s life (Yerxa, 1990; Benson, 2013). OS is concerned with the generation of knowledge about occupation and strives to discover the intricacies of occupation across individuals, groups, systems and populations (Pontes et al., 2018). It is defined as “the study of the human as an occupational being, including the need for and the capacity to engage in and orchestrate daily occupations in the environment over the lifespan” (Yerxa et al., 1989, p. 6).

OS is multidimensional and considers the nature, form, function and meaning of occupation in sociocultural and historical contexts (Clark et al., 2007). Its main focus is on the human ability to actively pursue occupations and making meaning out of what people do (Wright-St Clair & Hocking, 2014). Knowledge generated about occupation has the potential to illuminate solutions and opportunities for persons to flourish as individuals, communities and societies (Yerxa, 2005, p. 110). In the case of this study the occupational focus provided foundations for building solutions to address inclusion in the school as a fundamental right for all children to flourish in the places where they live.

Important aspects of an occupational perspective include the subjective experience of meaning, of autonomy and self-determination as well as “the complex interrelationship” between different types of occupations (Hemmingson & Jonsson, 2005, p. 572). Studying children’s occupations means delving into the essential characteristics of occupation: goal directed; organised; constituted of adapted skills and repertoires; socially valued; self-initiated; and essential to the quality of life, hence having the capacity to influence health (WFOT, 2012). Occupation may be

carried out in solitary but may also extend beyond one person's experience to include others as well as the social, physical and cultural contexts in which such occupations take place (Dickie et al., 2006). Hence, the focus on the pluralistic together with the individualistic experience is what supports the transactional nature of occupation.

There are three important assumptions underlying OS that are important for this study. The first of these is that engagement in occupations is core to humanity. Life is made up of what we do, how we experience life situations alone or with others, and making meaning of the way we use our time. This may seem simplistic, but within this simplicity are complex transactions that consider personal, interpersonal, spatial, temporal, societal, political and historical factors (Christiansen & Townsend, 2004; Clark et al., 1991; Hasselkus, 2002). Secondly, being engaged in an occupation is fluid and in a constant state of change. There is no recipe and outcomes are not definite, because they are dependent on the context - in my case the one of a school which is in constant state of flux: educators, children, policies and curricula. Amongst this uncertainty, engagement in occupation allows one to experience boredom as well as creativity, and comfort in a process that may be transformative and that involves sharing and negotiating (Bailey & Jackson, 2005). The school is a place that certainly involves a lot of negotiation as well as sharing between and amongst the educators, children and parents. Finally, occupations are about patterns: the organisation of one's daily and weekly activities, thus giving them a temporal dimension (Zemke & Clarke, 1996). This is totally in keeping with the school context, which is made up of daily and weekly routines, and these routines encapsulate the occupations that children and educators engage in.

The unique focus of occupational therapy in school-based practice is therefore to use this knowledge gained through OS, to understand, support and develop the occupations and everyday activities that occur in the school context.

These however need to be considered together with the external influences and the complex transactions that occur between all the stakeholders in the school setting.

In summary, taking an OS perspective means that the mandate for occupational therapists is to challenge themselves in implementing occupation-based and occupation-focused services in schools, keeping occupation at the centre of any transactions that take place between child, educator, parent and therapist (Fisher, 2013). It also means understanding the nature, form, function and meaning of occupations as they unfold in the school context as well as developing them to support participation and, ultimately, contribute towards inclusion (Pontes et al., 2018; Law, 2002; Hunt & McKay, 2014). I am confident that this work will provide insight into the process of achieving this. After understanding the significance of OS for this study, I will move on to explore further the centrality of occupation as is related to children and childhood.

Occupations have been defined as the ordinary and familiar things that people do every day as well as the out-of-the-ordinary events (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Occupations within the school context for children aged 4-12 years have been defined as: "Active and meaningful activities which are required or desired to fulfil the role of the school pupil within or around the school context" (Maciver et al., 2019a, p.5). Occupations also include school events and trips, as well as social participation, namely relationships with adults and friendships with peers (Maciver et al., 2019a). According to the American Occupational Therapy Association, (2016) and the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2016). School-based occupations are any and all those activities, events, routines and rituals carried out by pupils across age groups within the school routine - during recess, in the classroom and at all levels of the education system - supporting educational and academic achievement, social participation and daily living skills

Yerxa and colleagues (1989) stated that the study of occupations - work, rest, play, leisure and self-maintenance - needs to take place through the study of

the person's individual interaction with the environment, and not as a "decontextualised being" (Yerxa et al., 1989 p.11). Hence, the context is always important, whether a child is engaged in a solitary occupation or with others. Environmental barriers and supports have been identified as influencing children's occupations. These mainly include aspects of the physical (how accessible or otherwise places and spaces are), the social (attitudinal factors) and the institutional (policies and bureaucracy) environments that can hinder or promote children's participation (Law et al 1999). The environment in which children carry out their occupations will help or hinder task performance and completion. (Rodger & Kennedy-Behr, 2017). Children are occupational beings that constantly engage in activities that involve doing, being, becoming and belonging in time and space, have meaning, and serving to promote health and well-being. Childhood occupations therefore may be supported by aspects of the environment, such as the space, availability of equipment and resources as well as human assistance. The act of defining occupation needs to be considered "in the moment" (Spitzer, 2003b p.76), meaning that it needs to be framed in a context and time, where and when it is happening. The "where", "how", "when" and "with whom" questions need to be asked in relation to occupation (Humphry, 2002; Yerxa et al., 1989). The role of the environment on occupation and participation will be explored further in Chapter 3 - the literature review.

The challenge of understanding children's occupations particularly those of children with disabilities is essential to this study, especially when it involves those of young children, and more so those with a disability (Spitzer, 2003a). Development and learning outcomes for children are based on their engagement in occupations such as play, the latter being central to this research which is relevant to early childhood (Humphry & Wakeford, 2008).

Participation in meaningful occupations provides the context in which children acquire the physical and social competencies needed to develop and

flourish in their homes and communities (King et al., 2003), leading to a connection with others and the opportunity to find meaning in life (Law, 2002). As noted earlier, when considering context, there is a need to not just consider the social environment. Both the physical and social aspects of the environment (Law et al., 1998), including also attitudinal aspects, are important considerations in participation as much as the people, the objects and spaces in context (Maciver et al., 2019a).

On the other hand, participation involves children attending or engaging in these occupations and activities in the school setting. School participation is about involvement in routines and roles: how much, how often and what activities the child does with whom (Solish et al., 2010), and where activities take place as well as children's activity, enjoyment and preference (Law, 2002; Imms et al., 2015). However, engagement and satisfaction in occupations needs to be considered within the social and cultural contexts.

The complex nature of occupational transactions in school settings also requires consideration of co-occupations and collective occupations. These are purposeful and meaningful activities that two or more individuals carry out together (Price & Stephenson, 2009) and require synchrony between cohabitating groups. In the school context, these groups could be different groups of children and educators alone or even child/educator groups (Morrison et al., 2017). For example, the synchrony between the educator and the child in the classroom as well within a group of children may support the execution of the occupation of play.

Roles and routines are key when considering childhood occupations. According to Morrison et al. (2017) routines are made up of occupations which are performed habitually. Within the school, children also take on different occupational roles that may include those of peers, friends and students. Within these roles and through the interactions with others, they develop skills to support social interaction and participation. Occupational engagement facilitates a dynamic interaction

between the child, the environment and particular opportunities, activities or occupations, and supports the child's holistic development (Imms, 2008a).

The home and family are important when studying young children as they are the main support structures for the child. An example of routines in the home setting involves young children's participation in family life through their engagement in occupations of education, meal time, self care and play routines and such guided participation leads to a development in the way they think and behave (Rogoff, 2003). Routines lead to a mastery of everyday activities, whether directed by adults or when carried out with peers, leading children to develop a sense of organisation and belonging (McNamara & Humphry, 2008). The routines of home are guided by adult involvement usually that of parents, Children's experience of consistent routines within the home may serve as a preparation for role functioning in the school. Children learn what to do by participating in occupations be it at home or in the school setting, and this directly impacts the children's performance in skilled activities. In the event that occupations are disrupted in the home or school, occupational therapy may contribute towards enabling such occupations to occur. (Kellgrew & Allen, 1996; Kellgrew & Kroksmark, 2000).

Another important consideration linked to childhood occupations, especially in early years' education, is the concept of belonging. Belonging is a multifaceted concept and people can belong in different concrete or abstract ways and to many different objects of attachment (Johansson & Puroila, 2021). Different childhood occupations, such as play, may provide different opportunities for children to experience belonging. This concept will be elaborated upon in Chapter 3, the Literature Review.

1.3.2 Participation

There is no universal definition of participation (Imms et al., 2015), although it is widely accepted that the construct is a multidimensional, multifaceted and complex phenomenon that varies across age, families and culture (Bart et al., 2011;

Chiarello et al., 2012; Coster & Khetani, 2008; Law, 2002; Lollar & Simeonsson, 2005; Simeonsson et al., 2001; Woodgate et al., 2012). Participation is a core dimension of health. The ICF-CY (WHO, 2007) is a universal framework developed from the original ICF (WHO, 2001) with a particular focus on participation in children and youth. Participation in both these frameworks is defined by the World Health Organisation as one that considers an individual's involvement in life situations. While the WHO (2007) has established internationally this concept of participation from a health and wellbeing perspective in ICF-CY (see Appendix A), occupational therapy has also expanded and developed further this concept to interpret it from an occupational perspective.

From this perspective participation is defined as “taking part in the occupations of daily life” (Law et al., 2005, p.107). The 4th edition of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (American Occupational Therapy Association-AOTA , 2020) considers involvement as important, and defines participation as the engagement in desired occupations in ways that are personally satisfying and congruent within expectations within a culture (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020).

However the definition of participation leaves us with multiple questions and may be considered to be rather vague. As stated earlier engagement in desired occupations is one aspect of participation. There are many considerations in understanding and conceptualising participation as it related to occupations, and these will now be discussed in an attempt to understand and frame the key concepts around it.

1.3.2.1 Understanding and Conceptualising Participation

From an OS perspective, involvement and engagement may be considered key features of participation because they are enabling and are driven in part by one's biological needs to act, find meaning and connect with others through doing (Wilcock, 2006). Being involved by being there and through being engaged are both

valid aspects of participation. Participation for children must be considered on a continuum representing both active doing of an occupation to a more passive "being there" experiences of that occupation. Furthermore it is important that all such experiences of participation are equally valid. Ideally, the child in school, is engaged in activities of their own choice, with the involvement of self and significant others and under the guidance and direction of adults. These activities should be developed in such a way that they support the child's competence. There should always be the space for development of social roles, with friendships and relationships contributing to a sense of belonging (Imms et al., 2016). My own observation of the children's lack of participation and their failing to take part in the school setting coupled with a discernment of a lack of enjoyment and involvement led me to feel the need to explore occupation and participation in greater depth in the early years school environment.

Representations of participation across the literature vary significantly in terms of both where and how it is presented. This literature consists of subject reviews (Anaby et al., 2013; Imms et al., 2016; Maxwell et al., 2012), concept analysis (Hoogsteen & Woodgate, 2010), clinical commentaries (Coster & Khetani, 2008), invited commentaries (Granlund, 2013; King, 2013), editorials (Imms & Granlund, 2014; Raghavendra, 2013) as well as research articles (Adolfsson et al., 2011; Granlund et al., 2012; Maxwell et al., 2012; Piskur et al., 2015). There appears to be a number of main concepts around participation: attendance and involvement, engagement, choice, and partaking in meaningful goals. These will now be expanded and critiqued.

Participation is considered to have different dimensions: the objective dimension of attendance, which includes frequency, diversity, intensity and independence (King et al., 2013) and a subjective one, that of involvement, which includes enjoyment and/or satisfaction (Bart et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Bart, 2016) as well as quality of engagement (Chiarello et al., 2012). Participation in the context

of young children in school, needs to look beyond classroom activity and incorporate an examination of their relationships and friendships. Thus, participation includes both being present and doing. Nevertheless, some questions arise: If a child is not “doing”, can we call it participation? Participation is not just about being actively involved or engaged but also about the “being there”. (Granlund, 2013; Imms et al., 2015, 2016). The being there of some children may be a total immersion in occupations throughout their day all along their life span (Fisher, 2013) but this may not be the case for others. Leven and Johnsson, (2002) document ‘being in the atmosphere of doing’ as a basic but valid form of participation; this also fits in with concepts as outlined by Hoogsteen and Woodgate (2010) - that of feeling included.. So, participation can take on two forms: Doing and being there without doing. In this way we come to understand children’s participation within school as entirely subjective and based on their personal interpretation.

The core attributes of participation are well defined by Hoogsteen and Woodgate (2010) whilst also supported by others and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Attributes of Participation - Hoogsteen and Woodgate (2010)

Attributes of Participation
Child is taking part in something or with someone: involvement, engagement.
Child feels included in what they are doing.
Child has a choice or control over what they are taking part in.
Child works towards a personal or socially meaningful goal, or enhancing quality of life.

Further interrogation of the relevant literature highlights three components of participation: the context, the act and the experience, that collectively underpins engagement. It can take on different forms: being actively engaged in whatever occupation is taking place or a more “passive” participation (Almqvist, 2006; Imms & Granlund, 2014; Imms et al., 2017). Pereira et al., (2010) through their study on the

participation experiences of Portuguese disabled children in mainstream schools, suggested three forms of participation: *equal*, which means equally contributing; *special task*, implying children contributing differently; and *onlooker participation*, which is about an observer supporting others. An example of the latter relevant to the school setting, would be a child who cannot physically play football with their friends during break time, but is still fully engaged watching the match and cheering their class mates. Involvement such as this contributes to a child's sense of belonging and enjoyment. These authors also describe non-participation, in which children are completely excluded. All these forms of participation were identified as being influenced by the social and physical environment and participation was not just about being present but being involved and having some form of choice and power.

The concept of engagement is important for participation, and engagement is considered a fundamental aspect of inclusion and inclusive practices in preschool. (Almqvist, 2006; AOTA, 2014; Bult et al., 2012; Lawlor, 2003; WHO, 2001). Strong predictors of engagement include: interaction skills and availability of activities. Such engagement in activities is more complete if it leads to friendships (Solish et al., 2010). Doing the activity and experience of the involvement have a bearing on the intensity of engagement with the activity and therefore, both these elements are essential (King et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2012). Similarly, the intensity of active engagement can be amplified by the social nature of this engagement. Piskur and colleagues (2013) describe social participation as “consumer participation”. This suggests that meaningful involvement in decision making around engagement for children contributes to their perceptions of intensity and meaning in their participation. One may reflect on whether participation can be observed objectively, or if it is all about a personal perspective (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Hemmingson & Jonsson, 2005).

One debate that arises is whether participation and social participation are one and the same thing (Piskur et al., 2013): ICF-CY (WHO, 2007) does not clearly distinguish between the two. Although it considers the interaction between the environment and function, it does not provide for quality indicators of participation (Piskur et al., 2013). These authors suggest that participation may be redefined in ICF as a social activity. Participation when defined as engagement in social roles, can be particular to the individual child, but frequently includes social interaction with others. Therefore, the consideration of social roles is a relevant and important one. As already mentioned, participation can take on different meanings for different children. It may be defined by the immediate context surrounding the child's experience and the social role relevant to that context like the example provided earlier of a student with a physical disability, watching a football match. Although not able to physically take part, their "being there" must be considered as a valid expression of participation (Imms & Granlund, 2014).

Some further issues to reflect on include the following: is choice essential for participation? Is active engagement that includes attendance and involvement a key determinant of participation? Also, should the "being there", measured as frequency of attendance, be considered important? Involvement may include elements of engagement, persistence, social connection and level of affect (Imms et al., 2017). Many children in regular schools may not be engaged, may have minimal choice, or not be active participants. Professionals around the child may need to strive harder to address these issues adapting the way they work in order to ensure participation that is meaningful to them.

The viewpoint shared by Piskur et al. (2013), which I also share, is that involvement exists along a continuum, and both passive and active involvement may be considered participation. It is important that participation is defined with the individual child in mind. The optimal experience desirable through participation in everyday roles, activities or occupations is one of satisfaction and enjoyment.

Enjoyment is associated with more efficient execution of daily tasks as well as social functioning (Rosenberg & Bart, 2016). This ultimately leads to a good quality of life, irrespective of what adults perceive to constitute participation. We may need to exercise flexibility in constructing a functional definition of participation in order to ensure that the ultimate product is “real” inclusion for all children. Participation is after all related to the personal meaning it has for every individual child and not what a “professional” decides it should be (Perenboom & Chorus, 2003).

This next sections will outline contemporary education approaches. Finally the core principles of inclusion and inclusive education which are important for my study will be discussed .The scope, research gaps and questions for my study will end this chapter, providing an overview of how my interest in SBOT developed over a period of 25 years, leading to the start of this doctoral endeavour.

1.4. Contemporary Education Approaches

This section will give an overview of contemporary education approaches and concepts from educational science for the 21st century. I will then proceed to discuss inclusion for my study. Educational science has in the past decade seen a shift in paradigm from frameworks that focused on instructional teaching to a learner-centred approach. Recurring elements in frameworks that are more learner-centred include skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking, which are represented as the essential skills of 21st century education (Dede 2010; Gjedde, 2022). Particularly in the early years, the importance of moving away from the traditional knowledge acquisition to a more holistic development of the child is considered the way forward. This means that children learn primarily through project and problem-based learning opportunities that support belonging, active engagement and overall participation (Kennedy & Sundberg, 2020).

Early childhood education is crucial, as what happens in early childhood effects a child for life. A multisectorial approach to education in these years has

been studied together with pedagogies that support belonging and engagement, whereby children use their strengths, make choices, exercise curiosity, problem solve, express their interests and are motivated to engage in valued activities (Bartolo et al., 2019; Chu, 2022; European Agency, 2017).

According to Mc Dowell and colleagues (2018), an early childhood curriculum best practice model is one that involves parents and community members as active participants in their child's education. Such a model, also promotes and caters for planned and spontaneous experiences emerging from children's interactions. Moreover contemporary education means giving voice and choice to children and involving them in decision making.

Best practices in early childhood education are supported by a universal learning environment that is well designed, with adequate human and non-human resources, and curricula and pedagogies that can promote sustainable learning that allows the children to take initiative, think and reflect. It embraces the right of every child to receive a quality education that is inclusive and equitable. Contemporary education responds to diversity and accessibility needs with the provision of equal opportunities for all children and the promotion of life-long learning opportunities (Samuelsson & Park, 2017).

1.5 Understanding Inclusion for this Study

Inclusive schools and inclusive education, terms that will be used interchangeably in this thesis, cater for "the totality of individual students' diverse needs" (Bajada et al., 2021, p.4). Inclusion in the context of schools and education means "learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared learning experiences. It requires active engagement with learning and having a say in how education is experienced. More deeply, it is about being recognised, accepted and valued for oneself (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p.3; 2006). "Inclusive early childhood

education and care from birth onward provide the foundation for all learning⁹” My study is based on the belief that regular schools need to cater for the needs of all students through accessibility and a tangible curriculum. It is grounded in the belief that children with disability do not need to be fixed to fit into the educational system, but it is the latter that must be adapted to ensure they participate alongside their peers.

This is a study about children’s participation in school occupations in a regular school that welcomes a diversity of students, and the context is an educational one. It is based on the premise that participation is a key ingredient for successful inclusive education. This research is founded on the assumption that inclusion¹⁰ is good and beneficial to the majority of children and their families. There are many debates surrounding inclusive education (Hornby, 2011), some of which will be outlined in this chapter from the Maltese perspective, but a detailed debate on inclusion is beyond the scope of this work. A fundamental point in it is that inclusion is considered a human and moral right. All children need to receive an education together as part of their regular school, and to participate in the activities and occupations of young children appropriate to the early years. Additionally, there is the moral right of each child to receive the education most appropriate to their needs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities-UNCRPD (United Nations, 2007) defines inclusion by describing what it should consist of:

A process of systematic reform embodying changes and modification in context, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers, in order to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience

⁹ <http://campaignforeducationusa.org/topic/detail/early-childhood-education>

¹⁰ In this study, “inclusive education” and “inclusion” will be used interchangeably.

and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences (CRPD, 2016, p.3).

Inclusive education is based on the belief that children's participation in education can be enhanced by changing different aspects of the environment they inhabit, rather than focusing on their impairment. For this reason, inclusive education is about giving every student an opportunity to learn, rather than to fix or solve problems (Ainscow, 2002; Terzi, 2004) and in this respect it is aligned with the social model of disability.

The UNCRC and UNCRPD support the right of disabled children to participation and inclusion (see Table 2). This charter strongly affirms the rights of the child to be a full member of society by having access to a regular school and to the appropriate quality and level of support in an inclusive environment. It affirms their right to play, to succeed academically and to develop through a lifelong learning process with the ultimate aim of gainful occupation in adulthood.

Table 2

UNCRC and UNCRPD: Supporting Children's Participation

Legislative Document	Article	Statement Supporting Participation and Inclusion
UNCRC (United Nations General Assembly 1989)	Article 28	"children's right to education includes all children"
UNCRPD (United Nations General Assembly 2007)	Article 9 p. 9	"Participate fully in all aspects of life". This includes accessibility in schools.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) is a pledge made by countries worldwide to commit themselves to educating all children who are unique. It was a turning point in the history of inclusive education, both worldwide and in Malta. This statement and the

accompanying framework represented a starting point for the journey towards inclusive education in Malta. The content of the framework, informed by principles of inclusion, served as a catalyst for the revision of the Maltese Education Act of 1988 (Ministry of Education, 1988, CAP 327). The Salamanca statement and framework clearly lay out the principles that relate to equal opportunities and access by changing and modifying content; approaches; structures and learning strategies; respect for individual differences; and the focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. Furthermore, the Statement proclaims that education systems should be designed, and educational programmes implemented to take into account children with special educational needs, who “must have access to regular schools, which should be able to accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs” (UNESCO, 1994, No 2, p. viii).

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists’ perspective on inclusive education is worth considering as it aligns with inclusive principles as well as a rights-based approach to inclusion. It states that inclusion is “a paramount and non-negotiable right” (WFOT, 2016, p. 1). This means that any therapists working with children are professionally obliged to support inclusion as a fundamental right of their clients in school. That is the only (and inescapable) way to endorse the mission of their own professional body.

After setting the scene to understand the importance of inclusive education for participation, it is now important to understand it in the Maltese context for early-years students.

1.6 An overview of Early Years Education in Malta

This study takes a rights-based approach to education, in favour of the rights of the child to participate in school life and receive an education (United Nations General Assembly, 1989; UNESCO, 1994, WHO, 2001. 2007), acknowledging that children coming from diverse socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds have different abilities and needs. It was carried out in a Maltese primary state

school focusing on the Early Years. The early years in Malta is characterised by two years of non-compulsory school and the first two years of compulsory schooling.

The age groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Age Groups of Early Years School Children in Malta

Kindergarten 1	Kindergarten 2	Year 1	Year 2
3/4 year old children	4/5 year old children	5/6 year old children	6/7 year old Children

The Ministry of Education for Malta defines Early Years' Education as follows:

Early Years Education aims to follow a child-centred curriculum through play and fun learning opportunities. As children play, they are developing their cognitive, socio-emotional and physical skills which will take them into successful adulthood and through life. We aim to provide each child with opportunities of discovery learning according to their learning dispositions, focusing on the process of learning rather than on the product. Each child needs the freedom to explore, evaluate and engage in learning within a safe and fruitful environment, supported by professional observation, reflection and planning (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2021¹¹)

The focus on opportunities for development through play, discovery and engagement in an environment supported by adult educators is key to the Ministry's philosophy in theory, but the practice scenario may be somewhat different. For this reason, this study set out to understand what was happening in the real life context. The focus in my study was on children aged 4 to 6 years. This age range was selected in order to capture both the kindergarten setting, where play is expected to

¹¹ <https://education.gov.mt/en/early-years/Pages/default.aspx>

have a major role in learning, as well as the beginning of primary schooling, where a more structured and more academic curriculum is usually offered to children in Malta.

Early years are crucial years for children to develop the foundation skills for learning and the eventual productive and independent living. This cohort was regarded as a very appropriate context for this study for two reasons: firstly, the benefits of early intervention are documented in the occupational therapy literature (Bazyk et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2008; Chandler, 2010; Kingsley & Mailloux, 2013; Ohl et al., 2013; Priest & Waters, 2007), and secondly, occupational therapists can contribute to the development of childhood occupations through their knowledge on play and play-based interventions that support child development (Bundy & Lane, 2019; Cordier et al., 2009; Lane & Bundy, 2012; Mailloux & Burke, 2008; Moore & Lynch, 2018; Parham & Fazio, 2008; Stagnitti, 2004; Wilkes et al., 2011; Wilkes-Gillian et al, 2016; Schaaf et al., 2014). The next section will now explain the early years curriculum context for Malta schools.

1.6.1 The National Minimum Curriculum and the Early Years

The Early Years Curriculum¹² in Malta follows the national minimum curriculum¹³, and both are part of the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education & Employment, 2012). The curriculum is designed in a way to promote holistic development; a positive self-image; a love for learning through play; and hands-on experiences that develop social, communication and language skills in a joyful environment (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2021). This may include exposure to and early stimulation through creative activities, including play, music, physical activity and nutrition, which have been identified as having a marked effect on children's development, also contributing to their mental health (UNICEF, 2018). Early childhood is a period of immense neuronal growth; from a neuro-scientific

¹² <https://education.gov.mt/en/education/pages/early-years.aspx#>

¹³ <https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Resources/The-NCF/Pages/default.aspx>

perspective, children's brains are influenced and enhanced in their development through exploration, thinking, problem-solving and language during play. Engagement in purposeful activity and experiences with people, and their surroundings have been identified by the Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2009), as being equally, if not more important as the influence of genetics in supporting to the utmost the healthy development of children (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2012; UNESCO, 2009). The NCF states that the ultimate goal is that children should develop a positive attitude and a lifelong love for learning. In early childhood education, this is enhanced through play (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2012, 2013, 2021).

Over the last two years, the Maltese curriculum for the early school years has been undergoing modification to a more child-centred approach with a focus on following the child's lead and using more creative and spontaneous, rather than prescriptive, activities (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2019a, 2019b). The Emergent Curriculum, with its focus on play and active engagement is more conducive to children's participation. This Emergent Curriculum¹⁴ is not compulsory, although it is recommended that early years classrooms use it. The different schools are autonomous in delivering this curriculum, and some schools may opt out of using it. While a lot of schools, primarily state schools, have taken up the challenge, a good number of others have not. This may suggest that a shift in theory and practice is needed, and not all educators are ready or willing to make this change. Also, educators in those schools that have decided to adopt the Emergent Curriculum (Osberg & Biesta, 2008) may still be unsure of what it consists of exactly, and they may be finding some challenges in integrating the philosophy of emergent learning with the National Inclusive Education Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019b).

¹⁴ <https://www.kccc.ie/Resources/An-Emergent-and-Enquiry-based-Curriculum-for-Early-Years>

The National Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2019a) and the Inclusive Education Framework (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2019b) recommend that personnel are highly trained and conversant with the learning process and development of young children. Furthermore, the draft “Early Childhood Education and Care - National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo” (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2021) is proposing goals purposefully designed and bearing in mind three overarching principles, which are considered equally important for successful implementation of an early years curriculum. These encompass taking on a multisectorial and universal design approach where every child belongs as well as engaging parents as partners in the educational journey (Ministry for Education and employment, 2021)

These national policy frameworks recommend that educators adapt to the needs of different learners, support and educate the parents and use outcome measures to monitor student’s progress. They also recommend that childhood educators need to develop programmes of activities that are multi-sensory in nature. All this should be done through the support of “visionary leadership” (Ministry of Education & Employment 2012, p. 46). It is envisaged that the outcome of this study will support such visionary leadership through a model of school-based occupational therapy for Malta. What follows is a critique of Malta’s support system and policies for a better understanding of the challenges posed by the education system in Malta.

1.7 A Critique of Malta’s Support System and Policies

In Malta, services for children with disability have come a long way. Appendix B provides a timeline of Malta’s main educational attainments over the past 70 years and how they coincided with European and International legislation. However, considering the size of the island, there is potential for more collaboration, and the development of a more universal support system. In the area of learning support

within the Maltese state school system and that of the provision of centralised services, Calleja (2014) stated almost a decade ago that policies needed to be rethought. What Calleja was referring to appears to be the system of support in the form of Learning Support Educators that in the past years was awarded on an individual basis rather than as a whole-classroom support, which led at times to segregation within the regular school whilst meeting the needs of only a selected few “diagnosed” students. This system is now being reviewed, and support is being diversified to meet the needs of more students in the classroom. More recently, Calleja’s views (2014) were endorsed by other Maltese experts in the field of inclusive education and disability studies (Callus, 2020). Both have emphasised that for “our” schools to be inclusive, they need to be supported through professional development that not only develops their skills, but transforms their professional practice. “Inclusion requires a radical re-thinking of how we look at education and our asking what we need to do to adapt the setting to enable educators to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities” (Callus, 2020 p.1).

Maltese colleges have started to recruit on-site professionals, who see students in the school. The philosophy of practice is still, however, oriented towards diagnosis, individual assessment and intervention with children outside the classroom. Although some other professionals from the National School Support Services (NSSS) carry out school visits, therapeutic services that are part of Allied Health, including those of occupational therapists and physiotherapists, are still provided at a main outpatient health facility, most of the time using a clinical one-to-one direct model of intervention. Goals are set based on difficulties, and recommendations are given; follow up is usually infrequent, because of resources. Some services may offer intervention only in groups outside the school context.

These disparities in provision of services between professionals such as psychologists coming from a social science background and allied health services arise as historically, the latter services, that have always been under the jurisdiction

of the Health Ministry, do not perceive that they should “Loan out” their professionals to work in educational settings. Hence although in theory we as a nation boast about inter-sectorial collaboration in practice this still is not happening. (Caruana, J 2021 Personal Communication with the Honourable Minister of Education).

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta, 2014-24 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a) centres on best practices and policies within Europe and beyond. Most importantly, it acknowledges the challenges being faced in Malta in increasing current participation and quality education in the sector of early childhood education (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2021). The External Audit Report (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b) ends by saying that “while seeking home-grown solutions to address our challenges, we are ready to learn from others in Europe...and beyond” (p. 7).

The Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools and the National Inclusive Education Framework, both launched in 2019 by the Ministry of Education and Employment in Malta, as well as the National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2021) provide a framework for action as well as recommendations to improve inclusive education in schools. However, it is putting this policy and framework into practice that I believe poses the greatest challenge. In my study, I hope to contribute to these goals by supporting the implementation of both the inclusive education policy and the framework, primarily by promoting children’s participation and inclusion in school through the conceptualisation of a culture-relevant model of school-based occupational therapy.

In conclusion, the core concept of participation for this study is equated with an inclusive education philosophy. Inclusive education and participation are respectively fundamental human and moral rights of all children in society. They advocate the right of children to be educated in the most adequate environment together with other friends and peers, and to be involved and gainfully engaged according to their abilities and needs respectively. The European Agency’s position

on Inclusive Education Systems (European Agency, 2016, 2019) is that the ultimate vision for these systems “is to ensure that all learners are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers” (p.1). I augur that my study will discover the best ways to support these opportunities. I will now expand on the scope of my study and why I have identified it as being an important area to study.

1.8 The Scope, Research Gaps and Questions for this Study

My interest in the field of school-based occupational therapy has stemmed from over 30 years of working with children as a paediatric occupational therapist. My interest is fuelled by my passion for working with people, particularly families and children. My time spent working in the school system has reinforced my conviction that occupational therapists can make a difference in schools by supporting students’ participation in the activities that make up their school day.

The current state of affairs regarding overall therapeutic service delivery in Malta is that the focus on intervention is still impairment based. Children are offered services if they have an impairment through a referral, made by a medical doctor to the occupational therapist. In the school system in Malta, one finds a scarcity of therapy services. The only allied health professionals, that provide their services in the school namely because their services fall under a Primary Health Care Model are speech language pathologists, and they too follow this approach, whereby therapy is provided using a direct, impairment focused approach whereby intervention is offered on a one-to-one basis in a room within the school.

Maltese researchers in the field of disability studies argue in favour of an integrated model of school-based therapy, as this allows for less disruption in the disabled child’s school day, and children are more accepting of therapy when it is part of their school day. Provision of service in the classroom, the researchers say, is most desirable, but pull-out services should be offered when the specific needs of a child cannot be met in the classroom (Callus & Farrugia, 2016).

Internationally, there is ample evidence for how services can be delivered in other ways to maximize participation and learning. For example, the literature is witness to how occupational therapists can support the development and learning of all children in different ways (Bazyk et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2008; Cahill & Bazyk, 2020; Chu, 2017; Hanft & Humphry, 1989; Kingsley & Mailloux, 2013; Ohl et al., 2013; Priest & Waters, 2007; Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020). Furthermore, one does not need to have a disability to benefit from occupational therapy. Rather than waiting for developmental delays to emerge in primary school, occupational therapists are ideally placed to identify early on children who may be falling behind in their development, and provide immediate support accordingly preferably in the kindergarten classrooms of the early years (World Health Organisation, 2012).

This way of thinking represents a break from traditional paediatric occupational therapy practice and service delivery that currently still exist in Malta. This is more about health promotion and prevention in addition to intervention (Bazyk, 2013; Missiuna et al., 2012a) with a focus on collaboration. Collaboration is key to working in schools. This is based on capacity building through relationship building and the reciprocal exchange of knowledge, expertise and perspective. It encourages co-teaching and co-learning and a mutual respect for the roles of every school team member including the occupational therapist, within each classroom culture (Christner, 2015; Cook & Friend, 2010). My scope for this study was to explore a collaborative approach to supporting and enhancing children's development with a focus on the children, their occupation and participation in the school.

My immersion in the school setting and having worked side by side with children and educators made me wonder why occupational therapists were still looking at children in an out-of-school clinical environment, away from where all the occupations were happening, often far removed from the day-to-day realities the other children and their educators engaged in. The literature had many suggestions

about what childhood occupations in school were all about: play, literacy, numeracy, socialisation, routine, rules and daily living skills (See Appendix C). These will be discussed later in Chapter 3, but since every school system is unique in its culture and context, it has been unclear what aspects of participation and occupation were significant in the Maltese context. Furthermore, children's school occupations and, in particular, children's own voices on their school life have barely been researched in Malta (Psaila, 2017).

Finally, I also reflected on the fact that if I did not first understand the strengths and challenges faced by Maltese children in participating in school life, the local need for a culturally relevant model of school based-practice could not be addressed. Hence, the main research questions that I then set out to answer were as follows:

- What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in?
- What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in the school and classroom settings?
- How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school based occupation?

The research questions developed ultimately aimed to address research gaps in the literature that centres around an understanding of occupations in early years classrooms in Malta and the enablers and barriers to participation of young children in school occupations, primarily as experienced by children, parents and teachers in the Maltese school context children's, parents and educators' views on participation of young children in school and the role of educational leadership and educators in supporting participation how and what school-based occupational therapy can contribute to participation as well as add to the body of knowledge on international school-based occupational therapy using a collaborative approach

1.9 Organisation of the Dissertation

This dissertation will be organised as follows: after this chapter has introduced OS as a foundation for occupation and participation as a core concept for this study, the second chapter will explain the pillars that make up the conceptual framework for this study. This will be followed by Chapter 3, the literature review that will provide a review of evidence for this study on participation; occupation; and school-based occupational therapy. Chapter 4 will give a detailed account of the methodology for this study, a qualitative longitudinal case study that was guided by action theory. The subsequent chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 will present the findings, followed by the discussion in Chapter 9. This chapter will critique the findings with the literature as a backdrop and new insights from my work. Finally, Chapter 10 will highlight the main limitations of the study and make recommendation for future research and practice. The thesis will end with a reflection on my journey as a researcher and my concluding insights.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the background to this study, the motivators, the scope and the context in which it was set. It has outlined the gaps and research questions for this study. It has also highlighted the significance of this study for Malta and its potential contribution to Malta's school system and the occupational therapy services. What follows in Chapter 2 is the conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter 2: The Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

Participation which is central to this study and OS, a “rich concept” (Yerxa, 2005, p. 111) needed to frame occupation in childhood, have already been defined and critiqued in chapter 1.

The three models that provided a framework for further conceptualization are presented in Table 4. This provides a summary of the conceptual framework for this research.

Table 4

The Conceptual Framework for this Study: The Three Pillars

Conceptual Framework Three Pillars	Focus on	Leading to
Bio-ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007)	Transactions between children, educators, parents and the physical, social, cultural and political environment.	Child development as influenced by layers of the “nested system”: family, peers, school, culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1993)
Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983)	Strengths rather than impairment, and environmental adaptation rather than fixing the child	Participation of all children: a school for all.
CMOP-E (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013)	Client: child at the center, self-actualisation and motivation. Flexibility in defining occupations	The child and the human spirit at the core, leading to occupational performance and engagement through occupation-based, centered and focused practice

Different theories and models were considered for this study, but the three outlined in table 4 were chosen because of their focus on the community and the importance of the environment for participation rather than person-centred factors, such as individual impairments. Hence, the model of social disability (Oliver, 1994) was preferred over the medical model. Bronfenbrenner’s model supports the defining and understanding of participation in children, backing the notion that the

focus should be on the social and physical environment where participation is occurring, while considering personal factors, namely the child, context and culture. CMOP-E was preferred over other occupational therapy models of practice, such as the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) and Person, Environment, Occupation Model (PEO) because of their focus on enablement and the environment for occupational participation (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007)

The forthcoming pages will review this conceptual framework which has 3 main pillars that support both phases 1 and 2 of this study. Phase1, which includes an exploration of childhood occupations in school and the barriers and enablers to participation in these occupations, is underpinned by the bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The second phase of the study, which constitutes the intervention, is underpinned by the social model of disability as the main theoretical approach and the Canadian Model of Occupational Engagement - CMOP-E (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). The first pillar for this study is Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, which supported the understanding of transactions between the child, the environment and significant others.

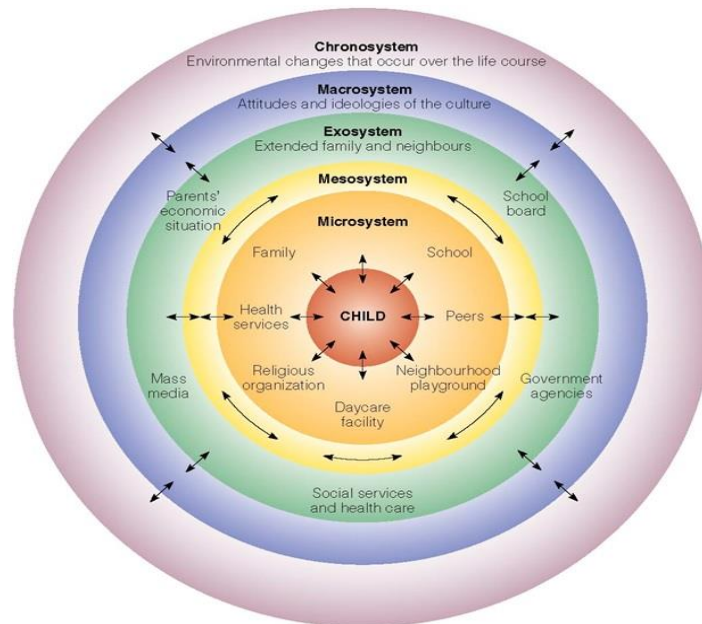
2.2 Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory

This model views how layers of a nested system (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) influence child development, and how proximal processes shape this development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). For my study it is important to state at the outset that I have drawn mostly on Bronfenbrenner's theory, developed in the 70's (Tudge et al, 2009) and which considered these different systems, with less of a focus on his newer work on the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT) . A transition from a focus on the environment to a focus on proximal processes is represented by this new model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). It is important to state that the earlier versions of Bronfenbrenner's theory still stressed the importance of the "person-context interrelatedness" (Tudge et al., 2009), which is an important consideration for my study.

There are various layers of influence in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner's work focused on the development of the child in the environment, namely how children interact with different systems and different people and how this effects who they end up being as persons. The environment of the child is considered a nested system of structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), organised in order of how much impact they will have on the child. There are many different layers of environmental influences that can affect a child's development, including people, policies and institutions. The reciprocal interactions between the child and the environment are of central importance in this framework, as is the context. Such interactions, termed proximal processes by their authors, need to occur regularly and over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The implications of environmental changes on the persons who live and grow in specific environments were explored by Bronfenbrenner, leading to the development of this framework. There are five systems that all interact or transact in different ways, with proximal processes being an important aspect of focus. They shall be described briefly and are represented in Figure 1. These are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exo-system, the macro system and the chronological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007)

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Guy- Evans, 2020)



(Reproduced with permission of the author)

The microsystem is made up of the child's individual interaction with his or her peers in the immediate environment and on-personal relationships with the people that have direct contact with the child: educators and peers in school, immediate and extended family in the home setting. It is defined by Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2007, p.814) as follows:

“A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645”

The interactions between all parties within each microsystem are crucial for fostering and supporting the child's participation in school. Examples of this include the child learning from their teachers and interacting with their friends.

The mesosystem on the other hand, consists of the interactions between two or more micro systems and the result may affect the child positively or negatively. At this level, we look at multiple interactions between the child, the family and the school and all the persons involved in this context: child, peers, educators, parents and administrators. An example of this is the interactions and transactions between the home and the school, such as the parent and the teacher, of utmost importance when working with young children.

The exosystem comprises people and places that children may not directly interact with but these would have an indirect influence on them. An example would be a child's behaviour at school being influenced by the parent. The latter has problems in their work place that are transferred to their dealings with the child. Similarly an educator who is dealing with health issues in her family may influence the children's participation because her family situation is not allowing her to be attuned entirely on the needs of the children in her classroom.

The macro system focuses on attitudes and ideologies: the effects of culture and religious beliefs. Some examples include the school culture, the family culture, socio-economic status, ethnicity, policies and country political agendas. These indirectly contribute to the lifestyle of the child. Environmental changes that occur over time may including major life transitions and may affect all the ecological systems, and this is termed the chronosystem. Both change and constancy in the child's environment may contribute to their development. Examples of these could be: starting school; changing homes; parental separation; health issues in the family; and major events, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This model is founded on the notion that through the understanding of the strengths and needs of different microsystems, such as the child, the family, and the educators as part of

the school family, empowerment and control of one's life is facilitated. In my study, empowerment has been key not just for the children's immediate families, but also for their teachers and educators, with whom the children spend a large part of their day.

Hence, in this study, it was important to look at the interactions and transactions between all the stakeholders: the children between themselves; the educators with the children; the children with their parents; the parents with the educators in the context of the school as well as the home and community environment. Figure 1 on page 34 has portrayed clearly the interaction between the "nested systems" with the child at the centre. The nature and extent of participation is dependent on child factors and those external to the child, such as the family (King et al., 2003), and they are defined by the interaction of the person with the environment (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Simeonsson et al., 2001).

For this study, the way things were done within the school structure and organisation and the important role adults played were also important considerations for participation (Maciver et al., 2019a).

Having shared my understanding of how Bronfenbrenner's model was relevant to the first phase of this study, I will go on to define the conceptual frameworks and the two pillars for the second phase of the study: the social model of disability and the Canadian Model of Occupational Enablement (CMOP-E) always maintaining a focus on participation. Bronfenbrenner's theory, which I have already described, and the social model of disability yet to be described, both consider the importance and influence that the environment can have on supporting all children's participation.

2.3 The Social Model of Disability: Defining Disability

Disability is complex to define. It is influenced by biology, culture and context, and the conceptualisation of it focuses on the interaction between individuals and society. The description of disability by the Commission for the

Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) is well suited as a definition for my study. Preamble 1 states that disability is an evolving concept and that it results from “the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations General Assembly 2007, p.1).

The social model of disability, whose roots are grounded in the disabled persons’ battle for their rights fundamentally arose as a reaction to the medical model, which presumed that anyone whose body structure or function deviated from the norm required the help of experts to diagnose and treat their impairment (Burchardt, 2004). In other words, the medical model perceives disability as a problem of the individual caused by disease or trauma, and consequently needs the services of health care professionals, with the disabled persons depending on such professionals to “fix” their impairment. This implies a power imbalance: it is the professional who is in power, not the disabled person. UPIAS, The Fundamental Principles of Disability document, published in the mid-seventies (Oliver, 2013) introduced the social model, stating that such persons were disabled by the barriers they encountered in society, and not by their impairments.

The social model is grounded in a rights-based approach and recognises the social, economic and environmental barriers as the roots of decreased participation for persons with disability, as opposed to their impairment (Oliver, 1996). More than 30 years after the model came about, Oliver (2013), amidst criticism of the social model, argues that “focusing on impairment and difference will only de-politicise the social model” (Oliver, 2013 p.1025), and will not lead to the development of solutions or alternative models that will serve to improve the lifestyle of disabled people.

This model, similarly to the ICF-CY, makes a distinction between impairment and disability: the former is a body condition, whilst the latter is a product of the social, physical and economic environments inhabited by individuals with a

disability. Secondly, social justice is core to the model, meaning that any barriers to full participation, mostly social, need to be removed as *they* are the cause of disability (Oliver & Barnes, 1998). Lastly, the persons who live with an impairment should be considered experts on their own life, and therefore should be involved in any decisions about them and any actions needed in making changes to society (Albrecht 1992). In short, the social model of disability does not embrace the notion of “fixing” persons to fit in society, but it is rooted in the belief that, if environmental barriers are adjusted or removed, such persons can engage in different “spheres of activity” (Burchardt, 2004, p. 736) successfully.

The social model of disability is not a theory, but “a tool to improve peoples’ lives”(Oliver 2013, p.1025). It is relevant to this study because it has influenced educational aspects in inclusion (Terzi, 2004) and it “acts as a powerful reminder to face issues of inclusion as fundamental moral issues” (Terzi, 2004 p.1). It also seeks to remove barriers, enabling disabled people to have more choice and control over their lives and increasing their independence. Whilst impairment has some impact on disability, bio-psychosocial factors are often responsible for restricted activity in persons with a disability (Thomas, 2004). It is often difficult or not possible to resolve an impairment, but it is possible to change attitudes and society, and reduce barriers. The social model’s meaning of disability is reflected in this definition of inclusive education: “shifting the focus from altering disabled people to fit in society to transforming society and the world by changing attitudes, removing barriers and providing the right support” (Rieser, 2012, p.2).

This study seeks to discover ways, including tools, to enable educators in the school context to support children’s participation in occupations. My choice was not to focus on the impairments of children with disability, but to consider that the environment is a key barrier to the participation of individuals in society, and that if the psychosocial and physical attitudes are altered, then children can be more active participants in the places where they live. This study acknowledges that bio-

psychosocial factors will influence a child's level of participation at school, and that activity restrictions imposed on children's participation through their body should be counteracted by adapting the environment and enhancing social enablers.

Impairment, a problem or a diagnosis does not inform a solution. It is not just one's lack of impairment that yields success in occupation, but it is the person's drive, motivation and interest within the context and immediate environment that is just as crucial and fundamental (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019).

This study attempts to discover children's desires and strengths in an effort to try to understand the barriers that children face in participation in school occupations. It aims to understand better how school-based occupational therapy in Malta can assist professionals in providing the necessary support to modify the physical, social, cultural and attitudinal aspects of the environment, thus making it more accessible and promoting social inclusion and equality. This is a study about occupation and occupational therapy. The support and tools that the social model acknowledges as important for change and participation need to be grounded in a model of practice that is occupation-centred, based and focused. Such a model chosen for this study is the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E), which will be discussed below.

2.4 The Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement

The Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) is an occupational therapy model of practice. Since this is an occupational therapy study, it was important for me to frame it within an Occupational Model of Practice. CMOP-E is client-centered, and it assumes the human spirit at the center of functioning (Townsend et al., 2011). The CMOP-E states that spirituality is a "pervasive life force, a manifestation of a higher self, a source of will, self-determination, and a sense of meaning, purpose and connectedness that people experience in the context of their environment" (Louie, A., 2008, p.20).

The model was influenced by OS and based on the assumption that occupations are contextually and developmentally determined. It was also built around humanistic theories, and hence the emphasis on client centeredness. The client is at the center of the therapeutic relationship. The model considers aspects of developmental and learning theories, namely self-actualization and motivation, as key concepts to participation in occupation, as well as environmental theories that speak to the importance of the environment for occupational participation (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007).

The model was expanded in 2007 to include engagement after being developed in 1997 by the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. Engagement was included in order to show the active aspect of the model: the client as an active, rather than a passive, participant (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). The model is based on the premise that the client is in charge. The client seeks advice and knows what they need. Therefore, it is a collaborative partnership in which the therapist is available to work and solve problems with the client, always being mindful of the demands of the environment and the context. The CMOP-E embraces six principles, which are in-keeping with principles of participation and the social model of disability, pillars for this study. Applying them to children's participation, they should include: a focus on the child and educators; autonomy and choice for both; a respect for diversity, in keeping with inclusive practices; therapeutic partnership and shared responsibility with educators; and finally enablement and empowerment of children, educators and their families. Figure 2 depicts the model which I shall now explain.

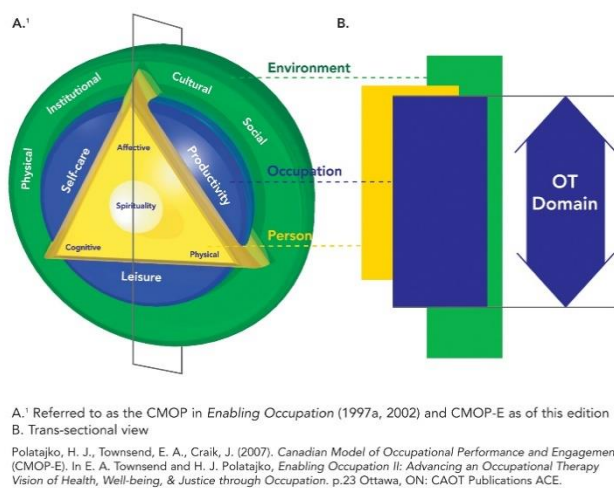
The person is at the center of the model that considers the spiritual component. This refers to the human spirit, which is the core of the person, and what motivates them: the sense of identity, self-direction and occupational choice. The doing (physical), feeling (affective) and thinking (cognitive) aspects of the model surround and are part of the person. Four aspects of the environment are

considered under this model: physical, social, cultural and institutional (Cole and Tuffano, 2020).

Figure 2

A Visual Representation of the CMOP-E Model

Figure 1.3 The CMOP-E¹: Specifying our domain of concern



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Defining occupations in CMOP-E is flexible and can be adapted to individual persons and contexts. The occupations are broadly defined into three categories, namely self-care, leisure and productivity. This provides flexibility in the way occupations are defined for the individual person. In other words, what may be productivity for one could be leisure for another.

This model supports the notion that person and environment are only in connection with each other through occupation. Furthermore, motivation in this model is intrinsic and fuelled by participation in meaningful goals (Cole & Tuffano, 2008). This model was preferred because of the consideration that it gives to the person as a human spirit, as well as considerations of self-actualisation, motivation and flexibility in defining occupations, engagement and enablement. These are all crucial concepts when working in a school with a focus on the person, the occupation and the environment. This framework looks at engagement as a core competency of occupational therapy. It outlines key enablement skills adapted from

Townsend and Polatajko (2007) that have potential relevance to my study and include: adapt; advocate; coach; collaborate and consult; coordinate; design; and educate. Most of these skills are very relevant to occupational therapy practice in schools, and can be considered as contributors to enabling the better participation of children, thus contribute to an inclusive philosophy.

As noted earlier, the CMOP-E views participation from one of two different angles: it is an outcome of occupational performance, or a context for occupational performance (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). The CMOP-E is an occupation-focused model with the person, environment and occupation as the focus of intervention. Such a model has the potential to support a therapist's reflection in changing a person's quality of occupational performance (Fisher, 2013) and supporting occupational engagement (Wong & Fisher, 2015).

2.5 Summary

The conceptual framework for this study is multidimensional due to the nature of the research questions. The study moves away from an impairment focus; instead, it is underpinned by the affirmation that an impairment does not define an individual, and each person's abilities and strengths need to be supported by psychosocial and environmental factors, thus minimising barriers. The child is placed at the centre of any transaction as an occupational being, with such transactions occurring between the child, the educators and the family within the school. Importance is given to the environment, activity and participation and to the dynamic interactions and transactions between these. Occupational performance and enablement leading to participation and inclusion are the desired outcome.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the components of the conceptual framework for this study, which are such that they allow for a deeper understanding of occupation and participation. They are particularly suited as they are perceived to have the

potential to promote the scope and outcome of this study - a journey of discovery of how collaborative school-based occupational therapy can contribute towards participation in occupation and the inclusion of all children in the school. In the next chapter, I will discuss the literature relevant to this study, with a focus on the research evidence behind participation, occupation and school-based occupational therapy (SBOT).

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter critiques the literature around the main theme of this study: children's participation in school occupations and SBOT. After introducing occupations in childhood earlier in Chapter 1, this first part of the chapter will define childhood occupations with a focus on school occupations. The second part of the chapter will critique participation in the context of schools and education. It will start by providing the research evidence on children's participation in home, community and school with a particular focus on young children's participation in the school from both children's as well as adult perspectives. It will highlight the significance of the environment on participation. A summary of the enablers and barriers to young children's participation in school occupations, together with a citation of the existing knowledge and gaps in the literature, will end this section. The third part of the chapter relates to school-based occupational therapy research and practice.

Finally, this chapter will present an introduction to the concept of belonging in childhood. This will be outlined through synthesis of occupation, participation and inclusive education.

3.1 Occupations in Early Childhood

Occupations have been defined in the introductory chapter, but a reminder as to what these constitute is called for, with a focus on those relevant to the school setting. Occupations are the ordinary and familiar things that children do every day and include both everyday activities and routines as well as the out of the ordinary events taking place at school (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Classroom occupations form a functional system that is made up of a combination of societal, social and intrapersonal factors (Dickie et al., 2006). Table 5 portrays a summary of the occupations of children, as identified in various literature sources, detailed in Appendix C. One may note that there are several similarities in the occupations of children, irrespective of age. School life contains social, recreational, communal, creative, civic and academic elements (Simeonsson et al., 2001; Chapparo & Lowe,

2012; WHO, 2012) with activities that students carry out in their daily routine including educational tasks, both academic and non-academic, such as reading and writing; crafts; play; recess; lunch; and field trips (AOTA, 2016b ; WFOT, 2016). Occupations in schools may also be “in between” moments that the pupils experience: drop-off and pick-up time; walking to class; waiting to use the toilet; fruit or milk break; circle time; and assembly (Bazyk et al., 2018). These are part of the routines that characterise the school day for every child.

Table 5

Young Children's Occupations in Schools¹⁵

Curriculum related (Education)	ADLs/Self care	Play	Work	School leisure activities
Instructional Learning	Mobility	Playground swinging, running ,climbing, jumping	Looking after animals(Agricultural chores)	School outings
PE	Mealtime /Eating	Quiet recreation	Household chores	Pupils' council
Religious Expression	Waiting time	Games		Hobbies
Numeracy/ Literacy	Bathroom/ Hygiene	Solitary play		Talking with friends
Building with blocks	Transportation	Recess		School ground
Drawing	Dressing	Playing ball		Sport
Handwriting				
Cutting		Choice time		Recess
Music		Social and passive play		School clubs
Art and craft		Pretend /non pretend play		
Circle time		Free and active play inside and outside.		

Roles and routines of children have been explored in different cultural contexts and were identified as important for children's participation in school life

¹⁵ Extracted from the Literature in Appendix C

(Maciver et al., 2019a). Children assume different roles within the school setting, ones of friends, players, students, learners and self-carers (Chapparo & Lowe, 2012; Rodger & Kennedy-Behr, 2017).

Studies that were carried in and out of school settings, have shown that whilst activity patterns were similar for children in different countries, occupational repertoires differed. For example, children engaged in more personal care occupations in a Brazilian context, whilst hobbies and sport were more popular occupations with children in Canada (Pontes et al., 2018). Hence, some occupational repertoires appear to be context and culture related whilst others are universal across nations.

Differences were noted between countries with regards to the value placed on education. Whilst studies set in some parts of the world such as Southern Ethiopia concluded that work and chores were significant occupations and an integral part of the culture (Jirata & Kjørholt, 2013), views from other countries like Canada, embraced the idea that schooling and formal education are the route to development and a better life (Pontes et al., 2018). Chores have already been identified as significant work routines that are acknowledged in different cultures as important occupations (Maciver et al., 2019a), but more research and understanding of what other occupational activities may be beneficial to children's participation would be useful. "Unoccupied time" was identified especially in free play outdoors in a study that explored the everyday environments and activities of Swedish preschool children (Astrom et al., 2020). It was not clear if this unoccupied time was experienced by all the children or those that had special support or other needs. However, this notion may also be similar to that of "onlooker participation" by Pereira and colleagues (2010), identified and documented earlier in Chapter 1. This may be a form of restorative occupation for children and one concerned with being rather than doing.

Play has been identified in research as a key occupation very pertinent to young children. Table 5 showed that play was frequently cited in the literature. Research studies exploring the everyday environments of preschool children and teachers highlight the significance of physical play across varied geographical and cultural contexts. The importance of indoor and outdoor play is acknowledged as well as associated, routine based activities such as dressing, eating, waiting time, table tasks, art and learning time for young children (Astrom et al., 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2018). Children perceived play occupations to be more those that were carried outdoors in the playground. These included free and self-chosen play that was child directed and voluntary, as well as sensory play activities and active play including swinging, jumping, running, climbing and sliding (Yan et al., 2005; Ziviani et al., 2006a, 2006b).

Furthermore, exploring older children's perspectives of free play during recess (referred to as 'break-time' in the Maltese context) revealed the importance of 'free play' in schools. Recess or break-time provides an opportunity and freedom to make choices, socialise and make decisions as well as provided personal satisfaction, partly derived through practicing playground occupations that involved competing and winning (Prompona et al., 2019).

Studies determined that children associated sit down table-top activities at school with work occupations (Lundqvist et al., 2013; Pyle & Alaca, 2006). Its significance lies in it being identified both as meaningful to the child and a fundamental occupation in cultures across the world. It was identified as providing an overall sense of well-being, happiness, satisfaction and joy, whilst supporting both the development of children's identity and their learning (Moore & Lynch, 2018).

The important relationship between play and pedagogy in early years learning and education has been widely reported (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). The role of play as a medium for learning and development in early education has

informed curriculum development across many jurisdictions (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2012; Woods et al., 2021). It is a mode of learning and should not be extrinsic to academic work for young children, when doing is part of learning. Play supports the development of skills and social participation and, most of all, it provides enjoyment and opportunities for engagement.

Data on the occupations of 4-year-old boys attending a primary catholic school was collected (Buhagiar, 2015) as part of a community-university partnership programme (Table 6). The types, but not the frequency, of occupations children aged four to six years participated in was obtained. Occupations centred primarily on education and play, self-care, and school leisure activities, with children participating in daily repetitive routines and assuming the roles of pupils, peers and friends.

Table 6

Children's Occupations in Maltese Kindergarten Classrooms

Curriculum-related / Academic Activities (Education)	Self-care (ADL's)	Play	School Leisure Activities
Writing	Eating/lunch time routine	Playing in the yard during recess	Cookery activities, such as those during Christmas and Easter
Colouring	Toilet routine	Playground equipment	School outings
Singing and Music	Dressing routine - take off /put on jacket	Using sensory room.	Fun Day
Reading			
Art and Craft Activities			
Circle time			
Religious Expression (attending religious celebrations).			
Story Telling			
Physical Education			

From this study it appears that, at least in a Maltese context that educational occupations predominate (see Table 6) contrasting with the international sources (Table 5) that reflect more significance on play. In the Maltese study, there were fewer variations of play occupations documented by educators in kindergarten classrooms, potentially implying that the focus on play occupations was not a central one. The nature of this pilot study (Buhagiar, 2015) limited the conclusions that could be drawn thus highlighting the need for a study that would delve deeper into young children's occupations and understand which ones were really reflective of early years school routines in Malta.

The complexity of occupations in childhood points at the need to explore occupational balance for children in the context of pre-school education. It is defined by Wagman et al., (2011, p. 1) as an "individual's perception of having the right amount of occupations and the right variation between occupations." Three key concepts appear to exist around occupational balance that relate to the nature of the occupation itself, characteristics of such occupation, as well as time used in engaging in the said occupation. Occupational balance is about fulfilling demands linked to one's particular role as well as the "internal harmony shaped by engagement in different occupations" (Eklund et al., 2019, p.41).

A study by Anaby et al, (2010), has identified that the reduction of conflict in occupations is supportive of adults' wellbeing. Hence, whilst occupational balance is about the just right amount and variation in occupation practised by the individual, it is also about the harmony experienced as well as the absence of conflict in carrying them out. These are important aspects to consider when dealing with children's occupations in school, as they contribute to health and well-being (Yerxa, 1998, 2005). Such a balance comes about when children spend enough time engaged in activities that provide meaning, fun and satisfaction to them, and which are intrinsically motivating.

In the school setting there is the danger that an over focus on one activity, such as academic study, reduces or eliminates altogether other important activities which provoke a deeper sense of enjoyment, such as playing and socialising with friends or engaging in other age-appropriate occupations, which are ultimately all important for young children to integrate and be part of society (Hewes, 2014).

The functional limitations that result from childhood ill-health, impairment or disability has an impact on the choice of occupations available to children and the nature of their engagement in those occupations. Occupational balance may be affected by disability, which imposes on the child a slower tempo; more dependence on adults; reduced diversity; less involvement in activities outside the home; and less involvement with friends. Hence childhood school occupations according to the evidence already cited, need to be varied, provide fun, enjoyment, satisfaction and choice. This would contribute to a more holistic development as well as to ensure engagement, involvement and a sense of fulfilment in each child (Folker & Woodward, 2012).

In conclusion, an examination of the occupations of children in Maltese pre-school education against international literature suggests a universality of experience across different parts of the world. However, the notable absence of documented evidence pertaining to play as an occupation in Maltese pre-schools highlights the need for further research. Considering the nature of occupations in childhood, such research should focus its examination as understood by children parents and educators in early childhood education as well as the early-years curriculum in Malta.

What follows now is a review of the literature on children's participation, with a more detailed focus on young children's participation in occupations within the home, community and school.

3.2 Researching Children's Participation: Home, Community and School 3.2.1

Introduction

Participation has been explored in the introductory chapter 1 and may be defined as the engagement in desired occupations in ways that are personally satisfying and congruent within expectations within a culture (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). Participation as defined in ICF-CY (See Appendix 1) stipulates parameters for activity, participation and functional engagement. It moves away from the traditional biomedical model and looks at disability in terms of function rather than dysfunction. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health- Children and Youth (ICF-CY) is ecological and builds on a bio-psycho-social framework, with key considerations of the environment.

Participation is important for children with and without disability to lead a good-quality, healthy life, and it is necessary for their development, learning, motivation and for their social inclusion (Bedell, 2009; Raghavendra, et al., 2012). Significant barriers to children's participation across settings and age groups exist. (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Coster et al., 2013; Eriksson et al., 2007; Liao et al., 2019; Piskur et al., 2015).

For this review, the literature around participation of young children in home, community and school but with a focus on the latter was considered. That of older children in secondary school, over the age of 11 years was researched (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Hemmingson & Borrell, 2002; Wendelborg & Tossebro, 2011), and may be eluded to at some points in this review, but will not be explored in depth since the focus in my research was on young children in the early years school setting.

Studies on the participation of young children aged 3 to 6 years in home, community and school settings have involved young children without disability as well as children with disability (Anaby et al., 2014). This includes physical disability

(Kang et al., 2017; Law et al., 1999; Piskur et al., 2016), autism spectrum disorder (Lavesser & Berg, 2010; Little et al., 2014) and other developmental disabilities (Coussens et al., 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2011; Soref et al., 2011).

. A number of studies investigated participation mostly from parental and caregiver perspectives in all three settings (Anaby et al., 2013, 2014; Kang et al., 2017), whilst others considered the home setting alone (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016) or in tandem with the community (Di Marino et al., 2018; Guichard & Grande, 2017).

Other studies considered the preschool, kindergarten or primary school settings (Almqvist, 2006; Anaby et al., 2014; Bart et al., 2011; Benjamin et al., 2016; Chiarello et al., 2012; Coster et al., 2013; Coussens et al., 2020, 2021; Kang et al., 2017; Lavesser & Berg, 2010; Lau & Cheng, 2016; Leung et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2016; Little et al., 2014; Maciver et al., 2019a; Magalhaes et al., 2011; Rosenberg et al., 2010, 2012; Soref et al., 2011; Tonkin et al., 2014; Tsao et al., 2008). This body of literature will be critiqued with the main focus on participation in the school setting, but first the next section will discuss the enablers and barriers to participation in home and community settings.

3.2.2 Children Participating in the Home and Community

The home environment was perceived by parents to be the place where children participated in the diverse activities with most frequency (Di Marino et al., 2018). Typically developing children were identified by caregivers as facing fewer barriers, so that they participated at a higher frequency and in a more diverse range of activities when compared with children having intellectual and developmental disabilities (Gilboa & Fuchs, 2018; King et al., 2013; Tonkin et al., 2014).

Findings from phenomenological studies that have explored views of disabled children out of school, have shown that firstly children with disabilities enjoyed the same activities as their non-disabled peers (Heah et al., 2007; Imms et al., 2008; Law et al., 2011; Tonkin et al., 2014). Such activities involved the children doing things themselves, which enabled them to experience enjoyment and success.

The barriers faced by preschool and school-aged children with disability, as reported by parents, are more pronounced in the community. Community participation in the literature refers to “out of school” activities (Anaby et al., 2013; King et al., 2013; Tonkin et al. 2014), ones carried out in the “community neighbourhood” (Hwang et al., 2015) and ones identified as social, recreational and leisure activities carried out in different settings (Solish et al., 2010).

The physical and social environments were identified as being the main supports or barriers to participation in the home and community. Physical environmental barriers, relevant mostly to children with physical disabilities, were identified from studies that took parental perceptions into account. These included insufficient transportation; unavailable equipment, such as manifested in a lack of choice and suitability of clothing and adaptive devices; issues related to the design and layout of their homes and public spaces, as well as the inadequate assistance these children and their caregivers experienced outside the home. (Coussens et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2017; Piskur et al., 2015). A barrier pertaining specifically to the community was the lack of participation in leisure activities for children with physical disabilities (Kang et al., 2017; Piskur et al., 2015) due to the fact that these were not available to them

Social environmental factors perceived as barriers to participation in the home and community for preschool children with disabilities consisted of the negative attitudes of people; lack of knowledge and access to information; and poor access to community programmes or services (Anaby et al., 2013, 2014; Kang et al., 2017; Piskur et al., 2015). On the other hand, the social environment in

community settings was, like the home setting, enabled by positive attitudes, maternal education and self-efficacy. Mothers with more schooling years reported that their children participated more frequently in home activities that included mealtimes; getting dressed; cleaning up; creative arts and craft activities; screen time; indoor play and games, amongst others (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Guichard & Grande, 2017).

The support of family, friends and service providers as well as child- and family-friendly policies together with children forming friendships and having fun were important enablers to home and community participation (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Anaby et al., 2014; Guichard & Grande., 2017; Kang et al., 2017; La Vesser & Berg, 2010; Piskur et al., 2015; Soref et al., 2011).

Income levels were also factors that affected participation in the home and community settings. Low income especially appeared to be a prevalent limiting factor for families of children with disability, creating more parental stress Attendance at sociocultural activities, such as going to the theatre, was also affected by low income.(Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Anaby et al., 2014; Di Marino et al., 2018; Guichard & Grande, 2017; Kang et al., 2017; King et al., 2009; Piskur et al., 2015; Soref et al., 2011).

The literature documented a similar perspective for children with communication difficulties: children over 6 years with autism spectrum disorder participated in significantly fewer leisure activities, and often with adults rather than with their peers. This was found to be correlated to the severity of communication, sensory issues and difficulties with social interaction. These impacted the ability of children to participate in out-of-school activities and many peer-based activities (Askari et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2011).

In summary, the research on the participation of young children in home and community settings shows similar findings in that the social and physical environment are crucial for the support of children's participation. Nevertheless,

there appear to be two predominant factors that support children's participation in the community: access to and availability of spaces are related to the physical environmental accessibility, particularly for those children with physical disability. The other factor relates to the social environment but with a focus on social participation: this appears to be strongly linked to participation in leisure activities. Barriers and supports to participation have been observed more frequently in the community settings. They were linked to the demands of the activity, whilst supports were identified as the availability of resources, information, programmes and services. Participation in the school setting, the most important one for this study, will now be explored in the next section.

3.2.3 Children's Participation in the School Setting

3.2.3.1 Participation and Children with Disabilities.

The participation of children with disabilities was investigated and frequency across all settings was found to be less than that of their typical peers, irrespective of age. Just like at home and in the community, participation in the school setting was influenced by both the physical and social environments as well as personal factors (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Anaby et al., 2013; Benjamin et al., 2016; Coster et al., 2013; Coussens et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2007; Law et al., 2011; Piskur et al., 2015).

The literature identified that participation for all children was not fully explained by the type and degree of disability, but by the nature of the support provided, and variance in participation was found to be multifactorial (Maciver et al., 2019a; Rosenberg et al., 2012). The most common barriers to children's participation in school were identified as social environmental barriers such as the attitudes of adults, physical design and resources in the school as well as lack of opportunities for friendship (Albrecht & Khetani., 2016; Copey & Ziviani, 2004)

The evidence around participation of primary school aged children centres to a large extent around children with physical disability, predominantly cerebral palsy (Anaby et al., 2014; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Imms, 2008; Kang et al., 2017; Law et al., 2011, 2016; Piskur et al., 2016; Tseng et al., 2011). Children with challenges in upper extremities and physical function had a lower intensity of participation when compared with children who were mobile (Chiarello et al., 2012). Teachers and professionals' views on full participation of children with cerebral palsy were that it was dictated by a combination of cognitive, behavioural and physical variables (Mancini & Coster, 2004; Schenker et al., 2005; 2006).

Studies that aimed to identify the predictors of participation in school activities have shown that in children with physical disabilities, personal factors were found to support or hamper participation (Mancini & Coster, 2004). Studies identified that the severity of gross and fine motor impairment and functional difficulties determined how children with physical disabilities participated, that is with a reduced intensity in activities (Huang et al., 2013; Imms, 2008).

The participation of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Askari et al., 2015; Lavesser & Berg, 2010; Little et al., 2014) was studied and featured prominently in the literature. Research on the participation of young children (3 to 6 years) with Autism Spectrum Disorder revealed that these children participated in fewer preschool activities of self-care; community mobility; vigorous and sedentary leisure; social interaction; chores; and education when compared to children without autism spectrum disorder (Lavesser & Berg., 2010). Non-participation was related to missed opportunities by the child in spite of exposure to them. These missed opportunities may be considered as child behaviours that did not support participation: opportunities for collaboration neglected by and interaction styles that were too directive for the child (Blackwell & Dunn, 2010).

Barriers related to the social environment included the limited availability of services coupled with human and non-human resources, as well as lack of support from staff, policy makers and service providers (Anaby et al., 2013; Piskur et al., 2015).. Negative adult attitudes, described as ones that lacked positivity and sympathy as well as adults' belief that disabled children were less able, compromised participation (Anaby et al., 2013; Specht et al., 2015).

Studies that considered parental and caregivers' (mostly teachers) perspectives concluded that the social environmental enablers to participation were the support of family , similar to participation in the home and community (Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Pereira et al., 2010).Peers overall were identified by the children themselves as an important enabler of participation, together with the positive interaction of pupils with their teachers and peers, which strongly contributed to participation in school activities (Anaby et al., 2013, 2014).

Studies identified that teachers perceived children with disabilities as participating less than their typical peers in both structured and unstructured school activities (Eriksson et al., 2007; Maciver et al., 2019a).

Contextual factors influencing participation of children included how activities were done and with whom, together with the opportunities that adults provided for children's participation. Examples of contextual factors that determined whether and how children with disabilities participated included the nature and availability of the assistants' involvement. The quality and quantity of support given in structured activities showed at times that more support meant less participation (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Eriksson et al., 2007).

Finally, children's participation in the school setting appears to be hampered by the lack of a modified curriculum and inadequate support from adults. Age was a barrier to older children's participation, while family income was a barrier to participation, especially in leisure/community activities (Egilson & Traustadottir,

2009). The next section will home in on factors that children and adults identified as important contributors to the participation of young children in school.

3.2.3.2 Participation of Young Children: Children's Voices and Adults' Views

This section will explore enablers and barriers that are relevant to the school context as well as both young children's and adults' perspectives on all students' participation in school occupations. Participation in school, however has mostly been documented through adult perspectives - mostly parents, predominantly mothers. Children's views on their participation in school life are important since this study considers gainful involvement in school and education as a child's fundamental human right that supports inclusion. Young children's views revolve more around their experiences of play than actual participation; having said that, play is still considered to be a significant childhood occupation. For this reason such data was considered relevant.

Children's perceptions on their participation in school life and what matters to them, especially in early-years settings, were not easily identified in the international literature, with a dearth of research focusing on young children's perceptions of their school occupations. This may be due to the fact that researchers in early childhood education have reported on children's occupations in other ways. Some examples of this will be discussed in the final section, 3.2.6, of this chapter. However, it may also be that young children may not be perceived as reliable research participants.

Older children's voices on their participation in school and out of school have been captured (Heah et al., 2007; Pereira et al., 2010; Psaila, 2015; 2017; Tonkin et al., 2014). Other studies that have considered young children's views have mostly documented the lived participative experiences of children with and without disability on what matters to them (Lundqvist et al., 2018), whilst some have centred around children's perspectives of play and learning in the classroom (Pyle & Alaca, 2016) and, more specifically, during recess and in the school ground (Norodahl & Einarrsdottir, 2015; Prompona et al., 2019).

Studies in Maltese and Portuguese contexts that have explored the perspectives of children in educational settings have shown that whilst adults placed emphasis on trying to fix the impairment, children desired to be treated normally and equally with peers. They wanted a voice and to be involved in decisions related to their occupations (Pereira et al., 2010; Psaila, 2017). This research carried out in different countries and contexts show that the presence and support of peers and significant adults, albeit without too much control, were supportive of participation. The mastery of a task was identified by the children themselves as dependent on their enthusiasm to participate in the specific activity or occupation.

Young children's opinions documented in the literature on what matters to them have been identified through research in different contexts (Lundqvist et al., 2018; Pyle & Alaca, 2016). Children's views emphasised the importance of relationships and interactions with peers; free play; gross motor play; cosy safe spaces; and connections with nature (Lundqvist et al., 2018). The children's views here support the adults' own, namely that young children's interaction skills and experiencing a sense of belonging are important for participation.

Outcomes of other studies in countries with diverse cultural contexts showed that young children wanted to participate in occupations that provided freedom, which for them meant doing what they liked; facing a physical challenge; being inventive and creative; and engaging in play. Children's level of engagement

seemed to depend on the location of their free play, with children showing a preference for the outdoor natural environment as well as the opportunity to use diverse playground equipment (Lundqvist et al., 2018; Norodahl & Einarsdottir, 2014; Psaila, 2017; Pyle & Alaca, 2016). This evidence appears to indicate the importance of context and setting in supporting children's involvement in school life.

Overall, the physical and social environment were found to influence young children's opportunities for engaging in occupations, mostly play in kindergarten and primary school settings. Summarising the literature on participation from children's perspectives, some key points will be reiterated:

- The school environment provided a balance between a restful space and a safe space where children can be physically challenged in the presence of adults and in the company of their peers, experiencing freedom and choice;
- The presence and support of peers and significant adults without too much control was identified as supportive of participation;
- Children's participation in occupations was enhanced through free and adult-guided play. Play activities were ones in which children were having fun;
- Opportunities and the availability of resources, like play equipment, were important for participation and enjoyment;
- Choice and voice for young children were identified as an important aspect of participation in childhood occupations.

In conclusion, the desire for involvement, engagement and enjoyment in their school occupations as well as a voice was relevant for many young children, irrespective of where they came from (Lundqvist et al., 2018; Norodahl & Einarsdottir, 2014). Play opportunities afforded young children a high level of agency and choice, allowing them to interact both with peers and their teachers. The literature on children's participation from adult perspectives will now be discussed.

Adult Perceptions on the influence of the physical and social environment on young children's participation has been detailed in the literature. Micro factors such

as people's attitudes and macro factors like institutional policies as well as the physical and sensory qualities of an environment have been found to impact the participation of children with developmental disabilities (Benjamin et al 2016)

Consistent, structured and planned routines facilitated by adults were deemed to be conducive to participation. Research findings documenting parent perspectives recognised the lack of knowledge that teachers in mainstream education had. This was less supportive of children's participation in their school activities, which involved group learning and socialising with friends. (Benjamin et al., 2017; Coster et al., 2013; Coussens et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2007).

A study carried out in a Swedish community-based school studied preschool children under the age of 4 with and without developmental delay. Interaction skills were the strongest predictors of high level engagement. The availability of activities also enhanced engagement and participation, irrespective of whether or not the child had a developmental delay (Almqvist, 2006). Significantly more interaction occurred between peers in child-initiated activities and with adults in adult-initiated activities. Children in inclusive preschool programmes were also observed and were found to engage in positive social interactions with peers and adults (Tsao et al., 2008). Factors that impeded participation, which were also predictors of the quality of involvement of young children in preschool, included deficits in social, motor, attention, adaptive behaviour and functional skills. These deficits did not support activity performance and interrupted school participation (Benjamin et al., 2016; Law et al., 2007).

Social environmental barriers faced by children with disability were rooted in what school activities were available and how they were organized (Benjamin et al., 2016; Bedell et al., 2013; Law et al., 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2012). Children's disability type was not key to decreased participation in young children, although generally children having a physical disability had significant participation restrictions.

It appears that the ways in which young children are supported to interact have a significant bearing on their overall participation. Children engaged with both peers and adults successfully, depending on who was initiating the activity. The importance of social participation appears to be key with younger children.

The evidence from a study by Costa and colleagues' (2016), shows that priorities for participation may differ between teacher, parent and child, even when children are young. Such data is missing in the literature, possibly because adults consider preschool children too young to have their own views on participation, or an opinion on how they should be spending their time at school and what matters to them (Liao et al., 2019).

This final part of this section will present a tabulated summary of the enablers and barriers to participation in line with one of the conceptual pillars of this study: Bronfenbrenner's framework. The micro-factors that have contributed to children's participation, mostly in school settings, have been compiled in Table 7.

Children's own voices in the literature identified the enjoyment, learning, choice, novelty, excitement and fun that they experienced through participating in play and other significant occupations in spaces like the playground, the outdoors, and in natural environments (Norodahl et al., 2014; Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Prompona et al., 2019). All these attributes are important for all children to participate in in the places where they live: the home, community and school.

Table 7*Micro Factors¹⁶: Enablers/Barriers to young children's participation in school*

Micro Factors	Enablers/Barriers	Evidence
The Child (Personal Factors)	Child's communication, social skills for play, motor sensory and process skills, functional skills, self-esteem, interests, preferences and enjoyment in carrying out structured activities	Askari et al., 2014; Chien et al., 2016; De Marino. 2018; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Granlund et al., 2012; Imms et al., 2017; Little et al., 2014; Rosenberg et al., 2011; Soref et al., 2011
The child interacting in the immediate physical and social environment of the school	Physical Design and resources in school Routines and Habits Social Participation and Friendship, Engagement interaction and availability of activities	Kang et al., 2017; Maciver et al., 2019a Tsao et al., 2008 Almqvist (2006); Bedell et al. (2011)
	Opportunities for friendship with peers Organizational skills, activity configuration and organization.	Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Chiarello et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011
	Activity participation and non-participation Acceptance, Fun, Doing and being with others freedom, choice and voice	Copley & Ziviani. 2004; Solish et al., 2010. Pyle & Alaca, 2016; Norodahl & Einarsdottir, 2014; Lundqvist et al., 2018; Psaila, 2017

¹⁶ These refer to both the natural and manmade physical environments as well as the social environment, which includes human/personal factors and attitudes of family and friends; social supports; and resources primarily.

The meso- and macro-enablers and barriers to participation that address different domains; natural and man-made changes; support and relationships; attitude and services; institutions; systems; and policies are collated in Table 8.

Table 8

Meso and Macro Factors¹⁷: Enablers and Barriers to participation of children in school

Meso and Macro Factors	Enablers	Barriers	Evidence
Meso Factors: The Physical Environment	Playground equipment/equipment for physical play/Toys	Inaccessible and lack of adapted spaces, playgrounds and equipment	Norodahl & Einarsdottir, 2014; Yan et al., 2005; kang et al., 2017; Piskur et al., 2015
The Social Environment	Learning accessibility; Universal design and an	Learning inaccessibility and accommodation;	Woodgate et al., (2012)
	Adapted curriculum with resources to support it.	lack of a modified curriculum	Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009
	Positive attitudes Knowledge and training of teachers.	negative attitudes Lack of knowledge and training Poor communication	Copley & Ziviani, 2004; Law et al., 2006; Piskur et al., 2015 Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Psaila, 2017
	Collaboration, empowerment, availability of adults		
	Maternal education and self-efficacy social support: family and friends	Unavailability of adults Parental stress and overprotection Family Income	Daunhauer, 2014; Little et al., 2014; Anaby et al., 2013, 2014; Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Kang et al., 2017; La Vesser & Berg., 2010; Soref et al., 2011

Negative attitudes were identified as key social environmental barriers, along with a lack of knowledge by professionals, and lack of resources (Anaby et al., 2014; Piskur et al., 2015). At the macro level, the literature has identified the social and

¹⁷ The Physical Environment, both natural and man made.

The Social Environment includes human factors, and consists of attitudes of family and friends, social supports, and, most importantly, financial resources.

institutional barriers as being significant ones, especially for young children's participation. Conflicts with local authorities relating to procedures, such as applying for financial support, and lengthy time frames to access services, were identified in different studies (Anaby et al., 2014; Law et al., 1999; Piskur et al., 2015). Also at macro level, attitudinal factors may be perceived as more significant than physical ones, as attitudes often prevented the physical barriers as well from being changed (Law et al., 1999). Cultural, institutional, and attitudinal factors in the environment were documented as either supportive or restrictive of participation of children with disabilities. They included socio-economic factors and maternal stress (Anaby et al., 2014; Kang et al., 2017).

3.2.4 Knowledge Gaps on Young Children's Participation

After reviewing the evidence and most significant knowledge around participation and occupation, the gaps inciting the need for this study that appear to exist in the literature will now be summarised:

- The limited evidence on the participation of children and young children in general, but especially those with a disability, in school occupations;
- International literature suffers from a dearth of studies on young children's own views and the their lived experiences of participation in school occupations;
 - When studying participation, the evidence identified data that had been collected through participation measures, questionnaires, surveys and methods that lacked human experience;
- Minimal reporting on young children's participation by persons other than parents, such as school leaders; teachers; early childhood educators; and any relevant support staff;
- Minimal studies were identified that look specifically at the role of the environment in explaining participation of young children exclusively in occupations in the school setting.

Little is documented about the participation patterns and activities of other children, especially those with an “unofficial” diagnosis or a “hidden disability”. These include those coming from disadvantaged groups as well as children considered to be at risk and are mostly unaccounted for in the literature. These children probably do not qualify for official support by the state or country, and hence are “hidden” from the system. Their need to avail themselves of regular school opportunities is a gap that may be addressed by my study, as these children may face significant problems in participating (Lillvist, 2009). The next section links participation, occupation and inclusive education and belonging prior to the final section on school-based occupational therapy.

3.2.5 Occupation, Participation, Belonging and Inclusive Education for Young Children

To end the section on participation, it would be appropriate to look at some evidence from inclusive education that resonates findings from research on participation, which was critiqued earlier in this chapter. This research is important, as it demonstrates how participation and inclusive education have similar characteristics. A fundamental characteristic identified in the literature is the role teacher’s play in the success of inclusive schooling through the following: their positive attitudes; adequate training and knowledge around curriculum; disability and their understanding of children; supporting friendships; caring and “professional love” (Page, 2017).

Studies in the different contexts have suggested that by developing friendly relationships, as well as using creative and playful activities in preschool, teachers supported children’s motivation. These activities were also identified as prerequisites to academic learning, with academic competence perceived as a contributor to inclusion. Relationship building and the use of relevant “occupations” were identified as being part of an effective educator, and were deemed essential for social, emotional and educational outcomes in early childhood education

(Hannikainen & Rasku Puttonen, 2010; Rouse & Hadley, 2018). In my view, these findings also speak to the importance of occupational balance for children in school that is all about “a personally meaningful mix of occupations aligned with one’s capacities and interests” (Eklund et al., 202p. 450).

Recommendations for creating inclusive school environments were documented as outcomes of studies (Lindsay et al., 2013) and are similar to studies that explored young children’s participation in schools. These included appropriate training and resources; teamwork; building rapport with parents and students; tailored teaching methods; and building a climate of acceptance within the classroom.

The need for the provision of resources emerged in a number of studies as well as policy and legislation in favour of children’s rights and human resources, including support for professionals and services. Professional support around inclusion geared at teachers (Downes, 2017; Macartney & Morton, 2013) was also addressed.

Parents are important stakeholders in promoting participation and inclusion. Their views on the integration of students with special needs in a Finnish school were investigated (Hotulainen & Takala, 2014). Their perceptions on inclusion were grounded in their personal experience, which was a reflection of their children’s experiences in the school setting. Parents said that the teachers’ attitudes, as well as their knowledge and understanding on inclusive education, were potential enablers or barriers to inclusive education. Positive peer relationships; help from support staff; resources, such as funding; and inclusive policies were considered important for parents. It was concluded that the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the neighbourhood school was important for the child’s self-esteem. The findings also concluded that parents of primary school children wanted their children to be treated equally, like the other children. Parents’ views on the overall success of inclusive education were also related to their positive experience

in the domains of their children's education, which they perceived to be paramount. This evidence resonates the core attributes of participation presented in Chapter 1, as well as earlier in this chapter; said attributes are related to choice; socially meaningful goals; taking part; and feeling included (Hoogsteen & Woodgate, 2010; Imms et al., 2016).

Similar attributes have come out of a recent and unique study that is worth a mention, because of its Maltese context. This study explored two thousand parents' perspectives of early childhood education for children under the age of 5 years (Sollars, 2020). Through analysis of parents' responses, indicators of aspects of education that parents wanted for their children included: characteristics of care and love; the relationship and communication between the settings and families; children's happiness; personal development; and the physical characteristics of the setting. In line with other research findings already presented, what for parents qualified as inclusive schools, were ones in which care, love, happiness and friendship were present (Rouse & Hadley, 2018). These studies and others that have researched participation, discussed earlier in this chapter, identified important aspects related to belonging: building relationships; social participation; care; love; happiness. Concepts relating to belonging and relevant to this study will now be discussed.

As noted in Chapter 1, belonging is an important concept for children's participation in the early years, and it is explored in the literature as sense of belonging and the politics of belonging (Stratigos et al., 2014). It is important to state that the subjective nature of this need has made it difficult to research, particularly with young children. These two ways in which belonging is conceptualized will be briefly discussed.

Belongingness has long been identified as one of the basic human needs encompassing love, friendship, family, a sense of connection, togetherness and acceptance (Maslow, 1987; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Knowing where and with

whom you belong is integral to human existence (Stratigos et al., 2014). Whilst the four potential dimensions to belonging are the psychological, sociological, spiritual and physical (Hagerty et al., 1992), the “Politics of Belonging” is operationalised in three ways. These three ways are categorisation, resistance and desire and Performativity. Categorisation means making judgements about who can belong; Resistance and Desire refers to how categorizations may be resisted or contested; and performativity refers to the ways that belonging is performed, namely through repeated conventions and practices (Yuval-Davies, 2006).

Some claims put forward by different experts are that belonging is not fixed but is a dynamic process (Sumsion and Wong, 2011) in a constant state of movement, and true belonging is an impossibility (Probyn, 1996). The subject of my research does not entail a detailed debate into the politics of belonging. However, the latter provides an important framework to reflect on inclusion. Inclusion is about providing the opportunity for children to belong. There is both resistance to and desire for inclusion in educational settings, as well as different ways and opportunities provided for children to belong, feel included and ultimately participate in school life. Disabled children in particular may experience a range of barriers to belonging due to cultural, language or ability differences similar to the barriers they face in participation as discussed earlier in this chapter.

It is crucial that children in early childhood develop a sense of belonging because it is this sense of belonging that shapes who the children are and who they can become “Sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992 p. 1).. A study that explored belonging and participation in five European countries concluded that children’s belonging and participation was not promoted adequately in the curriculum framework of said countries. In contrast, curricula in other countries, such

as the “Te Whariki” curriculum¹⁸ drawn up by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, have long formalised belonging. Further exploration of concepts of belonging in early years curricula in Europe is needed (Piskur et al., 2021).

In order to enable all children to experience belonging, adult educators, through their positive attitudes and expertise, may support the participation (rather than the mere physical presence) of the child in the classroom by getting to know each child and providing opportunities for them to socialise and build relationships within the accessible physical and social environment of the school (Macartney, 2012; Piskur et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the evidence in this chapter is important for my study, which is set in an inclusive education setting. It supports previous research findings that were documented by adults, mostly parents about participation of children in home, school and community, namely that the key factors influencing and supporting young children’s occupations constitute aspects of the social environment. This includes human care; maternal self-efficacy; relationship building; positive attitudes; engagement with children; knowledgeable educators with adequate resources; and occupations in which children have a choice and experience fun and enjoyment in carrying them out. All this are key ingredients that may propagate a sense of belonging.

. The final part of this literature review will now provide a critique as to how school-based occupational therapy can support the occupational participation of young children, as this is the main scope of my study and addresses the third research question. First some key considerations for children’s participation in the early years will be discussed.

¹⁸ <https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf>

3.2.6 Key Considerations for Children's Participation in the Early Years

As a preamble to set the scene for the topic on occupational therapy in schools, it is now important to summarise the key considerations for children's participation in the early years. The key points to take forward will now be presented. Such considerations are important for occupational therapists to bear in mind when working in schools.

When considering the participation of young children in school, research shows us that children with disabilities, irrespective of the type, participated less in activities. Engaged children had larger support networks (Eriksson et al., 2007). Data from the literature suggests that in order to participate in school life, children need to be included in activities that tap into their interests, motivation and skills, and have the support of adults (Magalhaes et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2011; Little et al., 2014).

School and classroom occupations, need to be fun and provide choice. They need to be carried out in the right spaces, with the most suitable objects, including resources. They need to be surrounded with supportive, caring and knowledgeable educators to enable better engagement, social interaction, academic achievement and autonomy (Maciver, 2019a). It appears that social participation with involvement and engagement is key to young children's participation, which includes both interaction skills between peers as well as relationships between the teacher and the child (Page, 2017; Tsao et al., 2008). Crucial as well is the support of mothers for young children, and therefore maternal education and self-efficacy are important (Guichard & Grande, 2017; Little et al., 2014; Albrecht & Khetani., 2016). Children's involvement, together with an element of choice in decision making, should enable them to achieve better participation. The evidence presented in this chapter is congruent with what research has shown, defined and conceptualised earlier in

Chapter 1 about participation: being and doing; attendance and involvement, in other words, engagement.

The importance of addressing both subjective and objective components of participation of disabled children early on is an ultimate goal that practitioners need to consider (Raghvendra, 2013). Changing and adapting the environment to promote some of the essential characteristics for children to participate may need to focus on supporting children's routines and habits in the school setting; the nature of the activities preschool children are expected to engage in; the knowledge and training of educators; the resources available; the self-efficacy of parents, especially mothers; and support networks.

My study may support our understanding of how the environment impacts young children's participation in Maltese early years classrooms, in order to identify the best strategies to support them. Hence, with young children, a focus on changing or adapting the social environment may be an immediate priority, with a special attention given to identifying ways to engage young children in school occupations.

3.3 Occupational Therapy in Schools

This section will start by defining school-based occupational therapy (SBOT), and then proceed to discuss the evidence behind service delivery models in school-based practice with a focus on the early years, identifying the key ingredients of SBOT for this period.

3.3.1 School-based Occupational Therapy in the Early Years

The school setting being considered is the early years, which in Malta caters for children under the age of 7 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2021). Therefore, for this review the term school-based occupational therapy will refer to any form of intervention to support children's learning in the school setting. School is the place where children practise daily occupations. They learn, play, do arts and

crafts, engage in sport and build social contacts (Rodger & Ziviani, 2009). For this study, “school” refers to any formal educational context where a child attends for learning, and may include preschool ,prekindergarten, kindergarten, as well as early years, depending on the country. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT, 2016, p.13) defines school-based occupational therapy as being “client-centred, solution focused, strengths-based, occupation-based, and collaborative and context-based, educationally relevant and evidence based”.

In early childhood, occupational therapy practitioners in school-based settings use their expertise which is unique to help children and youths with and without challenges perform important learning and developmental activities in their natural environment (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2012). According to the 4th edition of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (AOTA, 2020), the scope of OT practice in school involves participation in academic educational activities; non-academic educational activities; play and recreation; lunchtime and extracurricular activities (sports, bands, dancing); as well as prevocational and vocational activities. It is now be important to give an overview of the practice of school-based occupational therapy over the past three decades, with a focus on the early years.

3.3.2 School-Based Occupational Therapy Services: Practice and Research

The scope and impact of school-based occupational therapy on children’s participation in school life has been documented for more than 30 years. The literature for many years had mostly always originated in the United States of America (Ball, 2018; Bayona et al., 2006; Bazyk et al., 2009; Benson, 2013; Bolton & Plattner, 2019; Case Smith et al., 2014; Dreiling & Bundy, 2003; Dunn, 1990; Florek Clark & Polichino, 2020; Kemmis & Dunn, 1996 ;Law, 2004, Mu & Royeen, 2004; Reid et al., 2006; Swinth et al., 2004), but more recent literature provides evidence of the practice of SBOT in other countries. These include Ireland (Lynch et

al., 2020; O'Donoghue, 2021), Switzerland (Echsel et al., 2019; Kaelin et al., 2019) and the United Kingdom (Chu, 2017; Maciver et al., 2019a).

Students experience a number of challenges in the school related to their health condition or impairments. These may be motor, cognitive, sensory, developmental and related to vision and hearing. It may lead to behavioural, intellectual and learning difficulties. These students are usually identified, however there are other students who are “at risk” of school failure, as well as others that have “hidden” disabilities, together with those childhood populations that may be considered vulnerable such as refugees, immigrants, fostered and Roma children (Farrell., 2013). All these groups are likely to experience decreased participation in the school setting.

Occupational therapists may provide services to children in schools through services funded by the Health or the Education Department as well as ones funded through health insurance and local authorities providing intervention both in the community and in the school (Chu, 2017). The literature around the main school systems, those in North America and in Europe, has been reviewed and will be discussed. There are differing implementation and structures across every country in terms of how health and education are provided, and consequently how therapy is designed and delivered.

In the USA, until recently, the school system remains one of the main employers of occupational therapists, with 25-30% of occupational therapists working in the schools and early intervention settings (AOTA, 2017b), making it one of the largest practice areas. School-based occupational therapists are employed under part B¹⁹ of Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA (2004), and therapy services in the United States of America are implemented mostly through federal legislation. This means that children who have identified problems, namely a

¹⁹ Part B of IDEA relates to assistance for all children with disability.

diagnosis, or are at risk of needing one and therefore have an IEP, are the ones likely to benefit from this service. The costs of school-based therapy that is not related to a specific diagnosis, and which is documented in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504²⁰ plan, are not usually covered by the state. For this reason, it appears that without a formal diagnosis children in the USA have a slim chance of being supported by occupational therapy services in schools. One may argue that SBOT in countries like the United States is overly influenced by the legislative and general health insurance context.

The Guidelines for Occupational Therapy Services in Early Intervention and Schools (AOTA, 2017b) documented that the role of OT practitioners is to provide school-wide intervention and “to support general education children, who are at risk in academic and behavioural areas, and offer professional development and training to teaching staff” (AOTA, 2017b, p.5). This statement makes it crystal clear that by large, occupational therapy for young children in schools is obliged to cater for all children, and not just those who have a formal “diagnosis”. Since referral systems and funding across different geographical regions vary, this may not be happening everywhere, and it appears that in general, diagnosis does dictate if and where a child receives support (Anaby et al., 2018).

In Europe, most countries have an obligation to ensure that quality and free primary education is provided to persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. Most European countries have ratified conventions on the rights of the child and persons with disability (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, 2006; United Nations, 2006, 2014, 2016) and align their policies with these conventions and charters. However, the provision of supports for inclusion, such as occupational therapy, is not the mainstream across all of Europe.

²⁰ In order to be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or else have a record of such an impairment.

Evidence on models of service delivery that may guide and support best practices in school-based services for children with disabilities were compiled through a scoping review (Anaby et al., 2018). Studies in this review, which did not exclusively pertain to occupational therapy intervention, found that service delivery mostly focused on individual direct services for students, together with consultation and collaborative approaches, with the latter being not as frequently documented. However, overall the services documented in this review identified that a combination of principles, rather than individual components, showed promising ways forward in delivering effective services (Anaby et al., 2018). From an occupational therapy perspective, the range of supports and services provided in schools may differ from one country to another. Nevertheless, commonalities have been identified in the modes of service delivery. Some examples will expose these modes (Chu, 2017; Echsel et al., 2019; Kaelin et al., 2019; Salazar, Riviera & Boyle, 2020).

Research shows that occupational therapy practitioners still use an impairment focused model addressing core body functions and structures, or components that are influential on children's success at school (Bissell & Cermak, 2015), possibly as a consequence of how health insurance works or how therapy services are constructed. Such studies, carried out in the US, Swiss and British contexts, that looked at perspectives of occupational therapists in mainstream education revealed that most of the therapists provided direct occupational therapy (Kaelin et al., 2019), and intervention was documented to have been offered in pull-out treatment rooms (Salazar Riviera & Boyle, 2020) and delivered through hands on treatment (Chu, 2017) focusing on skills development (Clough, 2018). Most of the therapists in these studies, however, also said that they collaborated with schools, even if not frequently. Services in Swiss contexts were funded by health insurance, and focused on physical and social environmental adaptations (Kaelin et al., 2019) whilst research in an Irish context has shown that more than 80% of

school-based OT interventions focused on sensory, environmental, handwriting and assistive technology interventions, with a focus on improving specific skills (O'Donoghue et al., 2021). These and other studies also highlighted the importance of focusing collaboratively on both school related occupations and professional practices with teachers and teaching assistants (Echsel et al., 2019).

Until recently, therapists in Switzerland were not embedded within the education system, and their practice in schools, like in other European countries, was found to be an emerging area of practice (Chu, 2017; Echsel et al., 2019). The move from a direct pull-out model of intervention to a contextualised one in the school setting continues to be studied; the discovery of service delivery methods that provide effective training and support to all those practising in the field continues to unfold (Hasselbusch, 2015). Instead of just working with students with identified disabilities, school-based services were identified as potentially impacting those at risk of delays or challenges and promoting participation and well-being for all students through collaborative models of practice. Studies indicated that working in natural contexts throughout the day allowed occupational therapists to provide a all-encompassing service that reflected the needs of all students in the classroom (Bazyk, 2019; Lynch et al., 2020; Missiuna et al., 2012a).

The outcomes of the studies just discussed imply that laws and policies in each country for the provision of therapy services in schools need to support those types of services that serve all children, rather than the individual "cases". This can only happen if research and evidence is available for relevant authorities to see the positive outcomes of using such models. Although the modes of service delivery differ between countries in the European context, there are similarities in the way occupational therapists are delivering their services worldwide. The literature has provided evidence as to the different types of intervention that have been utilised across nations. These service delivery models will be described below, and the evidence behind such models will be discussed.

3.3.3 Research Evidence on Service Delivery Models in School-based Practice

The evidence of the main modes of occupational therapy service delivery in schools is identified in the literature. The different models (Bundy & Lane, 2019; Case Smith et al., 2014; Dreiling & Bundy, 2003) have been defined in the literature as follows:

1. The Direct Model in which the occupational therapist uses direct intervention to remediate the child's difficulties;
2. The Indirect Model. In this model, the occupational therapist provides training to someone else to deliver the direct intervention;
3. The Collaborative Consultation Model in which collaboration occurs between the educators or other school staff and the occupational therapist in the natural environment of the school, with a focus on capacity building to support all children in the classroom. This is also considered part of a workload²¹ model.

With regard to direct and indirect modes of intervention, the children usually seen by school-based therapists are ones that have an identified disability or diagnosis. Under a collaborative model of practice, preventative intervention can also take place, and the focus is on building the capacity of the educators. Evidence for the three models of service delivery will now be presented with particular reference to studies conducted with young children in early years school settings.

3.3.3.1 The Direct Model

Direct intervention means that the therapist uses direct one-on-one or group intervention with the child or children alone or in the company of an educator. This service delivery model considers the number of student "cases" treated by therapists as part of a caseload and is focused on remediating an "impairment" following a

²¹ Workload approaches consider all the activities that therapists engage in. They look at the overall time spent by a therapist engaged in a variety of therapeutic activities, including travelling; documentation; meetings and liaison with teachers; using therapeutic strategies with children; assistive technology; and access arrangements (Polichino & Jackson, 2014). A workload model is not dependent on individual referrals of children which count as a caseload, but the whole school is the caseload.

referral to OT from a medical practitioner (Dunn, 1990; Weintrub & Kovshi, 2004). This model still appears to be common in most school-based services, and still appears to be dominant in most countries (Clough, 2018; Kaelin et al., 2019) including Europe, in spite of the fact that the literature has shown that models using collaborative consultation appear to provide additional benefits (McDougall et al., 2000; Missiuna et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2012).

Research on the use of a direct model demonstrated the child being pulled out of their natural environment to receive therapy, and that such therapy was often provided away from the classroom or, more so, from the school, in a medical or community facility (Spencer et al., 2006). However, direct intervention was also embedded in the classroom whereby it occurred in conjunction with consultative and even collaborative models of practice (Bazyk et al., 2009; Case Smith et al., 2013, 2014).

Studies that documented direct models of service delivery aimed to address and improve specific component skills. These include ones that have documented intervention mostly for fine motor, visual motor or handwriting skills (Case–Smith et al., 2014; Cram & Egan, 2015; Dreiling & Bundy 2003; Piller & Torrez, 2019; Ratzon et al., 2009; Wehrmann et al., 2006), but also for sensory processing skills (Barnes et al., 2003), socio-emotional skills (Case–Smith et al., 2013) and play (Kuhaneck et al., 2019). Other studies have reported occupational therapist's involvement in recommending environmental adaptations (Frolek Clarke & Polichino, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2019). Fine motor, visual motor and handwriting skills appear to be main areas targeted in direct intervention, which for many years have been areas identified as commonly catered for in occupational therapy intervention with positive results yielded from one-to-one direct therapy (Chu, 2017).

Fine motor skills reinforced through individual intervention were found to improve and, as a result, met objectives for children with mild motor impairments as well as emergent literacy functions in preschool children (Bazyk et al., 2009; Dreiling

& Bundy, 2003). First grade children with low handwriting legibility, who participated in programmes co-taught by teachers and occupational therapists both individually and in station work, improved their writing fluency through intensive practice, peer modelling and evaluation (Case Smith et al., 2014). A study that involved evaluation of a reading intervention programme considered reading as an important occupation, so it provided small group and individual weekly therapy together with therapist-teacher-parent collaboration. Whilst no gains were made on reading scores, a significant increase in perceived performance and satisfaction was registered, namely an increase in the children's mastery and frequency of reading (Grajo & Candler, 2016a). Although these interventions (Case Smith et al., 2014; Grajo & Candler, 2016b) were direct, they also included elements of consultation and collaboration. In first grade, visual motor skills also improved in those children who participated in weekly direct sessions provided by an occupational therapist in mainstream schools (Ratzon et al., 2009), whilst children with autism spectrum registered significant improvement when individual strategies, such as modelling, were used to improve the occupation of play (Kuhaneck et al., 2019).

In summary, most of the interventions documented above followed a direct approach, which yielded positive results. On the other hand, direct intervention was often accompanied by an element of consultation through use of an indirect model (Grajo et al., 2016b; Ohi et al., 2013). For this reason, it may be difficult to determine to what extent each model contributed to these positive results.

3.3.3.2 The Indirect Model

This is primarily a consultative model in which the therapist designs the intervention and trains teachers, parents and significant others, such as professionals, to implement it (Sandler, 1997). In this way, persons who have direct contact with the students during school routines can support the child. The Indirect Model has been shown to be as effective as direct therapy. A number of studies have documented the use of an indirect model of SBOT (Bayona et al., 2006;

Bazyk, 2009; Bellows et al., 2013; Case Smith et al., 2014; Donica, 2015; Dunn, 1990; Kemmis & Dunn, 1996; Reid et al., 2006) and this literature will now illustrate such gains.

Improved handwriting skills in school-aged children through weekly consultation between therapists and teachers were registered in some studies (Kemmis & Dunn, 1996; Donica, 2015) whilst other studies pointed out that a consultative approach with teachers to improve children's print handwriting in kindergarten was superior to direct intervention (Donica, 2015; Ohl et al., 2013). A consultative occupational therapy programme carried out with parents and teachers reported improvement in fine motor skills and written communication. Consultation involved the integration of strategies into school activities and ongoing monitoring of the child's functional gains with both direct and indirect intervention, which contributed to their fine motor skills (Bayona et al., 2006; Reid et al., 2006).

Gains in the gross motor abilities of 3- to 5-year-old children were registered after their participation in a programme conducted in a preschool classroom, where lessons were led by the class teacher (Bellows et al., 2012). Recommendations to train teachers, the provision of early intervention, address of service delivery issues and the promotion of awareness of OT services and their effectiveness were outcomes of these studies.

The evidence just presented indicates that an indirect model of practice was effective in improving children's participation in classroom occupations, such as handwriting; fine motor skills; sensory skills; gross motor skills; and play. Outcomes when using an indirect model were related to improvement of skills similar to the outcomes when using the direct model. Such gains made by teachers appear to be greater than those provided by individual therapy alone.

Whilst the literature just presented provides evidence to suggest that both direct and indirect models of SBOT are effective in meeting objectives for preschoolers (Dreiling & Bundy, 2003), use of a combined approach to service

delivery may yield a more effective outcome (Kingsley & Mailloux, 2013). It will now be important to explore the collaborative model in more detail to understand its level of contribution to SBOT.

3.3.3.3 Collaborative Consultation - Response to Intervention and the Tiered Model.

Collaborative consultation has been documented as early as 1996 in support of intervention in a child's natural environment (Kellgrew & Allen, 1996). The outcome of collaborative consultation is to identify the needs and develop interventions to support all students' participation, irrespective of the any individual's ability/disability, with an aim to change both the human and non-human environments (Villneuve, 2009). Collaborative problem solving has the potential to contribute to more educationally relevant outcomes, developing solutions that team members may overlook when acting alone (Villneuve, 2009). Collaboration and inclusion cannot be separated from each other, and the best models of inclusion embrace collaborative practices (Mitchell, 2014). This is an important factor for my study, which is set within an inclusive education setting.

The use of a collaborative model was identified in the literature as further strengthening the intervention through capacity building and as benefiting students, educators and therapists alike, not to mention time and financial savings (Missiuna et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2012). International research primarily using workload and collaborative approaches comes from the USA (Bazyk, 2019), Canada (Missiuna et al., 2012a), Switzerland (Echsel et al., 2019; Kaelin et al., 2019), England (Hasselbusch, 2015; Salazar, Riviera & Boyle, 2020), New Zealand (Tokolahi et al., 2016) and Ireland (Lynch et al., 2020). Therapists in the USA, have become involved in mental health promotion models of practice that support all school aged children (Bazyk, 2019; Bazyk et al., 2009, 2015; Bazyk & Tokolahi, 2020). The focus on collaborative models of intervention is in a workload rather than a caseload approach, and it involves the whole school as the case. This means that

by using a collaborative model, all the children in the school may be supported to succeed in their occupations and not just those diagnosed with a disability.

Evidence of collaborative practices in occupational therapy with reference to young children over the past 10 years is available, with fewer studies exploring the perceptions of educators when compared to those of occupational therapists. Such studies, carried out with a young childhood population in a kindergarten setting have provided evidence on their effectiveness (Bazyk et al., 2009; Christner, 2015; Hutton, 2009; Hutton & Soan, 2010; Hui et al., 2016; Priest & Waters, 2006; Worthen, 2010). The evidence provided by these studies will be discussed.

In a pilot project that evaluated occupational therapy in mainstream schools, occupational therapists worked alongside teaching assistants who focused on increasing the engagement and participation of children in different activities. This was done through situated learning opportunities that promoted sharing of occupational therapy knowledge and skills with teachers, which gave positive outcomes (Hutton, 2009). In another study within this same project, kindergarten staff received formal and informal training by an occupational therapist to work with all children in preschool. This took the form of workshops and lunchtime discussions, and it yielded positive results that identified improved early identification of problems in children and increased confidence in kindergarten staff in the execution of their job (Priest, 2006; Priest & Waters, 2007). This project used a combination of indirect and collaborative models within the school and in the classrooms.

The outcome of a critical appraisal on sensory-based interventions in a general education classroom showed that improvement in students' attention and performance occurred through sensory such intervention strategies, incorporating the seven senses. These interventions were delivered to whole classrooms, and thus involved all children, and not only those with identified difficulties (Worthen, 2010). These Studies have documented an effective way of supporting educators to

serve all students in their curricular activities; this can be achieved through web-based professional development for occupational therapists that could be accessed by educators at their convenience. This opportunity served to promote a better understanding of the role of the occupational therapist among educators (Christner, 2015).

Collaborative Consultation has often been used in combination with direct therapy. One study (Kennedy Behr et al., 2013) investigated the use of a two-part intervention, which involved collaborative consultation in the form of occupational performance coaching and individual intervention for children with development coordination disorder. This was done to enable their play skills in preschool. It yielded improvements in such skills and also in occupational performance, as was registered by the COPM²² and play observation scales.

Whilst research has shown that direct intervention is effective for children experiencing challenges in areas such as handwriting and fine motor skills, remedial sensory interventions appear to be less effective in addressing sensory challenges in schools. After a panel of experts reviewed the literature on the topic, a clinical reasoning framework that was developed found that knowledge exchange as well as coaching, together with the application of universal design principles, may be more suitable to address sensory differences and optimise participation of children with autism spectrum disorder (Ashburner et al., 2014). Gains for both students and educators were recorded. This was done through classroom-based sensory interventions delivered through collaboration with teachers who documented the enhanced identification of sensory challenges; the learning of new ideas; increased concentration; and reduced bad behaviours on the part of the students with ASD. Challenges in using such an approach were recorded, such as including time for collaboration and staff constraints (Mills & Chapparo, 2017).

²² Canadian Occupational Performance Measure

One other study showed that through a combination of sensorimotor education delivered through a one-day workshop, in conjunction with eight sessions of occupational performance coaching, outcomes were registered as gainful. These outcomes included: improved teacher perceptions of their performance, satisfaction and classroom management for students with disruptive classroom behaviours (Hui et al., 2016). These studies show that collaborative models may support the educator and develop the child's individual skills.

Evidence on the effectiveness of a collaborative model was brought to light through a recent study that looked into teachers' perceptions on a new CIRCLE Collaboration framework (2011). This was developed in the Scottish context and was underpinned by a collaborative model (Maciver et al., 2019b). It aimed to explore teachers' satisfaction with this model, which provided a useful innovative bank of resources for early years classroom teachers and school personnel supporting their inclusive practices. This enabled them to reflect on key issues related to children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Fundamentally, this model translated knowledge from theory to practical classroom strategies. The outcomes of this study were that teachers perceived such a framework vital in reducing their reliance on specialist support, increasing their awareness of areas of challenge and supports, strategies and the benefits of collaborative working.

The evidence just discussed in all the above studies is quite diverse and widespread, proving the effectiveness of a collaborative model of practice in developing the occupations and participation of children with diverse needs. However, such evidence came from single studies that were not tried over a prolonged period of time, leading one to want additional evidence on the transferability and reliability of the findings to other contexts.

Evidence from large scale studies on collaborative practice is available and documented in the literature. One example is the Partnering for Change model – P4C project (Missiuna et al., 2012a) - which is the only model of its kind which has

been extensively researched over a long period of time, and evidence for this model was found in at least eight research articles (Campbell et al., 2012; Kennedy et al., 2019; Missiuna et al., 2012a; Missiuna et al., 2012b; Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015; Missiuna et al., 2016; Pollock et al., 2017; Wilson & Harris, 2018). Evidence on the P4C model and others will be presented to illustrate the three-tiered model, in section 3.3.3.3.2 (Bazyk et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2020; Missiuna et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2016)

These studies have provided evidence on collaborative models that have identified some core benefits of using such a model: capacity building; reduced waiting lists; earlier identification of difficulties; and knowledge translation for both teachers and therapists. Collaborative models are presented in the literature as ones that use a workload approach and a tiered framework. The latter has born out of a response-to-intervention framework. What follows is a discussion and evidence for this framework, followed by a critique of other best practice tiered models.

Response to intervention (RtI) is a multitiered preventative and support evidence-based system, through which assessment, monitoring and intervention facilitate the performance of students in school occupations. It started out as a general education prevention model based in the USA, and uses a data-driven, curriculum-based approach (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2012; National Centre on Response to Intervention, 2020). It emerged from the 2004 re-authorisation of IDEA. RtI was initially developed as an approach to identify the needs of and to intervene in supporting children with learning disabilities (IDEA, 2004; Preston et al., 2015). Its use in positive behaviour support for pre-school children (Bayat et al., 2010) is also documented.

RtI involves an evaluation of each tier prior to progression from one to the next, and serves to closely monitor how pupils respond to different types of instruction in order to determine any intervention needs. It is documented as being a method of service delivery in many school districts and local authorities in the United

States (Bazyk et al., 2009; Bazyk, 2019). It has been used more recently even in the United Kingdom (Cahill et al., 2008). However, it appears that occupational therapists' role and contribution to RtI is not widely documented and the number of students who receive OT support through RtI is limited, even more so in the international arena of intervention with young children (Cahill et al., 2013; McGuire, 2012).

One occupational therapy study has documented the positive outcomes of the use of this model in improving fine motor, visual motor and handwriting skills in general education kindergarten pupils (Ohl et al., 2013). Other studies have mostly investigated the perceptions of occupational therapists on their role in RtI teams, and how they could support schools and children through this framework (Cahill & Lopez Reyna, 2013; Grandisson et al., 2019; Reeder et al., 2010). Some main findings that came out of these studies, and that speak to the challenges and advantages of using RtI in school teams include: the limited knowledge of stakeholders about occupational therapy in the school system; teachers having misconceptions about what occupational therapists could offer; and therapists being expected to "fix" problems, rather than collaborate with educators. Some other important factors that were identified through this literature were the need for regular occupational therapy presence in the schools and classrooms; the importance of human resources; training of both occupational therapists and educators; and the need for occupational therapists to address "participation-related challenges" with all children in school, especially those with ASD²³ (Grandisson et al, 2019).

Response to Intervention was identified as a framework with the potential to support school personnel working with the majority of students (80%) through whole class instruction and the use of universal design concepts, those at risk needing additional support (15%) as well as the children who have individual education plans

²³ Autism Spectrum Disorder

(5%) and require more intensive intervention (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2012). It is a tiered model that provides a promising way to not only deliver, but also to evaluate intervention in schools (Cahill et al., 2014), and it serves as a template for other tiered models that will now be discussed.

Tiered models of service delivery are recommended practice in the World Federation of Occupational Therapy Guidelines for School-Based Services for Children and Youth (WFOT, 2016). International evidence shows that three tiers make up the tiered intervention of such a model, which is used across different educational systems around the world (Bazyk, 2019; Chu, 2017; Ohi et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2020; Hutton et al 2016).

The tiered model is built on the Response to Intervention model and other health promotion models that have adopted this way of conceptualising service delivery beyond direct, remedial interventions. It is depicted in Figure 3, and will now be defined. It is important to note from Figure 3, that Tier 1 intervention is universal for all the children, and intervention in line with Tiers 2 and 3 is provided over and above that of Tier 1.

Tier 1 is about universal intervention, which includes core instruction and intervention to the whole class. It is about education for all within the general curriculum. Principles of Universal Design²⁴ (Meyer et al., 2014) for learning are used by teachers, therapists and administrators in both the school and classroom to enable children to access the curriculum;

Tier 2 constitutes targeted intervention for children at risk, and may include supplemental intervention to groups of children with similar needs and who have not been served by a universal approach. This tier involves differentiation of the curriculum;

²⁴ This involves providing multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression to allow students better access to the curriculum. It includes the use of a variety of strategies, amongst others options, for self-regulation; physical action; perception; sustaining effort and persistence; communication; and expression.

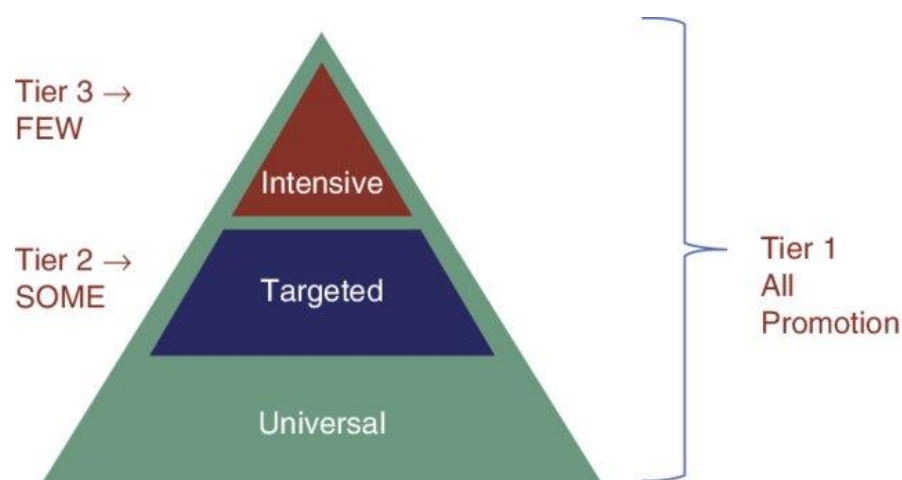
Tier 3 involves accommodation, meaning intensive intervention on an individual basis for children with identified additional needs. This involves individual education-oriented interventions. Tier 3 is usually for those students who have been diagnosed with more complex needs and who usually have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

The tiers work in a way that allows an overlap between the intervention provided by each tier, hence a child may benefit from universal intervention at Tier 1, targeted intervention at Tier 2 and intensive intervention at Tier 3 at the same time. In a tiered approach, direct, indirect as well as collaborative consultation models of practice are used. The focus, however, is primarily on collaborative consultation that promotes knowledge exchange and capacity building in the delivery of interventions (Lynch et al., 2020; Missiuna et al., 2012a).

I chose to depict tiered intervention (Figure 3) as it was done by Bazyk (2019) because of its clarity in depicting the universal Tier 1 intervention. Tier 1 includes all children with, without, and at-risk of disability and/or global health challenges (the green area depicts the whole school population).

Figure 3

The Tiered Model



(Reproduced with permission from Bazyk, 2020)

Tier 1, with its emphasis on health promotion and prevention, needs to be applied in all 3 tiers. Children with disabilities will benefit from services that focus on health promotion, in addition to strategies that minimize symptoms associated with any disability or disorder.

Some studies have produced evidence-based frameworks and models for occupational therapy that go beyond the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, and that have the potential to support children's participation in schools, using workload models that concentrate on collaboration in the school context. What follows is a discussion on research related to three of these workload models:

Partnering for Change developed in Canada, North America;

Every Moment Counts, developed in the USA, North America;

The School Inclusion Model developed in Ireland, Europe.

Partnering for Change -P4C- (Missiuna et al., 2012a) was a major SBOT research project using a whole-school approach. Based on collaborative consultation, it was designed and delivered by Occupational Therapists. It evolved into an innovative service delivery model and was piloted between 2008 and 2009, its implementation following between 2009 to 2011. It was then evaluated in 2015. This tiered model had four cornerstones, hence the 4 C's: building capacity; collaboration; coaching; and the contexts of the school and the classroom. At its outset, it focused on improving school-based occupational performance areas of children with DCD, but later it was extended for use with all children.

Prolonged data collection and a rigorous mixed research designs characterised the studies that evaluated the project. (Campbell et al., 2012; Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015; Pollock et al., 2017; Wilson & Harris, 2017). Key elements were identified through these studies that considered both teachers and therapists' perceptions. It was found that the project supported all students' learning. The teachers appreciated the flexibility and variety in the occupational therapy services available and the increased accessibility to the therapist, who was present

in the classroom and became more knowledgeable about the school system, the curriculum and everyday classroom practices. Teachers reported a high level of satisfaction with this model, which means they were satisfied overall with the service and were able to carry out recommendations that were helpful in the classroom. This model also empowered teachers to recognise motor difficulties in the children. They made changes to their classroom environment more readily and their confidence in speaking to parents about motor problems increased (Missiuna et al., 2012a). Teachers understood and valued the presence of occupational therapy when a collaborative relationship between the two professionals prevailed. Also significant were feelings of growth, empowerment and satisfaction reported by the therapists who acknowledged that P4C was a viable and effective model with the potential to support all students in the classroom.

Studies identified that when compared with a traditional model of practice, the P4C model allowed therapists to support more students and enhanced teacher and parent knowledge and efficiency in supporting the children/students (Campbell et al., 2012; Pollock et al., 2017). Two studies documented the experiences of occupational therapists and teachers in collaborating in schools through the Partnering for Change (P4C) Model. Teachers' views about the model showed their preference for P4C, as they learned new strategies (Wilson & Harris, 2017). The therapists also reported their experience as being positive and rewarding. They developed a stronger connection to the school, and felt that they could provide services that left an impact. They were more sustainable and their confidence improved by time, as well as with the support of their fellow occupational therapists. The fact that both could cater for all, rather than just specific students, was an added strength of using this model. Both the teachers and occupational therapists, who were able to support a variety of students in the classroom's daily routine (Campbell et al., 2012; Wilson & Harris, 2017), concurred on this point. The challenges that the therapists voiced related mainly to difficulties in moving away from traditional

intervention, and the temptation to fall back to practices that had been used to provide one-to-one intervention. Key outcomes of these studies included the capacity building that occurred, namely through the strengthening of the knowledge base of teachers.

Every Moment Counts (Bazyk, 2013) is an ongoing mental health promotion and prevention public health model, using a whole-school approach to how OTs can address mental health in children and youth. The goal is to help OTs embrace 'mental health roots' in paediatric practice by promoting mental health throughout the day in schools. This project ran between 2012 and 2015 and is still ongoing (Bazyk, personal communication 2020; Bazyk, 2013). It was also designed to promote knowledge translation of a public health approach to mental health in a US context. It was then evaluated through a study that involved a six-month capacity-building process among paediatric occupational therapists through their participation in a community of practice (Bazyk et al., 2018). Practitioner knowledge, confidence and renewed energy of therapists, as well as empowerment of and advocacy by leaders to effect change, were some of the qualitative outcomes of this study in addressing children's mental health within a multi-tiered public health framework

The focus on services embedded in natural contexts to promote positive engagement and interaction between children during all school activities was documented in the literature (Kellgrew & Allen, 1996; Bazyk et al., 2009, 2018). The outcomes of this project have supported the development of model programme tool kits: statewide and nationwide dissemination of findings through online resources (the projects web site²⁵; professional seminars; follow-up coaching; and communities of practice).

The School Inclusion Model is a therapeutic support model for mainstream schools, special schools and early years settings, involving unique collaboration

²⁵ <https://everymomentcounts.org/>

between the Irish Department of Health and the Department of Education and Children in Dublin (Lynch et al., 2020). This is an ongoing project that began in 2018, using a workload-capacity-building model, with the involvement of 75 schools and the same number of early years settings. A team of 31 speech and occupational therapists, supported by clinical leads, undertook the project. Subsequently, a number of positive impacts were observed, including teachers' increased ability to differentiate instruction and identify students' needs. Another notable impact was positive academic engagement of teachers with students, together with more positive interactions. The potential of the project to circumvent waiting lists for therapy in the community and the in-school nature of provision were also positive outcomes from the parents' perspectives. Challenges that were reported by the therapists included ones arising from the ongoing management structure, including confusion over reporting lines and role differentiation.

One can therefore conclude that the Response to Intervention and three tiered models are good examples of the use of a whole school/class approach to occupational therapy intervention, and they show how collaborative efforts between teachers and OTs are possible and fruitful. To end this section, it would be gainful to summarise what the literature identifies as the key building blocks of collaborative consultation: intervention in the natural environment for *all* children, with a focus on teacher-therapist collaboration aimed at building the capacity of professionals working with the child.

3.3.3.4. Strengths and Challenges in Using the Three Models

This section will summarise the knowledge and gaps in the literature on the use of the different models of service delivery: direct, indirect and collaborative consultation. Studies presented earlier have shown that these models of service delivery may have positive outcomes individually in students' specific and fundamental skills, such as visual, fine and gross motor skills; play; handwriting and sensory skills, which are important for young children. But there is also evidence to

suggest that combined approaches are equally, if not more, gainful (Missiuna et al., 2012a; Lynch et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that teaching specific skills directly to a child, accompanied by a focus on teaching and consultation with educational personnel, appears to be the main strength of individual direct, one-to-one, and indirect intervention respectively, but this may be short lived if it is unaccompanied by capacity building of educators and parents. The strengths of using a direct model of intervention lie in the improvement in specific skills in individual or groups of children (Case Smith et al., 2014; Dreiling & Bundy, 2003; Dunn, 1990; Kennedy-Behir et al., 2013; Grajo & Candler, 2016a, 2016b ; Ohl et al., 2013). Studies have provided evidence that using a collaborative model of practice that builds the capacity of educators scaffolds on the educator's knowledge, so that it is not only one child who benefits. The educator can transfer that knowledge to the classroom and use it to support other children.

Collaborative consultation with educators to support children's participation may be more cost effective in the long run (Missiuna et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2020; Bazyk & Tokolahi., 2020). Collaboration in SBOT has the potential to make further improvement, not only in one child or specific educators, but it may contribute to supporting a whole school as well as different schools as educators take the knowledge they have acquired with them when moving from one school to another. Evidence for direct intervention exists, as we have seen earlier in this section. However, integrating collaborative consultation in addition to direct intervention may still be absent in school-based occupational therapy practices worldwide. As seen from the studies just presented, a collaborative model focuses on capacity building of the educators in the school, providing more opportunity for teacher-therapist collaboration, increased effectiveness and better outcomes for the children (Jackson et al., 2006; 2009).

In the tiered model, all the children are potential clients, and therefore, those that are at risk, or do not have a definitive diagnosis or have a hidden disability, stand to benefit too from such intervention that addresses the whole classroom. This is why this model is ideal for use in early years settings, as it serves not only those children with a diagnosis, but all children, some of whom may be at risk of failure in school occupations. For this reason, the preventative aspect is a strength of the tiered model.

In the early years, as identified in a paper that synthesised the current knowledge on occupational therapy in preschools, service delivery models that were collaborative, or that used response to intervention, were recommended more often than the traditional direct model (Jasmin et al., 2017). In this synthesis, collaborative consultation with teachers and intervention with the whole class in kindergarten settings was identified as the most frequent type of intervention.

Bearing on the barriers to using a collaborative model that requires the consideration of a work versus a case load are employment restrictions, especially when therapists are employed by health authorities, which, more often than not, benchmark the efficiency and output of therapists on the number of cases seen. A reframing of practice in that workload models needs to be presented and explained to Management, to counteract the notion that efficiency is not about the time taken to see a given number of “cases”.

The cost effectiveness of applying a workload model as opposed to a case load model in terms of time and resources has been identified (Missiuna et al., 2012a; Bazyk et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2020). Research studies have reported that therapists perceive that they do not have enough time and resources; this is a three-pronged issue: too much to do; a shortage of therapists; and a lack of non-human resources, such as space and equipment (Rens & Joosten, 2013). Therapists' desire to move towards a workload model was evident in a study by Seruya &

Garfinkel (2020), but barriers to this included scant support from administrators; limited time and procedural knowledge; and decreased advocacy skills.

The knowledge on this topic that has been evidenced from research is promising in that it shows that collaborative consultation has been identified as a good model to use with the early years and young children, and that it is being used more than with older childhood populations. The main gaps in the literature, I would say, are that the evidence on collaborative SBOT contributing to young children's occupations is not only very limited, but lacks consideration of other stakeholders' viewpoints. Apart from teachers and occupational therapists, the views of relevant support staff, kindergarten educators, learning support educators, administrators as well as parents and the children themselves are mostly missing.

In addition, when evaluating the literature, a clear demarcation of indirect vs collaborative models was not identified at times. Whilst consultation appeared to be key in most literature sources that studied indirect and collaborative models of intervention, it appears that the distinguishing factor between the two was the equal knowledge sharing and contribution to intervention that occurred between therapist and teacher (Canchild, 2015) as well as intervention for *all* students (Missiuna et al., 2016) in their natural environment.

In conclusion, there are a number of multi-tiered models that have emerged in recent years, with a clear evidence-base off effectiveness. Although these models differ, they have core common features such as their focus on the whole school, children's strengths rather than their impairments, health promotion and prevention rather than only intervention, relationship building and knowledge translation between stakeholders and capacity building. For my study, adaption of an existing model like P4C was considered. However the need to explore a model that emerged from the Maltese context, taking into consideration informed responses from the stakeholders, was imperative. The aim in this thesis was to draw from the evidence that exists from many multitiered models to explore the goodness of fit for

a Maltese context. So no one single model was chosen when designing this study. Additional evidence on collaborating in schools will now be presented.

3.3.4 Collaboration in Schools: The Evidence around Other Models and Approaches

A number of studies have documented the experiences of collaboration between teachers and occupational therapists (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008; Kennedy & Stewart, 2012; Rens & Joosten, 2013). These studies, which did not specifically use a tiered model, will now be discussed with a focus on the strengths and challenges identified through this research.

The importance of occupational therapists being present in the classroom and the context was supported by evidence from a study using collaborative action research in Pakistan (Kramer Roy et al., 2020). The sense of community that developed between the teachers and therapists in Kramer Roy's study was also a significant finding in a study by Campbell et al. (2012). These studies identified that occupational therapists needed to understand teachers and educational pedagogy and curricula for collaborative intervention to be effective (Huang et al. 2011; Mills & Chapparo, 2017). I state this namely because this would place educators and therapists on a more level playing field with each bringing their expertise to the table. This is an important factor to support each one's professional identity and enhance professional collaboration.

Some studies investigated the perceptions and experiences of Australian teachers and occupational therapists working in school-based occupational therapy community programmes, as well as providing services for kindergarten and school-aged children (Kennedy & Stewart, 2012; Rens & Joosten, 2013).

One study showed that whilst occupational therapists knew what collaboration was all about and that it provided benefits to teachers, therapists, children and their families, they admitted that it was not happening as often as they

wanted it to (Kennedy & Stewart, 2011, 2012). On the other hand, the other study indicated factors that could support improved collaborative practices (Rens & Joosten, 2013). These included the need for occupational therapists to spend more time in the school; build relationships; understand the child in their occupational context; explaining their role; and making more realistic recommendations in line with the teachers' role and responsibilities. The study evinced teachers' frequent frustration with the occupational therapists assuming the expert role without acknowledging their perspective, as well as when they were excluded from the therapy process when it occurred outside the school setting, such as in community therapy sessions; this was often by the parents, who did not inform the teacher about such opportunities. Overall, both these studies support the positive outcomes of providing collaborative services.

An earlier study identified that teachers and occupational therapists were collaborating in the classroom by jointly developing goals and monitoring interventions and progress. As collaborative practices increased the teachers' perceptions of the contribution OT's gave to skill, development also increased. The number of IEP objectives met, however, were found to decrease, potentially because the collaborative process gave rise to more scrutiny and rigour in evaluating these goals (Barnes & Turner, 2001).

The use of methods such as coaching and occupational performance coaching (OPC), particularly with mothers, has been documented in out-of-school settings with positive results (Foster et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2012, 2020). Although not yet recognised as evidence-based methods in the school context (Miller Kuhaneck & Watling, 2017), occupational performance coaching has the potential to support the effectiveness of occupational therapy intervention in the school since this has the potential to have positive outcomes in the development of children's skills and their occupations in other contexts (Graham et al., 2012, 2016).

The literature on participation has provided evidence of the importance of maternal education in supporting young children's participation across different settings, making collaborative consultation a promising endeavour as an approach to support mothers, particularly through coaching settings (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; Guichard & Grande, 2017).

Earlier in this chapter, when exploring the participation of young children in school, barriers were exposed: educators' lack of knowledge and training ; insufficient maternal education and mothers' self-efficacy. Key enablers included engagement; involvement with children; knowledge of educators; the suitability of activities and choice; and voice and enjoyment for children when participating in school life.

The evidence just presented shows that collaborative consultation has the potential to overcome barriers to children's participation. Some essential components have been identified, whether or not a tiered framework is used: spending time in the school that contributes to relationship-building; understanding the child in their occupational context; and the development of more realistic, educationally relevant goals by both the teacher and the therapist. The tiered framework may, however, provide the right stage set for collaborative consultation to take place.

3.3.5 Concluding Reflections: Participation, Occupation and School Based OT.

The importance of occupational therapy practitioners staying focused on participation has been discussed (Frolek, Clark & Polichino, 2020). My views on participation-based occupational therapy are that it is occupation-focused and means that children attend and are involved, being meaningfully engaged in a real life context, in this case, within the school setting. It rests on the premise that real life experiences enable children to learn new activities and develop skills that facilitate inclusion (Palisano et al., 2011). Thirty years ago, the literature documented (Dunn, 1990) that when occupational therapists become involved with students in their

natural environments, like the classroom, they encounter more opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills. This is still relevant today.

More recently, Kingsley and Mailloux (2013) also support the concept of use of natural environments as a focal point in SBOT. The reason for this is that occupational therapists identify the children's strengths and needs within the real-life context of the school and, together with their educators, can inform the identification and intervention processes with a focus on occupation and participation.

In keeping with the Social Model of Disability, the change proposed in current literature to move away from "fixing children" (Gallagher et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2020) assumes the establishment of inter-professional collaborative practices between educators and occupational therapists. They should concentrate on adapting the physical and social environments in the classroom, rather than focus on the perceived deficits of the child. This means that the focal point is the collaboration itself between the educators and therapists to support all children in participating in the way that works best for them (Missiuna et al., 2016, WFOT, 2016). This can be attained also by adapting the activities that form part of the child's daily routine and providing resources and support for the educators and parents, particularly the mothers. Therefore, the participation of children in school can be achieved by more inter-professional collaboration between education and health professionals through relationship-building, knowledge exchange and increased capacity building.

3.3.6 Conclusion

This review has provided an overview of the main concepts of this study: participation, occupation and school-based occupational therapy within inclusive education. SBOT, using a workload and tiered approach, has the potential to support children's occupational participation in school through evidence-based models of practice. Integrated service delivery, i.e. providing services in the child's natural environment while emphasising a strengths-based model focused on

occupation, appears to be a good way forward. Vision 2025 (AOTA, 2017a) states that “Occupational therapy maximizes health, well-being and quality of life for all people, populations, and communities through effective solutions that facilitate participation in everyday living”.

The chapter that follows will describe the methodology, one that was adopted for this study. It aims to support the vision being discussed by exploring the development of a model of school-based practice for Malta to support children’s participation in everyday school life.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter will begin by reminding the reader of the research questions. It will then present ontological and epistemological perspectives that have guided this research and will discuss the decisions made in relation to the design: my choice of a qualitative paradigm, a longitudinal single instrumental case study approach with elements of action theory. An overview of the different methods and rationale behind the choice of methods that align with the case study and action theory will then be presented. It will include the strengths and limitations of this combination from a theoretical perspective. Details of the sample and recruitment of the participants will follow, together with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data generation and implementation of the study design followed by my approach to data analysis will form the penultimate part of this chapter. A discussion around ethical issues, including credibility and trustworthiness, and a summative conclusion will end the chapter.

4.1 Background

My work, a study conducted in 2 sequential phases, is about school occupations, participation and school based occupational therapy studied through case study methodology to inform occupational therapy practice (Hercegovic .et al., 2019).The use of such as approach appears to be missing in the literature and so my study may offer an opportunity to apprehend the value of using such an approach to understand this area of practice.The following is a reminder of the research questions as outlined in the introduction:

- What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in?
- What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in the school and classroom settings?

- How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations?

What follows is the methodological framework, that is, the ontology and epistemology and how these relate to my study. It will be followed by an overview of my choice of case study methodology as the overarching and main methodological approach and action theory significant for implementing the school based occupational therapy intervention.

4.2 Methodological Framework: Ontology and Epistemology

The paradigm adopted for my study was a qualitative one seeking to interpret and capture the complexity of the matter under study and is informed by a transactional, OS perspective. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2005) qualitative research is

“A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self...qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world”

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 p.3-4).

The ontology and epistemology for this study will now be discussed.

4.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical study of reality, the nature of being and becoming (Poster, 1996). My research adopted a relativist and interpretist ontology, dealing with the multiple realities of children and their occupations within the school and the wider educational systems (Stake, 1995). The primary values behind such an ontology are the understanding of personal experiences of individuals and communities, such as the school community. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) define relativist ontology as reality being a finite subjective experience. In this context,

reality is all about the subjective experience of educators, parents, children in the context they are being studied in, namely the school (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

This relativist ontology takes into consideration shifting realities as well as socially constructed realities. These shifting realities in the context of my study, refer to the school being in a constant state of change because of the turnover of educators, new and revised school policies always being created and implemented, as well as the different children and combination of children who are always on a trajectory of change as their learning develops and evolves in the same classroom along the school year and in the different classrooms every year. My study, that involved studying children's engagement in occupations that are bounded within a social and cultural system, was situated within a social constructivist paradigm (Merriam, 1991; 2009; Stake, 1995) rather than a positivist one. I chose an interpretivist and relativist paradigm as opposed to a realist one (Yin, 2017). Social constructivism refers to the different realities experienced and interpreted by the different stakeholders in relation to time, place and person. Working in a school and the day-to-day intricacies between school personnel, parents and the environment expose multiple facets of the same problem. The context and the environment - the classroom and the school - were crucial for my research.

4.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how to get to know, understand and learn about the subject under study. It is a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. Although I considered a positivist paradigm (Yin, 2017) that might have answered some aspects of my research questions, I came to the conclusion that for the purpose of my study, such an approach would fail to capture the complexity of my subject under study. A realist approach to my study that mostly considers measuring elements of a "case" was not considered adequate to address my research questions. For the purposes of answering the exploratory research

questions outlined above, a qualitative paradigm was deemed more suitable than a quantitative one, as the latter's focus on numerical data was considered too reductionistic and would have not captured the necessary data to inform my research questions. Furthermore experimental designs would not provide adequate evidence as a basis for action (Simons 2009). The scope of this work was not statistical research aimed at producing outcomes generalisable to all populations (Thomas, 2015).

The characteristics of qualitative research appeared to be well suited for my study and included relying on text as opposed to numbers, developing a holistic account of my subject under study that involved understanding the nature of children's occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation in a school context. I needed to gather data in a natural setting and used myself as a key instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2007). I wanted an approach that would allow me to explore, understand and make sense of a breath of perspectives.

In keeping with a qualitative paradigm, different methodologies were considered for my study such as phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory. These will be briefly discussed. Phenomenology was considered but not deemed as most suitable because my research questions were not just seeking to understand participants lived experiences. I discarded grounded theory as since school based OT was a new phenomenon and had not yet been developed it was my scope to generate a theory but to explore the topic. I also considered ethnography. However it was not deemed to be suitable as a methodology for understanding the aspects of my case that involved an action oriented and an applied component. Nevertheless it was important for me to be immersed in the setting of my study, the school and observe daily transactions that occurred as well as also be a participant observer and gain close up descriptions of the context.

I must emphasise that a case study approach does not only equate with qualitative research (Simons, 2009). Case study methodology can be both

qualitative and/or quantitative. The choice of a qualitative case study was made as it was the one that was deemed mostly fit for the purpose of my research question not only to understand my “case” but “to capture the complexity of innovation and meet the needs of decision makers” (Simons, 2009, P.15). Elements of action theory, namely learning through action and reflection were adopted and considered important for the intervention phase of my study.

In conclusion a qualitative approach was needed because “Qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject at hand. It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 3-4). My research topic, was a new one for Malta but also important for other countries (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2003; Morse, 1991) and the data generated would potentially inform practice. I will now go on to describe the methodology and approaches used in this study: case study methodology and action theory.

4.3 Methodological Approaches

Within an interpretive framework, I considered different qualitative approaches that have already been discussed in the previous section 4.2.2., but came to the decision that case study research offered the best methodological approach. I could relate to the concept of the case study put forward primarily by Merriam (1991) and Stake (1995) which resonated better with my study, hence my choice to go with their tradition which is more qualitative. Action theory came in as an additional approach for the 2nd phase of the study that involved an active component: an iterative school based occupational therapy intervention for Malta.

4.3.1 Case Study

There are various types of case study research that have been categorised in different ways by case study experts.. For example exploratory, explanatory and descriptive (Yin, 1989); evaluation case study; ethnographic case study; theory-led

or theory-generated case study (Simons, 2009). I will now elaborate on case study methodology according to Stake's tradition (1995).

Stake (1995) proposed three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. The Intrinsic case study is used to understand the particulars of a single case. Such a case is studied for its intrinsic interest. An Instrumental case design provides insight into an issue and is selected to increase one's understanding of the object of interest. A collective case study refers to an instrumental case study which is studied as multiple nested systems. The type of case study that I chose for my research was an Instrumental case study as it seemed to be the best fit with my research aim. Although I as a researcher had a genuine interest in the "case", my inquiry fit a particular purpose. The scope of my study was to explore a research question and gain insight into an issue or topic. In my case, this was children's occupations and participation leading to understanding and developing school-based occupational therapy for Malta.

Case studies can be considered single or multiple/collective (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2016). I chose to consider my study as a single case study rather than a multiple one, although it consisted of multiple aspects that could have constituted a collective case study. I chose not to view these as multiple cases in order to retain a holistic perspective of the case. The exploration of school occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation in them served to inform the development of a model of school-based occupational therapy for the Maltese context, and for that reason were viewed as all contributory to a single case within the one selected school.

Merriam (1988) cites essential properties of case study method, namely that it "maintains deep connections to core values and intentions" (Hyett et al., 2014, p.2) and that it is "particularistic, descriptive and heuristic" (Merriam, 2009, p.46). For my work this means that the particular focus was on understanding occupation in the school context by providing rich descriptions of the educators', parents' and

children's experiences and views of occupation and participation. Understanding the holistic nature of school-based practice in supporting children's participation was essential for my study. By being immersed in the setting, "the Case" school context would allow me to live through the personal stories of these diverse people by observing and interacting with them; Merriam (1988) also refers to case study as being inductive - revealing new relationships, concepts and understanding. In my research this pertained to an understanding of the enablers and barriers of children's participation in school and the nature of collaborative practices between therapists and educators.

Having reviewed the design approaches, it became clear that for the purposes of this study, the best decision was to undertake an instrumental case study longitudinal design. A further decision was taken as to how it would be written and presented in line with particular characteristics (Merriam, 1988) - descriptive, interpretative or evaluative. Descriptive and interpretative ways of presenting my findings were considered most suited. My case study yielded a rich picture through thick descriptions of the findings in an educational context that were interpreted by myself through ongoing reflection. According to Thomas (2016) "thick description captures the essence of interpretative analyses in its synthesis of reporting, reflecting and meaning making" (Thomas 2016, P. 234).

My study may also be viewed as a longitudinal, as opposed to a cross – sectional, case study, since it evolved over time. Time was a factor in my study as it was expected that things would change over time through the process of implementing the intervention. I could identify from stakeholders' perspectives any changes that took place along my time from inception of my study to the end.

Thomas, a case study theorist in his explanation of the case study, speaks about the practical knowledge which helps one make sense of particular situations based on one's own experience and although generalizability has been an area of concern on the other hand the core of case study is "an understanding presented

from another's horizon of meaning, but understood from one's own" (Thomas, 2011, p.32).

My study sought to capture the perspectives of the different participants with multiple meanings and their different opinions and perspectives is what illuminated my subject. Simons (2009) captures what I consider the essentials of epistemological underpinnings for my study by defining a case study approach as "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system" (p.21).

Case study research in contrast to other approaches offered a certain amount of flexibility (Hyett et al., 2014), which I deemed to be conducive to studying a school. Complex social situations like those found in a school context, can be understood by deep immersion in the "case". In my study, this in depth exploration of childhood occupations in the school to inform a novel service, may be considered a benefit (Simons, 2009) as it has potential to contribute to future policy and practice which is inkeeping with my third research question that centres around an intervention aimed at changing practice.

Limitation of case study research include the following: It is often subjective, situation specific and time consuming yielding a large volume of data that may be a challenge to analyse (Simons, 2009). My study design was planned to span over one whole school year and this may be considered a limiting factor. Case study is grounded in daily life realities that are often messy (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001) and hence this may pose a challenge for the researcher. The next section will now present how a case study approach was congruent with my conceptual framework for my study.

4.3.1.1 Case Study Methodology and the Conceptual Framework for my Study

The core concepts of this study are participation and OS which have been outlined in chapter 1. Participation has been defined as the involvement in life

situations. OS forms the theoretical basis to the study of occupation, namely gaining an understanding on the nature, form, function and meaning, as well as what enables and impedes the execution of occupations. Occupational scientists are concerned with the way people engage in patterns of occupation. Case study methodology provides a way of exploring the particulars of such occupations by addressing the practical day-to-day activities of individuals and/or organisations in context so as to explore complexity in action (Jones & Hocking, 2015).

The conceptual framework has been outlined in Chapter 2 as consisting of three pillars: Bronfenbrenner's Bio- Ecological Model, The Social Model of Disability and the Canadian Model of Occupational Enablement (CMOP-E). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model considers the transactions between the child, the significant others and the context: case study method is used to develop a better understanding of individuals in relation to its wider context (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2015). Occupations are best studied in the place where they occur and cannot be understood outside their context (Jonasdottir et al., 2018); likewise, knowledge is gained from studying persons' interactions in their physical space (Stake, 1995).

Whilst the nature of occupational therapy with its focus on the "client" at the centre is unique to every case, case study research enables the researcher to go beyond the individual client and to consider a setting as the 'client' -almost like a collective client –for my study this was the school. Case study methodology is hence supportive of the social model of disability to understand the environment, rather than the individual, as an agent for change.

In conclusion, the identification of the unit of analysis in case study research is essential and for this study I chose a single unit, one whole school (Thomas, 2015), a single as opposed to a multiple case study. This particular study involved one chosen school, one real life bounded system that had many facets to it (Creswell, 2007): childhood occupations, the enablers and barriers to participation and the potential development of a model of school based occupational therapy in

school. The aspects of the “case” of main interest to me in my study were related to occupation, participation and school-based practices.

Following all these justifications on design, the following design decisions were established:

1. To recruit one school and hence the reason why my study is considered a single case study.
2. To implement a sequential two phased study with the first phase informing the second phase. The first phase explored occupations and the enablers and barriers to children’s participation in these occupations. In the second phase, the data gathered from the first phase would be used to construct and implement an iterative occupational therapy intervention. All these aspects constituted my “case”.
3. To use multiple methods. This included for phase 1: A field diary/research journal, observations, interviews, focus groups, and other documented evidence such as children’s photos. For phase 2, these consisted of intervention logs, a field diary/research journal, observations, interviews and focus groups, other documents such as reports, emails and social media logs. A reflective diary was kept throughout both phases as well as a file with any significant documents related to the research process that were then analysed for their content.

What now follows is an overview of action theory to give a theoretical panorama of the approach and its significance to my study. Whilst a case study design was perceived to be the most suitable to address my overall research topic and questions, action theory was chosen to support Phase 2 of my study.

4.3.2 Action Theory

Within a qualitative paradigm, action theory is said to address complex, real life problems and experiences and it is value oriented (Mukherji & Albon, 2014). Action theory for my study refers to an action research approach in

accordance with the philosophy of action research. It is a process that places emphasis on experiment, reflection and learning (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002), which characterised phase 2 of my study. Action research seeks pragmatic and meaningful solutions to problems and what works in helping people bring about the change they seek. It also addressed the policy/implementation gap. In an educational setting, like the one chosen as my “case”, it may serve to create a change by proposing policy and programme interventions and working with teachers with curricula (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

My choice of an action research approach positioned within the case study was a way of connecting the research process with the action needed to solve the main “problem”. This choice was made since in phase 2 I was studying an intervention that was changing and I wanted to examine this process of change. Through action research in my study, I sought to understand the nature of the interventions that could form the basis of a model of school-based occupational therapy for Malta. In this way, I adopted the philosophy of action research, which is concerned with developing practical knowledge and “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with other, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally, the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2013, p. 4)

Eoyang (2001) calls the action taken based on what one has learned “adaptive action”. According to Patterson et al., (2010) “Action Research engages persons in “look, Think, Act” cycles that lead to adaptive action (p.154)”. “Look” refers to data collection and analysis, “Think” refers to quick reflection or more extended critique whilst “Act” focuses on action steps. Multiple layers of independent “Look, Think, Act “ cycles constitutes what in educational research is known as “critical action research” (Patterson et al., 2010).

In Phase 2 of my study my intervention was guided by action reflection cycles of look, think and act (Stringer, 1999). As a researcher I planned to engage in a process that involved planning and subsequent action; observing; and reflecting as a constant process (Mukherji & Albon, 2014) to support and refine the implementation of school based OT intervention from week to week. The educators were engaged in this process so that together we combined our knowledge and skills to collectively become agents of change. The process was one that required in depth thinking, carefully observation and then responsive action, creating feedback loops that intended to be transformative. In my study such feedback loops, supported by action theory were ones that had potential to contribute to the implementation of school based occupational therapy for Malta.

My involvement and working in the moment throughout the research process would also support me to develop credibility with central persons in the school (educators) and community (parent). Within this process, I planned to be with, talk, understand and overall engage with the stakeholders as well as observe and document the whole process using thick descriptions of what I saw and heard. By doing this I would be gaining deeper insight into the ways that school based OT could be implemented successfully.

I would ultimately gain insight into what was needed to answer my 3rd research question. "How can a model of school based occupational therapy in the early years support children's participation"? in phase 2 of my study. For this phase, my unit of analysis was the evolution and interactive development of an intervention however occupational outcomes may have indirectly been a product of this process (See Chapters 8 and 9). The ultimate aim would be to conceptualise and eventually generate some change in practice to support children's participation in early year's classrooms through the implementation of a model of school based occupational Therapy. Since the area under study was a novel concept for the educators, I had to initiate and lead the enquiry, bringing on board the educators as partners and

collaborators (Somekh, 1988). The next section describes how case study and action theory were aligned with my research questions.

4.3.3 Using Case Study and Action Theory for this Study

Case study methodology was deemed most suitable to address my research questions overall. On the other hand, action theory allowed action and reflection whilst developing, implementing and refining the intervention in this phase. Cycles of action and reflection, with the involvement of the stakeholders created a feedback loop that was very important to understand and refine the intervention (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Case study methodology and action research as applied to my study is outlined in Table 9.

Table 9

Case Study Methodology and Action Theory for this Study

The Research Questions:	Case Study Methodology	Action Theory
Single, longitudinal, Instrumental Case Study (Stake,1995 Merriam,1988)		
RQ 1: What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating i	Describing children's occupations in the school context and understanding the interactions between children, educators, parents, relevant support staff, the classroom and school environment	Not applicable
RQ 2: What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in these occupations?	In-depth analysis of the case: Interpreting educators and parents views on the enablers and barriers to children's participation in the school and classroom environments;	Not applicable
RQ 3: How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations?	An understanding of the case. analysis and interpretation of data from Phase 1 (RQ 1 and RQ 2, served to inform the understanding of and conceptualizing of school-based OT for Malta.	Identifying, trialling, adapting and developing school-based strategies in line with educators' feedback. Examining the process of change created by implementing school based OT.

The importance of a close, long term relationship with the setting in which the research is carried out, is supported by case study methodology and the desire and action to change and improve practice as advocated by theory of action research (Mukherji & Albon 2014). This makes both approaches complimentary and suited for this study. An in-depth understanding of the “case” as well as the use of action theory in my study, supported the conceptualisation of a collaborative model of practice. After presenting the methodology - an intrinsic longitudinal single case study, the section that follows will describe the methods of data collection for my study.

4.4. Methods of Data Collection

Multiple data sources and methods of data collection provide the depth and triangulation required for case study methodology and action theory to be considered rigorous (Stake, 1995), especially to counteract the perceived lack of rigour claimed by others who support a more positivist paradigm. The aim was to capture a holistic and realistic picture of the case and the meaning, values, attitudes, experiences and perceptions of the different stakeholders.

In case study design and within action theory the following methods of data collection are commonly used: observations, interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, research and reflective journals. More specific to case study research are interviews and focus groups, evaluating artefacts and documentary evidence. In action research data is captured through field notes, diaries and logs, reports, questionnaires, interviews, discussions and focus groups, video and photographs. Data may be tabulated and charted (Johnson & Christensen, 2013; McNiff, 2013).

. The following selected methods were deemed a good fit with the aims and objectives of the research and were used in phase 1 or phase 2 of the study as indicated hereunder.

- Field/Research diary.keeping field notes on any procedures and other data important to implement and evaluate the study (phases 1 and 2)
- Observations, including participant observations: Charted data for phase 1 of the study (phase 1)
- Intervention logs (phase 2)
- Interviews (phase 1 and 2)
- Focus groups (phase 1 and 2)
- Reflective Journaling (phase 1 and 2)
- Critical Friends:Documented discussions.(phase 1 and 2)
- Documented Evidence namely evaluating documents which included photos taken by children²⁶ (phase 1), school development plans, senior management team meetings; electronic mail related to intervention with children, through the educators and parents. IEP meeting reports. The main data collection methods are summarised in Table 10.

Finally, as a researcher, I also engaged in my own reflexivity; working in the moment, reacting to every situation as they arose and hence creating an iterative feedback loop .An ongoing knowledge exchange between the educators and myself together with my own reflection both in action and on action (Schon,1983) also contributed to refine the implementation of the whole process.

²⁶ Children were provided with disposable cameras to use in the classroom and were allowed by the class teacher to take photos of the things they liked to do. Cameras were not taken down to the school yard or on outings so the pictures mostly represent in class activities.

Table 10*Summary of the Main Data Collection Methods and Timelines²⁷*

Period	Method of data collection	Type of data documented relevant to occupation
Phase 1 October 2017-January 2018	Filed/Research Diary logs	Logging any observations, conversations, important insights, anything that captured the researcher's attention related to occupations in the school setting.
	Observation in classroom and playground	Play and other classroom activities: daily routines, such as lunchtime and toilet routines
	Interviews with Teacher and LSE	Routine and rules; child skills; parent involvement; occupations; enablers and barriers; feedback on intervention
	Interviews with Assistant Heads/ Heads and other senior management team members and relevant support staff	Children's occupations, enablers and barriers; educators; occupations; feedback on intervention
	Photos taken with disposable cameras kept in the classroom	Children's photos of the things they liked to do in the classroom
	Focus group: children	Most and least preferred occupations
	Focus group: parents	Education; activities of daily living; adult occupations; child occupations; enablers and barriers
Phase 2 January 2017-June 2018	Intervention logs using a standard template that documented SBOTTI	The where, with whom, what, why and when of the Intervention
	Observation and Participant observation in the classroom with children and educators	Observations on the transactions between teacher and children during classroom occupations: Literacy, numeracy, prewriting and other activities in class
	Field Diary: written feedback following discussion as well as observation logs.	Feedback from school staff on any aspects of knowledge exchange to support children's occupations
	Evaluation of documents: Recorded discussion with critical friend School Development Plans; IEP meeting Reports; Email.	Data from various school documents, reports and notes
Post study July 2018	Final interviews and focus groups with all stakeholders	Feedback on intervention

²⁷ A reflective journal was kept throughout the data collection period and documented reflection in and on action.

The methods used in my study in line with a qualitative paradigm, more specifically case study will be described. Then a detailed account of the data generation process including details of the participants and methods of data collection for my study will follow.

4.4.1 Field/Research Diary

A diary is used to collect significant data from the field. It may be used to describe each step of the research process. One may choose to include a variety of data, such as observations, analyses, diagrams, sketches, quotes, students' comments, thoughts, and feelings (Simons, 2009). The field diary contributes to the triangulation of findings related to the case and, subsequently, ensures rigour (Stake, 1995).

My Data Collection involved field notes for every day I spent in the school that was dated and included activity logs. These notes also included any comments that struck me when interacting with the stakeholders in the school and classroom. Another aspect of my research diary included my intervention logs (See Appendix J). Hence the research /field diary enabled me to capture the day to day happenings in the class and school, both from an observational point of view, as well as a detailed log of what went on in terms of occupation and participation. Besides a field diary a research journal was also kept. This will be described in section 4.4.5. The reflective journal served the purpose of documenting my reflections on the research process, thoughts feelings, and insights whilst the research diary was more of a detailed account of any events and happenings in the context of the research.

4.4.2 Observation

Case study research is all about understanding and studying natural, real life contexts (Jones & Hocking, 2015). Observation is a method commonly used in case study design. It can be seen as a radical, critical and open way of looking at everyday behaviours. It may also be seen as a way of viewing familiar and routine

events through a new lens (Nutbrow et al, 2013; Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Since the research site in this study was an everyday setting, the observations were carried out in the child's usual environment, what one may term as 'naturalistic'.

Observation of children in the context of their everyday life (Dunn, 2001), was important for a better understanding of the case and hence its choice for my study.

4.4.3 Interviews

Interviews are one of the most familiar and commonly used strategies for collecting qualitative data. A wide variation among interviewing approaches exists (Thomas, 2015). Interviews were chosen for this study as a method for data generation and were designed to be used in an unstructured and semi-structured format and used with the adults, both parents and educators. Unstructured interviewing consisted of a brief set of prompts and a single question, to allow a free response from the interviewees (Bryman, 2016). This free response allowed for each person involved in the "case" to express their viewpoint without being restricted to and influenced by specific questions.

Semi-structured interviews usually involve a more specific topic and a list of questions whilst still allowing flexibility for interviewees to respond as they wish (Bryman, 2016). This style of interviewing allows for more in-depth and specific questioning to understand the case more thoroughly. Both interviewing styles provided data to help me understand the "issues" pertaining to the case (McNiff, 2013).

4.4.4 Focus Groups

Focus groups allow one to obtain information from multiple participants. In my study these were children and parents sharing their knowledge or experience about a specific subject (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interaction between participants is a key factor in focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001). The focus group is not an interview with distinct individuals nor is it a short cut for collecting data from

several individuals simultaneously. Focus groups ideally contain between six to eight participants and are held in a quiet room with no distractions and free from interruptions and surveillance (Bloor et al., 2001). They were considered useful in order to provide rich data in keeping with understanding the given case as they not only gather the different perspectives of multiple participants, but also allow for discussion, the outcomes of which served to illustrate the essentials of the case more clearly.

The study aimed to obtain children's views through the focus group, in order to explore their own views on occupations in the classroom (Greig et al., 2013). I decided to give children the opportunity to take photos of the occupations they liked to engage in.

4.4.5 Reflective Journal

In case studies, the reflective journal is used as a vehicle for reflection enabling the researcher to position themselves within the case, understanding its complexity (Bryman, 2016; Simons, 2009). Within action theory it contributes to the action/reflection cycle (McNiff, 2013) enabling critical reflection that may be described as "the motor that drives the research process" (Mac Naughton, 2001, p.212). A journal log may take the form of a short note or a discussion, story, poem and/or diagram (Cowan, 2013). The journal may be described as a tool that aids the reflective process. Ultimately the journal is a personal document made by and for the researcher with no specific format (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007). My reflective journal was written manually in a note book after every day spent in the school and throughout the week when any thoughts on the research process came to mind. Every reflection was dated. I tried to capture what I learned and the significance of my learning from doing. A selection of these reflections "in action" are included alongside my results in chapters 5 to 7. These were the reflections documented in my notebook. I then added my own after reflection "on action". These reflections are presented along my results chapters and in the final chapter.

4.4.6 Critical Friends

The idea of a 'critical friend' is commonly used in both case study design and action theory. A 'critical colleague' was first recommended by Stenhouse in 1975 as a 'partner' who can give advice and is working with the teacher-researcher in the action research. Instead of perceiving the role as an advisor or consultant, the 'critical friends' see themselves as the 'friend' of the researcher. There is a 'dual' or 'overlapping' role to facilitate the progress of research by developing the reflective and learning capacity of the teacher-researcher, in a supportive, cooperative manner (Kember et al., 1997). In this study the choice to use critical friends was taken as it is an important way to engage in dialogue and discussion and obtain feedback and self-critique. In my study this occurred with both educators and also three experts in the field of inclusive and early childhood education, disability studies and occupational therapy. Critical feedback from these friends was essential to *inform the process and the product*.

4.4.7 Other Documented Evidence

Such documentation in line with both case study may be written or image based. This may include a thick descriptive research log, reports, questionnaires, discussions, photos as well as information from social networking sites (McNiff, 2013; Thomas, 2015). It involves careful reading and content analysis of relevant documents, thinking about them and making meaning out of them. In my study such evidence contributed to triangulation, making the research more rigorous and able to support or refute other evidence obtained from the interviews, focus groups, critical friends, the reflective journal and field diary.

To end this section, I will now synthesise and summarize my research plan. My study was a relativist and interpretist one drawing from a qualitative paradigm, and using a single, instrumental, longitudinal case study as the overarching methodology. Action theory within the case study method was deemed supportive of the Intervention Phase 2 of the study. Multiple methods were designed and

incorporated into the research plan in order to conduct a study over one school year that consisted of the two phases. It was a study, designed to understand the changing context of school practices, including what occupations, daily routines and roles children are engaging in over one school year and how they are being supported by significant adults.

4.5 Implementing the Study

The first stage to implementing the study involved ethical approval of the study, from both UREC (University Research Ethics Committee, Malta) and SREC (Social research Ethics Committee, University College Cork). However, prior to this stage I needed to first obtain permission from the Education Division in Malta as such permission needed to be included in the proposal. Once this was complete I could proceed to apply for approval for my study by the relevant university Ethics Committees. Details are explained in section 4.5.1.1. and ethical issues addressed later in the chapter. I will now move on to outline the recruitment process for this study, including a detailed account of how both school and participants were recruited to enable replicability of this study.

4.5.1. Recruiting the School

The main criteria that were applied in the selection process of the school were as follows:

1. The school embraced an inclusive philosophy in practice; the administration, particularly the head of school, understood the scope of the study. All stakeholders were willing and keen to participate, approved and felt comfortable with the researcher's presence in the school and classrooms;
2. The school chosen had to be representative of children's schooling in Malta (hence the choice of a state school over an independent or church school, as state schools house 60% of the childhood population and are co-educational);

3. The school had to have at least two classrooms of two consecutive year groups: Kindergarten (4/5 year olds) and Year 1 (5/6 year olds) to allow more room for diversity within that age group²⁸. It was hypothesized that the needs in terms of OT intervention were likely to be different for these year groups.

4.5.1.1 Mode of selection

The heads of four schools fitting the above criteria were contacted by telephone and the research project was explained in detail to determine their interest in my research. The first two that got back to me and demonstrated enthusiastic in participating in the study were invited to a meeting where any questions from their end were addressed. The heads were then asked to contact me in the time frame of two weeks to confirm their interest in participating. Both Heads got back to me indicating their wish to proceed. Due to researcher's time constraints, one school only was chosen, the one with the more diverse school population, wider choice of classrooms and what I perceived was a greater enthusiasm to participate.

I requested a confirmation in writing from the head of the chosen school. At this stage permission from the College Principle of the participating school was also obtained (Appendix D). Once permission was granted, a formal research request to the Department of Education in Malta was submitted for approval. The letter expressing this approval was attached to the local research proposal when submitting to the University Research Ethics Committee, Malta - UREC. The research proposal, with all the required signed consent forms and the approval from UREC, was then submitted to the research ethics committees of the University of

²⁸ These year groups were selected as the transition from the Kindergarten to Primary is usually challenging for pupils and teachers, and the nature of activities in Kindergarten and Year 1 are different.

Malta and University College Cork, which granted approval for my study (Appendix E and F).

4.5.2 The Participants

After the school was selected the the key informants were recruited: Educators, parents and children. These are collated in Table 11.

Table 11

The Participants and Key informants for phase 1 and 2 of the study

Participants Pseudonyms	Occupation	Gender	Age (Yrs.)
Ms Maria (I)	KG ²⁹ Teachers	Female	26
Mr Karl (I)	KG Teacher	Male	28
Ms Biancha (I)	Yr 1 Teacher	Female	29
Ms Rita(I)	Yr 1 Teacher	Female	24
Ms Wendy (I)	KG LSE ³⁰	Female	55
Ms Martha (I)	KG LSE	Female	28
Ms Charlotte (I)	Yr ³¹ 1 LSE	Female	45
Ms Moira (I)	Yr 1 LSE	Female	32
Ms Tatyana (I)	RSS ³²	Female	50
Ms Cynthia (I)	RSS	Female	42
Ms Helena (I)	RSS	Female	40
Mr Dion (I)	SMT ³³	Male	45
Ms Margaret (I)	SMT	Female	50
Ms Liliana (I)	SMT	Female	55
Carmen, Ritienne, Maria, Tessie, Molly, Georgina (FG)	Parents	Females	25-35
Dario, Gabe, Hope, Kim, Leo Lino, Mario, Matteo, Mirrhea, Maya (FG)	Children ³⁴	Boys and Girls; with and without disabilit	4 and 5 years

²⁹ Kindergarten

³⁰ Learning Support educator

³¹ Year

³² Relevant support staff

³³ Senior management team

³⁴ The total number of children involved in phase 1 and 2 from all the classrooms was 264

Table 11 shows the key informants who participated in interviews (I) and focus groups (FG) in my study. Educators refers to the teachers, learning support educators, assistant heads and head of school as well as relevant support staff.

4.5.2.1. Educators

As shown in Table 11, Sixteen Educators acted as key informants for my study. Having chosen the participating school, I requested and obtained permission from the Head of School to meet the teachers and learning support educators individually to explain what the research involved. Their enthusiasm was evident by the immediacy of the response to participate and the wish to know more about the research. This individual encounter gave me the opportunity to build a rapport with the teachers and also to ask and answer questions.

At the end of my summer break came my ethical approval for my study, and I contacted the Head of School, who gave me permission to send the information to the participants. Dispatch of the information letters was delayed due to a change in headship, which necessitated a new approval from the new head of school. Once such approval was granted, educators were emailed the information letter. Each educator was asked to read the information and given the liberty to confirm or refute to take part in the study. (Appendix G).

Details of the educators participating are collated in Table 11 and included: heads assistant heads, inclusion coordinators; teachers; learning support educators, relevant support staff. My critical friends were namely a head of school with many years of experience in teaching and educational leadership; a university lecturer in early years; and an occupational therapist with many years of experience in working with children.

4.5.2.2 Parents and Children

The final number of parents who participated in the focus group was 6 (see Table 11) as two dropped out after being recruited. 10 Children participated in the children's focus group while the total number of children indirectly impacted by the

project was 264. What follows is how parents and children were recruited. Once the study and focus group details were explained, the parents of 4 and 5 -year- old children were invited to take part in the study. This was done as part of a regular introductory meeting organised by the Head of School for these classes. Parents were selected as follows: each class teacher selected a random group of six children, sent an invite to the parents to participate, and waited for a response the next day and recruited more parents in the same fashion until the quota (8 parents) was reached. In this way, there was no surplus of participants and no parents were refused participation in the study. The parents signed a consent form to confirm their participation. The parents of the participating children, also signed a consent form (Appendix F). Children were also given a child friendly consent form which they signed using a stamper, as most were unable to write their name, thus confirming that they wished to participate

Table 12

The Number of Overall Participants Involved in the Intervention Phase 2 of the Study.

Senior management team	4
Relevant support staff	3
Teachers Year 1	4
Kindergarten educators 1	7
Kindergarten educators 2	5
Learning support educators (KG and year 1)	7
Teachers in years 2 to 6	30
Learning support educators years 2 to 6	50
Parents (all children)	60
Parents (IEP: statemented children)	12
Children (KG 1, KG2 Year 1 and Year 2)	264
Occupational therapy student	1

Table 12 depicts the total number of participants that were involved in Phase 2 of the study but it is inclusive of participants in phase 1. The numbers are quite large as they include all the key informants of phase 1 and 2 together with stakeholders who participated in Phase 2 through professional development sessions and curriculum time, as well as IEP meetings and other.

The study was explained using child friendly means (Appendix G), to some new children and their parents, brought onboard in the intervention phase as they were part of the participating classrooms. They were invited to take part in the focus group and hence permission was obtained from the parents and, subsequently, the children gave their own assent. The children's parents signed a consent form on their behalf as per data protection regulations in Malta³⁵. This was necessary since they were underage (under 18). Maltese guidelines on ethical research with children namely the Child Protection Policy for Schools (Education Division Malta, 1999) were followed. Clarification on what the study involved for both parents and children was provided to those parents who needed it through a follow up telephone call. There were no ethical issues anticipated regarding the adults as this project aimed to work together to improve service delivery.

4.5.3 Challenges to Recruitment

Although the parents' initial interest to participate in the study was high, their recruitment to participate in the focus groups proved to be a very difficult process. In the end, only six parents took part in the focus groups although I had aimed for 8. Participants were parents engaged in varied employment with jobs ranging from sales to office work to semi-professional to professional, they were the only ones who committed themselves to taking part in this focus group. Unfortunately, there is very low participation in general in any school educational activities for parents, unless in some way what is being delivered involves a social gathering or puts them

³⁵<https://justice.gov.mt/en/legalaidmalta/Pages/Data-Protection-Policy.aspx>

in direct contact with their children within the school setting (personal communication, School Administrator, 2019).

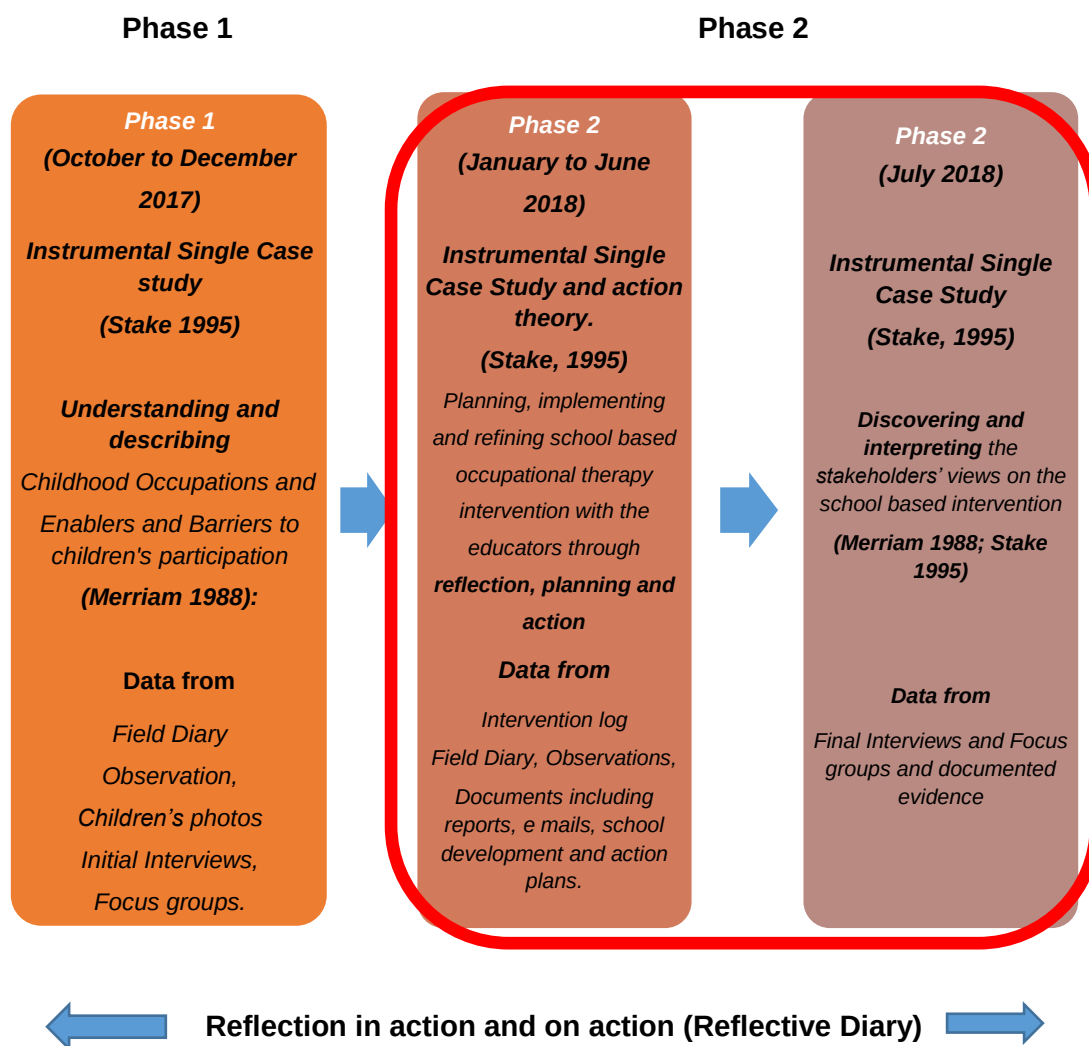
4.6 Data Generation

4.6.1 Overview of the Whole Process

The data for this study was generated in two consecutive phases. I was present one day a week every week (excluding holiday periods) in the school for a total of 30 weeks roughly 8 hours a week hence totalling 240 hours. Figure 4 summarises the data generation process which will now be explained in detail

Figure 4

The Data Generation Process



The first phase identified the childhood occupations and enablers and barriers to participation, with the data mostly collected through observation, other documented evidence from my field diary, as well as initial focus groups and interviews with the stakeholders. In the second phase, the data generated from phase 1, informed my school based tiered intervention: This intervention is depicted in a sample of the intervention log. This sample can be viewed in Appendix J.

At the end of the school year feedback from the participants was obtained mostly through written documents, other sources such as emails as well as the final interviews and focus groups carried out post data collection. A detailed account of both phases of the study will now be presented to enable a better understanding of the process.

4.6.2 Phase 1: Exploration: Understanding, Describing and Interpreting Childhood Occupations and the Enablers and Barriers to Participation.

The first phase of data collection took place in first school term, over 3 months, from October to December, 2017 covering a period of around 12 weeks. This phase attempted to address the following research questions: What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in? What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations in Maltese early-years classrooms? The first term, mostly the first month, was dedicated to relationship building. My weekly and regular attendance, enabled continuity and demonstrated a sense of commitment and predictability, and it also allowed me to become a trusted member of the school community. This ensured proper relationship building with all the stakeholders.

Data Generation for this stage involved different methods of data collection including initial interviews, focus groups, observations, keeping a field/research diary and a reflective diary, discussion with critical friends and other documented discussions.

In Phase 1, the children were given disposable cameras (one in each classroom) to take photos of their preferred activities throughout the school day. These photos, were used to explore and record visually what the children enjoyed doing most (See Chapter 5, Figures 5 & 6).

Sixteen initial semi-structured interviews were held at the beginning of the school year with the educators in phase 1 of the study. They were mostly structured since they were asking specific and more direct questions about children's occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation. Interviewees were encouraged to expand on the questions posed by the researcher (Appendix G). Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour, fifteen minutes and was audio-recorded. The participants were given the option to speak in English or Maltese, but were encouraged to use English if they felt comfortable with the language. This was suggested to avoid translation and therefore loss of the real text and words that the interviewees used. Most of the participants spoke in English. The interviews for this phase 1 and also at the end of the study took place at various times and places convenient for the different participants and were audio recorded. Most of these were held in a quiet location of the participant's choice for example the board room in the school, or the teachers' own classroom whilst the children were elsewhere. This was done so as to ensure better quality of the recording and to reduce distractions, allowing both researcher and participant to focus better on the discussion.

In phase 1 of the study, focus groups were held with children aged 4 and 5 years to identify childhood occupations that the children were participating in. The children's focus group involved at the outset a simple explanation of what was going to happen. Then questions were posed and for each question a short "round robin" session took place, allowing each child the freedom to speak. They were given the option to draw as a means of expression if they preferred to, but most of the children opted to speak. They were asked about the things they like to do at school, what

they did not like as much and what activities they thought would make their school day more enjoyable. An independent observer was present for all these groups. This was an experienced occupational therapist with an interest in paediatric practice.

Data from parents was also collected through a focus group. Six Parents of 4 and 5 year old children made up the focus group: one was held in the first school term (October to December, 2017) and one in the last school term. The focus group questions are provided in Appendices H and I. Table 13 depicts the participants for phase 1 of the study.

Table 13

Data Generation Methods: Phase 1: Interviews, Focus Groups, Observation & Participant Observation

Interviews (No = 16 persons)	Focus Groups (No = 2 groups)	Classroom Participant Observation (No = 4 classrooms)	Classroom Observation (No = 7 classrooms)
Head (1)	Children's	Two Kindergarten	Five KG 2
Assistant Heads (3)	Focus Group: 5 children from KG 2 and 5 children from Year 1	(KG 2) classrooms (24 children)	classrooms (60 children)
		Two Year 1 classroom (32 children)	Two Year 1 classrooms (32 children)
	Parent's Focus Group: 5 mothers 1 Father		
Teachers (2)			
KGE (2)			
LSE's (5)			
Relevant Support Staff: RSS (3)			
(Early Intervention Teacher; Inclusion Coordinator; Nurture Class Teacher)			

In Phase 1, my critical friends were brought on board and in this phase discussions with them revolved mostly around children' s occupations and the

inclusive early childhood education. An example of other documented evidence in this stage of primary importance were the Individual Education Planning Meetings (IEP) which I was asked to attend. I participated, observed and documented the whole process and encounter in as much detail as possible.

Observational Data were charted in my research diary namely the what, how, why and when around the activities that took place. I was engaged in listening and documenting any conversations, reflections and information from any encounters with the educators, parents and children wherever they were: the classroom, school yard, waiting in line to go home. In summary making sure to document any insights from talking and being with the participants, mostly children and teachers on an individual basis. All the activities served the purpose of getting to know more about the school. These interactions also involved the school administrators from whom I learnt more about the school, its system, policies and the curriculum and the schools overall mission and plan for that year.

Observations related to the first research question also revolved around children's occupations and were carried out in a total of 7 classrooms. These were charted weekly. My field diary was used to document detailed logs on how the children were spending their day and what activities they were engaging in. Any discussions that occurred informally and my observations were logged in separate notebooks, one for each classroom. After the school day was over, I retreated to a quiet coffee shop nearby to document any reflections and insights that could not be done during the school day. This was done to ensure that I captured salient classroom observations while still fresh in my mind to avoid their distortion if they were recorded later. I took great pains to be non-judgemental in my observations but write down or note things exactly as I had seen or heard them. I acknowledge that in such a setting it was impossible to observe all the children under the exact same conditions. Nevertheless, it was the observations that gave me what the interviews

failed to do: the close contact with the participants for an extended period of time (Bryman, 2016).

Whilst I made every effort to not intrude and blend in with the classroom, I acknowledge that my presence did in some way influence the teacher and the children. I was mindful to respect the classroom routine, and when sensing that the children or the adults in the classroom were not having a good day, I tried to adapt my plans to be supportive of the classroom situation at that particular moment. I did my utmost to enter the classroom without a fixed mind-set, but ready to observe and document anything that came my way.

I positioned myself as an outsider as well as an insider researcher (McNiff, 2013), and my observations contributed to these perspectives, which are discussed in my reflections about the research process in the final chapter. I was an observer as well as a participant-observer in this study (Mukherji & Albon, 2014). This was very important so that I could understand the context better, especially during the intervention phase of the study, in which my participation with the classroom team and children was important. Being a participant also enabled me to immerse myself in the ongoing activity in the classroom and to be part of the "class family" without being too intrusive. I understand this to have worked as I realise that the research participants forgot I was the researcher and considered me one of them.

My own reflections from prior to data collection and beyond the end of it were documented. I kept my reflective diary with me at all times to keep in touch with any thoughts, feelings, mental analysis that I engaged in hence documenting the process from my perspective.

4.6.3 Phase 2: Implementation: Designing, delivering and conceptualising the school based occupational therapy intervention.

This phase was from January to July 2018: the second and third terms of school, covering a period of around 20³⁶ weeks meaning a total of 160 hours (8 hours per week). The methods used for data collection and the participants who provided the data for this phase are depicted in Table 14.

Table 14

Data Generation Methods: Phase 2: Intervention, Interviews & Focus Groups

Interviews (No = 16 persons)	Focus Groups (No = 2 groups)	Classrooms involved in the Intervention (No = 4 classrooms)	Classrooms involved in the Intervention³⁷ (No. = 16 classrooms)
Head (1)	Children's Focus Group:5 children from KG 2 and 5 children from Year 1	Two Kindergarten (KG) classrooms (24 children)	Seven KG 1 classrooms (84 children))
Assistant Heads (3)		Two Year 1 classroom (32 children)	Five KG 2 classrooms (60 children)
			Four Year 1 classrooms (64 children)
	Parents Focus Group:6 Parents in total: 5 mothers 1 Father (1)		
Teachers (2)			
KGE (2)			
LSE's (5)			
Relevant Support Staff: RSS (3)			
(Early Intervention Teacher; Inclusion Coordinator; Nurture Class Teacher)			

³⁶ Excluding the mid -term break as well as Christmas and Easter Holiday periods.

³⁷ Intervention at Tier 1 involving the whole school. e.g. Professional development and chill out room.

This phase served to address the 3rd research question: How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations? It was informed by an action theory approach which involved a more action-oriented focus.

. The inductive process to develop the intervention in Phase 2 of my study considered the conceptual framework for this study (see Chapter 2) and was informed by my knowledge on collaborative consultation, including the tiered model of service delivery, emerging from evidence based practice in school-based occupational therapy. The skill base that I had as an experienced occupational therapist, together with the educators' experience and knowledge of the curriculum as well as the knowledge acquired from phase 1 of the study also were key to developing the intervention.

The intervention was carried out weekly over approximately 20 weeks until the end of the school year in June 2018. Throughout this phase 2 of developing intervention, there was an ongoing chain of action and reflection by myself, in collaboration with the educators, in an attempt to reconcile OT theory and practice with educational pedagogy and the curriculum. My intervention reflected the elements of an instrumental case study, advancing the understanding and discovering this area of interest (Boblin 2013; Stake, 1995) and also outlining the "particularistic, descriptive and heuristic" features of the intervention in accordance with Merriam's characteristics of case study (Merriam, 2009). In line with action theory (McIntosh, 2010) there was also an ongoing chain of action and reflection. The reflective logs that are my own reflections on the overall research process and action are presented in shaded boxes embedded in the findings chapters.

. Data Collection occurred during concurred cycles of co-designing and co-delivering interventions and documenting those, whilst also collecting data on the impact of those interventions through observations, the intervention log, interviews, focus groups, other documented evidence such as feedback provided through e

mails, feedback sheets etc. A focus group was held at the end of Phase 2 to capture children's views on the school based OT experience .During this phase of the study multiple methods were used (see section 4.4.for a description). These will now be explained for phase 2 of my study.

- Intervention log: This consisted of over 20 pages.These were detailed thick accounts of charted data on the amount and type of weekly intervention that took place in the second phase of the study (Appendix J);
- Research journal and field notes Field notes were documented as “accounts”(Thomas, 2015). Also significant situations and aspects were documented (McNiff, 2013). This was done through my spending an average of one hour a week per classroom in a total of 4 classrooms, with the teachers and learning support assistants. The data from the different classrooms was logged in four separate, colour coded note books every week on site and transferred to an electronic document within the next day. Once on the electronic document I was able to colour code the data according to what I perceived the type of intervention was, through my knowledge of tiers from international research and literature on these. I colour coded the tiers as follows: green for Tier 1, blue for Tier 2 and yellow for Tier 3. The analysed log was then reorganized according to what the intervention constituted, namely whether it was a Tier 1, 2 or 3 intervention (Appendix K).
- Documented evidence in the form of reports, emails, school documents such as action and school development plans. IEP³⁸ meeting reports, e mail correspondence, feedback given by educators through questionnaires after professional development sessions. These can be viewed in Appendix L.

³⁸ Individual Education plans

- Final interviews and focus groups (Appendix I).

Sixteen final semi-structured interviews were carried out with the educators to evaluate the school based occupational therapy intervention in line with research question 3. The interview questions (Appendix I) were open ended, allowing the interviewees the freedom to say whatever came to mind on the topic. Then I probed further, where necessary, by asking more structured questions. Participants, at their request, were also given the option to write down their feedback. These interviews allowed participants to share their over-all impressions of the school based intervention and to discuss how administrators and teachers saw this intervention moving forward.

Throughout Phase 1 and 2, critical friends were engaged as one of the methods of data collection. These were an education professional, one academic and one practising occupational therapist. We met three times during the research cycle. This enabled me to obtain feedback on issues that arose along the research cycle. As a sounding board, their feedback was used to make the research process and its product more complete and transparent. The discussions with the critical friends were handwritten in a note book and used as reflection material to steer my thinking when considering the research process and practice.

My reflective diary was my private document also used throughout phase 1 and 2, to record thoughts and feelings about any issues that appeared important to me prior to, during and after the data collection throughout the research cycle. My reflections are documented throughout my results chapters, while my research journey that came out of these reflections are documented at the end of this thesis.

All these methods of data collection were used to provide the data set that served the purpose of understanding the school, the “case” to try to effect change (Kemmis, 2009). If not directly, it may indirectly bring about social change, as the collaborative project may contribute to more equity, inclusion and social justice by

promoting children's participation. In all these documents and throughout the process, in line with action theory, I was constantly looking for feedback, even that most subtle, that was potentially suggesting change. Also in line with action theory, and based on the feedback I obtained, the intervention was refined in an ongoing fashion with the collaboration of the teachers, and also by taking into consideration parents' and children's perspectives. The data pertaining to school based occupational therapy in the Maltese context, will be presented in the results chapters. The findings presented through thick detailed descriptions in chapters 7 are my interpretation of the process, that came about by my in depth study of the implementation of the intervention, introduced to the school system by myself and of which I was a key part of. The outcome of this is presented in Chapter 8 and discussed in chapter 9.

4.7 Data Analysis from a Qualitative Paradigm

Data analysis from a qualitative paradigm involves in-depth detail with rich thick descriptions and is sensitive to the context, especially with multiple sources of data and in a longitudinal study like this one.

Table 15

Data Set for this Study

Phase 1	Phase 2
Observation/Participant observations	Intervention log
Field journal logs	Field journal logs
Initial interview transcripts	Final Interview transcripts
Initial focus group transcripts	Final focus group transcripts
Children's photos	Other documented evidence: reports, school development plan, Email correspondence, documentation of meetings.
Feedback from critical friends ³⁹ and Reflective diary ⁴⁰	

³⁹ For both phases

⁴⁰ For both phases

Data analysis of the data set in Table 15 took place. The text was interpreted according to the research and could never be judged to be true or false (Patton, 2002). In-depth analysis of the “case” took place: understanding the case, both human and non-human components, while action theory also guided the school based occupational therapy intervention. The qualitative data were analysed through content analysis, charting, coding (Elliot, 2018) as well as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Identifying patterns in the course of the research process through triangulation of the different data sources provided me with insights that helped me to answer my research questions. Table 18 identifies how data analysis is aligned with the three main research questions. Data from phase 1 of the study particularly for RQ 1, was primarily analysed using charting, listing and content analysis. This mainly included charting and analysis of children’s occupations and some of the enablers and barriers that formed RQ 2 for Phase 1 of the study

4.7.1 Data Analysis for the study

The data for all the research questions of the study was analysed as outlined in Table 16 and this will now be explained in greater detail.

Table 16

Aligning Data Analysis with Research Questions

Research Question	Summary	Data Analysis and Source of data
RQ 1	Childhood Occupations	Charting and content analysis of occupations as identified through research journal and children’s photos. Thematic analysis of educators’ interviews and focus groups of parents and children
RQ 2	Enablers and Barriers	Content analysis of field logs in research diary Thematic analysis of initial interviews with educators and focus group data taken from children’s and parent’s focus groups
RQ 3	School based OT intervention	Content analysis of intervention log and weekly observation logs and field notes as well as, thematic analysis of final interviews with educators and focus groups with parents and children.

RQ 1: This research question centred around classroom occupations and data was primarily analysed through content analysis and charting of data from interviews, focus groups, photos and observation logs in my field diary .Table 19 presents an example of this.

RQ2: Content analysis and coding of my own field notes as well as thematic analysis of the initial interviews was used to obtain data that would answer this research question, namely what were the enablers and barriers to children's participation in the context of the school (see Table 17).

Table 17

Data analysis for RQ 1 and 2: Childhood Occupations and Enablers and Barriers

Relevance to Research Question	Content Analysis of data	Charting of key words
RQ 1 Occupations	Outdoor play equipment outdoor play Technology as “play” Physical play Imaginative play Play Lacks spontaneity	Play
RQ2 Enablers and Barriers	Connectedness Friendships Positive attitudes Choice Social and physical Curriculum, rigidity, flexibility Inclusive, theory, practice School, family.	Attitudes Motivation Environment The system Policies Culture

The content analysis was based on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem model's processes, which served as categories for coding data into micro, meso and macro factors. Initial Codes were identified, codes were expanded and finally the coded

data was analysed and collated in word documents according to the topic, in this case a word document for enablers and one for barriers. (Creswell, 2007, 2015; Saldana 2015). The data analysed for phase 2 and RQ 3 of the study consisted of: The intervention log; The Field diary that included daily observation logs; Documents such as IEP meeting reports, SMT meeting reports, curriculum session reports, school development plans, e mail documentation; the final interviews and focus groups.

Research question 3 was about school based occupational therapy intervention for Malta and data was primarily obtained from the intervention logs (Appendix J) and field notes (Appendix K). Content analysis and charting was used to identify the type and frequency of the intervention that occurred in the classroom and the school (Elo et al., 2014). The final interviews yielded data yielded the stakeholders' perspectives on the school based occupational therapy intervention. Both the initial and final interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The initial interviews were analysed after the first 3 month phase of the study was completed. The information that came out from this analysis yielded information on children's occupations and the enablers and barriers to children's participation. This information served to inform the start of the second intervention phase of the study.

As the intervention part of the research study progressed the intervention logs were analysed ongoingly to provide me with insights into how implementing the intervention could be refined and guided me on what course of action to take. I kept a look out for patterns in all of the data such as common themes related to the intervention that emerged, whilst also checking back with the educators in order to refine further the action in my research process.

4.7.1.1 Thematic Analysis

My analysis primarily followed thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2013). I opted to analyse the data without the use of computer software. The reason for this was that I had a good connection with the data and insight into what I was dealing with. I wanted to avoid fragmenting the text (MacMillan, 2005), a risk using a computer programme might have posed, unless one could dedicate a lot of time and energy to really practise and work efficiently with the software (John & Johnson 2000). I wanted to ensure I looked at the data holistically. The data set for my study was presented in Table 17. Data from phase 1, collected through the initial interviews with the educators and the focus groups with the parents and children were first analysed to discover those significant themes that would contribute to the development of the next phase 2 of the study. The data for Phase 2 was collected through the field diary namely the intervention logs. This and other observational data was primarily analysed through content analysis.

The data from the interviews and focus groups in both phase 1 and 2, was done through thematic analysis. Manual analysis with the help of comment bubbles at the side of the text was my mode of data analysis together with Microsoft Word editing features that supported the task. I was confident that, using manual analysis, I could handle the data I had effectively and closer to the data in this way. I also wanted to avoid the risk of “fracturing the text” (MacMillan, 2005) and fail to capture the wholeness, richness and complexity of the school, its breadth and diversity. The six phases of which are presented in Table 18 as applied to my study.

Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data. My first step in data analysis was transcription and immersion in the data: Table 15 depicted the data set for this study (samples may be found in Appendix L). Listening to the transcripts over and over again and reviewing at length any documents I had collected helped me to become more familiar with the data. I ensured that the transcripts of all the audio-recorded material were thorough and of high quality. This enabled me to identify similar,

recurring and unique data. I attempted to seek in an ongoing fashion meaning in the data throughout my analysis, thus trying to understand better the nature of the “case”. In the words of Braun and Clarke (2006), I searched beneath the surface for what was hidden.

The raw data collected in the most naturalistic way reflected the messiness of everyday life in school. Through descriptive as well as interpretative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I could make sense of what was transcribed from the audio recordings. It was also inductive in that it was shaped by my own point of view, that of the educators and the occupational therapy knowledge base. It was also experiential in that it focused on the point of view of the educators, namely how they experienced childhood occupations as well as school-based occupational therapy.

Table 18

The Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phases of Thematic Analysis
Becoming familiar with my data set: transcribing data reading and re-reading the data; noting down initial ideas (Samples of Data Set in Appendix L)
Generating initial codes: coding interesting features of the data using colour and single word codes in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code (Table 21)
Searching for themes: collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme (Table 22)
Defining and naming themes: ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme (Table 22)
Reviewing themes: checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2); generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. (Appendix M)
Writing the results: the final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples; final analysis of selected extracts; relating back to the analysis to the research question and literature; producing a scholarly report of the analysis (Chapters 5 -8)

(Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes. After transcription of the interviews and focus groups was completed, together with the data from other documented evidence I commenced the coding process. I went through each data set, for each of which I generated initial codes, which were mostly words or phrases. I wrote these down on a hard copy of the interview script by clearly writing down the code name and marking the text, using colours for the main codes and single word labels for others. After this initial stage, I put the coded data aside. Later on I revisited them: I grouped some of the codes, left others untouched and removed the unnecessary ones. Finally, the notations were collated. All extracts were collected in different word files according to similarity and were given titles. These pieces of information provided the building blocks for developing the themes and the analysis.

Table 19

Coding Initial Interview Data: Enablers to Children's Participation: RQ 2

Child	Family	Educators	School	Education System/Policy
Active participation	Embraced routine	Resilience	Small class numbers	Inclusion policies
Child-teacher relationship	Interested	Sharing of ideas and resources	Large classrooms	Continuous professional development
Good communication,	Cooperative	Flexibility	Resources	School management
Problem-solving skills	Involved	Team work	Balanced cohort of students	Services
Positive behavior	Time	Support and caring		Inter-professional Collaboration
Eagerness to work	Discipline	Knowledge		

Steps 3: Searching for Themes. My codes often captured one idea or concept that I then collated, expanded and discussed (Table 21). They captured information that was relevant to the research questions. Original codes were expanded and organised into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I

documented each theme and collated the different codes under each theme. This was done using different Word files. I saved examples and extracts from the data, keeping in mind the research questions and reflecting on whether the codes and themes I had created were an accurate and faithful reflection of the educators' stories. The use of thematic maps supported my analysis (Appendix 13).

Step 4 and 5: Reviewing, Defining and Naming Themes. Once I had extracted key themes from the codes gathered from my entire data set, I looked for similarities and differences in the data to see if recurrent themes emerged. This involved sifting through the data to choose the most compelling and vivid extracts that supported and depicted my data and were a true reflection of what participants conveyed. Themes were developed and refined as the analysis progressed. An example of Initial and refined themes are presented in Table 20

Table 20

Examples of Themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) generated from data analysis of final interviews:
RQ 3

Initial Theme	Refined Final Themes
Children and their school occupations	Children's qualities that supported participation Reframing perspectives A focus on the real children with their own story
Parental education	Parents immersed in the classroom Coordinating Resources: Linking People
Professional development and teacher education	Making informed choices Educators involved in the doing Teachers knowing the obvious and learning the specific Active education, advocacy and consultation

I reviewed the data in an ongoing fashion, to make sure it reflected the research questions and many revisions of the themes took place in a process of defining and refining (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I went back to the codes several times to review them with a refreshed mind and to determine if they really reflected the themes I had constructed and, most of all, the participant's experiences and views. I also kept in sight the bigger picture. What were all these data sets telling me about the main research questions and the main topic under study? In other words, what was the data telling me about occupation, participation and school-based occupational therapy? The refined themes centred on the research questions, including concepts of occupation, participation, collaboration and school-based occupational therapy.

Step 6: Writing my Results. Once I was confident that I had exhausted my analysis and was satisfied with my main themes, I started to organize them into a narrative: the story of this school and its protagonists. I tried to integrate into the text the best extracts that really depicted the themes and showcased the case study as a whole, providing a deeper, holistic understanding of the case study. I will now move on to discuss the ethical considerations for this study.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical considerations for my study were as follows:

- Issues of confidentiality and anonymity;
- Issues of reciprocity;
- Protecting contributors from harm;
- Trustworthiness and rigour;
- Acknowledging bias and disclaiming objectivity.

These will now be explained with reference to my study

4.8.1 Confidentiality, Anonymity and Informed Consent

The participant's identities were safeguarded by giving them pseudonyms (Bryman, 2016). Great care was taken to keep the identity of the school or the participants secret by avoiding detailed descriptions of both. The author cannot guarantee that the identity of the school is unidentifiable. The nature of the data

collected was presented in a way that safeguarded the school's reputation. This means that the data was presented in a way that was strengths-based and solution-focused and the criticism in the data was not about specific individuals or the school but about more macro-level factors, such as systems, policies and procedures.

Participants were reassured that their involvement and acceptance to be part of my study was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage and for any reason. Although it may be perceived that participants may have felt pressure to withdraw from the study it appears that the opposite occurred. Other stakeholders that got to know about the study and initially had not signed up as interested persons, became interested in the study and wanted to be involved. This was mainly applicable to the teachers in the early-years classrooms. In fact they were brought on board as part of the intervention in phase 2.

4.8.2 Issues of Reciprocity

The research study, was a learning process for me as a researcher and the participants in general. Educators benefited from the collaborative nature of this research. Parents and children also reaped benefits through application of strategies incorporated into the class and thanks to the collaborative work of the teacher and the researcher. Throughout the process, discussion with parents and educators on occupational therapy strategies that could improve their children's participation took place.

Although it was made clear at the outset that the researcher would only be involved with the early years classrooms, requests by the school administration to support educators in other classrooms were made as the year went by and where possible the researcher found the time to accede to these request, especially when these were urgent. Since often this was not possible during the time of data collection, the researcher did her best to touch base on other days outside the data collection hours or through email with the educators who needed her support.

4.8.3 Leaving Contributors Unharm

There was no anticipated risk or harm in this study and all procedures were conducted with child safety protocols in place. Interviews and focus groups, especially those involving children, took place in a safe environment for all participants. They were guided during these sessions and were free to air their views. The interviews and focus groups were voice recorded and kept protected in a password-protected computer to ensure confidentiality. The observational data compiled by the researcher was kept in a passworded file, if this was done electronically. If handwritten, notebooks were kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's office at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta. In addition, no data recorded, digitally or by hand, identified the participants in any way.

This project evolved out of a need to support schools in inclusion strategies for children with special needs, and that is why parents were involved in the interviews and their needs included in the second phase of the project. My experience of 30 years working as a paediatric occupational therapist and five years spent working as an inclusion coordinator in a primary school - gave me most of the necessary skills and tools to support the parents throughout the research process if they were to become distressed or worried. Thankfully, no parents experienced any negative distress, but if they had, they would have been directed to seek support from local services. This was a means of managing risk.

4.8.4 Trustworthiness and Rigour in this Study

Qualitative research methods usually describe the lived experience of a group of people. The truth in qualitative research is subjective and depends on one's historical and sociocultural background and experience (Sharts-Hopko, 2002). The rigour or "trustworthiness" of a study should be evaluated using various criteria. Credibility or dependability has to do with the "truth" of the findings (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

The fullest possible truth requires the examination of a phenomenon from all points of view. That is why my research involved different stakeholders and methods of data collection. This was done in order to try to capture the viewpoint of all those involved in enabling children's participation in school occupation. The collaborative nature of the study also strengthened trustworthiness.

Rigour is the careful planning and "thoroughness" that goes into designing and implementing a research study. Validity, on the other hand, is all about how one conducts research to ensure that its findings are sound and carry weight and authority (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2008). Triangulation is one way of ensuring rigour and validity. This includes triangulation of data, methods, investigators, and theory on the topic. In this study, diverse sources of data about the topic were explored by including a diverse group of people relevant to the field of study. The data set was varied (Appendix L) and was collected from multiple sources to ensure rigour.

Another way rigour was ensured was through member checking. For the educators, this was done by giving out a transcript of the interviews and asking them to check the contents. The focus group transcript was sent to the parents by email, but most of them chose not to read it. The children's data was not rechecked due to the fact that most children could not yet read. However, when the observer attended the focus groups, she checked the transcript against her own notes. Furthermore, I used her journal logs to compare my own reflections with what the participants had said. I sought feedback from the participants when any clarification was needed, and used any supporting evidence in the form of notes that I had taken, emails or documented conversations to ensure I fully understood the perspectives of the participants. Besides collecting data using the different methods described above, the data was also analysed from the different perspectives of the stakeholders in different contexts. In spite of every attempt to make sure that the process was rigorous, I have to agree with Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) and humbly

acknowledge that “No matter how rigorous we strive to be...the research is not, and cannot be, completely objective, nor can we easily make transparent *all* the judgements we have made” (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001, p.7).

4.8.5 Acknowledging Bias and Disclaiming Objectivity

My study involved me as a participant and researcher, and this, together with my many years of experience in the field of occupational therapy with children, has certainly brought my experience and bias into this research. Whilst becoming familiar and befriending the school staff was an important aspect of the study to enhance collaboration (Simons, 2009; Thomas, 2015), such familiarity could have reduced objectivity to some extent. I also acknowledge that at times it was difficult to keep distant and neutral, but conversely this may be considered a strength that allowed me to become part of the school family one day a week for a whole scholastic year.

Whilst I made great efforts to critically reflect on the data collected and on my experiences as a researcher, my influence and bias as a seasoned therapist had to be acknowledged. My physical presence and my expertise contributed to the knowledge generated, albeit I had to be very careful to preserve my objectivity. My own personal experiences could have influenced how I interpreted the data. However, as an action researcher, I tried to be analytical and critical at all times by asking myself: What are the participants really conveying? What does this data really mean? On the other hand, personal reflexivity enabled me to exercise more rigour in my research and I kept in touch with my biases and how they may have influenced the data. I did this through my reflective diary. These reflections are presented throughout my results chapters with text boxes that contain my reflections in action and on action (Schon1983; 2017).

4.9 Conclusion.

In this study, questions were investigated through a case study design with elements of action theory. Collaborating stakeholders included heads and assistant heads of school; teachers; learning support staff; and other relevant support staff, including early intervention teachers; inclusion coordinators; nurture group teachers; parents; and the children themselves. The results of my data collection and analysis follow in the forthcoming pages in an attempt to answer the main three research questions of this study.

4.10 Preamble to the Findings

The findings will be presented over four chapters in line with the nature of my single, longitudinal, instrumental case study, using thick descriptions and providing analytical insights from the data that came about through a process of reflection and action.

The first chapter of my findings, Chapter 5, describes childhood occupations in the early years context for Malta as identified through the researcher's observations as well as children's, educators' and parents' views on these occupations. Chapter 6 is about the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations

Chapter 7 of my findings presents the process of school-based occupational therapy developed from the analysis of the data obtained from phase 1 of the study and through cycles of observation, planning, action and reflection. The outcomes of this whole process yielded the findings in Chapter 7. These findings portray the views of all the stakeholders illustrated with their own words, together with my interpretations and reflections. Data from my reflective diary gathered throughout the study will be presented in these chapters in text boxes as "Reflection in action" and "Reflection on action" (Schon, 2017).

Finally, Chapter 8, the fourth chapter on my findings, will propose a design and implementation of school-based occupational therapy for Malta. It will

synthesise the key concepts in point form and will map them out through the use of diagrams; these concepts will be summarised in tables to capture the salient aspects of the intervention.

Chapter 5 - Children and School Occupations

The first phase of this study served to gain an understanding of what all the stakeholders perceived as being the main childhood occupations in the classroom, as well as the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school life. The research questions in this phase of the data collection focused on participation and occupation within an OS philosophy⁴¹. It sought to answer two questions pertinent to the first exploratory phase of the study. The first of these, which will be addressed in this chapter, was: "What constitutes school-based occupation from the children's, parents' and educators' perspectives?"

The data that follows in this chapter is presented through thick descriptions. The value of using thick descriptions in presenting my findings meant that rather than being static they were much more dynamic. Thus, the views of participants, namely children, parents and educators, are presented vividly through their own words, which support the findings that I extracted through analysis of the data. The way my work is presented in the present chapter adds authenticity to it and also presents an intermediate product – understanding childhood occupations, which was necessary for me to achieve my end product – a school-based intervention for Malta that would ultimately support children's participation in these occupations

5.1 Children's School Occupations in Maltese Early Years Classroom

The following section presents findings relating to my observation of 5 classrooms of four-year old (75 children) and 4 classrooms of five-year-old children (80 children). Their occupations as experienced in a regular and state primary school in Malta will be presented. I have chosen to start with the educators' perspectives since, in my opinion, the educators are the focal point in the school.

⁴¹ See chapter 1 for an explanation of OS

5.1.1 Educator's Perspectives

At the start of this project, kindergarten educators and year one teachers (see Table 11) were asked about childhood occupations and what they perceived as being the most common occupations four- and five-year-old children engaged in within the school setting. Educators found it rather challenging to understand and verbalize the notion of children's "occupations" in school. This was elaborated upon and explained as the day-to-day activities that pupils participated in.

Table 21

Classroom Occupations in Maltese Early Years Classrooms

Occupation	KG 2	Year 1
Rituals and routines	morning song; prayer; attendance; calendar; the weather; clean up; circle time; outdoor play time	morning prayer; attendance; the weather; calendar; fixed break time
Daily living activities	jacket off/on; wash hands; lunch time routine; toilet routine	jacket off/on; wash hands; lunch time routine; toilet on demand; distribution of milk
Play including play activities, physical and imaginative play	home corner; free play; outdoor equipment and outdoor play; table top toys; play with tactile and other sensory media, such as paint, rice and sand	yard; PE lessons and movement in class; play activities
Social participation and friendships	circle time/ storytelling; rhymes and music and creative activities	story telling as part of literacy programme; action songs; class games and activities
Pre-literacy, literacy and numeracy	pre-writing activities, such as writing in sand and paint; fine motor activities such as threading pasta and beads; other sensory activities, such as use of playdough.	writing; reading; Interactive games on smart board; art; painting crafts; music used in literacy and numeracy lessons

Table 21 depicts children's occupations in the chosen primary state school from the educators perspective in the respective year groups. From this table, one can note similarities in the occupations of four- and five-year-olds. The main differences noted in Table 23 are the participation of the kindergarten children in activities that appear to enhance fine, gross motor and sensory activities and physical play which was not mentioned by educators of the Year One classrooms. The areas of education, self-care, activities of daily living and play featured in the descriptions educators gave of what they perceived to be the main classroom occupations.

The majority of classroom activities evolved around the academic aspects of the curriculum that traditionally are practiced sitting at their desks. Educators on the one hand mentioned outdoor play as one of the occupations children participated in, but on the other hand, they spoke about the lack of outdoor play experiences that the children had exposure to. An occupation that went unmentioned was the carrying out of classroom chores. An example of these would be wiping the tables, placing chairs on the table and clearing up toys.

The children were asked to carry out some of these, from what I observed. However, it was not really part and parcel of the educators learning objectives, but occurred randomly and depended on the educators who often guided the children to do such tasks, showing them what they needed to do and how to do it. Kindergarten educators mentioned sensory play and sensory pre-writing activities, which the year 1 teachers did not refer to. In contrast, the notion of technology as "play" was mentioned by year 1 teachers, but not by kindergarten educators. Imaginative play was observed in most of the classrooms, but it nonetheless occupied a very small amount of time in every school day and educators expressed the desire to have

more opportunities to involve their pupils in “more spontaneous” play activities. By spontaneous play Ms Maria⁴² meant:

Being able to engage in a play activity, unscheduled in my lesson plan, without being too concerned and feeling guilty. The children tell me: Miss let us play this game, let us go out in the yard.....but I feel guilty that I am taking time from completing the work set out in the beginning of the scholastic year by the curriculum (Ms Biancha, Year 1).

Hence, this lack of spontaneity meant that the teacher perceived she had to stick to her timetable and use the activities she had planned, and she was reluctant to deviate out of fear of not sticking to her lesson plan.

Reflective Diary log: 5th December 2017

Reflection in Action.

Children did not appear to be very involved in making choices in the classroom. Play was not often child led but mostly adult prompted and not central to the curriculum. Five year olds had limited opportunity for free play in the classroom although the latter was encouraged at break time.

Reflection on Action.

Play may not be perceived as important in its own right. Educators see the kindergarten classroom as a preparatory phase to more formal learning, which starts to take place in year one but at the expense of providing play opportunities. I reflect on the need for more awareness amongst educators on the power of play. The issue of frequency and time children spend doing various occupations is a stumbling block for children's participation. Taking an OS perspective the data shows that educators consistently are advocating for more occupational balance.

⁴² The convention for talking about an educator in Maltese schools is usually using the word ‘Ms.’ before the name. All the names used in the forthcoming chapters are pseudonyms

By contrast, two kindergarten classrooms in particular provided the children with more prolonged opportunities for imaginative play using props and which involved the children taking the lead. The difference appears to be in the way the educator perceived “deviating from the curriculum”. Some were more inclined to move away from the written lesson plan and diversify what they did, and they creatively used different play activities and opportunities to engage the children. The extent and quality of their own engagement with their students in playful interactions differed from one educator to another

I do my best to try and involve the children in imaginative play and fun play scenarios. The children always amaze me with what they come up with and they are always so happy and excited when I tell them to go and play in the home corner. (Ms Maria, KG)

5.1.2 Children's Perspectives

The photos taken by both the kindergarten and year 1 children provided triangulation with what both the children said in the focus group about their classroom occupations and what the educators said in the interviews. The pictures taken by the children show what they loved to do in their classrooms as well as match the classroom occupations the educators spoke about. An analysis of the photos shows that the activity orientation of the year 1 classroom was different to that of the Kindergarten ones. The children participated in more classroom activities that involved materials/toys like blocks, sand water, paint and playdough. The five year olds had more formal seating arrangements and a lot of the activities centered on literacy and numeracy, even if they were delivered in creative ways.

Figure 5

Photos of Classroom Occupations of 4 year Old Children



Social Participation - story telling

For example, looking through Story books and talking about the story (other children sitting around the table not featured in the photo)



Literacy - pre-writing:

Learning shapes, and colours

For example, picture making out of wooden shapes



Literacy:

For example, writing letters with play dough.



Play:

For example, cotton wool and tweezer game to develop fine motor skills.



Play:

For example, water and sand play using garden tools

Figure 6

Photos of Classroom Occupations of 5 year Old Children.



Literacy

For example, cutting and pasting pictures to make a story



Numeracy

For example, picture by numbers



Numeracy:

For example, games with blocks



Numeracy:

For example, number work with octagons



Craft activity

The photos taken in Figures 5 and 6 depict the various occupations the children enjoyed doing. The pictures show a difference in what was captured by the children. Whilst the children in the kindergarten classes captured a variety of occupations, those in the year 1 classroom captured activities that were mostly related to literacy and numeracy. My own observations confirm that the latter was a reality. The way the activity or the literacy learning took place and the extent to which it was carried out may have affected the child's level of enjoyment, the desire to participate and also the motivation itself of the child.

5.2 Most and least Preferred Occupations

This section will present perspectives of both the children and the parents on their most and least preferred occupations.

5.2.1 Children's Perspectives

The children in the focus group spoke about what they enjoyed mostly in school, which included playing outdoors, reading, colouring, playing with toys and friends, writing, imaginative play, hide and seek, basketball and sports⁴³. This is what they said: "We play basketball, I like to play PE and don't like it when children play silly jokes. I like to play sports, football and basketball and I wish we played more at school" (Mirrhea, Age 5).

This want of more playtime and the desire for physical play has already been noted in the educators' assertions. According to the data from the children's focus groups and the teachers' interviews, the children enjoyed a number of other activities. The extract by Hope below shows the children's enjoyment of painting:

Researcher: What is making you so happy in this photo?

Hope: I just love to paint and mix all the colours

⁴³ No pictures of outdoor activities were taken as children did not take the cameras down to the playground or anywhere outside the classroom.

Maya, on the other hand, spoke about how she enjoyed engaging in imaginative play in the company of her class mates.

We are the daddies and they are the mummies; we are taking our children to the park...this is my baby (holding and pointing to a doll); look we have tea cups and plates; we are going to have a tea party (Maya, 4 years).

The children also expressed their desire for more imaginative and physical play. Amongst the things that made the children happy were: playing outside with friends, just being in the classroom, getting a reward (sticker) for doing homework well, as well as being in the company of adults who cared for them, as one little boy portrayed by his spontaneous comment “My teacher Ms B makes me happy and Ms M, they make me very happy” (Lino, Year 1).

When asked about what play activities they wanted more at school, they mentioned equipment that promoted physical play: a playhouse, a trampoline, swings, monkey bars, see-saw and slide as well as the desire to participate more in sport activities like basketball and football. Kim’s words reflect these desires:

I wish we had a big big slide and a swing. Then I could push Matteo very high. I love to go on the trampoline in the yard with Maya and Mirhea but teacher don’t let us because we have to take turns. (Kim, Year 1)

To continue to outline the children’s views on their school occupations, the extract from the children’s focus group in Table 22 shows that the children had their preferred activities, but overall it seems that what they valued most was a sense of being with others and belonging. Preferred occupations were mostly the ones carried out with or in the company of others, especially in the absence of competition, and when the children got along together.

The children also spoke about their least preferred occupations/classroom activities that are shown in the Table 23 taken from the focus group that I had with the five-year old students. What is interesting to note in the conversation is that Children’s favourite occupations were mostly about “being” and involved moving.

They were concerned about the breakdown of relationships/friendships and being alone. They did like to participate in the more “academic” occupations like reading and writing; what the children really disliked about the classroom occupations was not the activities themselves, but how they were carried out, the context and the extent to which they were kept going.

Table 22

Children's Conversation: Most Preferred Occupations.

Maya:	I love to, I love to, and I really love to read books at school. I love to play with my friends.
Matteo:	I love to colour and paint with lots of colours, especially butterflies, but I also like to play with my friends, Gabe Mario and Lino
Researcher:	And how about you two, Gabe and Mario?
Gabe:	I like to write on the board in my classroom . . . I like to play hide and seek.
Mario:	I play hide and seek with my best friend Gabe.
Lino:	I like to play monsters with Gabe, but outside, not in class.
Researcher:	And you Dario?
Dario:	I like books. I really like to write on my white-board. I like toys.
Gabe:	He likes to play with me
Kim:	I like to colour.
Matteo:	I like to write on the board and I like paint.
Mirhea:	Me too, I like to paint, to write, write my homework, do my school work and then I like to go home.
Kim:	I like to play with my friends Kai and John
Lino:	I don't know (pause) I like to play with my friends Mario and Gabe and Leo...

Mario spoke about cutting “*too much*” while Gabe disliked writing when he perceived that he took too long to finish. Hence, the time factor was mostly the reason why these two children disliked the activities. Interestingly, children's least preferred occupations were not the occupations they engaged in, but those that disrupted their occupations of play.

Table 23*Children's Conversation: Least Preferred Occupations*

Mario:	I don't like drawing and cutting with the scissors; in class sometimes we cut a lot.
Hope:	Gabe always wants to finish first, I hate writing; no chance of finishing first".
Lino:	I don't like it when children fight in class and I don't like it when they kick.
Maya:	Colours
Kim:	I don't like it when children fight
Matteo:	I don't like scissors; yesterday we were cutting out a Christmas tree and we filled all the classroom with pieces of paper (laughing)
Mirhea:	I don't like it, because sometimes, Gianluca and Matteo, they hit me because they don't play nicely. Sometimes when we play basketball - they always want to play basketball because it's the best thing, and they want to make other people play. I like to play sports; PE at school; football, PE and basketball. Gabe is always singing when we are writing, Gianluca is always the first to finish when we are writing, but I don't like writing. He did something to me, I told the teacher and then he told the teacher back. You know, Jake always copies me and last time he hit me.
Lino:	I don't like it when teacher leaves the class.
Maya:	I don't like being bothered when I am working in class.
Gabe:	I don't like it when children hit me and don't play nicely.
Researcher:	What about you two, Hope and Mario?
Hope:	I don't like it when children fight in class.
Mario:	I don't like it when Matteo annoys me and takes my things.
Matteo:	I don't like it when the teacher leaves and does not come back.
Kimberley:	Matteo keeps swinging on his chair and he will fall...

A comment that came from a boy who had experienced neglect and a very difficult home environment relates to feelings of security. His favourite occupation was being with adults who loved him and supported him and this, in turn, led to

successful participation in other occupations such as writing. The boy turns to Ms Cynthia and hugs her “I really don’t like to be by myself, I love Ms Cynthia” (Lino, 5 years, Year 1). Whilst the children were clear about their preference of what occupations that wanted to engage in at school and what they liked best, it was evident that their class teacher, the environment, adult support and attitudes as well as being rewarded for their work were valued by the children. It was also interesting to note that even the five-year-olds desired to have some choice and control in their classroom and they needed to feel successful. These were Gabe’s words that express to what the extent a classroom writing task left him feeling disheartened: “I wish I was the teacher and then I would be able to do what I want no writing, I hate writing, I can never catch up, I’m always the last one”. Finally when asked one thing they would wish for this is what the children said:

I wish to play football, I wish to play in the yard...I wish to play more with my friends...I wish we have a playhouse. I wish we have monkey bars to hang from and to be able to swing and I also wish to have ladybugs emojis. I wish that teacher would let us do whatever we wanted. We don’t go out to play. We never go outside. I wish the teacher would say the class would stay outside till we go back home; I wish for calm (focus group of children, Yr 1).

The last little boy who had expressed the wish that his classroom would be “calm”, appeared to fall short of ideas, on how to bring about the change he wished to see in his classroom. This may either portray the sense of contentment that the child experienced simply by being in the class, or else his perceived helplessness and lack of power to change things. From my own observation of his non-verbal cues, his tone of voice and his behaviour in the classroom, I could sense that it was more of the latter. For this boy, the need of a safe and supportive classroom environment was paramount. The safety in this case was not just about the physical environment but also about the educators who provided such safety.

Reflective Diary log 7th February 2018
Reflection in Action

Is it the duration of an activity that determines the extent of children's enjoyment and engagement?

Reflection on Action

The children's photos and testimonials led me to reflect on a number of issues: it appears to me that most of the activities were structured and appeared to have a clear educational aim, namely literacy and numeracy. The Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015) that speaks about "a playful structure" (p.20 l. 8) advocating "child initiated playfulness" p, 20 l. 9 to the curriculum was not so evident in my observations, leading me to reflect that this needed giving attention to. Children expressed their desires for occupations that involved more movement and physical play

In conclusion, the data generated by this study shows that children in these Maltese early years classrooms mostly valued their occupations, even if they included academic-related activities: reading writing, drawing and painting together with play which included imaginative and physical play, being with friends and significant adults and other opportunities for social participation. These children showed that being in the company of friends and adults who cared for them was important. Rather than a dislike of specific activities, it was the extent to which the activity was carried out that the children disliked, that and circumstances that disrupted the opportunity to play.

5.2.2 Parents' Perspectives

This section will highlight what four parents Carmen, Ritienne, Maria and Georgina, perceived as the most important school occupations. Parents had varied views on what school occupations consisted of, and what follows highlights what parents valued most. Ritienne starts by mentioning that school occupation should focus on learning how to read and write; Maria elaborates further, saying that she

thought it was important for her daughter to learn how to share and that activities should always revolve around the concept of sharing. Carmen talks about the importance of children being problem solvers.

My daughter is an only child, and therefore it is so important for me that she learns to share and get along with others. I think academics are important but sharing is of greater value to me". (Maria, parent of child in year 1)

I think it is also important to learn not just sharing but problem solving. Children have to learn how to get along together so that all the children are happy. If you want to interact with others, you have to find a solution that works for everybody" (Carmen, parent of child in year1).

Georgina spoke about communication as a skill which she felt was necessary for children to be doing in school, saying "Learning how to communicate is very important for me. Children need to communicate between themselves to participate in what goes on in the classroom"

Parents agreed that children should be encouraged to carry over school occupations into the home setting. As Ritienne shared, "The children should learn how to clean up in the home too, not just at school those are important skills". When parents were asked to elaborate on more occupations, Georgina said: "I think using play to learn is great as my son learned mathematical concepts like shapes, long and short and counting from using lego blocks. He also learned these concepts through board games".

Georgina, parent to a 5-year-old child, shared how she too valued a more playful approach to learning by saying "Ball games...a different approach...rather than the teacher standing in front and just talking". After a discussion, parents came to the conclusion that it was a positive thing in that they noticed that when something was not right the children would report such events to them at home. For them, this meant that the children were happy and felt the need to report only when things were not right.

Tessie and Molly, both parents of Year 1 students, blamed themselves for not encouraging and providing the space for their children to express themselves due to their own busy timetables. They wished for their children to do well academically and to have exposure to activities that developed their communication, problem solving and social skills. They consistently maintained throughout the focus group that they were thankful that their children were in “a good class”. For them this meant that they had a teacher who cared, applied rules and had

Reflective Diary log: 10th November 2017

Reflection in Action.

As the parents spoke, I sensed that they felt a little frustrated. They were concerned that their children did not go home and speak about their school day. This made them feel somewhat uninvolved in their child's daily school routine. Yet they were able to engage in discussion about the school and their child's day with positivity.

My reflections led me to ask myself whether five year- old children may have difficulty remembering what they did over time and whether that may be a reason to not report back to their parents. Potentially, it could also be that what went on in the classroom was not “exciting enough” for the children to want to report about it. It is also likely that parents needed to become more skilful in finding ways to encourage and to promote their children to share their school day experience.

Reflection on Action.

My thoughts here lead me to believe that once parents saw their children happy and content, they were not overly worried and concerned with what went on in the class.

Parents value being informed about their child's school day and goings-on, as well as their child's willingness to attend school. Parents showed a sense of trust in their child's educators, and I believe this was most important in promoting the involvement of children and parents alike.

effective teaching skills and that their children were happy. Maria shared a crucial factor that in her opinion superseded any others, for children to participate gainfully in school life: that her kids participate gainfully as well as being safe and happy.

Young children should be encouraged to take part in activities that make them feel safe and happy; that help them to develop life skills. These activities should be creative and enjoyable, which makes it easier for them to willingly participate and to learn” (Maria, Parent, Year 1 student).

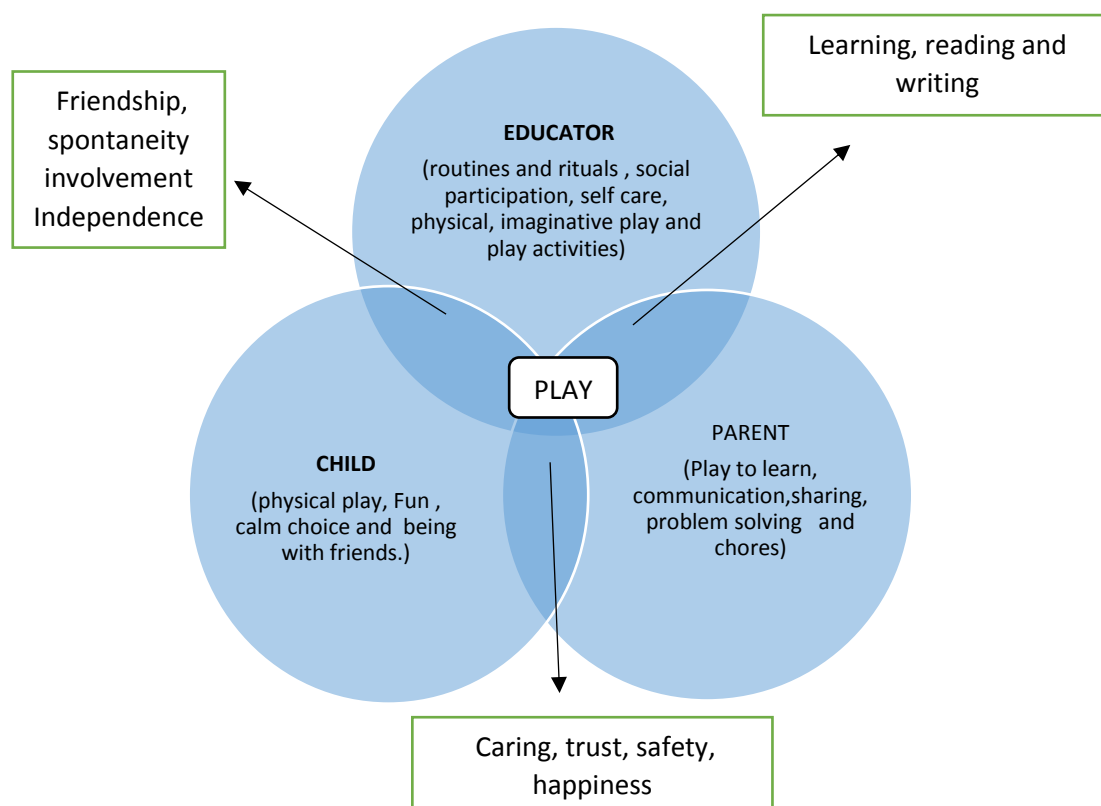
Summarising the parents’ perspectives, reading and writing were assumed to be the primary occupations that children should engage in at school, in other words, the area of education/work from an occupational therapy perspective, with no mention on self-care or leisure. Yet parents clearly stated that they valued the development of skills in their children, such as developing self-confidence, learning to do house chores, communication, sharing and problem solving. It is interesting to note that parents did not mention any desire for their children to engage in or develop any occupations related to self-care, and play was mentioned minimally. Potentially, this is not because they did not perceive them to be important, but possibly because they did not associate them with occupations to be learned at school. They may have perceived these to be home and outdoor occupations and that the role of schooling was to focus more on academic skills and social participation.

5.3 Conclusion

To conclude, I will summarize what the educators, the children in the kindergarten and year one classrooms, and the parents perceived as important classroom occupations, highlighting similarities and differences. This is also illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7

The Most Valued Occupations by Children, Parents and Educators.



The children spoke about various occupations, but it may be that those with the involvement of other children were identified as more enjoyable. Although children were told not to take photos of their friends but of the things they were doing, many of the pictures captured by the children were ones in which other children were doing things and being together. The facial expressions in the photos was witness to their sense of contentment. Various types of play activities were seen as important occupations, but children honed in on the desire for more physical play, such as play on playground equipment and playing games or a sport. Imaginative play, playing with toys, even colouring and painting were other occupations children valued and wanted more, according to what they said in the focus group. From what they said, it was also clear that children valued the more social occupations of “being”, such as making and having friends and socializing.

Children valued their friendships with other children, interacting with their friends, and they very clearly stated that they wanted to engage more in play activities, fun activities and sports with others. The children expressed their desire to have fun, have a calm environment and to have more choice and control over their learning environment.

This sheds light on the important role educators have in orchestrating the space to provide the right activities calm and security young children need. The parents placed value on occupations such as problem solving, participation and involvement in classroom chores. The parents and educators did perceive that literacy and numeracy were the two most important occupations, mostly also learning to read and write, but in addition communication was a skill desired by both. Educators like the children, also wanted play to be a more central occupation, be involved and independent. They specifically perceived that positive behaviour and life skills were important occupations. Parents and children both appear to consider trust, happiness, safety and caring key in execution of school occupations. A significant, interesting finding was that, play albeit in different forms, was the only occupation mentioned by all three: children, parents and educator. Hence in spite of the lack of play opportunities in these classrooms, highlighted in the data it is still considered a central occupation by the stakeholders.

In summary, this data, primarily gathered from the teachers, kindergarten educators, learning support educators and parents enabled me to delve deeper into the children's school occupations. This, together with the children's understanding of their own occupations, has provided some insight into what needs to be considered when designing the relevant school-based support. Placing pupils' occupations in context as the cornerstone for intervention means that they are more likely to respond and participate if they are engaged in tasks that have meaning, interest and motivate them. The next chapter will discuss the enablers and barriers to children's participation in the school environment.

Chapter 6 - Children's Participation in School Occupations: Enablers and Barriers

This second chapter of the findings, is presented according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory⁴⁴, in which the different levels of involvement and determinants of participation are viewed from a systems approach, meaning that it is the process of transaction between the persons and the environment and not the persons themselves that is mostly significant.

It will answer the second research question: What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations in Maltese early-years classrooms? The enablers and barriers allowed me to gain a better understanding of what challenges the educators faced in the school and classroom whilst allowing me to also be cognisant of the strengths. Both of these were instrumental in developing the collaborative intervention, which will be presented in chapter 7. The data for this chapter were gathered from my own classroom observations and documents such as the field diary logs, interviews with teachers, learning support educators, and school management teams, the parent's focus group, school action and development plans, the IEP meeting reports, and my research journal. The chapter will go further in-depth into the enablers and barriers to participation, using Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological model as a framework, thus presenting them as micro, meso and macro factors:

- Micro Factors: The child at the centre as the main microsystem of the school;
- Meso Factors: The transactions and connections between the different micro systems: the child, the educators, parents/caregivers in school, home and community settings;
- Macro Factors: Beyond school – the values, attitudes and cultures that govern the education system, policies, services and support.

⁴⁴ See chapter 2 for details on this theory

It will show how the school occupations presented in Table 23 were enabled or hindered according to the various stakeholders; that in some way were responsible for the children's education within the context of the school. The main children's school occupations will be recaptured. These were routines and rituals, play, including play activities and free play, physical and imaginative play, friends and social participation as well as literacy and numeracy.

6.1 Enablers to Children's Participation

This section will present in more detail the educators' perspectives, on enablers to participation summarized in Table 24.

Table 24

Educators' Views on Enablers to Participation in School Occupations

Enablers	Relevance to Occupation
The Child:	Sensory, Motor and Process skills supported by the environment and enhancing school occupations.
Communication with parents	School occupations supported in the home setting
The Environment	Physical, learning, emotional, aesthetic environment and resources supporting occupations
Building professional knowledge	Educators learning more about ways to enhance childhood occupations ,
Relationship-building and Friendships	Educators and Children "doing" occupations and "being".
A love and passion for teaching and learning	Educators and children motivated through engagement in occupation
Positive adult attributes : communication, empathy, connectedness, caring and flexibility	Children's participation supported by Adult Occupations.
Nature and extent of activities and resources	Engagement in Fun Occupations for the "just right" amount of time and, provision of a variety of resources.
Networks of Support	Educators', Senior management and support staff supporting each other's Occupations.

This first section addresses the educators' perspectives on personal factors that contributed to participation in relation to the child, the parents and themselves, within the contexts of the school and home.

6.1.1 Micro Factors

The micro factors presented are psychosocial ones that will focus on the child at the centre but within the context of the school and classroom setting and takes into consideration the child and adult⁴⁵ interaction.

6.1.1.1 Children's Qualities that Supported Participation

Teachers perceived the children's personal qualities that included strengths and skills to be enablers to their participation in the classroom. They were determined, helpful, loving, willing to learn, able to listen and respected each other. The fact that the children learned from each other was considered a strength, as was the level of motivation. If children were motivated, then they were keener to engage. Educators also identified a number of skills that children possessed that promoted their participation: good understanding of and self-expression in the English language, pre-writing and writing skills, and independent living skills, such as toileting, feeding, good skills in sport and PE and good hand writing and skills in making crafts. All students with different levels of ability were active participants in the lesson. Three words from educators' interviews sum up enablers of children's participation: "aptitude, motivation and eagerness to work" (Ms. Biancha, Year 1). Ms. Bianca⁴⁶ from year 1 shared: "Children are well behaved, active and alert and have a love for learning. They are interested and motivated to participate and learn through play. Students are eager to work; not all of them are bright, but they do their best to learn"

⁴⁵ Adult refers to the educator, parent or any other relevant support staff

⁴⁶ Teachers in this school were addressed by their first name.

Ms. Rita's (Year 1) words, who also saw this eagerness to learn, support what Ms. Biancha said.

This year my students are really eager to learn, it's a very nice class. Not in the sense of their intellectual abilities but how they are brought up, how they communicate and how they play. They help each other and are quite responsible for their age and polite, obviously not but most of them.

Both Ms. Rita and Ms. Biancha showed that teachers do not consider academic abilities as key to participation in the children they teach, but consider qualities like good communication, positive behaviour and play skills as well as children's eagerness to learn as prerequisites for participation. This includes a positive attitude, and respect towards authority. Ms. Rita spoke about the level of calm in her classroom, which she attributed to the children's ability to communicate and subsequently participate. "Most of the children are very communicative, you know...It's a very nice class; a nice level of calm." The educators perceived that when children had good communication, and consequently good social occupations, the overall atmosphere in the class was calmer, potentially since children exhibited more positive behaviour. The reverse also holds true however: a calm classroom environment will elicit better communication and, as a result, more positive behaviour. Both Ms. Rita's and Ms. Biancha's classrooms had this characteristic of a calm atmosphere, as documented in my log through my observations; however, these teachers were possibly failing to perceive this environmental characteristic as significant.

6.1.1.2 Parental Factors that Supported Children's Participation

This section addresses the educators' perspectives on parental/caregiver factors that contributed to participation in relation to the child, the parents and themselves. The data from the teacher's interviews shows that despite the challenges that teachers experienced in their efforts to involve parents, they also shared that they considered it to be a good number of parents who were interested

and got involved in their child's learning, and therefore they cooperated with the school. They said that they got this sense through parents' evenings and other such meetings.

Mr. Karl's words below quoted from his interview clearly show some key ingredients that he and other educators took into consideration prior to bringing parents on board: namely establishing a relationship with the care givers, keeping in touch with the adults and sharing through social networks what the children were doing in class. And most importantly, Mr. Karl aimed to show the parents that he was available to listen to their concerns. All this was done adhering to ethical boundaries set by the school policy on communicating with parents.

I think this year we have cooperative parents; the main thing is that you maintain a good relationship with the parents. I made a private group on Facebook as well for the parents, the LSE and myself. The group is focused on class activities. I have obtained consent to put photos of the children doing activities and I post any news that needs to be communicated on the page, or if I need something for the children I tell them so the children will bring it... only I am active in the group and made it clear to the guardians that I was not going to "friend" their children or anything or anything like that.

But if they had a question or something they could post it on the group chat. I told them that if they needed anything, they could text me privately". (Mr. Karl, KG2).

The teachers felt supported by the administration in that the latter made great efforts to involve the parents and guardians and to keep in contact with parents through the Facebook group/email. As Ms. Cynthia shared: "The head of school is making great efforts to get the parents on board. He works a lot with parents, involving them in activities, getting them to support school initiatives"

Reflective Diary Log 26th October 2017

Reflection in Action.

As the teachers share their views on enablers of children's participation, I realise that teachers have positive practices that contribute towards the children's personal qualities. These were great strengths that encouraged positive behaviour and gainful participation.

Reflection on Action.

From an OS perspective and looking at form, function and meaning, educators' quotes shared in this section show that they perceive that positive behaviour and self-regulation, communication and motivation were key to children's participation. The educators, on the other hand, may not have been aware that this was coming from their own skills in managing the classroom environment.

6.1.1.3 Educator's qualities that supported the children's participation

In this section, I will talk about the educators' qualities that supported the children's participation. The personal attributes and attitudes of the educators proved decidedly to be key factors that contributed to children's participation. The teachers spoke about how their approach towards their charges was generally child-friendly. For Ms. Biancha, this quality of child-friendliness meant being mindful of her tone of voice, body language and teaching style. "My tone of voice is child-friendly, I only raise my voice if it gets too much. My character and my voice compliment the classroom environment. I am very comfortable with young children."

A caring attitude towards the children, low tone of voice and feeling comfortable in the presence of young children were all considered important factors that enhanced children's participation in the classroom, according to Ms. Biancha: "Unless the child is happy being with you, they won't learn, Children will only learn from the people they love and from people who love them."

The notion of empathy and trying to understand the roots of children's behaviours were essential for the educators: by accepting and understanding the children they were more likely to render them active participants in the classroom.

You need to accept that children come from diverse backgrounds...some 5-year-olds have been through more than the grown up in the classroom. If you come from a loving environment you cannot take it for granted...you need to have enough empathy to understand someone who does not; teachers need to have empathy, and they learn this in their undergraduate training. Unless the child is happy with you they won't learn; once the child is happy, they will absorb what goes on in the classroom and participate more."

The importance of teacher's wellbeing was emphasised by Ms.Rita. Both the need to be kept motivated and to have a positive attitude were crucial for a teacher's survival in the school system. Ms. Rita spoke about the importance of wellbeing in the context of having a challenging year group that would lead a teacher to feel "very depressed".

One year I was really depressed; the class was very problematic; I was losing my love for teaching- the fighting, the punching, the spitting, it was impossible, I wouldn't have dared to do group activities, and no matter how much I prepared nothing seemed to work.

Ms. Biancha had a very positive outlook towards the students and their potential. Nevertheless, my observations led me to conclude that her own love of learning and teaching fostered the love of learning in her pupils. Ms. Cynthia shared the following that sums up adequately other important factors mentioned by various other educators:

I am able to form good relationships with the children so that they build trust and feel secure. I am the children's friend. If children are afraid of their teacher, they will feel insecure. Up-to-date planning is important, although

sometimes I have to be flexible and change my plan. I like to work with the LSEs as a team. Collaboration is important to me.

Ms Rita spoke about “keeping the momentum going” as essential to the school environment. By this she meant that educators needed to be mindful to constantly engage children, reminding them of the rules and supporting them to adhere to routine. As a teacher one needed to stay motivated, especially towards the later part of the school year when fatigue started to set in.

In summary, educators as well as the way they perceive their occupation of educating, played a major role in children’s participation. The way educators supported the children’s endeavours was linked to their own knowledge and skills, love for learning and teaching, their resourcefulness and having access to resources, relationship-building and establishing boundaries.

6.1.2 Meso Factors

The meso level factors that come into play and influence participation of children in school are influenced by the interactions between the child, the parents or caregivers, educators and school administrators within the school and the classroom and in liaison with the home.

The network of support, as one teacher shared, made a great difference in the school. The educators felt valued and cared for, and had a sense of cohesiveness amongst themselves. The teachers’ sentiment was that the administration was the most important part of the school network. The importance and the need to communicate with the senior management team, as well as other professionals working within the school, was also highlighted. The educators felt more motivated once they felt supported by this team.

Head and assistant heads are a team. They all pool in to support us.

Teachers work in groups and share resources and ideas and organise things together; the staff at school are welcoming and mostly very resilient”

(Mr. Karl, KG2).

Ms. Liliana, one of the assistant heads, stressed how important empathy was when working within a school. She said that in many cases, children had been through such difficult times that what they needed was someone who could empathize with their situation. She maintained that the right attitude towards the children helped children to thrive and participate. Ritienne, one of the parents, had a lot of praise for the senior management and the way the school was being run. This showed that although parents wanted an academic education, the parents were happy that the teachers cared about their children.

The SMT are all there to support us. They listen to what we parents have to say. You can hold a meeting and talk to them even though they are busy. They will listen to you and take on your suggestions. I am very happy with the way the school is being run...the teachers really care about our children” (Ritienne, Parent, Year 1).

Flexibility was also mentioned as key to working well in a school. A certain degree of flexibility to change according to the needs of the child, the curriculum and the class cohort was also considered important by a number of educators. Examples of this included adapting to the needs of the individual children, the cohort of students and the people/professionals in the class. “Feeling comfortable with the professionals in the class,” according to Ms. Liliana, was as important as working in a team. Flexibility also meant that the educator would adapt the curriculum so that all the children stood to gain. In fact, the educators spoke about “Personalising the curriculum” (Ms. Rita, Year 1).

This meant not using a one-size-fits-all approach, but in actual fact they were in my view, referring to differentiation and accommodation. Speaking about the curriculum, they said that if the curriculum was balanced and the children had exposure to the basic skills, they would be in a better position to participate. It could provide the children with the opportunity to share and play and include everyone. Educators allowing children to be creative without being too focused on prescriptive

work promoted a child-centered approach and was more conducive to the children's participation. The move away from writing and worksheets to a focus on group work and other creative activities offered scope for the participation of all the children according to several educators.

Participants in the study acknowledged the importance of the environment as an enabler for children's participation. They spoke of a "happy" school climate. The school was described by the teachers as "a welcoming one with great team work and supportive administration". This "happy" climate was created by the children and the educators. The latter assumed responsibility for such happiness, which could be felt in the corridors; it was partly owed to the connectedness collaboration promoted among the school staff. The focus on the person rather than the task contributed to this climate in two ways: the senior management connected with teachers and LSEs, while the educators connected with the children.

Teachers, like Ms. Rita, Ms. Biancha and Mr. Karl, all spoke about the family-like environment at the school. This environment, according to them, lent itself to the children's sense of security and comfort, and hence participating better. Moreover, the school radiated a certain "enthusiasm" - the teachers' and educators' enthusiasm. "If you use kind words and nice gestures, then the children are happy; that is the kind of environment that will support learning." Ms. Rita Year 1

The liveliness in the school was linked to the nature of and the activity level in the school. The educators were being encouraged to participate in various initiatives together with the pupils. Both the children and the educators were active participants in diverse projects which lent themselves to didactic learning. This included a number of activities introduced by the school management, including *Walk the Mile*⁴⁷, creative arts projects, gardening activities, project work in teams, feasts and special days celebrations, such as the Feast of Saint Martin, animal

⁴⁷ This initiative, which involved physical activity and visiting different creative places in the village, won a Malta Arts Award 2020 for Best project in the Community.

blessing activity etc. As Mr. Dion, one assistant head explained: “The teachers are motivated because of the introduction of more creative activities; the staff spoke to me last week and said ‘Please, let’s keep this going because the school is alive now.’” It appears that there were three key ingredients that made the school a good place to be and that contributed to making the educators resilient to the challenges they faced. These were:

- The connectedness between staff;
- Their attitudes and motivation;
- The environment: the “happy school climate” and the liveliness of the staff.

Ms. Biancha too spoke about the advantages of the school size. The fact that the school was large meant that it had a variety of educators employed, and so it was easy to find someone with whom to get along with. It was important for Ms. Biancha to find support in other educators. This, she said, was crucial to then going on to support the children through sharing of resources, ideas and methods that work. “Since the school is big there is a variety of people and you will definitely get on with someone” (Ms. Biancha, Year 1).

Getting along with colleagues did indirectly enable educators to support their students better, and personal friendships led to the sharing of professional knowledge and resources. The teachers spoke about the school being a “community” and that building relationships with both colleagues and the children was essential to have a harmonious setting in which children can thrive. The educators highlighted the importance of friendships between colleagues. The way student groups were chosen would impact their level of participation in the classroom.

A balance of ability and skill coupled with the readiness of both children and educators to learn seem to be a necessary ingredient that could potentially support participation, also by making the classroom environment more conducive to

learning. Teachers felt that, in relatively big classrooms, putting children in small groups was the ideal for participation as this presented a comfortable learning environment.

Interviewees acknowledged that whilst resources did not solve all their challenges in working with students, they were essential to supporting students' classroom participation. The vast quantities of resources the school purchased was another strength mentioned by the educators. These referred to books, materials to support literacy, games, the interactive whiteboards and others. Apart from the resources, more student involvement in other activities was considered an enabler to children's participation. One such activity mentioned by the teachers was engagement in physical activities. These were ones that the children looked forward to and gave the children opportunity to move, develop creative skills as well as work outside the regular classroom. Hence the importance of changing the learning environment to support the children's participation.

Outdoor learning is a must. There needs to be time and the availability of space. We did a maths treasure hunt. The children were so good and if we year 1s do more such activities, for example water games with a literacy and numeracy theme, children will participate more; we teachers should group up more and do these activities. The children get so excited when I tell them we are going outside at least, it's a change of scene, apart from the sun and the fresh air; and it motivates them to work harder (Ms. Biancha, Year 1).

Also, as Ms. Cynthia shared, the educators' questioned the need for elaborate resources to be more effective in engaging the children; what this implies is that it is not the resources that make for good teaching and learning. Very often these were only "excuses" and the fundamental issues went beyond physical resources. "I wouldn't blame the resources. My resources were never a problem for

me because I've got my own; so [t]here are brilliant teachers in the world who teach with a piece of chalk on a wall" (Ms. Cynthia RSS).

6.1.3 Macro Factors

The Macro level factors that came into play and influenced the participation and inclusion of the children in school were influenced by values, attitudes, culture, systems, services and policies. In spite of a lack of services, one support staff member firmly believed that the school management and their way of working made a difference. Adults collaborating amongst themselves, building their professional knowledge, communicating with parents and professionals and essentially having a love and passion for learning and teaching was what kept educators going: "Schools have a vision, a sense of commitment, embrace diversity and make great efforts to be inclusive and have good team work" (Ms. Wendy, KG LSE).

When the Learning Support Educators use effective strategies according to the student's needs the outcome in terms of participation is greater, even more so when the parents/carers within the home setting are on board as well. Good class teams embrace strategies and implement them effectively. (Ms. Tatjana, RSS)

When provided regularly, services were supportive of educators" and children's needs as shared by Ms. Charlotte (Yr 1, LSE):

The services are also a plus when we have them, erm, because there are, yes, services, like erm, the early intervention teacher and autism support teacher... they are here regularly and we send our students to speech therapy and occupational therapy whenever they have an appointment...the staff are very open to suggestions. Erm, they are very keen to learn about the student, in spite of all the difficulties they face, they ask and they are open to professionals' suggestions. (Ms. Charlotte, year 1, LSE).

One person in senior management stressed the importance of inter-professional collaboration not only between heads of schools and colleges, but even

between persons outside the educational system who could support their children. They were very appreciative of any support they could get.

We try to see what we can do. We make the best with what we have. So, if a teacher has a difficulty and asks me for help, has a concern, she sends me an email and I liaise with her. I act as a coordinator. I am not a professional in all areas and so I have to liaise. Liaising is one good thing we have. (Ms. Margaret, SMT)

6.1.4 Summary

In summary, micro, meso and macro level factors that enabled participation were mostly not about the child. What influenced the interactions between the child, the immediate family and the educators in the context of the home and school settings included: the educators' passion for teaching and children's love for learning; educator qualities; knowledge and attitudes; the physical and aesthetic learning environment: the nature and extent of resources available; access to support networks; positive behaviour; communication and motor and process skills of the child that to some extent were dependent on the immediate environment they were exposed to in both the school and home.

The identification of enablers as a baseline to develop school-based occupational therapy was important so as to really ensure that the project was a collaborative one which addressed the specific needs of the educators in the given school. The enablers were instrumental in developing the intervention, as this made use of the strengths of the children and educators as well as the school system. These were motivators and building blocks to support the barriers that would present themselves next.

6.2 Barriers to Participation in School Occupations

This section will present the barriers to children's participation in school occupations. The perspectives of the different stakeholders on barriers to

participation are given in the next few pages. Barriers according to the educators are tabulated in Table 25 and include the child; parental participation; the context of the classroom; the attitudes; skills and professional background of the educators; the curriculum and the school system itself. These will be discussed in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Table 25*Educators views on Barriers to Participation in School Occupations*

Barriers	Relevance to Occupation
The child	Cognitive, behavioural, motor and process skills not supported by the environment and disrupting school occupations.
Lack of parental participation	Lack of parental participation does not support or reinforce children's participation in school occupations.
The Environment	The physical and learning environment; lack of human and non-human resources that disrupt occupations
Educator attributes and attitudes: lack of communication, empathy, connectedness, caring and flexibility	Adult attributes not supporting children's occupations.
Educators' lack of knowledge and skills	Knowledgeable and skillful educators support children's occupations.
Time factor	Not enough time to prepare, develop and engage children in meaningful occupations. Not enough time for adults to support children's occupations
The system including, the curriculum and its delivery	Occupational disruption related to service delivery and educational policy

6.2.1 Micro Factors

This first section addresses the educators' perspectives on personal factors that hindered the participation of the child, the parents and themselves within the context of the school and classroom. The micro barriers presented here will focus on the child at the center, but within the context of the school and classroom setting, and takes into consideration the child and adult interactions.

6.2.1.1 Child Personal Factors that Hindered Participation

Educators perceived that some child "intrinsic" factors did not support participation. While these may appear to be inherently linked solely to the child, the data analysis reveals that it was the environment and other extrinsic factors that

promoted this lack of participation. This was evident in the educators' transcribed data and analysis. Some of these child inherent characteristics included children having multiple difficulties, including speech difficulties, low intellectual abilities, severe challenging behaviour, literacy issues, learning and handwriting difficulties, and difficulties in socialization. The language barrier and different expectations relating to cultural differences were also perceived as barriers. For instance, some families with different cultural backgrounds did not acknowledge the importance of engaging their children in home activities to support the skills they learnt at school, but instead adopted a wait-and-see approach. This often frustrated the educators.

Educators interpreted the children's difficulties as possibly originating from a disability or condition; they also acknowledged how crucial the children's attitudes and overall disposition were to their participation. Challenging behaviour was at the forefront. Such behaviour included inability to conform to class rules and rudeness (answer back) and stubbornness. Often, however, teachers understood that environmental psychosocial factors, such as situations in families where there was neglect and financial and difficult social situations where the root of this challenging behaviour. Ms. Biancha explains:

The children know no better; the children are often a reflection of their parents- their home, their culture, when I meet the parents, I often understand where the children are coming from and why they are not succeeding.

The children are not to blame, we need to educate the parents first.

These psychosocial factors were seen as a barrier to children's participation in the school since they did not permit the children to attend to what was going on in the classroom. The lack of motivation and disinterest of some of the children, which included their inability to accept failure and admit they were wrong, was another hurdle to participation, according to the educators.

More children in today's society have difficulties sharing. They have poor turn taking and are rather self-centred. They lack motivation and resilience. These

strong words by Ms. Charlotte potentially are reflective of the different environmental factors that are making children in today's society passive, self-centered and unmotivated. According to her, it was due to "lack of exposure" to various activities and experiences.

The interviews with the educators revealed that the children often faced a number of difficulties related to challenges in cognitive or motor skills, which did not support their participation in classroom routines. The cognitive challenges children faced included poor listening skills, difficulty problem solving and a short attention span. Ms. Charlotte and Ms. Biancha illustrate this and once again they associate such challenges with an environmental barrier: culture and language:

During story telling a lot of children have poor listening skills...they are mostly keen to talk themselves. If children are foreign it is a problem if they don't understand Maltese. They cannot focus for more than two minutes so the teacher has to make sure the instructions are short and broken down.

(Ms. Charlotte, Year 1, LSE)

Other challenges children faced according to educators were poor sitting skills, including bad posture; difficulty in skills such as hopping; general coordination difficulties; difficulties in holding the pencil, drawing and using scissors and dislike of getting dirty. These were all mentioned by the year 1 teachers as being stumbling blocks to participation, but not so much by the KG educators potentially because kindergarten educators do not expect their pupils to have accomplished these skills as yet. Consequently, they may not make these skills central to their teaching, or embed them in the children's activities and learning. The following quote illustrates the concerns of year 1 teachers, Ms. Biancha and Ms. Rita, as to the lack of skill development observed in some of the children, but they themselves acknowledge that the educators should be playing a more active role in remediating and supporting these skills.

Cutting with the scissors is a challenge; if they don't cut properly the picture is ugly and hence they are demotivated; yes, they have difficulty holding the pencil to write. Pencil grip is a problem. We certainly need to dedicate more time to support the children in developing these skills before it is too late but we need time and knowledge ourselves.

Other occupations the teachers felt the children were not fully participating in were self-care tasks, like buttoning up and zipping up their jacket, but they also recognized this as being the result of an environmental factor: once again, that of lack of exposure and practice:

Reflective Diary log: 5th December 2017

Reflection in Action

As I listen to the educators, experiences I realize that children and often parents may still be "blamed" for children's lack of participation. Maybe it is easier for adults to put the blame on the child rather than look at the context, the environment and the level of challenge being presented.

Reflection on Action

The above leads me to reflect on some main issues: are age appropriate occupations being promoted in the Maltese education system? Is the curriculum being designed, and adapted to accommodate differences in literacy, language and culture? Is the classroom space too crowded and cluttered, hence promoting more negative behaviours? Is diversity being taken into consideration in what and how educators teach? This brings me to reflect: are children being exposed to the "Just right challenge" that would motivate them to participate? Lastly it appears the focus is still impairment based with the want to work on specific skills, but is the final occupational participation being given its due merit?

Children are capable of learning these skills. I notice if children are allowed to be independent at home even by the way they talk...not using baby

language, parents even hold their children's bags, children can hold their own bag.... they are overprotected. (Ms. Biancha, Year 1)

Once again, this is not about the children not being capable, but about the environment, in this case the home environment, and culture that are posing restrictions on the children's participation.

Reflective Diary Log: 19th December 2017

Reflection in Action

As I listen to this educator's audiotape, once again, I have the following questions: is this really about the children? How can the environment be adapted to cater for the needs of every child? Do educators have the training and knowledge to use multi-sensory learning, especially kinesthetic methods, to actively engage their pupils in the process of learning

Reflection on Action

I reflect again: are we expecting too much from such young children? Are we engaging them in age appropriate occupations to tap into their inner drive? Are we providing the "just right challenge" for children to participate gainfully?

It is interesting to note that activities of daily living (ADL's) although mentioned as a school occupation (Table 22), were not thought of explicitly as childhood school occupations that children needed to learn in the school setting, albeit educators noting how lack of independence in these ADLs interfered with their independence and, consequently, with their participation. Potentially, educators do not view ADLs as tasks that should be taught in the school environment, which means they expect children to learn these skills at home, coming to school fully independent. As seen from the above quote, lack of exposure and overprotection, according to the educators, are contributors to the absence of such skills. Here the educators are once more talking about the importance of the home setting, the culture and environment, and the need that these inspire the children's participation in class.

6.2.2 Meso Factors

The meso level factors that come into play and influence participation and inclusion of children in school are influenced by the interactions between the child, the parents or caregivers, the educators and the school administrators within the school and classroom.

The barriers to participation experienced by the educators went beyond the child, the educators believed. Ms. Biancha was one of this group. She held the belief that, rather than over-focusing on child factors as the ones responsible for decreased participation, fine tuning the class and school setting, adapting services, reviewing policies and systems could ensure that every child participated.

So I think the biggest hurdle, I don't think would have anything to do with the children to be honest because even if a child has a disability or a condition it is the system that has to provide and make sure that the child is comfortable and has to learn. (Ms. Biancha, Year 1)

Educators attributed decreased participation, to factors extrinsic to the pupils and beyond their control. The children's dependence on adults and lack of exposure to everyday tasks also contributed to decreased active participation. The roots of this situation according to them were partially embedded in the long working hours of both parents; the lack of adequate knowledge on child rearing that the relevant child minders may have, be they strangers or even family members like grandparents or aunties; as well as lack of time and energy to invest in proper child rearing rules and routines.

The educators said that in spite of being an inclusive system, there were still a lot of excluding practices and that schools were focusing on only one aspect of learning, namely academia. Ms. Cynthia clearly stated: "There is still an over focus on academia". This over focus on academia put pressure on the teachers and prevented them from moulding the curricular content to tailor make it for the children's needs".

The teachers were of the opinion that they were not adequately equipped to assume the main responsibility of students with disability, i.e. differentiating teaching and providing the necessary accommodation; over-reliance on the Learning Support Educators also seemed to be common. This was considered to be a barrier as very often it may have led to a child being excluded from the learning environment simply because the teacher did not or could not cater for his educational needs. As one learning support educator, Ms. Moira, shared:

We learnt in our course aspects of positive behaviour and that punishing certain children such as those with Oppositional Defiant Disorder does not work. Teachers need to be updated and trained in this philosophy too. The child is the responsibility of the class teacher but this is not really happening. The truth is we are responsible for the child (Ms. Moira LSE, Year 1).

The teachers were aware of the above and they asserted that a one-size-fits-all approach was often still used in the classroom. In other words, they are acknowledging that they themselves were not adapting the environment to support the child. The teachers acknowledged that they lacked the strategies to make such modifications and this resulted in increased barriers to the children's participation. They spoke about needing more training on how to deal with diversity and the inclusive classroom. Such training needed to include strategies on how the teacher can support "difficult" children. The "difficult" children were often those having ASD, ADHD, other neuro-developmental disabilities and also included children with no diagnosis.

The Educators spoke quite passionately about their concerns pertaining to poor attendance by parents for activities organised by the school and even about their level of interest in their child's education. Such concern was also because parents often did not take notice of any written communication sent by the class teacher. The staff were concerned about their charges' lack of exposure to certain activities in the home setting as well as a lack of parental support and involvement in

their children's education. This was at times beyond parental control: some parents were willing but did not always have the resources. One mother of two boys, both with a statement of needs, desired to support her children, but did not have the resource, whether human or non-human. My conversation with her made me aware of the challenges some parents face at times in trying to support their children.

I cannot take Tim⁴⁸ to therapy because I do not drive and also I have to take Ben⁴⁹, with me and I cannot control their behaviour, when they are together let alone get on a bus with both of them. They start to play up and I am afraid for their safety. I really wish I can do more for my children but that is my situation and I really appreciate any support he can get from school (Tessie, Parent of child, Year 1).

Educators also acknowledged that families needed to be educated, empowered and supported to help their children. By this, educators once again recognised the factors influencing the children's participation in school occupations that went beyond the child itself, and were influenced by the cultural contexts and the attitudes of caregivers that were a reality and difficult to change.

They spoke about the teacher's need to try to understand the parents better and that the parents were key stakeholders in their children's development. They felt that even when parents had the knowledge to support their children, very often they were still constrained by time and other factors such as economic ones. These included parents' inability to pay for school trips, which was also an educational stumbling block as it prevented children from being exposed to community activities. The lack of the educators' relationship with parents was deemed as not conducive to children's participation.

A small group of parents gave their views about what they felt was hindering their children's full participation both at home and in school. Parents engaged in a

⁴⁸ Pseudonym

⁴⁹ Pseudonym

discussion about the difficulties their children faced in the home environment: sitting down, attending and completing the given homework, which often involved sitting and writing, and could be considered an academic exercise. They had additional concerns over their children's attention and handwriting skills and said that they found it challenging to master letter formation and size. Parents said that whilst their children performed well at school, at home they did not perform the same things well. As one parent shared:

They sit for too long at school and then have to come home and do the same work. They are fed up and don't do it well; so I'm not concerned as I don't think it is because L cannot do it but because he has had enough. (Molly, parent, child in Year 1)

One parent, Carmen, saw technology as a barrier to her child's learning. "My child is not able to live without technology". Parents in the focus group, explained how their children had more positive behaviour at school than at home. They said how hard it was for them to set rules and that they had to resort to punishment. The poor quality of some resources, such as a lot of broken items and lack of multi-sensory resources, came up frequently as being a hindrance to children's full participation. Whilst many spoke about adequate resources being provided by the school, some still felt there were not enough resources and often the parents needed to use their own finances to supplement the classroom ones. An example of this were toys for the home corner, resources to learn literacy and numeracy such as Numicon and expandable items that were needed on a daily basis: play foam, balloons, bubbles and stickers.

Another barrier to children's participation, according to some educators, was the fact that the ratio of the class size to the number of children was small. In some of the classrooms, educators agreed that too many of the children had additional needs and this made it difficult for them to include all children gainfully.

Just as the educators looked at physical activity as an enabler of participation, they were also concerned that the pupils were not getting enough of it at school. They said that the break time was not enough. By the time the children ate their lunch and went down into the yard, the time for play was almost over. They also felt that the children needed more dedicated time by the PE teacher rather than just doing physical activities with their class teacher. The year 1 teachers specifically blamed a number of things, from the fact that too much was going on in the school day to the lack of time for structured physical exercise. They felt that out of school activities that promoted physical activity were too few and far between. The reason for this was namely the financial cost of taking children on outings and the lack of school funds for this as well as parental support for those who could not afford to pay the transport for such activities.

6.2.3 Macro Factors

The macro level factors that came into play and influenced participation and inclusion of the children in school were affected by values, attitudes, culture, systems, services and policies. The barriers imposed by these macro factors pertained to culture, attitudes, the education system, curriculum and service barriers as well as professional development and educator training.

Factors mentioned as deterrents to participation were lack of interest; lack of communication between school staff and school administration; the need to be more involved and knowledgeable about the difficulties the children were experiencing in school; and above all, the lack of will to collaborate with significant others, such as paraprofessionals. As one educator in senior management strongly asserted:

You (health professionals) need to push your way into the education system!

We cannot retain a mentality of ours is ours and yours is yours. I've tried to work with ***** and there is this type of coldness they don't accept...their attitude is "what did you come here for?" so health and education need to

collaborate. I think that even educators need to learn to work with therapists too. (Mr. Dione, Assistant Head)

So I think the biggest hurdle, I don't think would have anything to do with the children, to be honest, because, even if a child has a disability or condition, it is the system that has to provide and make sure the child is comfortable....and has to learn, you know (Ms. Cynthia, RSS)

If you're a good teacher it's not about what you have but- It's the attitude. Today there are teachers that have interactive whiteboards, they have laptops, they have software, they have nice tables, and they still don't, there are still no results yet, you know? (Ms. Biancha, Year 1)

Some teachers recognized that at times their own colleagues were putting a lot of pressure on the young children to achieve goals that were not age appropriate. An example of this was an over-focus on writing quality in four- to five-year-old children. This led them to suggest that educators needed more training and support in delivering what is educationally relevant and adequately addressed the children's developmental needs. External support, they felt, was needed to support them in delivering the curriculum.

The availability and support of the senior management in the school was certainly a challenge but one that the teachers valued and wanted more of. The challenge was mostly related to the timeliness of support when needed, such as in the case of a student with ASD experiencing a meltdown and who was potentially harmful to himself and to others. As Ms. Rita explained: "Knowing who is available at the school, when and where in terms of knowing who educators could seek for support to then relay their support to the children is a big challenge".

The teachers perceived that the lack of proper handover from year to year was a barrier in supporting children's participation. Not knowing the children meant that they were ill-prepared to work with the children at the start of the school year,

especially with those that had additional needs. They often felt unprepared at the start of the academic year as they did not have any idea what type of children they would be faced with, especially if these were children who needed additional resources prepared, or required more dedicated support in the classroom. They said that they would prefer to get to know the children over summer or at least have a profile of their learning needs.

If a class happened to have more students with challenging behaviour or was the youngest class in the year group, particularly if these were kindergarten students, then participation was more of a challenge, especially if a teacher found it hard to control the class and needed to give more attention to the same children on at the cost of attention to the others. Here it appears that teachers are crying out for support to change the environment and the curriculum so as to promote more positive behaviour in children.

The shortage of peripatetic teachers, that is, teachers who came into the school to carry out more specialised lessons like music, drama, art and physical education, was also perceived as a barrier to children's participation in the creative arts as well as PE. The state school system uses external teachers to teach these classes. These teachers come from outside the school, and for various reasons cancel lessons from time to time. Often children were deprived of such lessons, if the teacher did not turn up. These situations not only left the children disappointed, but also the class teacher would then have to stand in for the absent teacher and quickly look for some similar activity to replace the music, art, drama or PE lesson that the children had really been looking forward to.

The time factor, namely lack of time, was an issue on many levels but especially for some school personnel who were not permanent staff in the school. Educators felt that there was a lack of support from other professionals in the schools, and there were still great challenges in promoting positive behaviour amongst all students, especially because educators lacked the know-how about

such a framework. Some of these professionals who experienced this situation, were the RSS, which included Early Intervention teachers and inclusion coordinators. They felt that there were too many schools to cover and not enough time to be immersed in the daily routine of each school. Other difficulties they faced were long waiting lists and services which they felt were fragmented. They also pointed out that they were the ones who were dependent on a system that failed to support them. They also spoke about the long time spent doing a lot of “*unnecessary paperwork*”, specifically referring to administrative work, rather than spending the time working with the children. The latter was important as the LSEs benefitted from the support the RSS gave them by providing strategies when working with their students.

So we have a lot of external agencies, and we have a lot of, like, services on paper. But in reality we do not have any services...so if the class including the kindergarten assistant or teacher, have a general difficulty...we do not have that service....to identify the main difficulties and give tips to the teacher. (Ms. Helena RSS)

The teachers pointed out that there was a lack of remuneration for training and Continuous Professional Development. The kindergarten educators felt that they needed more training specifically to deal with children who had additional needs. Teachers in general also felt that their undergraduate training did not equip them with the strategies they needed to deal with an inclusive classroom.

Reflective Diary log 30th November 2018
Reflection in Action

When talking to educators I pick up a lot of intense emotions relating to the overload (too much to be done in a school day), and a desire to be relieved and supported during the school day. I see that teachers feel the need to have their space in the school day to breathe; I also see a genuine concern for the children, a desire by educators to change their practices and make them more child – centered.

Reflection on Action

The fragmentation of the school day by the so called peripatetic subjects - music, art, drama and PE - does not really support the educators but may be a source of anxiety, especially if peripatetic teachers do not turn up. This lack of integration of such lessons into the curriculum by the mainstream class teacher leaves room for a lot of discussion. My observations and reflections support integrating these “occupations” for four- and five-year-old children into the curriculum. Teachers and educators may be provided with more training and support. This will reduce unpredictability and allow the teacher better control and organization of her/his time during the school day.

Others maintained that the infrastructure to further ones' knowledge was not user friendly as often courses were too lengthy and costly. The possibility of having “more specialised teachers in the school” was mentioned.

Teachers need to be properly trained. Teaching is not like...U ija...I think I'll go into teaching; you have to do it because you are passionate about it and you want to , but unfortunately our working conditions are a hindrance; very good people, very good teachers were looking for a job elsewhere, my my !! It's not enough to sustain a family; it's not a good living wage. (Ms. Martha, KGE, LSE)

In summary, the barriers impeding children's participation may on the surface be perceived as factors intrinsic to the child: their behaviour, attention, cooperation and disability. However, digging deeper into the data it was evident that extrinsic

factors contributed to these parameters: the learning, physical and aesthetic environment; knowledge, skills and attitudes of the educators; the national curriculum and resources as well as culture, school services and policies.

6.3 Conclusion

The main barriers and enablers to children's participation in school occupations have been presented in this chapter. Although the main factors determining whether children participated depended to some extent on child-intrinsic factors, their skills or abilities, of greater significance was how the environment, significant adults, the curriculum and the system supported such participation. Enablers that supported participation included enjoyment, motivation, provision of choice, the learning and physical environment, adult factors such as training, flexibility and team work. Also, mostly environmental constraints were often a hindrance to children's full participation, and this included classroom size, number of children and resources amongst others. The parents considered their children's behaviour; their level of attention and distractibility; the length of time spent in doing homework and overuse of technology as the main stumbling blocks to participating. They also recognized, however, that the strengths centered on teachers taking an interest in their child and their children's wellbeing as being strong contributors to their participation and enjoyment at school.

In summary, in terms of potential service delivery, school-based Occupational Therapy needs to focus on collaborating with educators personally and professionally. It also needs to collaborate with the senior management teams as well as with parents and caregivers. Finally, the education system at large that is the design and delivery of the curriculum in a universal way making it accessible to all is essential. The collaborative intervention presented in the next chapter is centered on these needs. In Chapter Seven I will elaborate on Phase Two of the study: the action phase in which the school based occupational therapy intervention was carried out. These interventions were based on a collaborative discussion

between the researcher and the educators themselves. In this phase, collaborative school- based occupational therapy supported educators in enabling children's participation, making use of the data in this present chapter to guide the intervention presented in the next chapter. I as the researcher brought along an OS perspective while the educators brought their educational pedagogy and their own perspectives to the intervention. The views of the educators on the contribution of such intervention to support children's participation in school occupations, were gathered at the end of the school year. This intervention documented through intervention logs along each week, was developed collaboratively along these weeks and is presented in the forthcoming chapter.

Chapter 7- School-based Occupational Therapy Tiered Intervention for Malta

This chapter will present findings from the data collected in phase two of my intrinsic, longitudinal, single case study and will address the following research question: How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations?

The first phase of this study had two research questions related to childhood occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation. Childhood school occupations for early years children, as identified by the educators and presented in Chapter 5, were namely the following: routines and rituals; friendships and social participation; play, numeracy and literacy and activities of daily living. The data in Chapter 6 has shown that the enablers and barriers included aspects of the learning and physical environment; communication and involvement of parents; educators' attitudes and attributes; their professional knowledge; flexibility; human and non-human resources; the culture, the curriculum and factors related to service provision. The choice to frame the enablers and barriers within Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model, was made since this model focuses on the transactions between the child, the significant adults and the environment. This means the occupations within the context of the classroom and the school environment were always at the forefront. The focus on changing the environment was key and in line with concepts from the social model of disability.

Whilst presenting the findings, this chapter will draw upon the elements of best practice that I asserted in my literature review and the key findings so far from Chapters 5 and 6. These served to underpin the development of phase two of the study: the development of the intervention. The data in this chapter is once again presented in thick descriptions and includes my interpretation of the process. The findings are framed within a tiered approach to intervention (universal design, differentiation and accommodation), the data that follows is in line with another aspect of the conceptual framework, with a focus on the key enablement skills from

the CMOP-E (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007): collaboration, coaching, adaptation, advocacy, consultation, coordination, design, education and specialisation. What follows is an overview of the chapter.

7.1 Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 7 depicts how a model for school-based occupational therapy for Malta evolved from an understanding of childhood occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation, findings that have already been presented through thick descriptions in Chapters 5 and 6. These occupations as well as the enablers and barriers to participation informed my thoughts and actions to reach this point where I, in collaboration with the educators, was able to implement (design and deliver) the intervention. This chapter therefore tells the story of how school-based occupational therapy intervention evolved over time over one whole school year from beginning to end, although the intervention was mainly carried out in the last 5 months, the understanding of childhood occupations and the enablers and barriers to participation were a preamble to it.

This chapter presents the interventions and the way they were iterated through ongoing collaboration but also observation, action and reflection to understand and refine the implementation process. Once again, as in Chapters 5 and 6, this chapter presents the findings through thick descriptions to allow the reader to understand how the intervention evolved and to understand what it consisted of: what was done in terms of intervention with the educators; how it was done; who was involved in the discussions; and ultimately what was valued most. It will also portray how I engaged with the educators and understood what was happening along the process. Action theory, namely my learning through action and reflection, was present throughout this whole process of planning, action, reflection and evaluation.

The chapter starts with an introduction on the need to support schools at all levels.

It will then proceed to show, in line with the tiered approach, the intervention

strategies obtained through rigorous content analysis of my research logs as it evolved in my study. This will be supported with examples from my data. The interventions presented are ones that were developed in accordance with the educators' needs and with their involvement as determined by the enablers and barriers identified in the previous chapter. Such interventions were documented along the weeks and in line with the daily curriculum being delivered by the educators, yielding a 20 page data log that was analysed for its content and then coded. This process enabled me to study the implementation and provide my interpretation of it.

In the final interviews with the educators at the end of the study and data collection period, as well as during the focus groups with parents and children, the researcher asked for feedback on the intervention; this, combined with the researcher's field diary and other documented data provided by the participants, depicted how school-based occupational therapy tiered intervention, supported children's participation. The chapter ends with an overview of the children's experiences of the school-based OT intervention and how educators perceived the intervention to be unique and different from others. My reflections documented towards the end of this dissertation explain the research journey and show the challenges experienced, so that the reader can understand the nature of the challenges faced and how they were overcome.

7.2 Supporting a School at all Levels Using a Tiered Approach

The research process was outlined in chapter four, and I will now go on to describe the core characteristics that arose when developing a multi-tiered model of school-based OT in a Maltese context. Core characteristics began with regularly being in the school once a week on the same day for consistently and to build up confidence and trust and for me to become part of the school culture. There were three consistent factors will be reflected throughout the data presented in this chapter:

1. A gradual building of relationships along the school year with the educators that instilled mutual trust;
2. Knowledge exchange that also supported knowledge translation, whereby I learnt more about the classroom and curriculum, and educators understood how OS theory and practice supported their occupations. Every interaction between the educators and myself was a learning opportunity for us all. Details of how knowledge was exchanged will follow below;
3. Capacity building, whereby intervention with any child supported the learning of at least one parent, the teacher, both the LSE and SMT, the relevant support staff as well as my own. The saying “It takes a village to teach a child” was very relevant in my school based intervention. These three factors will be explained hereunder and supported with the data.

7.2.1 Relationship-building

My presence in the school was regular and consistent, enabling me to offer regular and timely follow-up sessions as well as maintain myself updated and in touch with what was happening in the school as well as in contact and connected with the educators. It also allowed me to gain an understanding of the classroom routine and curriculum. Similarly, the educators developed a better understanding of Occupational Therapy theory and practice through formal as well as informal interactions. I dedicated time to building a trusting relationship with the educators, encompassing respect, presence and support.

Educators mentioned personal factors that related to human contact and that supported them in an environment that posed daily challenges and left them often feeling tired and demoralized. They valued being asked about their wellbeing and being cared for as persons rather than employees. Kindness, patience, encouragement, praise, feedback and listening were greatly valued by the staff, as was presence. To the senior management team, this project, meant support for the educators and for early- years teachers. This included human connection,

supporting well-being, the affirmation of good practices, emotional support and the value of continuity and regularity of OT involvement. One kindergarten teacher with 30 years' experience valued the emotional support. She shared her appreciation of the encouragement she received, which kept her positive and motivated:

Encouragement and praise and positive feedback towards me. Sharing ideas and confirming that what I am doing is ok; a listening ear and guidance on how to support our children" (KGE, KG2, 20+ years⁵⁰).

Feedback from most educators about the collaborative project related not solely to techniques and skills, such as "useful advice in developing the children's fine and gross motor skills", but also to more fundamental issues concerning human relations, communication and the nature and frequency of SBOT (see Table 26)

Usually we may meet the OT at an IEP conference but this year it was better as we had an OT in class from time to time. The OT was present most of the time and when the need arose she was willing to help. OT was of great support (LSE Year 3, 13 years).

Table 26

Relationship-building: The Maltese Context

Building Relationships
Introducing ourselves: me and the educators
One day a week throughout whole school year
Joining in daily routine
Being and full immersion in the classrooms: blending in with the classroom
Asking, learning about and appreciating classroom practices
Understanding the context and environment
Educators going on with their plan and I fitting into their plan
Flexibility
Engaging in small talk
Listening
Waiting
Being Available

⁵⁰ These indicate the number of years of experience of the educator

7.2.2 Knowledge Exchange

Pupils' participation in the classroom was supported through evidence based information with a focus on knowledge exchange and collaboration to identify the problem and determine the solution. This was a power-sharing and shared decision-making process of trial and error. My own problem solving, identifying and trying out strategies in collaboration with the educators. The ultimate aim of this was the expansion of my understanding of the curriculum and school system and also the capacity building of educators. Whilst I understood the student's educational needs in context through my own research, reading and attending teacher training courses, the educators understood how, why, when and where the specific strategies worked. This knowledge gained by all of us was then used in the day-to-day school life by myself, the educators and families.

The project brought along with it a renewed positive energy and approach.

Support in the classroom and a check on how things were going. It provided a point of reference for many of us educators. The immediate response to the queries that were addressed within our classroom and difficulties, was unique and relevant to our classroom and children; above all we felt valued, appreciated and understood how we could support our children better (Teacher, Year 1).

One Kindergarten Educator also commented on the fact that she appreciated the level and quality of commitment that school based OT intervention supported her with: "An example of full commitment to one's work, working with the children with kindness and patience and a precise explanation on the strategies to support me as a KGE" (KGE KG 2, 5 years +).

7.2.3 Capacity Building

This included a mutual awareness of children's needs, resources and exchange of knowledge, together with mutual problem solving through the enhancement of my knowledge of the curriculum and the educators' becoming

knowledgeable about the neuro-scientific principles applied to the classroom.

Together we could support the children's participation by enriching the physical and learning environment. One educator's quote below illustrates her experience:

It was a great experience discussing children with the OT and gaining the OTs professional insights on how I can be a better teacher. This has been a truly positive experience. The support through this project, helped me identify children with motor difficulties that were impacting on their participation. I was provided with materials and tools to help children function to the best of their ability (Teacher, Year 1).

Table 27 shows how capacity building and knowledge exchange were actioned in this study in line with key enablement skills (CMOP-E). There were many instances of knowledge exchange throughout the project. One example of this demonstrated engagement and coaching. Engagement and coaching are two key enablement skills that came about in the context of the playground.

Table 27

Knowledge Exchange and Capacity Building: The Maltese context.

Types of Knowledge exchange and capacity building	Enablement Skills (Townsend and Polatajko, 2007)
Discussion and planning with Inclusion Coordinator and Senior Management Team	Consult
On site planning and discussion such as environmental modifications, such as setting up chill-out room	Design/build
Hands-on training for educators	Coach
Information sharing and discussion	Educate
Trial-and-error of strategies to find what supports best fit the student	Adapt
Workshop on activity analysis Use of visual and kinaesthetic supports	Specialize
Solution-finding through inter-professional discussion	Collaboration
Coaching LSEs. Consulting with teachers and KGEs	Coach Consult
Modelling strategies with child and supporting LSE in implementing them.	Coach and Engage

The OT shared novel activity ideas to improve children's physical skills, whilst the educator used her knowledge of physical activity and her sport related background to decide how this activity could be used to the children's greatest benefit. Scooter board activities (Figure 8) were used during the class teacher's movement breaks.

Figure 8

A Novel Playground Activity.



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Although the teacher already knew the latter concept, OT involvement diversified the scope and nature of such movement breaks and also encouraged a more consistent approach to its use. The OT introduced the concept and benefits, and explained safety rules to the children. Then they worked in pairs with one scooter board, taking part in group games, which made the activity fun. The concept of enjoyment was key. This teacher's quote shows their perception as to how the activity supported children's participation:

My students interacted more with peer and practised team work, balance and coordination. It was so much fun even just to watch the children having fun.

This was an excellent opportunity to discuss and experience how to use the space at school to engage the children in activities in the playground

(Teacher Year 1).

Educators stated that they had gained rich knowledge about simple activities that needed basic resources. They valued the exchange of information, considering it to be "*a goldmine*" (Teacher Year 1). The reference to the goldmine was very apt because the knowledge exchange enabled the educators to deliver their curriculum in a more child-centred manner, and this supported their teaching. Such knowledge

exchange, according to the teachers, supported the children's behaviour and participation because it contributed to their curricular needs.

Some Educators did view the OT presence as one that could bring a different perspective to an old problem as well as potentially help find solutions to other problems. The fact that occupational therapy theory and practice brought a different perspective to a number of classroom activities through activity analysis, was what mostly left an impact on the teachers.

This meant that, together with the educator, I was able to adapt the curriculum or classroom activity on site after having discussed and experienced the specific situation myself. In the discussion with the teachers about the children's learning profiles, I could support them by having better understood the children's learning styles, and in turn the teacher would understand how using OT theory and knowledge could enhance such learning profiles.

The exchange of expertise we both had was an Enriching and Supportive experience that supported me in a professional way by "reaching out" to children and parents. The support given was relevant and to the point (Teacher, year 1).

The senior management team agreed that, besides engaging in the discussion on how to help particular students, of great value was the fact that the researcher modelled practices for the educators giving also practical hands-on support accompanied by written advice for future reference. This was an example of educating and coaching in context, in which the OT really understood the nature of the challenges the educators were facing and tried to address them in light of the child's challenging behaviour.

Everyone learnt from the activities, seminars, PD's and SDP and from tips given throughout the year. The chill out room which has helped educators in supporting the school life especially of those children with rather challenging behaviour (LSE, Yr. 1).

Through regular collaborative practices, learners were supported to achieve age appropriate occupations, and school became more fun for pupils who had specific needs and came from situations that make it hard for them to adapt.

The aspects of school-based OT most valued by the educators as well as the reciprocity experienced by myself as an OT researcher is summarized hereunder. Some examples from educators' experiences are summarized in Table 28.

The School Based OT intervention encouraged team work, trust and fun. It provided the opportunity for mutual learning by educators and therapist and was relevant to the classroom context, making it more significant to both educator and researcher. Collaborative practical hands-on sessions using modelling, coaching as well as pictorial, verbal and written ways of teaching and learning were the interventions educators acknowledged to be most supportive of their efforts in enabling children to participate. The way the transactions between the child, adults and the context evolved also proved to be a significant contributor to the educators' resilience and motivation or lack of it.

Finally, the school based OT intervention promoted parental involvement and mutual understanding and learning between the educators, the parents and the Occupational Therapist.

What follows next is how a tiered approach to school-based occupational therapy supported children's occupations in a particular Maltese school.

Table 28

School-Based Occupational Therapy in the Maltese Context.

SBOT: what educators' valued	Educators' quotes on the intervention	Occupations being supported
SBOT supported team work, trust and fun	"Outdoor activities and novel physical activities such as the skateboard activity was a great physical activity"	Play, social participation and friendships
SBOT provided the opportunity for mutual learning by educators and therapist	"Curriculum time was great as it provided an discussion of the activities and their purpose"	Literacy and Numeracy
SBOT was relevant and to the point	"The PD session enabled me to discuss my ideas as to what I can use in my literacy and numeracy lessons with the students"	Literacy and Numeracy
SBOT was carried out through modelling, practical hands-on sessions as well as through written instruction	"Classroom tools and delivery of activities in the class. These had an impact particularly on attention." "My children loved <i>the Let's move activity</i> sent out by e mail...it was great to get them moving" "The Tool Box" is an essential classroom resource "The Chill out Room" – fun and learning all in one.	Social participation and friendships
SBOT supported parental involvement and learning	"Parental involvement/meetings/talks such as the one on Classroom Chores" : parents are instructed on how to support their children's learning "common sense strategies that were not so common"	Activities of Daily Living

7.3 Tiered Intervention in the Maltese Context

This section will look at the details of the collaborative project. Table 31 provides a backdrop as well as a reminder to how one defines tiered intervention. International authors who have trialled the tiered approach are being referred to. The

work of these authors has featured in the literature in the last 10 years. The tiered approach for the Maltese context is tabulated later on in this chapter after the tiers have been explained in detail, with evidence from the data collected in this study.

Table 29

The Tiered Model from an International Perspective

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Author
Promotion	Prevention	Individual, Intensive Intervention	Bazyk (2013)
Universal design	Differentiation	Accommodation	Missiuna et al. (2014)
Universal	Targeted	Intensive/ Specialist	Hutton et al. (2016)
Whole school	Classroom- based	Individual	Chu (2018)

The intervention throughout this study was designed to support the enablers and minimize the barriers to participation outlined in Chapter six, whilst also enhancing children's participation in the main classroom occupations identified in Chapter five. The data that follows will present an analysis of this. It will also explore the process involved in implementing the intervention.

It is important to state that the tiered intervention was documented by taking into consideration the children's occupations with regard to education, play, activities of daily living, social participation in the context of the classroom, rules and routines and the school environment. All intervention documented in the three tiers included elements of relationship-building, knowledge exchange and capacity building as explained earlier. The key findings that will now be presented came from the analysis of the intervention log. Through my analysis I sought to understand if and how the strategies used collaboratively with the educators, fit into the three tiers that are documented in the international literature (see Table 29). Table 30 gives an

example of the strategies documented through my intervention log whilst Table 31 shows a sample of how the intervention was sorted according to tiers.

Table 30

A Sample of the school based Intervention: April to June 2018, hours collated and colour coded according to Tier⁵¹

School Based Intervention	Minutes
Classroom Embedded strategies year 1	450
Discussion/ involvement with LSE to refine, adjust strategies being used in direct intervention	135
Teacher collaboration and consultation for Individual children	75
KG 1 and 2 whole class activities: Sensory and water Games	420
Planning of kindergarten sessions with assistant head	150
<i>Hands on support to small groups of children and their LSE during classroom occupations eg:math, literacy, craft</i>	100
Liaison with inclusion coordinator	60
Sensory motor groups Kindergarten	90
E mail queries/strategies	100
Meetings /discussion with assistant head on sensory motor room	60
<i>Professional Development</i>	120
OT involvement in new mapping tool for IEPs	120
Parents sessions and consultation	60
Teacher /parent KG 1 and 2 in class sessions	585
Involvement in coaching and demonstrating activities with child and LSE	120

⁵¹ Green Tier 1; Blue Tier 2; Yellow Tier 3; Grey All Tiers

Table 31

A Sample of the intervention sorted according to Tiers: Phase 2: April to June 2018

School Based Intervention	Minutes
<i>Tier 1</i>	
Teacher /parent KG 1 and 2 in class sessions	585
Classroom Embedded strategies year 1	450
KG 1 and 2 whole class activities: Sensory and water Games	420
OT involvement in new mapping tool for IEPs	120
Sensory motor groups Kindergarten	90
Planning of kindergarten sessions with assistant head	150
Liaison with inclusion coordinator	60
E mail queries/strategies	100
Meetings /discussion with assistant head on sensory motor room	60
<i>Professional Development</i>	120
<i>Tier 2</i>	
Hands on support to small groups of children and their LSE during classroom occupations eg. math, literacy, craft	100
Parents sessions and consultation to support home carryover of difficult occupations	60
<i>Tier 3</i>	
Discussion/ involvement with LSE to refine, adjust strategies being used.	135
Teacher collaboration and consultation for Individual children	75
Involvement in coaching and demonstrating activities with child and LSE	120

Each tier in the Maltese context had unique characteristics and thick descriptions of these will now be presented.

7.3.1 Key Findings of Tier 1 Intervention

The main aspects of Tier 1 intervention was a universal design with an emphasis on promoting wellness and preventing disruption in daily roles and routines. The main aim of Tier 1 intervention in line with the stakeholders' needs was to support educators in changing the environment in a way that would make it more accessible from a physical and learning perspective. The co-designing of activities and routines to meet the the learner's educational and curricular needs also served to promote sensory motor and cognitive development. Table 32

presents the enablers and barriers identified in chapter 6 and how they formed the basis of the intervention.

The data shall now be presented under the six sections that were constructed from the data analysis. Each section will outline the following: how the intervention was framed within a collaborative framework, and what made it unique and different from traditional clinic intervention.

Professional development session;

Parent education: talks and in-class workshops with teachers;

Curriculum development time;

Classroom embedded strategies;

Environmental design;

School development and action plans.

Table 32

Tier 1: Collaborative intervention in the Maltese context in line with enablers and barriers to participation and occupation.

Intervention	Enablers/barriers	Occupation
1. Professional development session/classroom embedded strategies	Educators involved in the “doing”, a focus on the real children, parental involvement	Supporting adult occupations
2. Parent education: talks and in-class workshops with teachers	Communicating with and involving parents	Supporting routines, activities of daily living, e.g. Chores
3./4. Curriculum development time/classroom embedded strategies	Building professional knowledge	Supporting literacy and numeracy
5. Environmental Design	The physical and learning environment	Supporting play
The “chill out” room designing play opportunities for learning (including motor and sensory skills)	Activities and resources	Social participation
6. Involvement in school development and action plans	The child The system including the curriculum and its delivery Developing networks of support	Sensory - motor and process skills. Literacy and numeracy Supporting adult occupations.

Diary Log: 15th February 2018
Reflection in Action

This extract was documented in my reflective diary: Ms. M, from Senior Management, ran up to me as soon as I entered the school. "I would really appreciate if you could touch base with the teacher in Year 2. She has a boy who is having difficulties and is disrupting the class, and she is desperate for help...maybe you can give her some suggestions"; "I wish I had known these strategies at the beginning of the year as I would have introduced them then and prevented a lot of unwanted behaviours", Ms. B. (class teacher year 2)

Reflection on Action

Since Maltese schools aim to be fully inclusive, the educators are often very needy of support to manage their classrooms, and they welcome any form of input. Although the children with diagnosed needs usually have support in the form of LSEs, the teacher still has to mould her curriculum so that all students, irrespective of their strengths and needs, can benefit and this often poses many challenges. The challenges faced by the class teacher go beyond the "traditional" disability groups and a statement of needs. Hence a whole-school approach and school-based OT has potential to address such needs holistically for the participation of all. Such requirements were often met by the collaborative practices of the educators and myself in this project. I constantly reflect on the best ways to support educators in modifying the curriculum from the OT's vantage point.

7.3.1.1 Professional Development Sessions

Various aspects of professional development were discussed with the senior management team. The uniqueness of this intervention was the spotlight on the educators as doers; the contemplation of the real kids and their stories as well as the parental involvement in the classroom setting. The main result of these discussions, which also supported what the educators identified as enablers to participation and what the educational leaders perceived in terms of effective professional development, were as follows: firstly educators were involved in "Doing" in context

rather than “just listening”. The problem solving and solution finding focused on the “real” children in the educator’s classroom. Above all, parents were involved at classroom level in the activity, interacting and solving problems with the educators and the therapist.

7.3.1.1.1 The Educators Involved in the “Doing”. The educators described knowledge in line with sensory processing theory as applied to the classroom context and their own classrooms as being novel and useful to them. This was mostly because it presented a fresh way of looking at all students behavior and, more so, in potentially preventing negative behaviours in the classroom.

If there is at least one PD session a year involving these hands-on strategies, it will be a great asset for both teachers and LSEs, maybe focusing on different areas” (SMT, Early Years).

I had the opportunity to not only engage in discussion on possible solutions to challenging issues such as behavior. The introduction and concept behind self - regulation strategies were one of the possible solutions. I could practice the strategies with my colleagues and get feedback on how to use these strategies with specific children in mind.

I learn much more from doing and hence that is why I really enjoyed this session. (Teacher, Year 1)

7.3.1.1.2 A Focus on the “Real” Children with Their Own Story. The quotes below show how the hands-on intervention was supported by acknowledging each and every child as an individual in the classroom context.

I believe that the PD session was of great help since it provided information of what happens to each child who follows a sensory diet. I got the opportunity to try out some of these strategies in the workshop through the ten centres and also learnt why these strategies are important to help children stay alert and focused

(LSE year 2 .5 years)

PD sessions were very informative and useful and enhanced my knowledge to support my student....materials and resources were very useful; hands on Resources shared personally and through e mail came into good use. They were very practical and can be used with most of my students". (LSE Year 1)

Educators used terms like "useful", "hands on" and "practical". They valued the more action-oriented professional development sessions, ones in which they were shown what and how to carry out the strategies. Hence, modelling strategies as well as action-oriented knowledge was of importance to the educator.

Senior management personnel viewed participation as two-fold that is related to the educators and the learners. They said "Staff are better equipped to support children." An example of this was the professional development session of the Chill Out Room, in which the teachers learnt how to use the room.

At this point, the uniqueness of the school based OT intervention was that the professional development was one that occurred *in situ* and the participants were engaged in realistic and hands-on problem solving in the school environment, using the spaces and resources that were available in the school. Children adapting better to school life, engaging in more hands-on activities, being more motivated as well as active participants were some concepts that emerged from the educators' practical use of this PD session. This, they said, would lead to an improvement in children's abilities. "Children are more confident to try new things and participate enthusiastically in activities, even those that they are usually reluctant to participate in" (Teacher, Yr. 1).

The educators unanimously gave feedback that they preferred PD sessions to involve some form of action, whereas they disliked ones in which they simply sat and listened. They also said that they preferred being in smaller groups and valued in class demonstrations. The educators valued the fact that the OT shared her ideas

on how to support students with the minimal classroom resources that they had. As two of them said:

The Presence and professional support of an OT in school was of tremendous support. Such support can take the form of demonstrations in class and in class lessons. An OT can provide advice throughout the scholastic year; sessions done by the OT herself in the classroom. It was great because we got to discuss personally and individually the difficulties the child we support has. (Teacher Year 2)

7.3.1.1.3 Parents Immersed in the Classroom. “Outdoor sessions with the OT with the whole class”, such as the ones carried out with the use of the scooter board, were highly enjoyed and appreciated in term of usefulness as well as enjoyment for the children. The teachers suggested that

Videos of different sensory motor sessions done with the OT can provide KGE with more ideas on how to create activities which will help, as not all KGE’s had experienced any of this during their studies” (KGE, KG1)

In summary, the above data depicts how my presence, involvement and collaboration in the classroom brought new ways of thinking and working to both the educators and myself. There was a focus on each unique child, action-oriented practice and involvement of the educators. Some other examples of professional development included electronic communication; sharing of resources, such as a practical tool box; discussion and modelling of strategies to support behaviour and wellbeing. The above Tier 1 interventions also formed the basis for tier 2 and 3 interventions, therefore students with identified needs as well as those having individual support in class were still served by Tier 1 intervention. So, one may say that intervention in Tier 2 and 3 was embedded and provided over and above the universal Tier 1 intervention.

7.3.1.2 Parent Education

The essence of the intervention that was unique with parents mainly involved: information exchange and knowledge-sharing through on-site classroom activities with the participation of their own children. The sharing of strategies was embedded within the educator's lesson through the classroom teachers' closed Facebook group or email together with brief encounters embedded into the daily drop-off and pick-up routine of the school. Parents' comments about the frequency and usefulness of such interactions are presented hereunder:

I had no clue we have so many small muscles in the hand and that children need to make their hands stronger by using them in activities not necessarily always writing. I think I will try to let her help out with some cooking activities although I hate the mess in my kitchen (Parent of KG 2 student).

The meeting was very interesting and useful. Just wish they could be held more frequently. I like the fact that the session was held in the class and with the kids (Parent KG 1 student).

I find these short sessions ideal as they keep me focused on the main points I need to bear in mind. Everything you said was interesting and gave us parents an insight to what the children's normal capabilities should be at their age. Also what all the different activities help develop, the muscles used etc.

(Parent.KG 1)

Another parent felt encouraged by what she had learned:

Parents need to be encouraged not to feel discouraged to try certain things at home. Knowing the benefits reinforces that. I think it was just perfect and from a personal perspective I love what you said that sport is a life investment (Parent KG 2).

Resources were shared with the parents through email and the classroom facebook page, and these provided ideas for activities and ideas on sensory motor play, hand skills and handwriting, backpack awareness, toys and games for children.

They were good practical tips and I liked the handout with pictures because it is understood by all and can give the kids to choose one thing to do a day, with non-verbal children pictures help a lot (Parent, KG 2).

The parents were asked to give feedback on how user-friendly knowledge sharing was for them. The following feedback provided by the parents enabled me as a therapist to improve the resource, in this case a handout that I had created.

This is invaluable and fantastic work. With the handout on classroom rules I think it may be a bit confusing especially for children with sensory processing difficulties; too many colours...too many directions. I would keep it simpler by having all the instructions written in a forward direction. I think it would be good from my own personal experience if teachers/educators used positive behaviour (parent, year 1).

One parent of a child in kindergarten experiencing sensory processing issues sent by email samples of their child's work to show me that they had tried the recommended activities: "Your notes were greatly helpful, I feel K. can succeed".

Parents' comments showed how they valued the relationship built with the OT as a researcher who understood their challenges and supported them in their endeavours. Parents felt encouraged not to give up. Hence, a two-way engagement process occurred with the parents/caregivers, whether it was in person, through online communication or in a group encounter.

We were moving house and I could not take my son to therapy. I know it is bad but I missed his therapy appointments. I really had no choice...so I really do appreciate your understanding about my situation (Parent, Year 1)

I never really noticed he had improved so greatly in eating his food and that the messiness had decreased so considerably. Maybe because

our mealtimes are always in a rush...it is great that you pointed it out so I can praise L for his efforts (parent, Year 1).

My role also included debunking certain myths that parents believed. As shown above, parents were receiving knowledge that supported and encouraged them to take action. This was done through the in-class sessions, which parents attended in large numbers. The attendance at these sessions was far greater than is typically expected. The reason for this parental involvement may have been that there was a more personal component. Apart from that, the parents were also going to see their children in context:

Amy, a girl with sensory modulation difficulties and ADHD, was repeatedly not allowed to take off her jacket in the classroom as she was constantly told by the adults that she would catch a cold; I did explain that if Amy felt too hot she would not be able to pay attention in the classroom and her feeling hot would increase the chances of her behaving badly (researcher's intervention log, 3rd March 2018).

To summarize the main findings relating to parental involvement in the collaborative project were as follows: parents could access the OT knowledge as it was part and parcel of the classroom practice and communication. Parents also understood that their challenges were acknowledged without them being judged, and they were encouraged to work with their children. They enjoyed the in-class hands-on sessions where they could observe their children in action and could see with their own eyes "activities with a purpose" being implemented. The fact that they could also see their own children's level of enjoyment made them more motivated in wanting to do the activities with their children. Being available in the daily life situations of a school made occupational therapy more accessible to parents.

7.3.1.3 Curriculum Development Time

Curriculum Development time was unique in the following ways: it was more personalized, as it was specific to each year group. It was also an opportunity for teachers to meet in small groups according to year groups; to discuss challenges they were facing in a wider forum but in an informal set up over a cup of coffee. This dedicated time presented a personal and safe space for the educators to vent out their worries and frustrations with the OT, who, although an “outsider”, understood their challenges in context. A lot of discussions centred on their pupils’ behaviour. The knowledge translation focused mostly on the discussion on positive behaviour strategies as well as self-regulation classroom solutions. The teachers spoke about the value of this time for them:

A space for me to share my concerns and vent out with my fellow colleagues...and someone who is unbiased to look at issues objectively (Teacher, Year 1).

I learned what I could do to observe the needs of children, learned more about the activities that can be done, the planning of the curriculum. The ideas on hands on activities supported me as a teacher (Teacher, Year 2).

I understood that this was also a time to just be together and support each other in our needs. The educators gave positive feedback about this time and the new knowledge and information that the OT brought to the session. Most of the time, in these sessions I was flexible enough to allow other ideas other than what I had prepared to be brought to the table, and I believe this was greatly valued by the participants.

Reflective Diary Log 23rd March 2018
Reflection in Action

As I spoke with the parents this morning, I became aware of the challenges they face in raising their children in 21st century Malta: juggling work with child rearing; some raising their children single handedly, others experiencing complex social problems-in some cases exacerbated with health issues- mental and /or physical. Parents value the school's support in situations that they can do nothing about themselves.

Reflection on Action

The overall message I witnessed and experienced was that parents want the best for their children albeit some cannot do anymore because of their circumstances. The issue of time and availability was a real and challenging one. The researchers availability put the parents' mind at rest that they could discuss their children's issues if they needed to. The OT's regular presence in a school lends itself to parental support and in cases where parents have complex situations, the OT, as has happened in this study, can provide the support to the child via the educator. Children who would have never been reached in an outpatient medical centre had the opportunity to be supported through the school based intervention. I have reflected on the importance of the OT's consistent presence in the school to support the children's participation by first supporting the parents.

There was a down side to the researcher's involvement in curriculum time. Since this was the only time teachers got to meet alone, some teachers looked forward to that time to discuss their own practices, concerns and iron out any pending day-to-day issues.

It's not that I don't appreciate input of other professionals. But when this happens on a regular basis we are left with no time to discuss our own internal issues. We need this time for ourselves to discuss and refine our problems and existing practices and just meet together; there is no other time to do this (Teacher, Year 1).

To synthesize, curriculum time was supportive of children's participation in four ways. It served as an opportunity for the educators and myself to find solutions to existing problems; it provided a space to consolidate relationship-building between year group teachers and myself; it also helped to exchange good practice and new knowledge related to the curriculum and occupational therapy theory in small chunks. It was important that this time also provided a personal space for educators to discuss any pending day-to-day concerns that they may have had and the opportunity to use the OT as a sounding board.

7.3.1.4 Classroom-embedded Strategies

This involved a combination of direct and indirect models of practice: educator training and engagement with the learners through the use of coaching and modelling. My role was to model OT strategies to support the successful participation of the schoolchildren in these activities. It also involved the use of coaching to teach whole-class lessons. Roles were reversed: I became the class teacher for this half hour, and the teacher and LSE practised the strategies with the children, integrating them into the lesson. A discussion after each lesson ensured we refined the intervention for the next time. A year one and year two teachers shared the following:

The activities we planned were more appealing to the children so if they enjoy it you get a better outcome. Increased movement activities instead of just listening or seeing helped the children understand much more" (Teacher, Year 2).

I valued the simple but important tips and handouts on posture, paper pencil and preparation. These are truly supporting the children's handwriting" (Teacher Year 1)

Being involved in any activity and you can actually see and do it yourself...It really helped me to understand how to support my children better. I could observe mostly that the learning was made easy and fun” (Teacher Year 2)

Diary Log 24th February 2018

Reflection in Action

I appreciated this curriculum time with the teachers today, as this allowed me to see another side to the class teacher. The assistant head started off the session with an ice-breaker, and that helped me see the teachers as individuals and them to see me as a person too. I left the session thinking: Educators need time to share their classroom experiences not only to learn from each other and discover new ways of working with children, but even to simply vent off : scream, laugh, cry, complain; a safe haven for teachers to self-regulate and to help them remain committed to their work.

Reflections on Action

This time was also a great opportunity for me to learn about the challenges that teachers were facing. I understood the complexities of classroom teaching and how limited the time that the educators had for discussion in the primary school setting. To make matters worse, this very short duration was often cut shorter due to practical issues that merited discussion. Many times, this left me feeling frustrated. The teachers appeared to value discussion with me because although I was an outsider and potentially may have had new solutions to a long standing problem, they also felt comfortable enough to share their concerns.

I found myself often positively reframing the educators' complaints so that the exercise would not turn into a complaining session. Overall, this time did not only focus on curriculum work, but had a cathartic effect in allowing the educators to let off steam in a controlled environment where they discussed the concerns and frustrations they encountered in trying to support children's participation in the classroom. More than anything else, it was an opportunity to focus on solutions and strengths and move away from the traditional over-focus on problems.

The participants highly valued the classroom-embedded strategies and the presence of the OT/researcher in the classroom, who modelled behaviours, techniques, and gave hands-on support during curricular activities. One Educator, an LSE in year 2 with 5 year's experience said that she valued "Good and teacher-friendly practices" whilst a teacher in Year 2 and with fourteen years of experience found that "Integrating OT knowledge in the classroom" supported her work with the children. One LSE said that she was comfortable with activity ideas and instruction on how to use the chill-out room (LSE Year 3). Finally, educators felt that these strategies were also important contributors to children's behavior, as one year four LSE, having two years' post graduate experience, shared: "My children could participate better because applying these OT ideas and strategies in my classroom helped them keep calm in class"

The vignette in Table 33, gives an example of this form of professional development. By combining our expertise, and learning from each other, we attempted to create the optimal learning opportunities for the children. Some criticism of the classroom-embedded strategies was put forward by the educators. This mainly concerned the length of the activity, difficulty level and level of interest from the children. As one LSE shared:

I think the tombola activity was too long for them...they got fidgety and could not see the end result and so became demotivated and that's why they started to talk and misbehave. Maybe next time we can have tombola with less numbers say 1 to 30.

Table 33*General Aspects of Tier 1 Intervention in a Maltese Classroom*

The OT discussed with the educators in-class learning opportunities for the children. A set of six sessions were developed in line with the educators' needs and suggestions. These were carried out for the whole-class to learn about strategies related to positive behavior, self-regulation, handwriting and scissor skills. These once-weekly sessions were half an hour long, and involved active participation and hands-on experiences for the children, as well as co-teaching opportunities for the educator, LSE and OT. A Tool Box as a resource that supported children's skills and behavior was developed by the researcher and the class team including the children. The OT explained how and when the tool box could be used and what could be put in it, and then a discussion with the educators and the children ensued. This resulted in setting up the Tool Rules to make the best use of the tools that the children and educators deemed most effective. In line with universal design concepts, the seating arrangement of the classroom were modified to allow enough space for movement activities in the center. Also, a number of seating/standing options during story telling were allowed: soft cushions on the chair; a peanut ball; a move-and-sit cushion; floor-sitting; and even standing behind the desk. A quiet space namely a pop-up tent, housing a few reading books and cushions, was placed to the side of the classroom; the pupils who finished their classwork were allowed to sit and look at books in the tent till their friends completed their tasks.

The researcher gained more knowledge about classroom practices, whilst the teacher became more knowledgeable about strategies that could support her student's classroom occupations.

In summary, the classroom-embedded strategies were mostly universally design strategies that promoted the physical and learning accessibility of the classroom, supported activity ideas and design as well as student wellbeing. An example of the latter was the ideas on movement activities. These strategies ensured the development of sensory, cognitive and motor skills as prerequisites for the children's occupations of writing, cutting, lunch-time routines and play.

Reflective Diary Log: 26th February
Reflection in Action

This weekly hour gave me a real understanding of what good collaboration was about. The teacher and I made great efforts to try to come up with the best solutions for the children during the session by following each other's lead and each filling in the gaps which the other would have left out. Time needs to be invested in developing relationships with the educators it is the only way to build a good rapport that will be the foundation of collaborative practice.

Reflection on Action

The exercise of placing myself in the "teacher's shoes" for this one hour a week was valuable in many ways. Firstly, I appreciated one of what I would consider, the joys of being a teacher a: being welcomed and greeted by the children, who were always happy to see me. I got first-hand experience of what it felt like managing a class of 18 five-year-olds; this was not always easy. I learnt from the teacher's attitude, structure and ways of dealing with the children. The teachers encouraged the children to listen and modelled appropriate behaviours. I also appreciated the honest feedback when things worked and when they did not. This meant that the teacher felt comfortable and open to say what she thought.

7.3.1.5 Environmental Design

This involved collaborating with the senior management team to facilitate the modification and renovation of the said environment and spaces to enhance student learning. The occupational therapist researcher and the educators collaborated on designing a room that met the needs of the particular school and child population. The design and setting up of the chill-out room (Figure 9) involved many hours of collaboration with the school's inclusion coordinator and the help of a member of the school management team.

Figure 9*The “chill-out” Room**(Reproduce with permission for the copyright holder)*

The discussions ranged from wall colour and curtains to equipment to more refined details, such as the setting up of rules and regulations as well as a handbook for referencing activity ideas. At a later stage, the educators were asked to attend a day of training on the use of the room and the concepts informing it. The chill-out room had various functions: it was used by whole classes, giving children an opportunity to develop their sensory-motor skills, for instance improving postural control for better sitting. It was also used as a time-out space for some students to get away from the overstimulating classroom, and it allowed these children to regenerate and go back to the class ready to continue their work. One may say that considering a whole-school intervention use of the chill-out room served all three tiers as it was used for prevention as well as remediation for individual learners as well as the whole class.

My little students loved the chill out room; it was an opportunity to play freely without too much restrictions. I valued mostly their laughter and happy disposition but also the learning that went on especially before and after the session when they had to put their shoes off and on. (KG 2 Educator)

The chill out room was of great help to my student; when he was having a hard time coping with the class he could use his time out card that meant a few minutes in the chill out room” (LSE KG2).

Another learning support educator from a year 2 class and with 5 years’ experience, said that her child made use of “a lot of resources in the chill-out room”. She was referring to the soft play shapes and ball pool; soft balls; emoji cushions; and crash pad that helped her child calm down and self-regulate better; this meaning that the ultimate result was more positive behavior. On the 23rd of January 2019 the researcher, who is subscribed to the Facebook page of the case study school, saw a post that read as follows “These photos show the year 5 R making use of the Chill Out Room. The children enjoyed themselves through various exercises coordinated by their class teacher”.

Other aspects of environmental design were addressed through school-based occupational therapy. This is shared in Table 34. Out-of-class resources, like the chill-out room, run the risk of become an “escape room”, in which those educators that feel unsupported and unable to work effectively with a child retreat to, with no gain for the child. As one relevant support staff said:

Educators need to be guided and made accountable: preparing a programme for their child to carry out in the chill out room...a SMT member would need to monitor these activities, otherwise such a resource could very well end up being misused and abused of. Every LSE should come up with a plan and without such a plan should not be granted permission to use the room (Ms Helena, RSS).

Overall, educators and LSEs perceived the chill-out room to be a positive addition to their school, although there were a few reservations for specific reasons, as one LSE shared:

If my child needs to use the room for some time out and other students are in the room what am I supposed to do...It will be hard to keep him in class and

at the same time I cannot risk him hurting other children due to of his impulsive behavior.

Another LSE spoke about the distance she needed to travel to access the room: “By the time I come up here, I am afraid that the child will run away and get into some sort of trouble” (Ms, Martha, LSE KG 1).

Senior Management also expressed concerns that the room would be misused by educators, and that unless a proper programme was put in place and monitored the room would merely serve as a “*glorified baby sitter*”. The feedback and collaboration by all these educators *just documented above are witness to a collaborative approach to environmental design in the school.*

Reflective Diary Log 26th January 2018

Reflections in Action

Today I had a really productive session in the chill-out room with KG 2. The children were attentive to instruction and followed their teachers lead. They understood what was requested of them and seemed to have not only benefitted from the self-regulation strategies, but clearly enjoyed themselves”

Reflections on Action

My thoughts about this point lead to considerations of accountability and trust. If professionals are not accountable and trustworthy, then proper collaboration cannot take place. Having educators that have good professional ethics is of the utmost importance; such behavior comes from educators who are passionate about and keen to do their job. This was to me an excellent example of knowledge translation. The educator may have potentially used the information she had acquired from both the professional development session about the chill-out room and the booklet produced by the OT, which also includes a menu of activities that can be used in the that room and can be adapted them to the needs of her child.

Table 34 that follows depicts aspects of environmental design addressed through SBOT. It shows how the school environment and spaces were adapted

through collaborative discussion that went on between the researcher and the educators to create the best learning ambiance for the children.

Table 34

Aspects of Environmental Design addressed through School Based OT Intervention

Organization of furniture and creation of spaces in the classroom to allow movement opportunities
Use of voice and tone
Light and air in the classroom
Use of outdoor space and structuring that environment
Physical resources, such as furniture fit for children
Games and activity suggestions, e.g. cookery
Furniture fit for children; use of cushions to support posture and arousal levels,
Resources to support self-regulation, included physical and tangible objects, like theraband, putty, fidgets, pencil grips, which were introduced as part of a classroom toolbox
Resources to support writing: different-lined copybooks; use of different writing tools; marking the desk to guide pupils where to place their copybook.

7.3.1.6 The School Development Plan and Action Plans

My involvement in the School Development and Action Plan was to discuss ways of incorporating opportunities for multi-sensory learning in the curriculum. The educators also requested help with developing their ideas for a sensory wall. Apart from all this, I took part in discussions with the SMT to draft the behavior policy and the design and delivery of appropriate school activities in line with the school's action plan. At the end of the scholastic year 2017/18 I was invited to attend the day away with the school staff.

Reflective Diary log 10th January 2019

Reflection in Action

I was excited to see that the SDP featured the involvement of OT. To me, this meant that the SMT valued and understood the importance of OT contribution to supporting educators

Reflection on Action

This type of intervention did not feature in other models. I reflect on how involvement with the senior leadership teams in schools can be a novel approach for school-based OTs to make more significant changes in the school system.

School Based OT intervention also supported the school's action plan by promoting a healthy lifestyle through physical activity in collaboration with the kindergarten assistants. An example of how the school senior management team valued the OT's collaboration was by inserting an "action" that read as follows: "The OT can discuss with Educators tools for self-regulation, which should be included in the school behavior policy" providing in-class parent education sessions, but with a focus on occupation. This was not physical activity out of context, but it was a session in which parents were encouraged to reflect on their lifestyle and resources and come up with ideas that worked for them. Here is what the kindergarten educators had to say about such sessions:

The hands on activities and resources were beneficial to both ourselves and the parents. Information was practical and demonstrations were very useful. Also parents learnt how to support their children with minimal resources; everyday things in their situations; the handout with pictures of everyday activities that parents could use in the summer months is a valuable resource which I can share with other parents (KGE Kinder 2).

I chose to reframe this session on the benefits of play from a two-hour "chalk and talk" session to a hands-on in-class session to make it more meaningful for the

educators as well as the parents. I did this through experiential learning and hands-on activities focusing on play-based activities that could support motor and sensory learning to support children's wellbeing.

Reflections on Tier 1 Intervention

As my involvement with the chosen classes progressed week by week, I consolidated my belief and conviction that working with the educators and with all the class every week definitely gave results on different levels: the learners' enjoyment and motivation; the educators' reframing of educational challenges; the SMT apprehending the needs of both the educators and the children from a different perspective; and my own understanding of and immersion into the curriculum and school life.

I will now summarize the essence of Tier 1 intervention. The capacity of stakeholders was built through the enablement skills of consultation, coaching, advocating, adapting and education, with engagement at the core of any such intervention, which in turn was dependent on my knowledge and understanding of school culture, curriculum requirements etc. in the Maltese context.

This consisted mainly of an exchange of knowledge with the educators on environmental design, accessibility, and designing of activities and routines in line with the child's educational and curricular needs in context. Six modes of intervention appear to have been significant from the data, and these included: Professional Development session; parent education; curriculum development time; classroom embedded strategies; environmental design; and involvement in the school development and action plans. The intervention was always applied and modified according to the children's occupations in play, social participation; activities of daily living; literacy and numeracy within context namely the physical and learning environment of the classroom and school. The significance of the educators' role in supporting the children's participation is evident in Tier 1 intervention, whilst the child factors and performance skills of the individual children

were reinforced by the environment. I shall now move on to present the key findings of Tier 2.

7.3.2 Key Findings of Tier 2 Intervention

The main aims of Tier 2 intervention in line with the stakeholders' needs were: Collaborating with the adult educators to consult on and model ways of supporting children at risk of failing to participate in the class activities but with less complex needs.

Reflective Diary log: 5th July 2018

Reflection in Action

"When analyzing how I spent my time throughout the intervention in the case study school, I realize that Tier 2 intervention is very sparse and that the number of hours spent in Tier 3 intervention by far over-shoots the time spent in Tier 2"

Reflection on Action

Tier 3 students require intensive support to cope in a mainstream environment, and this is linked to the rate of inclusion in Maltese schools which stands at 99.9 percent (Agency for special and inclusive education 2014), meaning that mainstream schools have to support the participation of children with very complex needs. Throughout the data collection, I constantly reflected on how I, as an OT, could support all the students in the classroom, since the school system did not favour working with children in groups or individually outside the classroom. My thinking needed to revolve around working with these children in the classroom context and empowering the educators to find the best ways to support all of them, irrespective of their individual needs.

Building up the capacity of educators to work with children at risk by supporting them to identify dysfunction, and provide strategies to support the student while monitoring changes. This included group work with individual and, sometimes, pairs of students in the classroom as well as sessions with small groups of students in the chill-out room. In most cases, it took the form of modelling

strategies and coaching LSEs. This took place in the classroom with specific children who had a statement of needs and with others who did not. Hence, my main role was to exchange knowledge with the educators and support them in their working with the children. Table 34 presents the main Tier 2 interventions and how they provided the enablers to participation that the educators previously identified.

The strategies mentioned earlier in the chapter, will now be affirmed by the educators' own experiences. The occupational therapist worked with the children and Learning Support Educator in the classroom, and the teacher joined in.

The information was knowledge based both theoretical and hands on practices were teacher friendly. It would be great to have other opportunities like OT days which involves parents as well as their kids (Teacher Year 1).

The Occupational Therapist where possible explained on site what she was doing and at times after to maintain the flow of the session. Small-group intervention also took the form of sessions in the chill-out room with two children and two of us (LSE's). Once again we were shown how to carry out the strategies and discussed behaviours and possible solutions. We were involved in "doing" with our children, and given feedback on how we were doing with the child. We were also guided to observe the child's responses to what we were doing. We learnt a lot and felt supported (LSE Year 1).

Table 35*Tier 2 Interventions in the Maltese Context*

Intervention	Enablers-supported by the intervention to minimize barriers.	Occupation
1. Intervention in the classroom with individual and small groups of children.	Knowledge exchange	Literacy and numeracy
2. Sessions in chill-out room and yard; modelling strategies for LSE and Teacher with children at risk.	Knowledge exchange	Social participation and play
3. Individual parent collaboration; knowledge-sharing and coaching for children without a statement of needs	Communicating and collaborating with parents	Activities of daily Living
4. Problem-solving with relevant support staff to discuss strategies of benefit to children with identified needs but not having a statement.	Network of support; support services and human resources	All Occupations
5. Activities and resources discussed with teachers and LSEs for those children with emerging difficulties.	Nature and extent of activities and resources	All occupations

Teachers valued the individual and personal support in different ways. They found it of great value to discuss individual students with an OT on site, and to devise a plan for them. This was different from Tier 1 intervention as the latter provided mostly classroom strategies for all the students, whilst in Tier 2 the focus was on discussing in more detail the needs of and solutions for the children who were struggling and perceived at risk of failing.

In the pages that follow, narratives of two children: Amalia and Nabil (pseudonyms) are described (Tables 36 and 37). These vignettes will enable the reader to understand how Tier 2 intervention (albeit appearing rather sparse in my data findings) unfolded in a Maltese classroom. I have chosen to present these two “cases” as I think they portray two different ways in which intervention at Tier 2 can support children’s participation: Preventative intervention and Identification of needs.

Table 36

Case Vignette: Tier 2 Intervention: Meet Amalia

Amalia was a lovable 5 year old and at times overly affectionate child. She needed frequent prompting to sit properly on the chair; the teacher had noticed that her copybooks were untidy, and during classwork she nearly always lagged behind. She was a messy eater, spilled her drink when opening her bottle and stuffed her mouth with food. Besides, she could not yet open her school bag. I observed her and noticed this as well. The teacher asked me if I thought Amalia had a problem as she was concerned about the child’s lack of organization. I engaged in discussion with the teacher and I explained the possibility of Amalia having an emerging picture of dyspraxia, and we talked about how best to keep an eye out for her. A handout on strategies to support students with dyspraxia was discussed with the teacher. We agreed that she benefited from the universal classroom tools to support her behaviour and writing skill. Her teacher promised to speak with Amalia’s mum on parent’s day and inform her of our observations and the strategies that are being used in class. I took the opportunity to use lunch time in class to explain more to the educators about Amalia’s behaviour and her potentially being at risk of DCD. I engaged in discussion with them about if and how the strategies could-address her needs. By the end of the year, Amalia was doing better with the strategies and did not require further support; however, a note was left with the Assistant Head of School to instruct next year’s teacher to keep a watchful eye on her participation in classroom occupations.

Table 37*Case Vignette: Tier 2 Intervention: Meet Nabil*

Nabil was a lively, sharp-eyed 4-year-old migrant boy from North Africa with a lovely smile. He loved to draw and listening to stories. I was initially called in by the teacher as Nabil was “misbehaving” and hitting other children. The teacher was rather distraught, and failed to understand how “such a bright boy could not understand he needed to behave”. I observed Nabil and interacted with him and his educators in the classroom environment, using this observation period to build a rapport with the teachers. The boy was noted to have difficulties with social participation and activities of daily living. His participation in class activities, such as singing and storytelling, needed to be demarcated by rules. The teacher, the LSE and I exchanged knowledge on potential causes for his difficulties in occupational domains, and I modelled practices for the LSE, demonstrating how to support Nabil’s occupations in the classroom and on the playground. These involved teaching and modelling sensory and other positive behaviour strategies. In the classroom, the educators were coached on how to modify the environment and their own strategies to try to elicit acceptable responses from the child. Such strategies were also helpful to other children in the classroom. Every week I checked in on Nabil and his educators to see how things were going and to discuss Nabil’s progress. The educators were satisfied that they had managed to make a positive change in this child behaviour so much so that he was participating in break time , singing , storytelling and other classroom instruction more gainfully. I supported the educators’ request-for more dedicated support for the following scholastic year by writing a report on Nabil’s main challenges and needs.

These vignettes testify to an element of fluidity and interconnectedness between the tiers. Tier 1 intervention was experienced by all the children, and therefore any children at risk as well as the statemented children received universal design strategies. The case vignette demonstrates that Amalia’s needs would have been likely to go unrecognized if I had not stayed and observed her in the classroom and engaged in discussion with the teacher. Together we came up with a plan that supported the child effectively. In the case of Nabil, the knowledge exchange and understanding of Nabil’s needs in context were very important, as outside the classroom Nabil was a different boy. Modelling supported the LSE in working better with him. This was also an example of advocacy for both the educator and the child’s family.

There was an element of layers in the support the children received and in moving between tiers, depending on what classroom occupation was being supported. School-based occupational therapy with young children is largely about working with children at risk, and often Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are interchangeable. The main challenge lies with those children who have more subtle difficulties, but also more potential to improve: these are the children that SBOT will potentially be able to support, and who otherwise may not be reached. Amalia's teacher portrayed this powerfully:

So, with Amalia and others like her, she is a bright kid I sense but if you had not picked up her difficulties how would I have known about them? The learning support educator in the class was already saying that she needs to change her attitude and we should tell her mum to discipline her and we were all getting angry and cross at her messiness, but now, I understand this dyspraxia could be a part of this. I'm glad I now know what to do and what to look out for. (Teacher, Year 1)

Diary Log 13th June 2018

Reflection in Action

I am enjoying my conversations with the educators as I realize that the implicit message of what they are sharing with me is that through this project they feel supported to help their learners succeed. Often they are simple things that they mention a strategy, a listening ear; some hands on support; a reference to a text or website.

Reflection on Action

School-based OT intervention may have enabled educators to move away from an over focus on problems. Words like "respect, determination, support, understanding and resourceful" appear to feature more in our conversations. I reflect on my own learning in this context: how can students with more subtle difficulties be identified? I believe the answer lies in the chemistry between all the stakeholders with an invested interest in the classroom, who use their knowledge and sensibility to understand each child better.

In summary, Tier 2 intervention was the least documented form of action, but possibly the most important. It consisted primarily of support to the teachers in the classroom on specific strategies and accommodations for children at risk and those who did not have official support (i.e. a statement of needs) from an LSE. Hence, it was more about enablement through coaching, engaging and specializing (CMOP-E). A unique feature of this level of support was that it provided an opportunity for educators to become more sensitive to the needs of the pupils with more subtle difficulties by understanding better how to adapt the environment and understand the children's specific needs in the context of the classroom and the curriculum. SBOT aided the educators in understanding different ways to support their learners. This happened through an interactive and co-learning process whereby my understanding of the child's difficulties in context propelled the educators in coming up with a solution that bolstered the child's occupation in the classroom.

Reflections on Tier 2

Tier 2 intervention is mostly absent and needs to be developed further to support those students that are the most in need, as they tend to be undiagnosed and may be the ones that fall through the net. Improving this support can lead to fewer children needing individual support, statements and LSEs.

Tier 2 intervention appears to merit the most attention in the Maltese Early Years. Children in this tier are the ones that will not be diagnosed, and therefore will not be eligible to receive the traditional one-to-one clinic-based services. For this reason, the importance of these children being served by school-based OT cannot be stressed enough. Moreover, further intervention at this level may result in fewer children needing Tier 3 support. The most likely scenario is that most children will only begin to present with learning needs at this age so Tier 2 intervention for children at risk should be more dominant than Tier 3. This fact provides a unique contribution of my study to support children's participation.

7.3.3 Key findings of Tier 3 Intervention

The main aim of Tier 3 intervention in the Maltese context in line with the stake holders' needs was to:

Collaborate with the educators (mostly LSEs) supporting those students with more complex needs. In the Maltese contest, these were primarily students with a Statement of Needs, and therefore an Individual Education Plan⁵²;

Cater for educators working with children with more complex needs by supporting them in functional goal-setting as part of the Individual Education Plan as well as supporting teachers and LSEs through consultation, discussion, coaching and modelling. The school based OT intervention also contributed to the review of goals at the end of the scholastic year and refined and supported recommendations for the next year;

Collaborate with parents in adapting the environment to support their children's participation in the home and school.

My presence and involvement at the IEP meetings for the KG and year 1 students was a priority for the SMT as well as the educators, as the IEP is a plan that is developed for the whole school year and gives the educators tangible goals to work towards. Oftentimes, the educators found it hard to set goals, especially with the more challenging children, and this is why they requested my involvement. This ranged from modelling specific strategies, such as those related to self-regulation and positive behavior in the classroom to working on postural control on a ball in the chill-out room. Tier 3 students and their educators benefitted from additional support in the third term thanks to my attendance at the end of year IEP evaluation, in which follow-up through collaboration with the educators and parents occurred. This took the form of discussions on how the overall support provided by the school

⁵² Students with statements of needs have an Individual Educational Plan, which is supported by an LSE. The LSE may support the student on a shared basis with another one or two students, or else on an individual basis

throughout the year reflected on the child's participation. Table 38 gives an overview of how the SBOT evolved in Tier 3 intervention.

Table 38

Tier 3 Intervention in the Maltese Context

School Based OT Intervention	Enablers supported by the intervention to minimize barriers.	Occupation
1. Connecting with educators, parents and establishing rapport with carers through IEP meeting.	Communicating with parents	All
2. Using the IEP conference to share knowledge, resources and strategies; and engage in discussion about issues pertaining to functional school occupations.	Professional knowledge	All
3. Observation of IEP children in class to identify challenges in classroom occupations.	Learning environment	All
4. Contribution to functional goal setting and goal review as part of the IEP, with an open discussion on what recommendations would be most appropriate to support the child in the next scholastic year.	Nature and extent of activities and resources	All
5. One-to-one support for child in class meant discussion with educators on how to apply accommodations to enhance classroom occupations, such as morning routine, handwriting, lunch-time routine, organization of personal belongings.	The physical and learning environment	All: mostly routines and rituals
6. One-to-one support for child and LSE in school and community activities, example: Christmas concert and creative project; petting farm; gymnastics workshop	Support services	All: mostly social participation

The characteristics of the intervention in Tier 3 was different from one-to-one clinic-based intervention primarily from four perspectives:

The element of capacity building;

Knowledge exchange with the educators (both the LSE and the teacher)

employing a more hands-on approach, including modelling and coaching;

The difficulties and solutions identified were in context;

The accommodations were also in line with the occupational challenges the child was experiencing in the classroom and the school in general.

The focus in this tier was not on working out of class with the child, as in traditional Occupational Therapy intervention, but on coaching educators and modelling strategies to support the children in class or in specific environments, like the chill-out room. Table 38 now presents a summary of Tier 3 intervention in the Maltese context that served to propagate the enablers of participation.

Table 39 now presents a case vignette to illustrate how Tier 3 intervention unfolded in the Maltese classroom.

Table 39

Case Vignette Tier 3: Meet Joey

.Joe was a 5-year-old who loves dinosaurs and using the computer. He lived with his extended family, since his mum could not assume responsibility of him due to psychosocial problems. His foster carers were extremely supportive. They collaborated with his teachers, his one-to-one LSE and any other support staff. Joe had good intellectual abilities, but he has some sensory sensitivities, including auditory sensitivity. His main challenges were tolerating assembly time and not participating in break time play. Additional supports were needed for Joe to write on his copybook and to pay more attention to understand teacher instruction in the classroom. These included: a move-and-sit cushion and a pencil grip. The OT became acquainted with Joe's carers during the IEP meeting and established a rapport with them. Goals were set for Joe, namely the trial and use of a sensory backpack for assembly and more organised play activities for break time to be introduced minimally, ~~and~~ gradually extending the time). The OT discussed strategies for reducing sensory sensitivity and tips to improve handwriting with all the stakeholders during the IEP. Throughout the school year, the OT regularly visited the classroom to see how Joe was doing. Very often discussion with Joe's LSE led to refinement of the strategies being used. E.g. This could be changing in copybook due to the ruling suggestions for activities as part of a sensory diet. When in doubt, the LSE sent emails to the OT to confirm she was on the right track and to ask, at times, questions on issues that arose. Joe's aunt attended any parent talks that the OT organised, such as a parent's information session to learn more about sensory motor strategies for self-regulation.

Reflective Diary Log: 3rd March 2018

Reflection in Action:

What did I do differently with Joey as opposed to Nabil and Amalia? For sure, I spent more time engaged in direct intervention in order to find solutions together with his teacher and mostly LSE.

Reflection on Action

Aside from the child having a formal diagnosis, the main difference between a Tier 2 and a Tier 3 intervention here appears to be in the frequency, and not quality, of support, with Joey getting more regular help and the rest less frequent support. I reflect here on the importance of timeliness as well as spending time in the school and its importance in developing the collaborative intervention

Four aspects that I extracted from the data in relation to the educators' experiences of how school based OT intervention enhanced occupation and participation of pupils with an Individual Education Plan are shared below.

The characteristics of the intervention all included:

Reframing of my perspective and that of the Educators

Coordinating resources/linking people

Making informed choices

Active education, advocacy and consultation as part of the individual education planning (IEP) process.

Examples of these characteristics of intervention are presented below.

7.3.3.1 Reframing Perspectives

One key aspect of the IEP meetings was the reframing of my perspective and those of the educators' and the parents'. A child's behavior can only be fully understood if it is explored in light of the consideration of the viewpoints of the different stakeholders responsible for educating the child. The OT can contribute by putting her informed opinion on the table for discussion. The IEP conference

provides a unique opportunity for this. Such a thing cannot be achieved merely by intervention in which the focus is the child outside a contextual understanding.

An example of the above follows:

The LSE explained how C's behavior was inconsistent, and she noticed that he was "lazier" during some activities than others. The LSE used the terms "lazy" and "laid back" as C could not open the cracker packet and often gave up. I explained that maybe C was finding it hard and that was why he opted out, and that we had to be cautious not to misinterpret his lack of skill as "laziness". Whilst the educator's knowledge about the child in the context of the classroom was crucial for me to understand the child better, I pointed out the danger of giving the impression that he understood by responding to visual cues. The class team needed to ensure that C could understand the verbal cues, and to try to understand if the perceived laziness was more of a cover up for C's motor difficulties. (Researcher's log December 2018)

7.3.3.2 Coordinating resources: linking people

The IEP meeting was a learning experience for all involved: parents, educators and myself as the OT and researcher. It was an opportunity to engage in discussion with the parents on the importance of involving their children in appropriate community activities and, as a result, I was often involved in the coordination of school/community partnerships, which were beneficial to families. I supported the parents in seeking community resources for their children such as sports activities and scouts and other. I tried to achieve this by acting as the link person between the parents and the organization. At times a discussion would take place in the IEP meeting which would lead to a child's referral to services offered by the state national health system or other organizations. These services were usually ones that were most accessible as they were free of charge.

7.3.3.3 Making Informed Choices

The nature of Tier 3 intervention was also about engaging in discussion with parents and carers and supporting them in making informed choices. The researcher/OT often facilitated the discussion and provided immediate and timely suggestions to the parents on environmental modifications and strategies that could be used at home. During the IEP meeting, suggestions on modifications to the classroom environment as well as suggestions on modifying the routine to accommodate the children's sensory needs were made. An example of this was a child coming in to school later to avoid the morning sensory overload. One parent shared this in the final IEP evaluation:

Coming in to school half an hour later made all the difference to little T.

When he arrived at school all the children were settled in their classrooms and there was a quiet environment. He took Miss M's hand and went to class with no tantrum. What a relief that he could start the day on a positive note!

This shows us how the collaborative discussion between educators, therapist, parents and SMT supported the parents in making choices for their children that would not have encompassed everybody's perspective had they been made by the professionals and parents alone.

7.3.3.4 Active Education, Advocacy and Consultation

Parents were offered support in understanding the challenges their children were facing, and were also accompanied in coming to terms with the diagnosis. For instance, the Occupational Therapist explained what certain conditions were, such as hemiplegia and the child's functional limitations. The teaching team gained insights on what to look out for and act upon in order to support the child's development and minimize delays. Often little hands-on demonstrations were given. These included specific strategies, such as tripod pencil grip; midline crossing; chair

push-ups; among others. The teachers said they understood better the basis behind “struggling learners”.

Individual advice on specific students as it helped me understand the child.

The sensory motor stations with KG students were fun and children and adults enjoyed them a lot”. (KGE, KG2, 20 + years)

The educators spoke about how this collaboration helped them become better observers, making them aware of what to look out for in the children and engage in discussions about ideas for new activities. The most valuable comment from the researcher's point of view was that the teachers looked forward to having an OT present in class and the words “fun” and “enjoyed” frequently featured in the educator” discourse. They spoke about how the occupational therapist facilitated their own knowledge of and achievement of the children’s developmental milestones. Finally, LSEs said they appreciated being taught specific skills to support the children in curriculum requirements. Hereunder are their own words to support this:

Involvement of the OT during the IEP and during the scholastic year were very valuable to me; I enjoyed having an OT in my class; I understood how learning could be made easy and fun for my students. I mostly valued the individual support for my student; I valued tips on how to practice cutting with the scissors with the child I support” (LSE’s Yr. 1 and 2, 2-8 years)⁵³

Being present during an IEP conference and sharing ideas that might be in common and help more children and adults in the classroom. My student responded well to the strategies and ideas we discussed on self-regulation and I feel they have moved forward. (LSE KG 2, 2 years).

⁵³ Indicate years of experience

Reflections on Tier 3 Intervention

Within this tier, my focus was on supporting and collaborating with the LSE through coaching and modelling. The one-to-one intervention with the child only occurred in the presence of the LSE, and was aimed at modelling strategies for the professional. The input of the class teacher with students having more complex needs is usually not significant. My intervention in this tier attempted to involve the class teacher more; but realistically the majority of intervention occurred with the LSE and the child. This is an area that merits further exploration of ways to involve the teacher, who is the one ultimately responsible for the child. My thoughts are that as universal design and differentiation strategies are put into place, there will be fewer students needing Tier 3 support apart from children with the most complex needs, who will always continue to need additional and more intense support. I reflect mostly, however, on how this support can address the needs primarily of the key LSEs so as to prevent burnout and help keep up their motivation to support their charges' participation.

One can reflect on how the IEP meetings, which were essentially Tier 3 intervention, also incorporated aspects of Tier 1 and Tier 2 modes, especially in terms of capacity building of the educators and parents. At times the occupational therapist was able to model certain tips, e.g.: guide parents on what sitting posture to encourage; how to hold the pencil and scissors; providing tips for positive behavior and feeding. The occupational therapist also acted as an advocate for the family when conflicts arose with other professionals; she also helped to resolve conflict arising from “school internal politics”. What follows in Table 40 is a case Vignette depicting how one child benefitted from intervention at all three tiers.

Table 40*Case Vignette depicting Tiers 1, 2 and 3: Meet Federica*

Federica was a sociable five-year-old who loved the sea. She had supportive parents; there was also good communication between the teacher and the school. Federica had a statement of needs and shared support in the classroom due to a diagnosis of ADHD. In class she was often reprimanded by her LSE for not sitting still, fidgeting and disobeying. Her LSE mostly monitored her behaviour and tried to make sure she was paying attention to the teacher's instruction. Her teacher, the LSE and I all agreed that she benefitted from the universal classroom tools (Tier 1) to support her behaviour and writing skills. Her LSE provided differentiated work by reducing the quantity of writing, allowing verbal rather than written response and use of tools for self-regulation (Tier 2). Following OT consultation with the LSE, it was decided that more positive behaviour strategies would be used instead of reprimanding Federica. A sensory diet was integrated into her daily routine and she used the chill-out room with her LSE. Both the child and the LSE were supported by the OT. (Tier 3). A handout on heavy work activities was sent to Federica's mum through the teachers' closed Facebook group to ensure close liaison with the parent and continuity of the strategies so that she would also be successful in home occupations.

Across the three terms and Tiers One, Two and Three, one notes an overall focus on collaborative intervention: knowledge exchange; capacity building of staff and members of the senior management team; as well as support and collaboration with parents. In addition, there is a constant thread of relationship-building, connectedness, empathy, caring, flexibility and timeliness. The intervention provided within the tiers kept a focus on supporting the main enablers whilst attempting to minimize the barriers:

A summary of all the tiers is presented in Table 41 whilst Table 42 gives a summary of the Core Characteristics of the School Based OT Intervention for my study.

Table 41

A summary of the Tiered Intervention in the Maltese Context

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Author
All children	Individual and Small groups of children at risk. In and out of class/ prevention and response to intervention	Children having more complex needs with a statement of needs and an IEP	Buhagiar (2020) Buhagiar (2020)
Participation through universal design and intervention in the natural context of the school and classroom	Prevention and Identification of needs	One-to-one support to both child and educator	
Examples:	Examples:	Examples:	
<i>Let's Move</i> programme delivered weekly by email	Working with individual and small groups of students in the classroom during schoolwork tasks	In or out of class, using coaching and modelling with a focus on building the capacity of the LSE and relevant support staff	
Whole classroom embedded; 4 Ps for writing, scissor skills and other e.g. positive behaviour strategies	Small groups of children in chill-out room to work on self-regulation		
Curriculum-relevant activities embedded in the class. Example: numeracy through movement	Differentiated instruction supported through activity analysis		

In all 3 Tiers:

- Collaborating with parents; teaching staff; relevant support staff; school management/administrators to ensure their collaboration
- Beyond the school: college principals; service managers; and assistant directors and directors to reinforce and consolidate the philosophy of the tiered approach.

An overview of the interventions shows that the main areas supported by school based OT intervention in the Maltese context, were knowledge exchange between stakeholders; communication with and involvement of parents; the physical and learning environment and resources; and developing networks of support between all stakeholders.

Table 42

Core Characteristics of Collaborative SBOTTI Actioned in the Maltese Context

Tiers	Core characteristics	The process
Tier 1 universal design whole school/class intervention	Professional development sessions; curriculum development time; classroom-embedded strategies; parent education; involvement in school development; and action plans	Discussion in line with the needs of the students teased out in the first phase of the study; planning time, including regular contact and discussion with SMT to ensure that the knowledge was relevant to the educators; use of universal design concepts to present the knowledge in different ways, including hands-on and audio-visual materials
Tier 1 Universal design supporting The school environment	Environmental design: chill-out room; seating arrangements; use of outdoor space	Discussion and planning with Inclusion Coordinator and Senior Management Team; on-site planning and discussion; liaison with equipment suppliers; conceptual and hands-on training of educators in use of chill-out room
Tier 2 Differentiated instruction	Activity analysis and breakdown of curriculum tasks and in between tasks e.g. Transition times and going to the toilet; use of visual and kinaesthetic supports; problem-identification and solution-finding with educators	Information-sharing and discussion with LSE, accompanied by an element of “trial-and-error” to find what supports best fit the student
Tier 3 Accommodation of students	LSE support for students having a shared or individual statement of needs, discussion and implementation of alternative curricular work in line with learning objectives	Coaching LSEs; modelling strategies with child and supporting LSE in implementing them

7.4 Providing Intervention Beyond the School and Data Collection Phase

After the data collection was over, the researcher remained receptive to any spontaneous requests for support made by the school. The table on the next page shows the activities that continued to support the school in the year following the data collection, and which were requested for future scholastic years. These all came about through intermediaries in the data collection after their experience of OT involvement in the data collection.

This took the form of training sessions and discussions with Inclusion Coordinators and Early Intervention Teachers, and meetings with Education Officers of the early years; service managers; and assistant directors and directors, to explain the benefits of such a framework. It included as well professional development sessions with other schools and parent education sessions and seminars with outside entities, e.g. Autism Support group. Invites to go both on TV and Radio programmes to talk about the importance of school-based OT were received and accepted. It is worth mentioning that requests for school-based OT carried on after the end of the data collection phase. I felt the need to follow the lead and to continue to provide this intervention as it enabled me to remain in touch with the educators and to continue to reflect on the aspects of intervention that were truly meaningful to them; it enabled me to continue to visualize how the intervention could be further developed even in view of the changes in the early years curriculum that were going on and are still going on to date, namely the introduction of the emergent curriculum. Table 43 depicts a summary of the interventions post data collection.

Table 43*Timeline with intervention (post-research data collection phase)*

Timeline	Activity
July 2018	End of formal data collection
Nov 2018	CT with KG 1, KG 2
Dec 2019	Well-being classes with 7 KG 1 classrooms and 5 KG 2 classrooms, involving educators and children
January 2019	CT with Year 1 and year 2
March 2019	Parent talk on using Everyday Chores to Enhance Learning
May 2019	Invite to school SDP
May 2019	Request by assistant head and INCO to work on curriculum for scholastic year 2019/20 as well as to work with KG class, with the involvement of the students.
June 2019	Parents talk on summer activities to support development
July 2019	Request for support from ex-head of “case study school” now assigned to head another school
August 2019	Request from head of an independent school to support and give PD to educators on Tiered Intervention.
September/ October 2019	Workshop with childcare workers through the Foundation for Educational Services
October 2019	Contributing to NAS training of INCOs and LSEs: recommendation from my research to formulate course aimed at working with ASD kids in Maltese schools
November 2019	Workshop with 100+ childcare centre managers/coordinators and assistants from all over Malta
January 2020	CD time with KG1 and KG2 in case study school
January 2020	Parents meeting on Children’s Involvement in Home Occupations
April 2020	COPE session with primary school teachers/LSEs (case study) school
March 2020	Invited by Head of School to join Facebook group named “School Activities During Lockdown” to support parents with activity ideas during COVID 19 lockdown. Activity ideas posted on this page.
May 2020	Invite for a Zoom session with Secretariat for Catholic Education on the tiered approach and collaborative consultation

7.5 The Children’s Experience of School-based Occupational Therapy.

At the end of phase 2, the children from the participating classrooms were asked what they liked best about school based occupational therapy intervention.

Responses were recorded and kept anonymous. It was interesting to note that the children had difficulty in talking about their experience of school-based occupational therapy. Since I was there once a week, my presence was simply part of their classroom routine and they knew to expect me every Wednesday. As a result, the children did not identify my presence as a separate one from their school experience. To me, this inability to single my presence out was also a confirmation that my intervention blended in with the classroom curriculum and activities. What mattered to the children and what they were enthusiastic about was what novelty I brought with me every week, and they looked forward to what I had to offer. I must add that the educators' attitude towards my presence helped to foster this, by speaking about me and my "lessons" throughout the week as an integral part of her classroom timetable.

The children did manage to come up with some answers to my questions eventually. The top activities which were mentioned most frequently were the cookery activity (healthy coconut balls); the sensory walk; "This is me" activity; and the Butterfly Peg activity. Some of these activities are depicted in Figures 10, 11 and 12.

Figure 10

Sensory Walk Activity

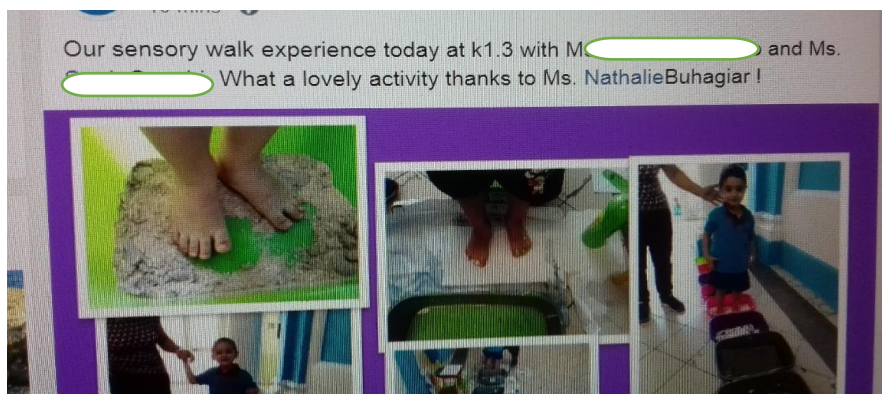


Figure 11

Learning Science through Art and Craft's Butterfly Peg Activity

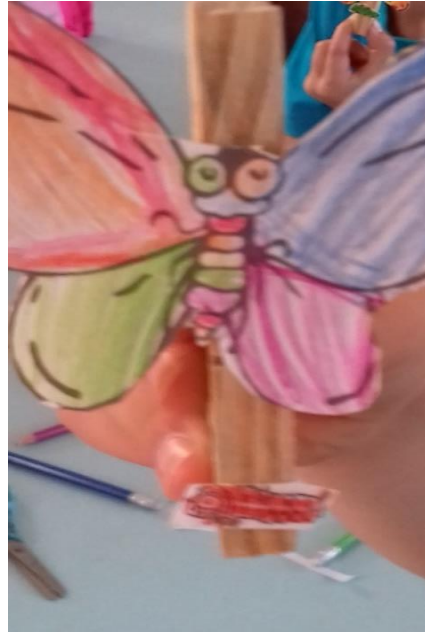
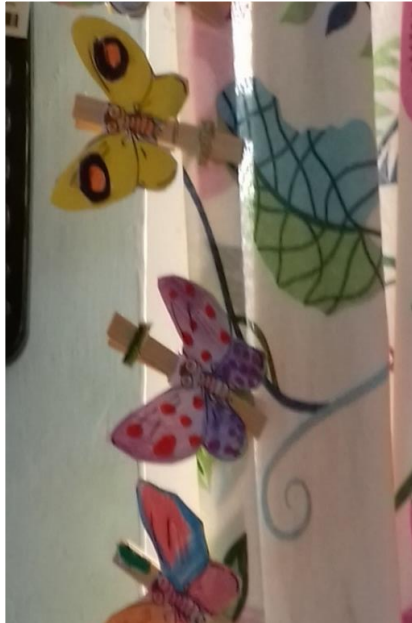


Figure 12

Personal and social development through art: This is me Activity: self- discovery



These were some of the children's comments,

Stepping in the mud: Me made out of stampers; drawing with my friends on the floor; cooking coconut balls was fun, fun, fun; a bit messy; my mum really liked them and we made some more at home; I told her how to make them; Our butterflies are beautiful because we have painted them in many colours and they can fly...ours have stopped to rest on the curtain (child giggles); I loved to play the game; the one of the monkey's on the tree was my favourite; best was when they all came crashing down!"

I then asked them more specifically if they remembered any of the tools we had talked about. Not all the children could find what to say, potentially the reason for this being that the strategies were so much part and parcel of the curriculum that no one single item could be singled out. On the other hand, some of the children did mention specific strategies that the OT/researcher had carried out in the classroom.

Hereunder are some of the things they mentioned off the top of their head and with no prompting from the researcher. Table 37 shows one of the "doing" activities that the children mentioned about the collaborative project. The unanimous feeling that was mentioned by the children (see quote above) and that had been visually evident and been noticed throughout the feedback session was the element of fun, being with friends, and belonging. These were captured by comments like "sitting by my side, helping me with my writing"; "cooking together"; and "chatting during lunch time" that the children made on what they liked about the project.

Table 44*Classroom Embedded Strategies: Quotes from Children's Feedback*

"The sitting down properly, I remember the movement; the mouth; we use our mouth to speak"

the teddy bears: Mr. Sleepy, Mr. jumpy and Mr. Frog

the one that you squash the paper...it helps your hand....become stronger

the scissors, let me show you how to hold it

the monkey game

tools for the muscles, chair push-ups

you hear with your ear; you have to listen

the skateboard, the one which I had to hold on (referring to hoola-hoop)

move your feet to help you pay attention"

the tool box, slime

you are using the muscles of your hand (a boy got up and showed the wheel barrow walk)

I remember playing with the slime

I was doing the hand presses at home...

at home I play with toys...

chair push-ups; I can push my whole body up in the air...

The teacher also explained how one child had found the self-regulation strategies useful. He and his mum had shared with the teacher that whilst on a family outing, her son was crying uncontrollably because he was remembering his grandpa, who had just passed away. "He remembered your tips the wheelbarrow and they laughed together and it helped to calm him down" (Teacher, Year 1).

The above quotes show that, in spite of being five years old, the children remembered the strategies they had been taught. This particular strategy, the wheelbarrow, is a heavy work activity, i.e. one which provides proprioceptive input and calms down the nervous system. The activity entails the child walking on its hands with an adult holding its feet at the ankles. Hence the child is the

“wheelbarrow”. Potentially, some may have found them useful, like the little boy who lost his grandpa, but another possible reason among others could be the fact that the children had enjoyed learning the skills as they were part of a classroom activity that was fun. The fact that strategies were embedded effectively into the classroom made them part and parcel of the curriculum, and as a result they may not have been specifically identified by the children.

Diary Log: 3rd April 2018

Reflection in Action

I was greeted with a warm welcome when entering the classroom. On reflection, this was because I was “Ms Nathalie”, and not “the OT”, who also sat and chatted with and listened to the children, joined in their learning and lunch time activities and also possibly did fun things with them.

Reflection on Action

Key to gaining the children’s attention and respect was my approach and attitude. I do not believe I was at any point perceived as a threat to the children. When stopping to reflect on what may have made the children so happy to see me, I believe it was how I treated them: showing them respect; understanding them; giving them choices; making them feel happy by being and doing first and foremost what I asked them to be and do.

7.6 School-based OT Intervention Versus Other Experiences of OT in Malta

The educators stated that there was no comparison between in-school support and a clinic-based therapy away from school. The reason for favouring one over the other seemed to stem from the fact that the OT was on site, and therefore responded to requests in a timely manner. More children stood to benefit, even those whose parents were not on board, meaning they were not cooperative. The fact that the “therapy came to the children rather than them going to therapy” facilitated participation, and the latter children could at least get support from the educators, compensating for the fact that their parents were not in a position to

support their children for many psycho-socio and economic reasons. The educators valued the timeliness as well as the practicalities of the intervention. They described it as “A better understanding of the struggles and difficulties faced by particular learners and immediate support and very practical on all levels”

This is not to say that the educators did not find any value in reports or information they received from therapists working in external settings, such as the national health services, but in-school support was deemed very beneficial as more students could benefit from the service and being in the school itself. The educators also felt that there was more continuity. They went on to say that they could seek advice on the spot, and the fact that they could see modelling behavior and attitude in the classroom, yard and chill-out room was crucial to this continuity.

The in class support as well as “*Having a professional sounding off and listening to your concerns*” were greatly valued. The Occupational Therapist/researcher who supported educators dealing with the multiple needs of the pupils and members of staff was often one of very few consistent supports that the educators received. Finally the support provided by the OT in the setting up and running of the Chill Out (sensory motor) room and supporting staff in its use was described as “*Invaluable*”.

Therefore, in summary, both the educators and the senior management appreciated the modelling of appropriate strategies to support the children’s participation; however, it was interesting to note that other factors not directly related to what the OT did were important for the stakeholders. These included the timeliness of the OT involvement and the continuity and “on the spot” support whereby educators had someone to sound off their ideas and concerns. A student occupational therapist who was shadowing me whilst on placement in the same school shared how she saw a different side of paediatric OT practice away from the clinic. This is a very powerful quote that provides scope for occupational therapists to reflect on the relevance of OT practice with children in schools.

It was a great experience for us to observe the children in their natural environment rather than the artificial environment of the clinic/hospital. This helps provide a deeper insight into the challenges that they might be facing since they were observed during the school-time activities in which they were required to participate in. I felt that I was valued and respected within the school since all the people that we worked with seemed to have appreciated the work that we put into the experience and at times they willingly came up to seek our help as well (Final year OT student).

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of phase two of the study that attempted to answer the research question “How can occupational therapy involvement in Maltese early years classrooms contribute to children’s participation in school occupations?” This chapter has provided insights into a yearlong study on how school-based occupational therapy in Malta has unfolded, a study that attempted to capture participant’s perceptions of how this may support children’s participation.

The next chapter will present what the data in this study appears to suggest on the way forward in a conceptual sense, which may lay the foundation for school-based occupational therapy in Malta. It will provide a detailed overview of the outcome of the implementation with my interpretation of the process providing insights into the nature of the intervention that formed the tiered model. The discussion will then follow in chapter 9.

Chapter 8:

Conceptualising School-based Occupational Therapy for Malta

This chapter will present data in support of this study's contribution to developing school-based collaborative practices in Malta. From this point onwards, the acronym SBOTTI-M (School-based Occupational Therapy Tiered Intervention for Malta), will be the term used when reference is made to the school-based occupational therapy intervention emerging from my study: presented here are some ideas that have evolved from this study as to how School-based Occupational Therapy for Malta (SBOTTI-M) may be conceived for Maltese state schools and what may be done based on the data this research study has produced.

The definition of Occupational Therapy presented in the OTPF Version 4 is expressed as the “therapeutic use of everyday life activities (occupations) with individuals or groups for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation in roles, habits, and routines in home, school, workplace, community, and other settings”. (AOTA, 2014). The data in this chapter will be grounded in occupational therapy and educational theory and practice: CMOP-E, the emergent curriculum and invitational leadership.

8.1 Key Concepts and Constructs

A concept is an idea, a plan or an intention. (Oxford Learners Dictionary n.d.). The current study found that the primary and most important concept for SBOTTI-M was adapting the environment to support the child to participate better. This included providing direct support for the child and the adult's in their occupation of teaching, adapting the physical and social environment and address institutional factors including providing support for administrators and contributing to policy development. SBOTTI- M, was a way of achieving child participation and inclusion using direct, indirect and collaborative approaches with a focus on working with the teachers, LSEs and *all* the children, in the context of the classroom and within the environment of the specific school.

The next most important key concept identified centered on building a relationship of trust and this included: respect, presence, support and reaching out, which developed and consolidated as the school year progressed. Trust led to a greater connection between myself and the educators.

The third key concept was that SBOTTI-M brought an opportunity for knowledge exchange between the educators and myself within the context of the classroom and school environment. The exchange of knowledge and my own learning about the educators' curriculum were essential for me as part of my new role as collaborator in the school. I used that knowledge to frame my own occupational therapy knowledge and practice in achievable classroom occupations.

The above came about through:

My presence and prolonged immersion in the classroom; and my participation in classroom activities, including supporting the teachers in their lesson plans;

My experimentation with embedding universal design strategies in the classroom curriculum content: this means that whilst educators taught me about the curriculum, I supported the educators in addressing the learning process by practicing with them multiple means of representing and communicating their curriculum, whilst also modelling how the children could express what they knew in multiple ways;

My learning of the early years curriculum through attending COPE⁵⁴ training sessions and informing myself through documents published by the education division, such as Inclusion Policies and Frameworks as well as other bibliography;

⁵⁴ Training Programme on the curriculum

My discussions with teachers and educators: both formal, informal, planned or unplanned in the classroom, corridors, during lunch time in formal SMT meetings;

Attendance at meetings with all senior management persons as well as meetings with individual assistant head or heads. In these dialogues I shared my knowledge on OT theory, and understood better how it could apply to the educational setting I was in;

Often trial and error with educators on different strategies and acknowledging that it was acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them as long as they adopted what worked but have had the courage to discard what did not.

All these factors contributed to knowledge translation. Concepts of relationship-building and knowledge translation were previously identified by the partnering for change model (Missiuna 2010). Table 45 gives some examples of what educators valued most in line with tiered model concepts. The knowledge exchange also involved an element of skill building, which in turn motivated educators to engage in new ways of delivering their curriculum.

Another key concept that was embedded in the data and linked in with knowledge translation, was that of power sharing. Educators would not have valued the SBOTTI-M had they being coerced or told what to do; the mutual discussion and learning made it different to other traditional professional support which they had experienced.

Therefore, I reiterate that child participation and inclusion were the ultimate goal of any intervention and SBOTTI-M was a way of achieving this indirectly through the adults working mostly on adapting the environment and not changing the child. From the feedback given by the educators, it is evident that the concept of enjoyment as a motivator for children's participation was a key outcome of SBOTTI-M. Other Examples of SBOTTI – M that emerged from the data included timeliness,

consistency and a constant presence. This meant that it was provided in time, consistently as well as the presence of the therapist was consistent. Elaborating further, Timeliness means acting in time and providing the right information and support at the right time. Consistency refers to repetition of same concepts. All the below were described as a “goldmine” by senior management and are summarized in Figure 13.

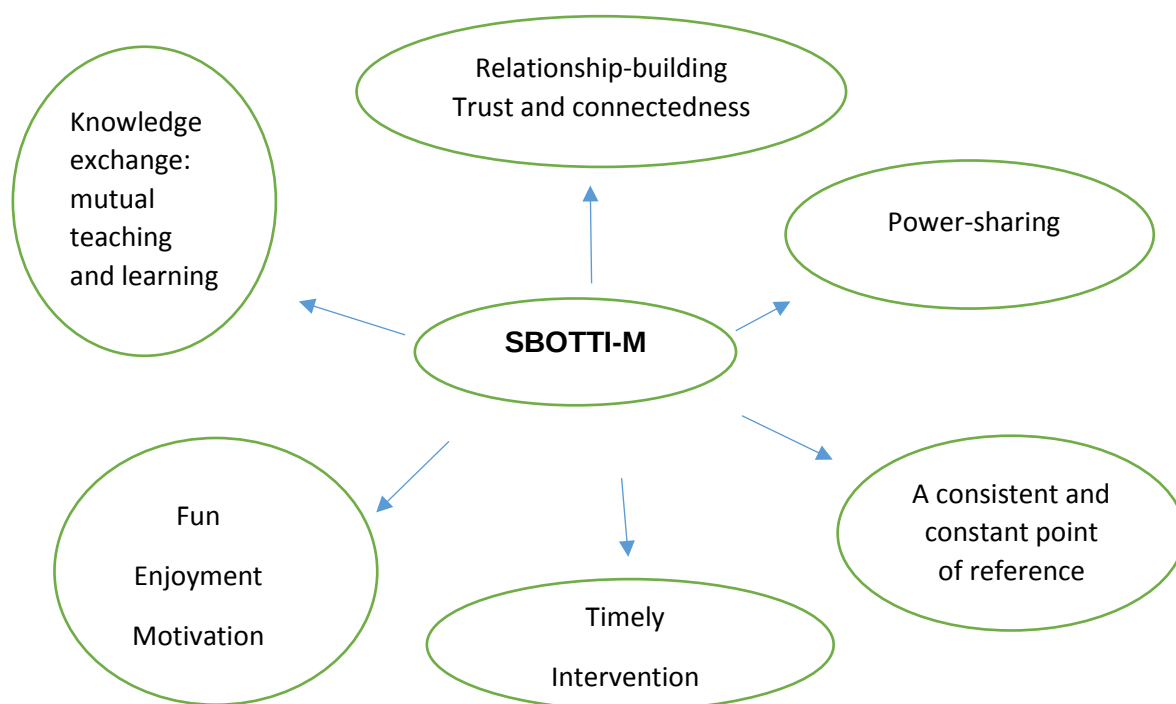
Table 45

Most valued SBOTTI- M that contributed to Children's Participation

Educators' quotes on the intervention	Occupation	Relationship-building	Knowledge Translation
“Outdoor activities”	Physical Play (Play)	Having fun together	Modelling, trial-and-error with educators
“Classroom tools and participation together in activities in the class. These had an impact particularly on attention.”	Literacy (Education)	Building bonds and trust between teachers and students	Modelling, learning new strategies and learning about self-regulation with educators
“Curriculum time as it provided an explanation of the activities and their purpose; relevant to our classroom”	Cookery Activity (education/play/ADLs)	Listening; a comfortable space to receive and give critique	Coaching, problem solving and discussion with educators
“The PD session, as it enabled me to get an idea what I can use in my literacy and numeracy lessons with the students”	Literacy and numeracy (education)	Collaboration with educators, understanding educators' perspectives	Hands-on , workshops, new ideas, activity analysis with educators
“Parental involvement/meetings/talks, such as the one on classroom chores”	Chores (Routines)	Trust	Understanding and Sharing of ideas with educators
“The chill-out room”	Playing with friends (social participation)	Fun and trust	Active learning with educators
“Being involved in any activity and being able to actually see and do it yourself, as this helped me understand the scope of the activity better”	All aspects of occupation	Understanding the nature of occupations	Hands-on learning, modelling with educators
“Novel physical activities, such as the skateboard activity was a great physical activity”	Outdoor play (play)	Team work	New ideas; learning about Sensory Integration Theory and the role of the vestibular system in learning with educators
“The Tool Box”	Literacy and numeracy (education)	Sharing, collaborating, cooperating	Resource ideas, tool-sharing with educators

Figure 13

The “Goldmine” in SBOTTI- M: Supporting Adult Educators



The constructs, now, answer the *what*, *why* and *how* questions for SBOTTI-M.

These are presented below.

8.2 Ten Key Principles in Delivering SBOTTI-M to Support Children’s

Participation

The data in this study has consistently identified some key principles that could be used as the foundation for the delivery of a school-based service in Maltese schools. It is presented hereunder. A number of key enablement skills (Townsend &, Polatajko, 2007) supported by the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance – Enablement, are embedded in these ten principles that support school-based practice. These principles derived from my study, distinguish SBOTTI-M from the traditional clinic-based OT.

Intervention should adapt to the children’s occupational challenges in context as well as be integrated into the children’s school routines. The intervention was

not directed towards the child and occupation directly but more towards the adult: supporting the child through the adult's understanding of the social and physical environment;

Collaborative intervention means that there is power-sharing on occupational issues. This may pertain to interactions between the educators themselves, educators and therapists, educators and SMT and therapists and SMT;

Knowledge exchange implies a two-way system that involves educators and therapists learning from each other: this includes problem-solving with educators to come up with the best possible strategies and solutions for a given child in his/her specific classroom, with a specific cohort of students, thus providing ongoing mutual educational opportunities. Knowledge exchange also enhanced the translation of theoretical concepts into practical strategies and was key in SBOTTI-M;

Intervention should focus on training educators in the use of techniques, such as coaching and modelling strategies with and for the benefit of the children, in the context of the classroom and school environment, using the available day-to-day resources;

Coordinating resources in the school and with the school: this included environmental design and adaptation;

Linking people: this means that the school based occupational therapist, may use advocacy to put parents and educators in touch with community resources and significant others that can support the children's occupations in school. This is done after the school based occupational therapists has understood the real needs of all stakeholders in the classroom context within the school environment...not by using a "one size fits all" approach;

A constant and consistent engagement with the Senior Management Team: This should involve an exchange of ideas and discussion with the SMT to ensure

that the educators and children within the context of the curriculum are supported for participation;

The educators involved in the “doing”: hands-on education in the classroom and school;

Supporting parents: parental involvement in the classroom and in line with the educators' way of working, e.g. communication and SMT knowledge exchange through social media; email; printed matter; audio advice; parental support embedded into the school routine (drop-off and pick up) and parents interacting and solving problems with educators and therapist in the classroom; and school yard and other school facilities. Also transmitting universal design concepts to the parents;

Cultural sensitivity: this refers to the adoption of an attitude by acknowledging the uniqueness of every classroom context and every school culture by developing the strengths of each unique setting.

Every classroom and school is in a constant state of change, and each evolves from one year to next. SBOTTI-M needs to align with the school development and school action plans to see what priority senior management have for their school. It is not about every individual therapist, but about addressing the school's plan for promoting full participation in the relevant occupations for each scholastic year.

All the above should be affected in line with the National Policy for Inclusive Education and the Learning Outcomes Framework for Malta. Table 46 depicts occupation focused and based strategies that supported Learning Outcomes (LO) and school occupation whilst Table 47 shows how performance skills were supported through SBOTTI – M in line with Learning Outcomes and Relevant Occupations. Lastly, Table 48 presents a summary of how SBOTTI-M provoked a change in children's participation. It depicts how educators prioritised their teaching objectives in line with the LO's, Occupation and Participation

Table 46

Occupation Focused and Based strategies that supported Learning Outcomes (LO) and School Occupations

Learning Outcomes	Occupations	SBOT (Malta) examples of occupation focused and occupation based strategies that supported school occupations.
Children who are effective communicators: understand that print is organised from left to right; make a variety of marks and scribbles (LO 4); control and coordination of smaller movements (LO 6.2)	(Literacy, numeracy) Pre-writing and writing activities; project work/creative activities; story-telling; rhythm and music.	Thera band tied around chair (ACC) Move-and-sit cushion (ACC) Pencil grip (ACC) Body preparation (UD) Headphones (ACC) Using a variety of writing utensils (UD) Tool Box (UD) Craft and creative work with scrap materials (UD)
<i>I regulate my behavior to ensure cooperation and good communication</i> (LO 3.3)	(ROUTINE) Routines; Morning assembly; toilet and feeding routine	Games (UD) Craft activities to make one, common themed picture (UD) Fun (heavy work) activities in chill-out room & school yard (UD) Sensory Backpack (ACC)
Children who develop appropriate physical skills; control and coordination of larger movements (LO 6.1)	(PLAY) Outdoor play; use of outdoor equipment,	Weekly distribution of Let's Move Programme (UD) Scooter board (UD) Ball games, trampoline, parachute games (UD) Sensory walk (UD) Individual activities in chill-out room (ACC) Water painting of wall (UD) Sensory walk, chalk games, water games (UD) Building with Lego bricks (UD)
Children are capable of establishing relationships with others and are socially adept (LO 3)	(Social participation and rules)	Play groups Positive behavior strategies integrated into outdoor play (UD) Social and sensory stories through play (ACC) Sensory diet (ACC)
Children who develop a sense of identity: <i>I participate in daily routines, I can complete a task independently</i> (LO 1.2) <i>I exercise self-help skills independently</i> (LO 2.3)	(ADLs) Independence in self-care, namely toileting, feeding, dressing and routines	Scissors skills to cut shapes (UD) Opening bags (UD) Cookery, handling kitchen utensils, handling raisins, sifting flour (UD) Craft activities/building with scrap materials (UD) Moving around the school independently (UD) Dressing and undressing jacket, fasteners (UD)

Table 47

Performance Skills supported through SBOTTI – M in line with Learning Outcomes and Relevant Occupations

Learning Outcome and desired child factors	Occupation	Performance skills supporting occupations through SBOTTI-M
Children who are effective communicators: understand that print is organised from left to right; make a variety of marks and scribbles (LO 4), control and coordination of smaller movements (LO 6.2)	(Education Literacy, numeracy) Pre-writing and writing activities, project work/creative activities storytelling, rhythm and music	Fine motor, praxis, seating and posture, core muscle strengthening, postural control activities, hand skills, scissor skills, body awareness, auditory sensitivity.
I regulate my behavior to ensure cooperation and good communication (LO 3.3)	(ROUTINE) Routines; morning assembly; toilet and feeding routine	Organization of behavior and self-regulation; social skills
Children who develop appropriate physical skills; Control and coordination of larger movements (LO 6.1)	(PLAY) Outdoor play; use of outdoor equipment	Gross motor coordination and bilateral integration; shoulder girdle strength; hand skills (tactile discrimination and modulation), sensory discrimination and sensory modulation
Children are capable of establishing relationships with others; children who are socially adept (LO 3)	(SOCIAL PARTICIPATION) Participation, friendship and rules	Sensory processing and sensory integration; sensory modulation; self-regulation
Children who develop a sense of identity: I participate in daily routines, I can complete a task independently. (LO 1.2) I exercise self - help skills independently (LO 2.3).	(ADLs) Independence in self-care, namely toileting, feeding, dressing and routines .	Hand strength and tripod grasp; bilateral integration and hand dominance; skill side of the hand; manipulation of small objects, like beads; bilateral skills; sensory discrimination; spatial awareness and orientation

Table 48

Participation Outcomes in Children's following SBOTTI-M in line with LO⁵⁵'s and Occupation.

LO	Curricular Learning Outcomes	Educators' priority for collaborating with OT	Occupation	Participation
3.1	Children who are socially adept: children who regulate their behavior to ensure good cooperation and communication	Addressing challenging behavior and self-regulation	Social participation, socialization, play, literacy and numeracy	Children were able to use self-regulation to attend better to classroom instruction and get along with peers
6.1 6.2	Children who develop appropriate physical skills	Identifying delays and developing physical skills	Play Play, literacy, numeracy, self – care	Children engaged in group games during break, such as ball games, and participate more fully in general PE lesson
4.2	Children who are effective communicators. Children who develop control and coordination of smaller movements	To be knowledgeable about skills that support children's posture and handwriting	Education Handwriting, literacy and numeracy, PE,	Children engaged in classroom physical activities and movement opportunities to support their learning
1.2	Children who develop a sense of independence, become responsible and resilient in the face of challenges	To support activity choice and analysis	Play and ADLs play, self-care, chores	Children were supported to engage in activities that were tailor made to their needs during any class or school activity.
5.1	Children who develop a range of cognitive skills...sorting, comparing, sequencing	Identifying delays and developing cognitive skills	Education Literacy, numeracy	Children were supported to engage in project-based learning by being provided with necessary sensory motor supports
2.2	Children will gain confidence in themselves and their achievements	Inclusion and participation	Routines	Children had an inner drive and motivation to succeed

8.3 Educators' Recommendations for Collaborating with Occupational Therapists to Support Children's Participation

Relevant support staff also gave their views on how the occupational therapist could support their work in schools. Knowledge of structure, content and process of the early year's curriculum is needed if occupational therapists are to work effectively in schools. This is what support staff collectively stated. They also perceived that the occupational Therapist's presence at IEP meetings was

⁵⁵ <https://www.schoollearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/subjects/early-years>

“*essential*”, together with support to the LSEs and children with a statement throughout the year. The priorities mentioned by the educators were also endorsed by the RSS, who summed up what type of support they wanted through SBOTTI-M. These may be summarized as follows and are also in line with some of the enablement skills (CMOP-E), addressing concepts of knowledge, translation and capacity building:

- weekly collaboration on site with the occupational therapist: in school, classroom, class visits and class sessions;
- hands-on approach in school (including modelling in class with the children; with educators *in situ*;
- regular (eg.bi-monthly) two-way communication through emails;
- Professional development sessions to discuss how best to support the children’s participation (e.g.: RSS can acquire different techniques that they can learn, use and share);
- Developing and sharing resources for school, and collaboratively organizing workshops for parents.

Table 49 depicts what the educators valued from SBOTTI-M and hence what they desire in the long term, from Occupational Therapy involvement and, subsequently, the “hats” occupational therapists need to wear to collaborate with and support educators.

Table 49

Recommendations for OT involvement through SBOTTI-M: Educators' Quotes from their experience of SBOTTI-M

Occupational Therapy (OT) was child-centred, therefore conducive to the idea of emergent learning. Children were directly involved in learning activities and were active participants in the choice of topics.

Consistent OT involvement in the Early Years supported curricular work in Maltese schools. For example, educators were supported in using kinaesthetic learning methods that were incorporated into the curriculum to support learning outcomes.

Occupational Therapy supported teachers in enabling children to achieve age-appropriate skills corresponding to the learning outcomes. These helped to strengthen the children's physical and social skills, promoting the function and engagement of children in school routines, such as work and play.

Occupational Therapy provided immediate and direct intervention for struggling students in general education, and mutual learning from each other through joined sessions took place.

Occupational Therapy acted as a human resource as well as engage in exchange of ideas on material resources for both educators and parents.

Occupational Therapy supported educators' awareness on posture, ergonomics, the role of movement in the classroom, identification and education on sensory processing abilities and supported children's development of gross and fine motor skills.

The parents provided feedback as well on what they valued most from the SBOTTI-M, as depicted in the previous chapter, and can be summed up into three main areas:

- In-context hands-on experiential sessions, i.e. learning with their children in the classroom;
- Availability, encouragement and support through brief encounters at the start or end of the school day;
- Talks for parents that provided ideas on ways to support their children's learning; contact and support through email and social media.

8.4 The Role of the Occupational Therapist in Support of Children's Participation

Figure 14 depicts views of the educators from their experience of SBOTTI- M on how occupational therapists can support children's participation.

Figure 14

The Different "hats" school-based OTs need to wear



These are in line with the ten principles of client- centered enablement already outline previously in this chapter. They are now explained by practical examples as they emerged in the case study data. All the roles were identified as supportive of collaborative work whereby educators and the occupational therapist cooperated to come up with solutions to children's occupational challenges in the classroom.

1. Consult: an ongoing exchange of views and ideas with kindergarten educators, teachers, LSEs, senior management personnel and relevant support staff;
2. Design/Build: how, why and from where educators could have access to information, materials, resources to support their children's participation;
3. Coach and model: educators were supported to work with specific kids through coaching and mode with demonstrations and hands-on techniques and strategies, and their learning was supported though discussion, questioning and

probing within the classroom context. Moreover, supporting them to find solutions to the problems that worked for them, rather than giving them the solution;

4. Empower: encouragement and positive feedback. Giving positive feedback to and reinforcing the educators about their personal qualities as well as their strengths and how these supported their work with the children. “You can do it”; “You are on the right track”; “That activity was great”; “You are so talented!”;
5. Confide: Listening to the personal and professional stories and supporting educators in living through them. This was achieved by developing a relationship of trust, through regular contact with the educator;
6. Adapt: the occupational therapist listened to the various educators’ perspectives and stories, and attempted to reframe their perceptions to allow positive attitudes to propagate whilst not undermining their own perceptions;
7. Advocate: go between teacher and SMT: the occupational therapist supported the educators by relaying their concerns to the SMT when the former were hesitant or afraid that they might be misunderstood as well as the transfer of information from educator to SMT and vice versa;
8. Educate: source of knowledge and evidence-based practice using knowledge of OS to support the curriculum. Providing ideas and explaining the reason behind specific activities motivated educators to use them more. Activity analysis helped educators identify the purpose of activities they may have perceived as futile. Translating of theoretical knowledge into practical strategies enabled educators to understand the “why” behind children’s needs in support of participation;

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented how school-based occupational therapy may be presented in the Maltese context through the various stakeholders’ views and their engagement in this study. The data from this study could constitute a preliminary plan for how to take school based occupational therapy in Malta forward with further refinement. The discussion chapter that follows will provide a critique of the results

against a backdrop of existing literature, together with new knowledge claims and the limitations of the study are presented in the penultimate chapter. The thesis comes to an end with a final concluding chapter that includes my personal reflection on the research process.

Chapter 9 – Discussion

This chapter will examine my findings in the light of existing literature in this field of study. Theoretical and methodological insights will be interwoven into the discussion as well as recommendations and lessons learned. The unique contribution of SBOTTI-M to children's participation in school occupations in line with Maltese inclusive education policies and practice frameworks will be found in this chapter, alongside the novel contribution this study has made to the body of knowledge.

9.1 Overview of this Chapter

The discussion will start by looking at childhood occupations in early-years classrooms, and highlight what has shaped the transactions between educators, parents and the children themselves. A discussion on how adult educators' occupations influenced the children's participation and the enablers and barriers to participation in school occupations will then follow. This will take place in the light of the Maltese context in comparison to international literature. Subsequently, the role of the school environment and the significance of adult participation in supporting or hindering children's participation will be discussed.

This discussion will be interwoven with insights and recommendations in the light of current existing literature. Insights on the tiered approach for Malta and a way forward to support children's participation in Maltese schools, with a focus on collaborative consultation, will be presented. SBOTTI-M will then be revisited in line with Malta's Inclusion Policy and Framework for Inclusive Education, expanding on how it may contribute to participation and inclusion.

The centrality of knowledge translation in supporting professional development as well as professional identity (which includes a debate about the importance of stakeholders, such as senior management teams and educators, in establishing school-based services) will be looked into. The chapter also delves into

how the professional and personal development of occupational therapists and educators can support children's participation in early years education.

Lastly, implications for practice at macro levels, namely how intervention beyond the school is about breaking barriers to bring about change, will be the penultimate debate. The chapter ends with some suggestions on how occupational therapy curricula may be designed to prepare entry level therapists for School-Based Occupational Therapy. The proposal of a way forward for SBOTTI-M in line with an inclusive philosophy through a school-centred practice for Malta's early years will be made.

9.2 Conceptualising Children's Participation in the Maltese School Context

At the start of the study I set out to answer the following research questions. What are the occupations that children in Maltese early-years classrooms are participating in? What are the enablers and barriers to children's participation in school occupations in Maltese early-years classrooms? How can occupational therapy involvement in early years classrooms contribute to children's participation in school occupations? The ultimate aim of these questions was to set a baseline for developing SBOTTI-M with an occupation-centred philosophy, and to gain a deeper understanding of how occupational therapy involvement in Maltese early years classrooms can contribute to children's participation in their school occupations.

Participation was a core concept for this study, defined as "Involvement in life situations" (WHO, 2007). In this case, participating in school was the "life situation" being studied. The consideration of activity and participation for children's health and wellbeing was another integral part of my study, which was also grounded in OS. For this reason, importance was given to the nature, form, function and meaning of children's occupations supported by my conceptual framework, which rests on three main pillars. These were Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework that considered the complex interactions between the children, their educators and parents in the

school context; the social model of disability; and an occupational model of enablement and engagement (CMOP-E).

Attributes of participation have already been discussed in Chapter 1. These are involvement and engagement; choice; and working toward personal and meaningful goals. These characteristics - choice of activity and carrying it out with others - were essential to involvement and were supported by the data in my study. Aspects of participation defined as “being” and as “doing” were also evidenced specifically by the data from the children’s focus group. This emerged clearly in Chapter 5. The educators also said that SBOTTI-M was supportive of their initiatives to motivate the children to participate, as we saw in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7: the consistent presence of the OT; active involvement in the classroom; the mutual learning. My data overall showed that participation was more about the teachers: their attitudes; knowledge; motivation and connectedness to the children; the environment; and the interaction between these components that contributed to participation (Imms et al., 2016). Hence, the social environment was identified as key in my study. Although this finding is similar to findings emerging from the literature around adults’ views on the participation of young children in school (Anaby et al., 2013; Di Marino et al., 2018), young children have not been given much of a voice as to how they should be spending their time in school, and in this respect my study provides supporting evidence.

This study, centred on the hypothesis that the needs in terms of occupational therapy intervention were likely to be different for the different year groups. The findings seem to suggest that the needs of 4-year old children in Kindergarten and 5-year old children in Year 1 classrooms were very similar. The 5-year olds in Year 1, although perceived to be older and ready for more formal instruction, still wanted more physical play, enjoyed movement and creative activities, and they still required a supportive class team. Cardona (2011) stated that “The role of education in our life tends to be limited to academic learning” (p. 2) This may still be somewhat true. The

data from this study shows that educators perceived the need to address the more academic aspects of the curriculum, and at times, were not content with the extent of academic content in it. For this reason, the OT intervention in Year 1 was unique in that it supported the educators in delivering their “academic” curriculum whilst still addressing the basic foundation skills for learning. The challenge for the Year 1 teachers ranged from the physical space and layout of the classroom to the curricular demands. SBOTTI-M may have contributed to the discussion on the curriculum with educators and supported the implementation of learning objectives in keeping with participation and inclusion.

This study was situated within an inclusive education setting. In their initial report for Malta on the Implementation of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2018), CRPD, whilst acknowledging the progress made in the Maltese education sector, state that “various system factors result in schools being only partially enabled to effectively implement inclusive education” (United Nations 2018, Article 24 ,p.23). Although my own experience has shown me that many schools do their utmost to be inclusive, some schools are more successful than others. This relates to the attitudes and ethos of the school leadership and their own belief and passion for inclusive education; but inclusion is also informed by the level and quality of support provided by the establishment. Borg (2020), a Maltese academic and educational authority, posted strong words on social media in support of inclusion:

Inclusive education is not an option. It is the way forward. No country can afford to waste its children through a one size fits all system that ignores difference and diversity. It is opportune to remind all that access to quality education is a basic human right for all (Borg, 2020, FB post, 1stDec 2020).

Amongst other recommendations, the CRPD initial report (United Nations, 2018) includes a mention of the need for more resources to be provided to schools, and specifically mentions “occupational therapists in multi-sensory rooms” (p. 24). Whilst this is positive in the recognition of the need for occupational therapy in

schools, this statement shows that there is little understanding of how SBOT needs to be framed. Whilst such a resource may be supportive of children's needs, if it is not applied in unison with other facets of the children's education, it will not make the system more inclusive. Inclusion starts with moving the focus away from impairment to the discovery of children's potential and motivation to participate (Salamanca Statement, 1994). By finding out what each child can do and providing the key ingredients relevant to the Maltese context, children's participation and inclusion will be propagated.

As Psaila (2017) states: "Besides acknowledging the children's expertise and creating environments conducive to listening, we must be open to thinking outside the box" (p.184). Education is after all, as Cardona (2011) stated earlier, "a means to ensure that every person is valued and supported in society" (p.36), and one that promotes cooperation. Inclusive education is about determining what one needs to do to adapt the school setting so as to enable educators to meet the needs of their students. Callus (2020), in an interview with Inclusion Europe (n.d), stated that rather than questioning whether inclusion is possible, we should focus on how to make it possible.

I believe that SBOTTI-M has the potential to support Malta's schools system in being more inclusive, especially through the capacity building of the educators. I cannot but agree with Bartolo (2010) and Soresi (2017) that one of the most important dimensions to inclusive practices is the educators' own attitudes. The request by Maltese educators for practical strategies on how to support inclusive practices has been documented a decade ago and is still relevant today (Bartolo, 2010). The usefulness of such practical strategies implemented collaboratively between the occupational therapist and educators were documented in my results and form part of SBOTTI-M.

In my opinion, inclusion cannot occur without participation and vice versa. In an interview with Tanti Burlo (2017), Soresi (2017) shares that inclusive scenarios are possible with capacity building and “co-construction of new knowledge” (p. 166) and if there is engagement of all parties concerned: parents, children and educators. This point has been raised again with urgency by experts in education, more recently in the light of a call for a reform in Malta’s education system following poor outcomes in exams at the end of the compulsory school period. Recommendations made by Cefai, an academic and expert in the field of education (Calleja, 2021) included “engaging students interest and active participation from an early age by focusing on training teachers adequately to use relational, student-centred and participatory approaches” with a focus on “mutual respectful relationships” (Cefai, 2021, p. 12) This is in line with SBOTTI-M, which can contribute towards this philosophy.

Summing up some main aspects of participation significant to the Maltese context, and which have emerged as key factors in SBOTTI-M, are, from an adult perspective, educators and occupational therapists’ attitudes towards collaborating in school settings, including their own knowledge. The importance of choice in their school day; children being with others and taking part with someone; active participation and engagement of educators; parents and children; and adapting the school environment were also findings that emerged, from a children’s perspective, in the review of literature on young children’s participation. Social environmental enablers; knowledgeable educators; and engagement between pupils and educators (Almqvist, 2006) were also significant findings of my study, which contribute to children’s participation.

9.3 Insights into Children’s School Occupations

The data from this study shows that children valued occupations that involved both doing and being, confirming what they liked and disliked about school.

Loris Malaguzzi (1993), one of the founders of the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education, which is based on emergent theories, stated that what children learn is in large part due to the children's own doing, and is a consequence of their activities and resources. The current study found that Maltese children's occupations were very similar to those of other children worldwide. In the local context, these included similar ones to those cited in the literature. Children voiced the want of more Play (Bart *et al.*, 2011; Fahy *et al.*, 2020; Law *et al.*, 2006a; LaVesser & Berg 2010; Lynch, 2009) and a fully equipped playground (Bart *et al.*, 2011; Mancini & Coster, 2004; Prellwitz & Skar, 2016) but they also wanted to be with friends (Lowe & Chapparo, 2010; Solish *et al.*, 2010; Ziviani & Muhlenhaupt, 2009). Social participation (Rosenberg *et al.*, 2011; Tsao *et al.*, 2008) was an important occupation voiced by both educators and the children whilst educators and parents primarily highlighted the importance of academic related activities as important school occupations (Jarus *et al.*, 2011; Ziviani & Muhlenhaupt., 2009; Imms, 2008; Egilson & Traustadotir, 2009); Routines in the Maltese context (McNamara & Humphrey, 2008) were named as important occupations.

The results of my study show that engaging children in occupations with the involvement of friends was key to the children's enjoyment. This notion of enjoyment and involvement was reflected in other literature sources and considered important for participation (Bart *et al.*, 2011; Chiarello *et al.*, 2012; Hoogsteen & Woodgate, 2010; Rosenberg & Bart, 2016). Lack of friendships, or a breakdown of them, was a stumbling block to children's participation in this study. Children wanted to belong and be accepted by their peers as well as the adults teaching them. This sense of relatedness and connection to others is described by Deci and Ryan (1985). They proposed that self-actualisation comes from the need and ability to fulfil three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence. In my study, these translated into a scope for choice, connection to others and "doing" things, that is, engaging in diverse activities and goals.

Choice, autonomy and competence shall now be expanded briefly in relation to my study. Choice is fundamental to client centredness. Choice in doing to achieve a specific goal may be lacking in early years classrooms in Malta, leading to decreased motivation, participation and “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). An interesting point of note is that in the literature, choice was only mentioned in the context of play and recess. In a study by Eriksson et al. (2007), the pupils received support during structured activities, but not in unstructured ones, such as break time. In other words, teachers and support assistants were supporting children that were less engaged in class, but not in break time. This may indicate that educators are placing greater value on in-class instruction, and less value in facilitating children’s participation at break time. Support at break time is important for children’s enjoyment. The concept of choice is important in occupational engagement and relates to the notion of flow. I believe that concepts of occupational engagement apply for educators, students as well as therapists. All three categories require a need to experience flow in order to stay motivated in doing and being part of any school activity and system.

This makes one reflect on the fact that possibly the only context in the school in which children have some form of choice is when they are in the playground, and it is for this reason that in my study they requested playground-based activities and looked forward to the break so much. Modelling and coaching through collaborative onsite learning experiences supported competence. Doing the activity and the experience of involvement (Hoogsteen & Woodgate, 2010) were important for the children. All the above points to one very important conclusion: the relationships built between the children themselves and those between the children and their educators ultimately supported an emotional connection and a secure attachment (O’Toole et al., 2014).

A significant finding in my study was that educators, children and parents all named play as a valuable occupation (see Figure 8 p.174). Yet both educators and

children expressed the desire for more play in the school day. They also almost unanimously referred to physical activity and the want of more of it in their school day. The changing nature of childhood occupations raises concern because of a decline in physical activity. Children tend to want to participate more in physical activity if it is fun and if the skills required by that activity are at par with the child's abilities (Ziviani et al., 2006a, 2006b).

My observations supported the educators' views that outdoor play was very limited, and when it did happen the available setting provided little in the way of structure, adult guidance and resources for the children. The educators agreed on the lack thereof and, at the same time, of their need of more physical activities in their school day. The lack of bodily activity and movement may be the product of a curriculum delivered in a way that has children sitting for a long time. Therefore, SBOTTI-M did centre around supporting educators and collaborating with them in adapting the delivery of certain curricular work, developing more opportunities for physical and outdoor play relevant to the school context, and making the children's occupational repertoires relevant to the context in which they "live" (Pontes et al., 2018).

Specific learning goals and objectives can be achieved through a play-based curriculum in which children are active participants (Argabrite, Grove & Davis, 2010). This means they learn through exploration and experimentation and have the opportunity to initiate rather than just be passive recipients of information. The educators in a play-based curriculum are also active and engaged like the children, providing support and scaffolding the children's learning through prompting and providing novel challenges as the play evolves, depending on the individual child (Biermeier, 2015). This ties in neatly with universal design for learning. A play-based curriculum supports curricular flexibility in line with universal design, as it provides diverse modes for students to acquire information; it also allows them to express

their knowledge differently. Moreover, a play-based curriculum offers ample opportunity for better engagement of students in the learning cycle.

The educators did not identify chores specifically as classroom occupations in this study, but they subtly implied that they were significant. My own observations led me to understand that although involving children in classroom chores was not a curricular goal, educators, unintentionally and with no pedagogical aim, still did so. The reason for them involving children in such chores could be that although the aim of schooling in Malta is still perceived to be mostly associated with the academic acquisition of knowledge, the educators realised that such chores were significant childhood occupations. According to D'Entremont et al. (2017), chores prepare children for later productivity and paid employment. Data from a literature search of D'Entremont and his colleagues' work shows that chores enable a child to gain "habits of industry and responsibility". In her interview, one parent actually mentioned chores, specifically "clean up" after play, but mention of routines that centred around "work", such as classroom chores, was not significantly recorded neither in my research diary nor the interview data. Rest and sleep were never mentioned neither by the parents nor the educators as significant occupations. My involvement with the educators in this study gave me the opportunity to discuss the importance of such chores with them as well as with the caregivers resulting in their integration into the classroom routine. This study has elicited more thought and discussion around the concept of including chores in children's school life. More debate needs to take place as I believe it may contribute significantly to children's participation. This was one example of how SBOTTI-M engaged educators in thinking beyond the usual traditional educational goals. To end this section I will now sum up other positive outcomes of SBOTTI-M.

Children's occupations in schools can be supported by acknowledging and applying the key principles of OS, educational pedagogy of emergent learning and a play-based curriculum, as well as universal design. These all come together to

support the children's participation in early years classrooms. All these form an integral part of SBOTTI-M: knowledge exchange and translation: relationship-building; novelty, choice and flexibility in child-led activities; active participation supported by coaching and modelling; and a balanced routine. A discussion around the need for SBOT to be more centred around educational pedagogy, in this case the emergent curriculum, will be taken up later on in this chapter.

SBOTTI-M integrated child-centred play with curriculum goals relating to behaviour, socialisation, literacy and numeracy, and these goals were achieved through the implementation of activities that were rooted in play. This was especially true of the outdoor activities carried out using different types of equipment. My study findings show that the children were very excited and looked forward so much to using the scooter board, trampoline, skipping rope and other resources that engaged them physically. Moreover, they were not only learning to control their bodies on the equipment and developing spatial orientation, but the activities also gave them more confidence and control, were intrinsically motivating and a great deal of fun. This can be explained by the fact that outdoor play is a hedonic activity that offers fresh positive experiences that excite the senses (Huta & Ryan, 2009). This was a novel approach for the educators and the school. The novelty lay in my collaboration with the teacher to change the environment for the delivery of some of the curriculum. This involved using the outdoors as the environment for learning so that it created more diverse options and learning opportunities, apart from the traditional sit-and-listen classroom approach. An activity would be repeated if it was positively reinforcing. Movement stimulates the vestibular system, which has a positive effect on self-regulation, altering one's level of arousal and eliciting more verbal communication from children (Smith Roley et al., 2001). Taking this as one example of developing skills through play, the overall message conveyed by both educators and children is their desire for a more play-based curriculum. Playing is fun and a primary occupation in early childhood, and it increases children's

motivation to be involved. This innate sense of fun, together with the appropriate challenges provided by the play opportunity, enables every child to develop and learn. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

9.4 Occupational Balance in Schools: Is it happening?

Backman (2004, p. 208) defines occupational balance as “a relative state, recognisable by a happy or pleasant integration of life activities and demands”. This research has provided new insights into the distribution and practice of different school occupations and how varied classroom occupations were in the school day. For example: how much time did children spend doing literacy and numeracy work when compared to the time they spent in a physical education class, lunch time routine or social interaction? The data from my study showed that children expressed no dislike towards any aspects of the routine. What they did not like was the extent to which some occupations were carried out, which in turn led to dissatisfaction. This brings us to the notion of occupational balance, or the lack of it.

Occupational balance can be achieved by taking part in everyday occupations, or in activities that do not overwhelm an individual, but which result in feelings of satisfaction, achievement and positivity. It is a way of being (Backman, 2004). In order for children to experience well-being and health and to develop optimally, they need to engage in a balance of occupations (Bazyk et al., 2009). Cara and McRae (2012) elaborate on concepts of occupational rights in the school setting, and document how occupational imbalance deprives children of engaging in non-academic occupations that support their integration and participation in society. In agreement with this, Townsend and Polatajko (2013) state that occupation organises time and brings structure to living. From my perspective, carrying out this study and being in the school for almost a full year have led me to experience this reality.

One may ask: how is OS relevant to the elementary classroom? My reflections here are that when looking at children's school occupations and

participation, occupational therapists can engage in knowledge exchange with educators on how OS theory has potential to support the curriculum and educational pedagogy. Such a conversation may lead to a more balanced “diet” of occupations in the school day, which has the potential to lead to happiness and wellbeing in young children in school. The need for all stakeholders to understand the nature, form, function and meaning of children’s occupations in the school environment is essential to understand and promote participation. Backman’s (2004) understanding of occupational balance as “a way of being” is in line with key concepts of participation (Hoogsten & Woodgate, 2010) mentioned earlier in this chapter and those that this study has identified for Malta. I cannot agree more with Backman, who states that occupational balance is about the participation in a balance of activities that provide satisfaction and a “happy and pleasant integration” and restoration.

Routines are also about finding balance. The findings of this study have also confirmed what others have said regarding the importance of rules and routines: routines are positive as they promote a sense of security for young children, together with a sense of organisation and belonging (McNamara & Humphry, 2008). Yerxa (2002) resonates similar views: habits relate to personal meaning, identity, competence, satisfaction and self-expression. The educators in my study have supported the notion that children’s occupations in early years classrooms are governed by routines and rituals. Both these were considered important by Maltese educators. Routines are the day to day events or habits that form patterns in our lives (Clark et al., 2007). McNamara and Humphry (2008) and Rogoff (2003), share similar views. If children are guided to participate in daily activities and repeated routines, not only do they develop a sense of mastery of these activities, but also ways of thinking and behaving in line with the rules of the community they live in, in this case the school community.

The importance of routines and rules is significant even in the Maltese context, and this study continues to reinforce the notion that, irrespective of changes in the curriculum rules, routines need to be followed. My observations of the daily occupations of the children in this study, together with the interview data from the educators, involved observation of a number of routines that included self-care; early morning greeting; lunch time; toileting; undressing jacket on arrival at school and dressing jacket before leaving time; assembly, as well as a consistent daily timetable delineating the time of specific lessons, mostly for the five year olds. Occupational therapy theory and models of practice support the importance of rules, routines, habits and volition, and frame therapeutic intervention around these constructs (Law et al., 2002).

The outcomes of my study also portray another facet, and a somewhat unique perspective, of rules and routines in the Maltese classroom. If too rigidly applied, these may impede spontaneity. While Maltese kindergarten classes housing four-year-old children have more of an informal setting, Year 1 classes (five-year-olds) share a more structured routine, with the expectation that children should sit, listen, be attentive and cooperate with the teacher's requests for longer hours. Thus, the focus on participation and interaction in kindergarten shifts to a focus on more academic learning (Hannikainen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). This shift may be somewhat necessary to prepare children for more formal learning, but one may pose questions: Is there too much control that is stifling children's autonomy and participation? Are children being allowed enough freedom for growth? Are educators and parents keeping children too safe?

Tranter and Pawson (2001) have entertained the notion of excessive safety in their literature. Are children being exposed to just the right amount of challenge that is advocated for consistency in occupational therapy theory and practice? (Bundy & Lane, 2019). This "just right" challenge was often addressed in SBOTTI-M,

and educators were supported to provide challenges that enabled the children to develop skills and be more active participants.

Given that the importance of routines may be undermined and set aside in the name of child-centred arguments, this is an important debate, especially in the light of the new emergent curriculum that has been introduced in Malta. The emergent curriculum embraces a philosophy of teaching that is responsive to the children's interests in order to create meaningful learning experiences which allow for more exploration. Always keeping the child at the centre, the philosophy gives priority to active participation; relationship building; flexible and adaptable methods; and inquiry and play-based learning. This is the philosophy adopted by the Reggio Emilia Approach (Malaguzzi, 1996), and it is the foundation of an emergent curriculum. Hence, there is less control from the adult in such a curriculum while more choice and control is given to the child. This leads to greater satisfaction stemming from active participation, choice and child-led activities, which can be part of the daily routine.

In a school system like that in Malta, which is fully inclusive and houses large numbers of children that need rules and routines to thrive, the omission of such structures would undermine those children's participation in school occupations. On the other hand, a lack of flexibility within a routine will deprive children of the much needed playful experiences, and will limit their choice and autonomy as young learners. The findings in my study, therefore, further support the idea that school occupations need to provide routine, but at the same time each routine needs to be flexible and novel. Hedonic and eudemonic elements are important not only because they ensure novelty for learners, but also because they put a focus on wellbeing and connection with adults, while they also provide an opportunity to develop competence, ultimately addressing the learning outcomes within the curriculum.

Finally, my study has explored and provided data on another very important issue, one that is a relatively new subject of study in Maltese schools: the idea and importance of the notion of happiness - the children's happiness when engaged in what they perceive as fun activities. The pupils' perception as to how happy a teacher made them feel was present in the data. The findings are in agreement with the outcomes of other studies (Moore & Lynch, 2017) that explored and identified happiness as an important component of engagement and participation, making the findings more about relationship-building and connection as the basis for the important concept of belonging. The findings of Moore and Lynch, (2018) identified how play, place and people contributed to happiness. The data from the children's focus group in my study showed how teachers were central to the children's happiness, sense of safety and belonging, as were the play activities that came about through SBOTTI-M.

Gray and Ryan (2016) clearly discard academic benefits that many kindergarten classes seem to boast, while at the same time advocating for play-based kindergartens that promote children's happiness and wellbeing. SBOTTI-M has the potential to support learning through a playful approach, enhancing core concepts of physical play; activity; fun; happiness; enhanced wellbeing; novelty; choice; and control within the classroom routine.

In a study that explored different pathways to children's enjoyment, the latter was more associated with psycho-social functioning, such as emotional strength or difficulty, and so, well-being (Rosenberg & Bart, 2016). Children's well-being and participation are enhanced if they are having fun. Fun leads to happiness and is often dependent on the activities chosen or facilitated by the adult educator, as was found in this study.

9.5 Educators' Wellbeing and Knowledge - Central to Children's Participation in School Occupations

The way Maltese educators perceived their own occupation of teaching appears to have had a major influence on the children's participation. This could be seen in how they forged relationships, established boundaries and became equipped with the right knowledge and skills that motivated them to work in class and the school. The findings of my study show that the way the adult educators carried out their occupations influenced the children's participation: their attitude and flexibility as well as how much choice and freedom the children were allowed, in other words, how the adults facilitated the children's occupations. This was evident in the data from the parents who described "a good class" as one in which the teacher's attitude was positive; the children's focus group also showed children's desire to be with their teacher. My own observations document this reciprocal relationship as contributing towards better motivation and participation. Ziviani et al., (2012) speak about motivation as being key to the practice of any professional, especially ones working in "messy" areas, such as a school, and it can determine the success or failure of the pupil to participate. The findings of my study show that the whole process of SBOTTI-M, including the way the teachers collaborated in the project, impacted the children's level of enjoyment and participation.

Another important debate: that of the teachers' wellbeing . If teachers have good physical and mental health then their students are more likely to have a positive experience of schooling (McCarthy, 2011). My own belief is that teachers bring themselves: their personality, their skills, their whole selves to the classroom and that impacts the child's participation. As Sergiovanni, (2005) states, "Teachers are best able to serve students when they themselves have been adequately served" (p.101).

It follows that taking care of educators - developing their competence; their sense of security; their wellbeing; and their overall resilience - is of utmost importance as this will impact on the children's level of enjoyment and participation. SBOTTI-M addressed teachers' wellbeing through the use of a number of strategies that constituted the Tier 1 whole-class support, which included discussions around new knowledge; action oriented intervention; and coaching and modelling in a classroom context. The educators' views in my study echoed McCarthy's (2011) views. This was novel in that the Maltese school system to date has placed greater emphasis on Tier 3 students, those with a statement of needs. Support to the class teacher for the whole cohort of students and those at risk is mostly lacking. The notion of knowledge translation and empowering educators to support all the children in class merits more attention, as it has the potential to subsequently support all students but above all, it can provide the teachers with tools to remain motivated and increase their resilience to perform their day to day roles and routines.

The above notion of caring for teachers also applies to senior management and LSEs. The busy schedule of the educators cropped up in the data and all concurred that it represents a threat of burnout in the same way that disinterest does. Unless educators are supported with the best practices and collaboration with the therapist, the chances that they will be reproduced are slim. Therefore, the ideal scenario is "motivated educators who are keen to learn, even if they do not have large amounts of expertise" (Teacher Year 1). The biggest challenge is a matter of attitude: there could be a situation where the workforce lacks motivation and they have very little expertise and/or experience, as shared by a senior management team member, Mr. Dario, who said that "Some LSEs have no clue what to do with the kids but at least they are motivated; others have no motivation at all and the wrong attitude."

Striking a balance is hard, but the ultimate solution may lie in how such professionals are trained. Knowledge exchange in SBOTTI-M supported play activities and play-based learning, for example, numeracy through movement and craft projects, socialisation and team work through physical activities, like the scooter board games. An important point emerges here: knowledge or training in play-based learning or a play-based curriculum is important and should be a prerequisite for all educators, both teachers and Learning Support Educators, working with early years students. Such training needs to include onsite, embedded and active classroom teaching similar to that of SBOTTI-M, rather than mere knowledge of the curriculum presented in a classroom.

The perspectives namely collaborative working, with the school as the client, brought about by SBOTTI-M influenced both the child's and the adult's occupations. Glennon (2011, gives an interesting perspective in explaining how the teacher may be perceived as an OT client. The value of the therapeutic relationship with their clients that occupational therapists believe in can be applied to the therapist-teacher relationship. More than 80% of therapists in a study by Taylor et al. (2009) rated therapeutic use of self as the most important determinant of therapy outcomes in the school context. The data in my study also showed the importance of the development of a similar therapeutic relationship between the educator and the child. This therapeutic relationship in my study consisted of a positive attitude, flexibility, minimal expectations and human connection between the therapist, educators and children. These appear to have supported the educators' occupations in some way, as data in the previous chapter revealed. The data presented in Chapter Eight shows that a lot of occupational domains were supported by SBOTTI-M, with my study contributing to the understanding of ways to enhance the quality of each occupation.

Educators in my study were supported in ways that enhanced such occupations, and consequently this enabled the pupils to participate more gainfully

in them. This was done through the use of the collaborative strategies, in which my understanding of the school curriculum and the educators' understanding of occupational therapy theory and practice helped us come up with solutions that may have enabled children to be more participative in the classroom context. This is in keeping with some outcomes from other studies carried out (Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015); the extent to which educational and OT theory and practice came together in my study was, I believe, rather unique for our island.

In conclusion, I reflect here on the need for the development of an occupational therapy philosophy for school-based practice that aligns more specifically with educators and educational pedagogy. As occupational therapists, we speak about the importance of client-centred practice when relating to children and their families. My study has identified characteristics for "school-centred practice" when relating to children and educators in school. This concept will be revisited later on in the chapter.

9.6 Environmental Factors as Important Contributors to Participation.

The school environment played an important part in children's participation. It's contribution can be considered from a physical and social perspective. When the physical environment was organised and decluttered, and space maximised for children to move, it contributed to good participation. In the present study, enablers of children's participation went beyond the child and the "condition". They were dependent on socio-environmental factors, such as, the adults' attitudes; collaboration amongst themselves; building professional knowledge; communicating with parents; and essentially having a love and passion for learning and teaching. The teacher's attitude and presence included tone of voice; nonverbal communication; care; and diverse modes of instruction. These appeared to be greatly conducive to a better learning environment. This included the emotional environment, in which adults responded to the children's needs in the best way. This

evidently came about when educators were personally and professionally equipped to deal with the challenges posed by the classroom.

Educators and parents alike perceived that engagement, good communication and problem solving were most crucial to children's participation. These findings are noted also as significant in other studies that have looked into participation (Anaby et al., 2013, 2014; Huang et al., 2011; Imms, 2008; Imms et al., 2015, 2016; Law et al., 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

The supports and enablers in my study were hence the educators themselves as persons and as professionals. They outweighed the barriers through their resilience; team spirit; love for the children; a willingness to learn. These make for a successful school, where everybody puts their heads together to make it work.

The children's own views on enablers to participation were ones mostly related to friendships, the nature and extent of an activity, concepts of fun and resources. They were mostly concerned when there was a breakdown in friendships or when circumstantial and environmental constraints disrupted interaction with others. The children also mentioned the want for more resources, mostly relating to outdoor play, perceiving them to provide more fun and enjoyment. Similar findings were identified in the literature (Lundqvist et al., 2018; Norodahl & Einarrsdottir, 2014; Prompona et al., 2019; Pyle & Alaca, 2016).

Finally, a major factor in my study that emerged from the data mostly in Phase 2 of the study, was the value placed by educators on the consistent and regular support that came about thanks to the project. The once weekly presence supported relationship-building, which was valued mostly by the educators. Intervention was provided in a timely manner and on the spot. This together with the hands-on strategies - coaching and modelling - were enablers to children's participation and educators' execution of the curriculum.

On the other hand, barriers to children's participation also rested on physical and socio-environmental shortcomings relating to the educators' knowledge and

skills and the education system in general. The findings of my study have shown that the educators acknowledged the physical impediments in the school, and the socio-cultural challenges that came about due to the heterogeneous student population. These findings are consistent with those found by other studies (Coster et al, 2012; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Hemmingson & Borrell, 2002; Imms, 2008; Law et al, 1999; Law et al, 2006a, 2006b).

This study observes that the educators consistently appeared to perceive specific institutional factors as major barriers, namely the design of the curriculum, also documented as a point of contention in other countries (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). This was a barrier in the Maltese context, as educators perceived that the curriculum was often unrealistic, too demanding, and that it was very difficult to deliver to such a diverse class of students. Lack of parental participation and parental overprotection were also perceived as barriers, as were situations of stress and poverty that families were experiencing. This was also identified earlier in the literature on participation and maternal stress (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016). These were barriers as they interfered with the children's learning. Such data is supported by that of other authors (Anaby et al., 2013, 2014; Lamichane & Kawakatsu, 2015; Law et al., 2003, 2013, 2014; Coster et al., 2013; Imms, 2008a; Rosenberg et al., 2011). Educator's lack of knowledge on how to adapt their teaching to accommodate all students, as well as the lack of human and non-human resources, such as healthcare professionals, and material resources were also perceived as detractors (Coster et al., 2013; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Law *et al.*, 2006). Finally, time was also perceived as an obstruction to participation in my study: the lack of time due to a very full school day and the demanding curriculum decreasing the time for preparation, were factors that educators mentioned. Time as a barrier to children's participation is documented in the literature (Copley & Ziviani, 2004; Law et al., 1999).

My study identified the importance of and supported the connection between the children and the significant adults, mostly the educators. This contributed towards the children's level of participation and, consequently, inclusion. My research has also shown that SBOTTI-M was a potential catalyst of fostering a strong bond between all stakeholders in the school, leading to a collaborative culture in which everyone assumed responsibility for the children's participation. This connection between children and educators appears essential when dealing with young children in the Maltese context and beyond.

9.7 Parental Participation Supporting Occupation: Challenges and Strengths

This work has shown that parents are interested and willing to support their children, and are happy to learn about and engage in a more play-based routine with their children, if they are shown how and assisted in doing this. Parents were most willing to learn from in-class sessions with their children, educators and occupational therapist. This was especially important if their own experiences of childhood were different. As Lynch et al. (2015), and earlier Humphry & Wakeford (2008), found in their studies, parents' values and attitudes have been shaped by their own childhood experiences and are further informed by the communities in which they have lived, and subsequently they pass them on to their own children. Parental values and personal reasoning influences how the environment is structured to support play and learning (Lynch et al., 2015). I strongly believe that this spills into the school system, and that is all the more reason why school-based occupational therapy needs to be supportive of parents as well to enable them to reshape their potentially negative experiences into more positive ones for their children's benefit.

An important discussion, possibly culturally specific to Malta, also needs to centre around mothers. Maternal education in the international literature was documented as being an important environmental support (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016). In a study in the Maltese context on parenting children with a disability

(Debono, 2019) the “mother” recurrently is named as the main caregiver. For many years in Malta the mother has been perceived as the primary carer of the child and although studies have identified more involvement of fathers in the care of children, it was mothers who were mostly involved in my study. Potentially, fathers are still the primary breadwinners in Maltese families. In spite of the fact that mothers are also engaged in paid employment, they still appear to be the primary caregivers for their children. The literature (Albrecht & Khetani, 2016; UNICEF 2018, 2019) highlights the importance of maternal education in supporting children’s participation in preschool. UNICEF (2019) in one of its reports on early childhood development mentions the importance and family friendly policies and flexibility to support families in promoting their children’s development. In my study, parents involved in the focus group were predominantly mothers. Their feedback on the school-based collaborative project indicates that, when supported on how to help their children participate, they were willing to do so. The turnout of mothers especially, and a few fathers, for the classroom kindergarten sessions is witness to this. Such practices need to be further explored and developed so that occupational therapists can involve parents in collaborative school-based occupational therapy. (Guichard & Grande, 2017; La Vesser & Berg, 2010).

The OT literature provides no specific evidence of paternal involvement in therapy supporting their children’s participation. No studies have been carried out locally that explore maternal versus paternal participation and their involvement in young children’s education and therapy. Ways of involving Maltese fathers in the therapeutic process need to be explored and encouraged.

The data in my study has shown that some parents, especially mothers, do not have the resources to take their children to therapy in outpatient community settings. Two mothers received support to help their children participate, through SBOTTI-M which they would not have accessed otherwise, either because their children were not considered a priority, or else because their own socio-cultural and

economic status did not permit them to. One of the mothers did not drive and had two children with additional needs, so she was afraid to take the bus to access services for them. This mother really valued the support she was given through the collaborative efforts of SBOTTI-M that collaborated with her son's educators.

This study made me reflect on the parent-educator relationship. This to me is another important finding from my study and enabler to participation. It was evident that whilst educators were conscious of and worried about not delivering to the parents' expectations, the latter, although at times demanding, were mostly grateful and supportive of the educators' occupation. This speaks to the important role that educators have in supporting and promoting the parent-child relationship and, consequently, parental engagement in parent-child play (Morozini, 2015). School-based occupational therapy using a collaborative framework, such as that provided by the intervention in my study, may support teachers by fostering parent-child opportunities. Such opportunities should encourage parents' efforts to engage their children in occupations within the home setting, which in turn support the educators' efforts to improve the children's participation in the classroom. Parent-educator relationships as well as knowledge exchange and intervention through SBOTTI-M may be potential contributors to developing resilience in Maltese children, their immediate families and the school family by supporting parental engagement in promoting occupations in schools, managing child-educator relationships and managing occupational engagement across environments.

In summary, as an outcome of the findings of my study, a bio-ecological perspective was evident, considering the interactions and transactions between persons (the child, the educators, and the parents), the context (the class, school environment) and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Law et al., 1996).

My findings and the supporting literature led me to construct through SBOTTI-M a vision for supporting Maltese early years pupils and their educators and their participation in school occupations: relationship-building and human

connectedness supported by developing a culture of positive attitudes and behaviour; a more functional and accessible emergent play-based curriculum for children; creative, flexible, knowledgeable educators and therapists who are well supported with human and non-human resources; and mothers and fathers who are involved via various parent/educator/child opportunities in the classroom, such as hands-on activities, and motivated to support their children. These characteristics can be supported with a school-based collaborative model of therapy, like SBOTTI-Malta. Personally, I would propose the term “school-centred” as a more accurate title than “school-based”. This not only ensures a physical presence in the school, but it also implies the need to revolve around what is central in order to work in an early years school system. The next part of this discussion will focus on how SBOTTI-Malta has the potential to support such participation.

9.8 SBOTTI-M: A Collaborative Approach to Supporting Schools

This section of the discussion will critique SBOTTI-Malta in the light of the existing literature while also providing some recommendations on the way forward for school-based services in Malta. As a preamble, I would like to state that one may get the impression that the collaborative project was all positive and with no challenges. The data has shown that the educators were very positive and enthusiastic about collaborating. This could be reflective of the fact that the educators in Maltese schools have so much to deal with on a day-to-day basis, and perhaps this collaborative project was seen as an opportunity for support that also provided a novel way of teacher education through on-site hands-on collaboration. The latter could be a reason why the feedback was largely positive. Other factors leading to this positivity could have been the senior management encouraging their staff - the teachers, kindergarten assistants and LSEs - to make the most of this opportunity. I acknowledge also that some of the participants may have deemed it inappropriate to be critical of a project which was supporting their work, because

being critical would have made them appear “ungrateful” for this “unique opportunity”.

Throughout the second phase of the study, the theory of invitational leadership drew my interest after I had been introduced to it early on along my data collection. The invitational leadership theory was created by blending a number of leadership principles, values and qualities (Purkey & Siegel, 2013). This leadership style puts the person at the centre of everything, including optimism, respect, trust and intentionality. The five P’s of invitational leadership consider the people, places, policies, programmes and processes as integral to leadership success, with the people being the most important element. As Loader (2010) stated: “Leaders need to be constantly reflecting, analysing their actions and words to see if they are inviting or suppressing leadership in others” (Loader, 2010, p.2). I can identify with Loader’s words in my own collaborative efforts.

The educators through the process of SBOTTI-M were encouraged to take on a leadership role, empowering themselves to work with the children in ways that enhanced their charges’ participation. The findings of my study have shown that in most of the educators’ data, some consistent people characteristics were greatly valued. These included genuine concern, care, respect, availability, listening, hands-on support and attitude. Invitational leadership is not restricted to personality, gender and ethnicity. Purkey & Siegel (2013) state that it is critical to discover qualities and characteristics that will consistently provide leaders with the knowledge and skills to succeed on a regular basis (Burns & Martin, 2010).

I reiterate my attraction to Invitational Leadership Theory as, according to Purkey & Novak (2015), it provides a means of “intentionally summoning people to realize their relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor. The purpose of invitational leadership is to address the entire global nature of human existence and opportunity.” As I stated earlier in this chapter, this is what education is all about: ensuring that every human being is valued and

supported in society (Cardona, 2011). This combination of one's potential, together with opportunity, contributes towards participation and inclusion.

9.8.1 SBOTTI-M Versus Traditional OT: Same or Different?

SBOTTI-M adopted a bio-psychosocial workload model, providing intervention in the context of the school and classroom with a focus on inter-professional learning and working. It was aimed at building the capacity of both the educators and the parents. Its focus was on knowledge translation and relationship-building, using coaching and modelling and providing a consistent OT presence and availability in the school.

Traditional OT services in Malta use a caseload approach, mostly with a direct and consultative intervention with the child; it is often practised in a healthcare setting, and thus it is removed from the real life context and environments of the child and educator. Although the present research study did not compare models, its outcomes support other models that use a tiered approach, (Missiuna et al., 2012a; Lynch et al., 2020; Bazyk et al., 2009). This model, according to the participants in my study, enables “more possibility of continuation” and “more students stand to benefit from services on the premises”. The Partnering for Change Project Report (Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015) documents reduced waiting lists thanks to such an approach, which helped increase cost effectiveness by addressing more referrals in less time.

SBOTTI-M was unique because it was a collaborative endeavour that involved the various stakeholders and integrated OS theory and practice - CMOP-E with education theory and practice: invitational leadership and the Emergent Curriculum. SBOTTI-M gave voice and choice to both children and the educators, reduced power differences, created a space for active learning and involved senior leadership in the therapeutic relationship and decision making. The fundamental principles of SBOTTI-M included “a solution-focused, strengths-based, collaborative and context-based approach, educationally relevant and evidence-based” p.1

(WFOT, 2016). Finally, using a workload model, SBOTTI-M focused on changing the social and physical environment, and *not* the child, through a thorough understanding of the child and their school occupation in the real life context of the school.

9.8.2 The Tiered Approach in Maltese Early Years Classrooms.

The tiered approach is a novel approach in a Maltese Early Years context. To date, it is absent from the education or health care settings in Malta. The results from this study, following an analysis of the intricate data, have shown that educators mostly advocated for intervention in line with Tier 1 and Tier 3, specifically universal design and comprehensive support for the whole class, as well as the support received for the most vulnerable students that had dedicated support from an LSE. Some examples of Tier 1 intervention were the *Let's Move* Programme delivered weekly by email: whole classroom embedded strategies; and curriculum-relevant activities embedded in the class, such as numeracy through movement (Appendix L). I believe this was a new experience for educators, giving a boost especially to classroom teachers while putting them at the forefront. It was evident that they needed and valued this support, which enabled them to manage their class more effectively.

Tier 3 support that consisted of support for students with a statement of needs took the following form in SBOTTI-M: one-to-one support for educators, namely in- or out-of-class support, using coaching and modelling with a focus on building the capacity of the teacher and the LSE and relevant support staff and parents. Although therapists working through a caseload model and visiting the school to advise LSEs is common practice, the use of coaching and modelling in situ was novel. Another unique contribution of SBOTTI-M in Tier 3 was the involvement of the class teacher. In the Maltese school system, class teachers are minimally involved in the execution of a child's IEP. My role was potentially a catalyst to trigger a chain of discussion around the needs of the students who need intensive

intervention. This occurred during the IEP meetings as well as in the classroom. The role of teacher-therapist collaboration in supporting participation of the most needy students needs to be studied further.

Analyses of the intervention log from this study showed that educators made few requests for Tier 2 type interventions. My perception is that this was because of a lack of awareness of how intervention at a Tier 2 level could support them. I believe there are four main reasons one would do well to reflect on:

- The young age of the children: this was a study focusing on the early years; Potentially, the educators did not perceive the importance of addressing certain issues at this young age and took a more “wait and see” approach;
- The educators, their lack of training and their experiencing difficulty in differentiating the curriculum for their pupils in the different tiers led to an over-reliance by the teachers on the learning support educators, thus creating a power imbalance between the two;
- The “struggling children” might not have been a priority due to so many other “severe cases”;
- There may have been a lack of insight and knowledge of some children’s “hidden disabilities”.

Based on the data from my study, the Tier 2 support is the one that requires further attention and development. To date, in Malta’s school system there has been, I believe, a focus on the Tier 3 students, and rightly so since these are the most vulnerable children who need to “survive and thrive” in the mainstream. However, Tier 2 support is very unique in that it has the potential to support early years students with subtle difficulties and the ones that do not have a formal diagnosis *and* those whose “diagnoses” do not merit support by an LSE. My study has shed light on the importance of considering a band of students that are either “lost” or not catered for.

The awarding of LSE support is becoming increasingly more and more stringent with only the more “deserving” children being provided with individual support, and this has significant implications. Educators need to be better equipped and need to collaborate with the LSEs in the classrooms to serve the students who, in spite of having additional needs, will not qualify for more human support. Tier 2 support through SBOTTI-M has the potential to provide unique support to young children in the natural context of the classroom.

In essence, using the tiered approach within a collaborative framework in the Maltese context has the potential to encourage a more equitable power relationship between all educators, with each and every one assuming responsibility for their students’ learning. Some of the 10 key enablement skills (CMOP-E) can serve as a backbone for school-based practice, with key concepts of Invitational Leadership to support these skills (Table 50).

Most of the enablement skills in Table 50 are very relevant to occupational therapy practice in schools, and can be considered as the backbone that enables better participation of schoolchildren, and therefore contributing to an inclusive school. They are supported by the theory of Invitational Leadership; the 5 P’s, as seen in Table 50, together with ongoing principles of optimism; respect; trust; and intentionality. In keeping with the concept of enablement is occupational engagement (Bandura, 1986). This is embedded in the conceptual framework for this study.

Table 50

Linking the Ten Key Enablement Skills adapted from Townsend Polatajko et al. (2007), the 5 P's of Invitational Leadership and SBOTTI-M

Key Enablement Skills	5 P' : Invitational Leadership	SBOTTI – M
Adapt	Places and Programmes	Environment and tasks in schools. Use of Universal Design
Advocate	People	For children and parents
Coach	People	Teachers and parents
Collaborate & consult	People and processes	With administrators, teachers and parents
Coordinate	Programmes & Policies	Intervention in school, meetings, events, professional development
Design/build	Places, Policies Programmes	Accessible and inclusive environments
Educate	People and Processes	Administrators, teachers, parents and children on the role of OT, on concepts around inclusion and participation, Occupational Therapists on the educators role and the curriculum

With the whole school being targeted as the client, the gradual capacity building of educators and other factors, such as school-based professionals supporting the school, may create a shift in the provision of support. If support targets the middle band of students at risk who can make it and if they are given the necessary support and are identified earlier on in their schooling years, this may mean that the number of students requiring intensive support may gradually decrease over time as the capacity of schools and educators is built. Such capacity building can be supported with knowledge translation; the application of invitational leadership styles; and the application of the 10 key enablement skills.

9.8.3 Aligning SBOTTI-M with Inclusion Policies and Frameworks for Inclusive Education

The findings of this study have provided insights into the nature of the curriculum and its association with participation. My research shows that the curriculum was not always child-centred, while at times it was very prescriptive and allowed no choice for the learners; the teachers were burdened with a tall order of things to accomplish in the school day. The children's voices in this study, and the educators', confirm this association, which is also supported by the literature (Bartolo, 2010; Callus & Farrugia, 2013). The importance of offering choice and opportunity to the children leads to autonomy and, as a result, improved participation (Hoogsteen and Woodgate, 2010).

The key ways to support educators as outlined in Malta's Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools are congruent with the main points emerging from this study for SBOTTI-M. The two are compared in Table 51 which shows how the ten key ways of delivering school-based occupational therapy extrapolated from the data in this study may support the Policy and Framework for Inclusive education. In the year following my data collection, the emergent curriculum was introduced in Maltese state schools with 3-year-olds in Kindergarten 1, and since then it has been extended to Kindergarten 2 with plans to continue reaching across other year groups.

A policy on inclusive education in schools and a national inclusive education framework for Malta (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2019a, 2019b) and an Early Childhood Education and Care Policy and Framework (still in draft, 2021) were developed by educational authorities in collaboration with a team of experts that did not include any health care professionals. The aim of these policies was to support educators, parents and children's full participation in inclusive schooling. The policy's key ways to support educators are congruent with the main points emerging

from this study for SBOTTI-M. This implies that SBOTTI-M has the potential to contribute to inclusive education in Maltese Early Years classrooms.

Table 51

School-Based Occupational Therapy in Malta and the Policy for Inclusive Education in Malta

Key ways of support to educators outlined in “A policy on Inclusive Education in Schools” (2019) for Malta	10 Key ways SBOTTI-Malta can support Educators (Buhagiar, 2020)
Inclusive and strategic leadership	Use of Invitational Leadership concepts; Involvement in policy and frameworks.
Whole-school development planning	School development and action plans
Whole-school inclusive environment	Environmental design and school improvement
Collaboration with parents and community engagement	Parent education sessions
Individual education planning	IEP involvement, namely attendance at IEP meetings as well as liaison with LSE on IEP goals; individual work with the most needy children
Continuous Professional Development	Curriculum time
Learner and staff well-being	Supporting wellness programme with KG classes
Positive behavior management	Individual/SMT/teacher/LSE consultation: identification of needs and resource allocation
Support structure and services	Working with support staff, such as literacy specialists
Teaching and learning	Whole-class embedded strategies: instructional strategies to support literacy and numeracy

The introduction of the new emergent curriculum in October 2019 for three-year-olds in Kindergarten 1 classrooms was a positive step towards promoting a more playful learning environment with more focus on the child. It is promoting a shift in terms of the focus of learning, tapping into the child's interests and

motivation: it provides for child-centred, theme-based learning; and aims to have more active involvement with hands-on participation of children. Yu-le (2004, p.1) states the following about emergent curricula: “Emergent curriculum is a constructive curriculum in which the teachers, students, teaching materials and environment interact in the context of a conversation. It departs from the idea of ‘everything is predefined’ and maintains that ‘everything is developing’. It is a play-based curriculum that is more likely to support flexibility; choice; child-centredness; motivation; and engagement. Table 52 depicts how the sources of the emergent curriculum are aligned with those of SBOTTI-M.

Table 52

The Emergent Curriculum with SBOTT-M

Sources of Emergent Curriculum	Sources of SBOT/SBOTTI-M
• Children's interests	Children's inner drive
• Teacher's interests	Occupational therapist's interests
• Developmental tasks	Performance skills
• Things in the physical environment	Environmental design/physical access
• People in the social environment	Social participation/learning access
• Curriculum resource materials	Differentiated instruction/Activity Analysis
• Living together: caregiving, and routines	Activities, occupations and routines
• Values held in the school, community, family, and culture	The human spirit

(Adapted from Jones & Nimmo, 1994, 127.) (Buhagiar, 2021)

With the introduction and implementation of the emergent curriculum (Kuh, 2014; Osberg & iesta, 2008; Edwards et al., 1993), Maltese educators have the advantage of using more child-centered, creative activities with the option for more choice, and just the right level of challenge in the context of a child-friendly environment: all the concepts embraced in the frames of reference used by paediatric occupational therapists (Hinojosa & Kramer 2008). However, they also face the risk of sidelining rules, routines and the teaching of skills, judging these

incongruous with an emergent learning curriculum. This would be a threat to inclusive practices and universal design. It would be a move away from the National Inclusive Education Framework and Policy (Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2019a, 2019b). A happy middle ground needs to be found between practice of the emergent curriculum in the early years and upholding the Framework for Inclusive Education.

A collaborative model of school-based occupational therapy embracing a tiered approach together with concepts of knowledge exchange and relationship-building may be the answer that will support a balanced inclusive early year's curriculum (Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015). Table 53 depicts the similarities between SBOTTI-M and the Emergent Curriculum.

Table 53

Foundations for School - Centred Practice and the Emergent Curriculum

Child/educator-centred
Child and adults as active participants
Observation of children in the naturalistic environment
Context being central in the curriculum
Tapping into child's inner drive and interests; child-directed activities
Knowledge translation through coaching, modelling, hands on, classroom-embedded approaches that provide educational opportunities and capacity-building for the educators
Encouragement of play-based curriculum
Use of projects/purposeful activities to develop skills
Adaptation of the physical and social environments for occupational participation

Like the educator in the delivery of the emergent curriculum, the role of the occupational therapist in the school is that of knowledge translator, rather than transmitter. The occupational therapist is not there to impose strategies on the

teachers, but to engage in discussion and collaborate in finding common solutions to curricular problems.

I would say that SBOTTI-M can contribute further by supporting educators to shift their focus more on school occupations within the emergent curriculum.

In Table 54, we see an outline of how school-centred practices and SBOTTI-M can support the emergent curriculum and children's occupations. Although *school-based practice* (AOTA, 2016b) is the term favoured in the international context, I have chosen to use the term *school-centred practice* to highlight what is special and valuable about school-based occupational therapy in the Maltese context.

Table 54

SBOTTI-M supporting the Emergent Curriculum and Children's Occupations

Uses coaching and modelling in the classroom context with educators to support children's daily living;

Applies universal design strategies in context: supports children by exploring multiple ways of acquiring information, and engaging the child in learning occupations;

Teaches activity analysis and use thereof, to support children's participation in creative occupations and to enable educators appreciate the value of creative activities;

Contributes to the redesign of the curriculum to facilitate the children's participation in all the school;

Provides environmental supports, such as adapting the classroom physical space; developing spaces for recreation in the school;

Integrates OT theory with educational pedagogy to enable educators to promote and support occupational engagement;

Shares expertise on play to develop play occupations; its value in supporting literacy and numeracy.

SBOTTI-M needs to take into consideration the child, the context and the environment, and needs to be combined with educational pedagogy: emergent learning and a play-based curriculum; invitational leadership, putting the person at the core; and applying the key enablement skills, with relationship building and knowledge exchange at the forefront.

9.8.4 Educational Leaders as Important Stakeholders in SBOTTI-M.

The current study is innovative in that it generated data on the contribution of SBOTTI-M towards school senior management. Involvement of heads of schools and school leadership teams in the development of school-based services is imperative. This study, like that of Christian et al. (2020), has shown that head teachers appreciated both a more collaborative approach and the autonomy in being involved in school-based interventions.

No other occupational therapy studies, to my knowledge, have specifically recognised the role of senior management's contribution to school-based occupational therapy. I found that senior management personnel were very clear in what they perceived to be the outcomes of their involvement for both the children and educators. Throughout the study, the support of senior management, that is, their interest in and openness to the project, were crucial for its implementation. The extent of SBOTTI-M involvement was varied and not intense, and consisted of face-to-face brief meetings; email communication; phone calls; quick sharing of ideas through social media; and the integration of SBOTTI into whatever was going on in the school from a senior leadership perspective. Flexibility was exercised not to pose additional burdens on the senior management through SBOTTI-M.

These findings led me to understand that, although a necessity, senior management's involvement in providing a collaborative approach to school-based occupational therapy need not be pervasive or time consuming. Whilst senior management teams need not be overburdened with too many meetings and discussions, they need to own and value such a service. This can be accomplished by mutual support in achieving goals that are meaningful to them rather than to the occupational therapist (Loader, 2010). There needs to be a trusting relationship, and SMT members need to be available to discuss the more pertinent issues related to the students. On the other hand, SMT may involve the occupational therapist in their discussions related to the needs of the whole school. Senior management teams

may use the OT's presence in the school to their advantage, to support mainstream and wellness programmes in line with Tier 1 intervention. In this way, the occupational therapist may be a visiting member in Senior Management Team meetings, providing support and ideas ranging from school development plans to ideas to make the day-to-day running of the school smoother. It is up to each school management team through collaboration with the occupational therapist to decide on the mode of occupational therapy involvement.

For any occupational therapist working in schools, they should be willing to *“embrace diversity and form teams of people with different strengths and weaknesses”* (Loader, 2010 p. 2, column 3, line 1). Occupational therapists need to humble themselves and be ready to support the school in their needs (Loader, 2010) rather than seek at all costs to run their own agenda, and they must be sensitive to pick up any cues from senior management on what is important to them and their school. Only in this way will the school be motivated to engage in collaborative initiatives, value the contribution the occupational therapist and involve them in school initiatives; having said that, they may not always fully comprehend their role. The senior management also emphasised how important OT involvement was to keep the educators motivated, reminding them of what and how they could work with the children and also challenging them to not be complacent when it came to finding solutions to occupational challenges faced by their pupils.

I propose two important constructs in collaborating with senior management personnel. These are the establishment of a trusting relationship, in other words good will and mutual understanding together with taking a genuine interest in the person one is collaborating with, as well as accountability. The latter may involve, as it did in my study, a written documentation of all activity carried out and action proposed and taken (Novak, 2009). Reasonable expectations in terms of time are important. Senior management personnel are very busy, and effective use of an

SMT member's time is important. OT's need to explore creative and efficient ways of accessing SMT members when they need to.

Overall, SBOTTI-M needs to consider the context of each senior management team and work around what works best for each team. It is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Occupational therapists collaborating in schools with leadership teams need to consider the unique context and the school development and action plans relevant to each school.

9.9 The Centrality of Knowledge Translation in SBOTTI-M

A unique experience for the educators, was the extent of collaboration and knowledge translation. Learning support educators, used our discussions to develop activities, resources or programmes for individual and/or groups of children. This meant role release from the occupational therapist to a person more consistently present in the school, who would ensure the implementation of the said activities. It also meant the understanding and internalising of OT theory by the educator and transforming it into practice. This is an example of knowledge translation that is being called for internationally in school-based practice: the educator and researcher will share their profession-specific theory and practice, supported by research in the implementation of intervention. In my study, a constant ongoing chain of communication existed between the OT and the relevant support staff, using different forms of media to communicate, and this facilitated knowledge translation.

9.9.1 Knowledge Translation Contributing to Educators' Professional and Personal Development

The findings of this study show that educators and the occupational therapist have gained from this collaborative project on two levels. It instilled renewed confidence, and it endorsed the good work that the educators were doing. With this partnership, the occupational therapist and the educators were motivated to try new things and realised that they could afford flexibility and choice without compromising

their curricular agenda. On the other hand, both the therapist and educators acquired new knowledge on skills and strategies to support the learners as well as reframe their thinking on certain aspects of teaching early years pupils.

Supported by research, the educator and researcher exchanged their profession-specific theories and practice to implement intervention. This mainly came about through the occupational therapist being present and at work in the classrooms and participating in co-learning opportunities for self-development through curriculum time, professional development and through the Individual Education Plan meetings. The use of coaching and modelling (Graham et al., 2012; Rush & Shelden, 2011) was key to the development of the educators' confidence in trying out new strategies, and for the therapist to understand by doing and witnessing the real needs of the child in context. The importance of training Maltese teachers to use coaching and modelling is imperative, and it is supported by many (Graham et al., 2012; Kretlow et al., 2011; Rush & Shelden, 2011). Professional Development in the local context involves mostly taught content and workshops, but these are not usually delivered in context. The coaching and modelling that was part of SBOTTI-M was therefore a rather unique experience for the educators, which they valued, as we have seen in the results chapters (7 and 8).

This study, like those by McCarthy (2011) and Hassan et al. (2015), has shown that teacher training may not be adequately addressing educators' needs vis-a-vis supporting children's participation in inclusive education. The reason could be that training is focused on the delivery of knowledge without its application. Lessons related to educators' and occupational therapists' learning from this study show that exposure to collaborative practices as well as training in appropriate leadership skills need to be provided. Likewise, they need to have theoretical knowledge translated into practice, and access to the support of human and non-human resources.

9.9.2 Professional Identity and Inter-Professional Education Supporting Knowledge Translation and Children's Participation

Educators' and therapists' professional identity and inter-professional education are important elements in setting up collaborative practices. Little evidence in the literature has been found in support of this finding, especially in relation to school-based occupational therapists. Professional identity is defined by Abreu (2006) as "a developmental process by which one recognises in which group one belongs" (p.3).

"Good" school-based occupational therapists are those who move away from an impairment focus to an occupation- and client-centred focus (Beck Ericksen, 2010). My understanding is that in order to "compete" with other health care professionals, OTs, both locally and internationally, may choose to retain a focus on impairment as opposed to occupation. I believe this focus comes about because we, as therapists, feel insecure and unsure of our roots in OS. Since we as therapists have more of a humanistic orientation rather than a positivist one, we tend to be seen as "lesser professionals" (Beck Eriksen, 2010).

It is true that in the process of knowledge exchange and translation, which is important in school-based occupational therapy, one's role identity can decrease, but on the other hand the professional identity may be formed and strengthened. The professional identity that one develops is based on a number of factors, one of which is not only a sound knowledge of one's professional role, but also the perception that others have of one's role. The professional identity for occupational therapists can be strengthened only if we have a sound grounding in OS and occupation, for this is where our expertise lies. The challenge is how to achieve this. Starting early on, at the very beginning of training to become an occupational therapist may be the key to producing therapists with a stronger professional identity. This, however, also needs to be reflected in a change of extant professionals' practices and practices in our already established services.

Similarly, teachers struggle to maintain their professional identity and potentially feel insecure when faced with a health care professional that may be perceived as a superior breed of professional. During consultation, the boundary is often blurred as each individual is hesitant to relinquish their role, and consequent power issues come into play (Beck Ericksen, 2010).

The debate here is whether school-based therapists feel that they are professionals in their own right. Do they retain their identity and status? This may be especially experienced by the newer/entry level therapists; but also, I dare say, seasoned, experienced therapists who lack self-confidence in their professional role may be susceptible to these self-doubts. The school setting is challenging in that, as a therapist, one is constantly striving to assert one's presence and relevance, given that the school will continue to function with or without the OT. One has to feel secure enough to relinquish his agenda as a therapist and mould and merge one's practice with the educator's curriculum, thus supporting the children's participation. I have often asked myself what would make a therapist feel secure in his or her identity to survive working in a school. This may be detachment from one's agenda; or the best interest of the child at heart; or building a relationship with the school and educators that enables each one to drop their defences. Possibly a combination of all these. This study has tried to show how such power issues can be diminished and even eradicated through the use of a collaborative approach, in other words, building solid relationships and facilitating knowledge exchange. This work, such as others like the Partnering for Change collaborative school-based project, (Missiuna & Hecimovich, 2015) found that collaborative practices were greatly valued by the educators. In my study this was seen in the positive feedback given by the Maltese educators about SBOTTI-M.

Despite these findings, questions surrounding the power issues remain; these often relate to the interaction between health care professionals and educators. In the local context, it is often the former assuming a superior position to

the latter. In the current context, professionals visiting a school handout a set of recommendations or instructions that teachers are expected to follow or integrate into their classroom without any form of prior consultation with the educator. Often the educators feel powerless and that their professional standing is undermined. Furthermore, since the recommendations are often not drawn up collaboratively, they are not likely to match the educators' and children's needs in the classroom. When power struggles develop between the "outside" professional and the "inside" professional, especially if there are conflicting ideas as to who is right, the child, its needs and its family end up being caught up in a quandary as to whose advice they need to follow.

Power issues are minimized if professionals are part of the school family and are respectful towards all members of this family, engaging in dialogue and debate as to what can work for a given child in a particular context. Here SBOTTI-Malta is definitely different to what our traditional OT services currently provide.

Inter-professional education (IPE) also means that the occupational therapist stands to learn educational philosophy and theories and to understand better where educators are coming from. This is not a one way system where only the occupational therapist has what to offer to the teacher, but it is a system in which the occupational therapist has to be receptive and willing to understand educational pedagogy as well as be open to learn from and with teachers in the classroom. Hence, OT's need to enter the school potentially as expert in occupational therapy theory, but as a novice in educational theory. They need to have a growth mindset and flexibility, and be ready to change their views and learn from the educators. However, Freeth and Reeves (2004) and more recently Bonello (2018), caution that educators have to be committed and enthusiastic to work inter-professionally and that such a practice requires preparation. Educators and therapists alike would require ongoing support to achieve *"a good level of inter-professional, collegiality and commitment"*, Bonello (2016) p. 87

9.10 Intra-sectorial Collaboration: Implications for a Change in Practices at Macro Levels

My data has shown that educators and educational leaders expressed the importance of health care professionals being in the school to support children's participation (Chapter 6, p. 129). For this to happen, the starting point should be inter-sectorial collaboration between health and education authorities (Tomas et al., 2018). Occupational therapy professional leads have the important mission of bringing the two authorities together and supporting their understanding of how the two can collaborate to serve each child in "the least restrictive environment" possible.

Occupational therapists' interaction with college principles, service managers, education officers, assistant directors and directors across ministries is essential to bring school-based occupational therapy to the forefront on the Education Department's agenda. Occupational therapists need to be consulted at policy level, especially in designing policies and implementing frameworks. Occupational therapy managers would do well to widen their perspectives when setting priorities for the services, which are health-care based, using outpatient clinic settings as a base and providing outreach services into the community, such as childcare centres, preschools and schools. I am pleased to say that I myself in my capacity as a university academic have started disseminating my findings with the early years education personell for maltese state schools, and these have been received in a positive proactive way.

Parent involvement could be instrumental for such a shift to take place. The current climate in Malta is one in which statementing boards are being very stringent with the provision of learning support. There is the need for professionals to embark on the use of collaborative models for the provision of therapy services that support children's participation in context. I hope that this work will help some change to take place.

9.11 Developing a School-based Occupational Therapy Curriculum: Preparing Student Therapists for Practice

This section will briefly discuss the way forward in preparing entry level therapists for school-based practice. Hillier et al. (2010), in their systematic review of collaborative models for health and education professionals, provided what they call “Guiding Principles of Interactive Teaming”. They suggest inter-professional education and practical experience as well as modelling of inter-professional education at faculty level as the skills and attitudes necessary for effective collaboration.

My belief is that entry level therapists with the right amount of knowledge, guidance, determination and motivation can venture into school-based practice using a collaborative model, as long as there is a strong professional identity and willingness to work in an inter-professional manner with educators. They need to have a strong occupational therapy knowledge base; knowledge of educational theory and practice in the early years; and be passionate about striving to promote children’s participation.

The major challenge to develop a carefully planned paediatric curriculum tailor-made to the Maltese context lies not only in the acquisition of knowledge and theoretical preparedness of entry level therapists, but in their ability to build and negotiate relationships that are conducive to working in the school environment. Whilst it is possible in theory to train entry level therapists to work in schools, using a workload approach, their level of maturity needs to be taken into consideration. Needless to say, their motivation, ability to work independently and professional identity have to be strong as well. What is necessary is substantial groundwork in interpersonal and communication skills, a focus on occupation in childhood, and a move away from impairment-focused practice to solution-focused practice.

Therefore, entry level therapists ought to go into the school with a different mindset to that embraced by OT practice in the more traditional and mainstream

sites. Inter-professional education is about a learning continuum that could potentially start at undergraduate level and move on to graduate education and continuing professional developing. Should school-based practice be restricted to the more experienced OT's, or can the more novice therapists work, with the necessary preparation, collaboratively in the school system?

Missiuna et al. (2016) have developed online learning modules on the P4C model of school-based practice. They worked well for me as a model of support and learning in my project. The International School-based Occupational Therapy Network have recently launched a website to support academics in the teaching of students for school-based practice. Both these constitute a very relevant training opportunity for therapists going into school-based practice. Such professional development may also be supportive of entry level therapists. The question is: would this be enough? My opinion is that it would need to be contextualised to the local settings and accompanied by regular on-site active support. SBOTTI-Malta can succeed if OT students are “raised” with a growth mindset and resilience, and if they have a passion and love for the work they do.

9.12 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to engage the reader in a discussion about young children's occupations in schools; the enablers and barriers to participation; and how SBOTTI-M can contribute to such occupational participation. This study has identified that children's occupations ultimately depend on the way adults carry out their occupations. Adults may be both parents and educators. Relationship-building and connectedness between all parties are important. The occupations that children participate in in the Maltese context are similar to children's occupations worldwide. In the Maltese context, chores were not perceived as childhood occupations, while physical occupations were perceived as lacking and in demand. The desire for children, supported by adults, to engage in more play occupations in school has emerged from this study. Play can be perceived as a means of learning

and having fun and it may also be a means of transmitting socio-cultural values.

This study has confirmed the importance of routines and rituals; however, a debate exists about the rigidity of some routines versus the flexibility of an emergent curriculum. A balance is needed here. It is hoped that this study has provided new insights into the concept of frequency of practice of school occupations. What appears to affect children's willingness to participate is not which but how often they practise occupations.

This study has tried to give some insights into the importance of supporting parents to enable their children's participation, more specifically through hands-on involvement and modelling. It has highlighted the importance of the parent-educator relationship. Support was given to the more vulnerable mothers through SBOTTI-M, whilst more consideration and investigation into the involvement of fathers in their children's school occupations has yet to be implemented. This study concurs with other studies in affirming that we should never underestimate the importance of teachers' wellbeing and children's happiness and enjoyment in the teaching and learning processes.

Finally, this study has hopefully provided food for thought on significant contributions made by SBOTTI-M: developing equal relationships with teachers; a continuous presence in the school and a student centred collaborative tiered approach to intervention with a focus on whole school/class involvement; and the need for developing Tier 2 intervention for children at risk. Invitational leadership styles with a focus on the uniqueness of every person; knowledge translation; and school leadership involvement were central to SBOTTI-M. Development of a sound professional identity and inter-professional collaboration as well as the importance of preparing occupational therapy students for school-based practice are called for.

In support of findings from Grandisson' et al. (2019), I end with what I consider to be two very crucial factors: firstly, SBOT's who are excited to work in the schools need to be engaged and not ones merely looking for a job and, secondly,

adults (educators and parents) need to be willing to change their practices. I cannot but agree with Gallagher et al. (2019) in that, particularly in Malta, there should be a shift in focus away from the perceived deficits in children. SBOTTI-Malta is not about fixing children but changing classroom, school, home and community practices through collaborating with educators. The limitations of the study, novel contributions to practice as well as recommendations for further study are presented in the next chapter, which contains the epilogue to this journey.

Chapter 10 - Limitations, Implications and Novel Contributions

This final chapter of this dissertation will treat the limitations of the study, the implications for practice and research and recommendations for further studies. A brief concluding section and epilogue that presents my reflections throughout the research journey will end this thesis.

10.1 Limitations of this Study

I shall discuss what I perceive to be the key limitations in my study. The nature of my study did not permit an outsider to do the data collection as the scope of the study would have been lost. The fact that I was collecting the data but at the same time providing an intervention as well could have created potential bias. I took all the necessary measures to be as objective as possible. Since I was wearing two hats, that of the therapist and that of the researcher, this was at times challenging as on the one hand I was immersed in the data and on the other hand I had to be objective. Whilst doing my utmost to ensure rigour in my study I cannot negate that there may have been potential biases due to the nature of the research methodology and my involvement as an action researcher and participant observer.

The data was collected from one case study school and results may not be generalisable to other schools upholding a different curriculum and ethos. The use of a participation quantifiable measure would have been ideal for triangulation of the data, but this would have required more involvement from the educators. At this stage, this was very difficult given the novelty that school-based occupational therapy is to the educators' classrooms. Also, the participation measures that were available would have needed to be recast for a Maltese population prior to using them.

In the research process the stakeholders were not full participants as they were not involved in the design and operationalisation of the research. This was not possible, as the stakeholders had no previous exposure to and experience of

school-based occupational therapy, which I introduced as part of my research.

Action research is in itself collaborative, and power relations are equal. I can safely claim that, during my data collection, every attempt was made to ensure a collaborative and equal partnership throughout the whole duration of my presence in the school; however, I cannot state that power relations were exactly equal all the time. When dealing with specific situations, the teachers were less involved in the solutions that concerned expert knowledge on occupational therapy theory and practice. Conversely, there were also moments when teachers took the lead due to their expert knowledge in educational pedagogy.

Another limitation in the method of data collection, namely action research, is that I as the researcher may have searched for solutions to my own problems rather than those which the practitioners were interested in. I attempted to overcome this through my second research question that sought to understand the enablers and barriers from the stakeholder's perspectives.

Although my data analysis revealed rich and detailed data, the lack of breadth may have been a disadvantage. This is because I only had access to the views of a number of educators, which was not a major issue because depth was more important to me. I wanted to understand in depth the challenges that educators were facing, and how occupational therapists could support such challenges.

Finally, a last but important limitation was recruitment and, to an extent, data collection. I would have liked to have more parental data and involvement, but recruiting parents proved to be very difficult. In spite of the educators' response to participate, it was quite a feat for them to find dedicated time to carry out the data collection after school hours, because data collection during school time was not very ideal at times. Hence data in more quantity and quality may have provided a more in-depth insights into children's participation.

This next section will outline some suggestions on the way forward for school-based practice. It will be discussed in the light of my findings, which discussion will be supported by research from the literature.

10.2 Implications for Practice and Research

This section will provide the key implications for research and practice, including some reflections on the importance of teacher-therapist collaboration as well as new insights gained from this study; the uniqueness of it will also be reflected upon, citing novel contributions to theory and practice.

10.2.1 Reflections on Teacher-Therapist Collaboration

The findings of my study showed the importance of collaboration in enhancing the educator's skills. Better preparation of general education teachers may give them a better understanding of occupational therapy and related professions and how these can contribute to their classroom practices (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Huang et al., 2011; Truong & Hodgets, 2017). Similarly, occupational therapists need to be prepared to practise in school settings. Even the literature proposes a collaborative model of practice in schools whereby teachers and occupational therapists can develop professional coursework aimed at enhancing their respective knowledge of one another's expertise (Huang et al., 2011).

In my opinion, there is still a need of more research on how collaboration between educators and occupational therapists can contribute to student outcomes. Although at the start of my doctoral journey I had investigated various participation measures and made plans to use such measures to evaluate student outcomes from an SBOTTI-M stand point, this did not materialise. It was already a big change for school staff being involved in the process of collaboration: it would have been overly challenging to introduce and train educators to use a participation measure, not to mention that such measures would have first had to be normed on a Maltese population. The time factor was a significant stumbling block. Educators did adapt

and collaborate with the researcher at relatively short notice, but the intervention phase was still not long enough to introduce another variable, especially at the end of a school year, when everybody was tired and not receptive to novelty. It would have also been very difficult for me as a single-handed researcher.

Collaboration between educators and occupational therapists can be facilitated through education programmes as well as communication and leadership practices. This was witnessed in my study (Villeneuve, 2009; Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2012). Nonetheless, I believe the area of measuring student outcomes needs to be the next part of the process, picking up the thread where this study left off. It should start with the development of a culture of fair participation measure, which may be piloted in a school that has adopted SBOTTI-M.

Providers of occupational therapy programmes worldwide should reflect on whether entry level therapists are being prepared to work in school-based practice. If not, then such training needs to be addressed, or else one must ask whether therapists should practise in schools only after post graduate training and continuing education has been undertaken (Brandenburger-Shasby, 2005). Whilst personally I believe that entry level occupational therapists may engage in “knowledge exchange” and learn the skills necessary to transfer theory to practice in schools through proper hands-on exposure and teaching, such training needs to be done alongside student educators who are “brought up” to think in the same way.

The relationship building aspect of SBOTTI-M is a bigger challenge. Will young, entry-level therapists be mature enough in terms of professional identity, inter-professional collaboration and leadership skills? Can our training programme be rigorous enough to prepare these therapists for this area of practice? Others have succeeded in doing this using novel ways. One example of this is role-emerging practice (Dancza, 2019). This is a way of encouraging school-based practices to flourish in countries and settings where human resources are lacking, by supporting qualified educators with student involvement. Use of a theory

informed workbook (Dancza et al., 2016; Dancza, 2019) can help support student OTs on role-emerging placements in schools when full-time on-site therapists are not present. This means having students on placements in schools where there are no qualified occupational therapists, however with a strict protocol and “modus operandi” supporting students with long arm and periodic supervision. Another initiative taken by Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, is the development of a Post Graduate Certificate Course in Collaborative Practices (Maciver et al., 2019b), where health care professionals, such as occupational therapists, learn alongside educators on collaborative practices in schools. The Partnering for Change Research team (Canchild, 2015) have also created an online module on school-based collaborative practice that can be a great support to entry level therapists and those new to school-based practice.

Inclusive education policies in Malta that advocate for an in-class rather than a pull-out form of support are in line with Spencer et al., (2006). The impact of my work has primarily been in this area for the school chosen for my research. The fact that my study presented a whole-school collaborative approach was unique and supportive of educators' efforts to support all children's participation. Apart from this, it gave both the children and the educators a voice. We need to understand why occupational therapy practitioners, in spite of growing evidence, still opt to practice in ways that contrast with best practice approaches. Some ideas to sustain best practice are highlighted by Chandler and Pollichino (2013). Experienced practitioners can act as mentors to individual school practitioners. A system of mentorship can be developed. Occupational therapists need to be informed about the resources available through bodies such as WFOT and AOTA, and community awareness about OT in schools needs to be increased. Occupational therapists can disseminate information on school-based practice by presenting and participating in conferences within and outside the OT realm.

This study buttresses the idea that inter-professional education (IPE) courses to address teamwork, communication and understanding of each other's professional roles, especially in early intervention and school-based practice, are necessary (Myers & O'Brien, 2015). Such opportunities have already been identified previously as essential for the above mentioned practice areas (Chandler 2010; Hanft & Place, 1998; Hanft & Shepherd, 2008). Myers and O'Brien (2015) explain how IPE can be delivered through online discussions and case study reviews across different educational institutions and different professional courses. They tell us that ideas and practices can be shared across universities that offer OT programmes in different countries.

Bonard and Anaby (2015) suggest that a needs assessment of therapists and educators could help uncover those areas in which professionals require professional development in order to effectively provide a broader range of occupational therapy intervention. Such a needs assessment could help identify barriers and facilitators to inform and, therefore, help implement change, as was the case in my study. These authors mention the need for therapists to develop knowledge translation strategies in order to practise in a dynamic school setting.

10.3 Novel Contributions to Theory and Practice

The notion of occupation and the study of childhood occupations is new to Malta. Getting the children's own perspectives on their school occupations is a novel concept. No studies in Malta have ever taken in to consideration children's voices on what matters to them in school. Researchers have never investigated the occupations of young Maltese children in schools nor what enablers and barriers to participation in school-based occupations exist. Furthermore, to date there are only three occupational therapists working exclusively in the school system. And it is important to note that the practices of these services do not embrace the exact same approach used in this study. The main difference between the current

occupational therapy services and SBOTTI-M underlies the philosophical rationales that SBOTTI-M has embraced and that make it fundamentally different to the rest. The conceptualisation of SBOTTI-M is novel in considering educational pedagogy alongside occupational therapy theory, simultaneously giving paramount importance to educational leadership and embracing fundamental practices of relationship-building and knowledge translation. All these have the aim of supporting professional identity and inter-professional collaboration. No school-based therapy services using a tiered model and a collaborative approach currently exist in Malta, and this study is the first of its kind to explore how such a model can support inclusion and participation. It is unique in its potential for contributing to the enabling of a fully inclusive experience for children, rather than one of mere integration.

Other research studies have piloted school-based collaborative practice models (Canchild, 2015; Hasslebusch, 2015; Lynch et al., 2020; Missiuna et al., 2012a, b). It is hoped that this study will be valuable in adding evidence to the body of knowledge that supports school-based occupational therapy.

In short, this study has contributed to OS and Occupational Therapy practice in the following ways: to OS by consolidating existing concepts on the nature, form, function and meaning of occupation in childhood from children's, parents', and educators' perspectives. Play was identified as a central occupation, but other occupations were also highlighted. My study has been unprecedented in giving children an opportunity to air their views on what occupations they valued and to give their reasons. My study also enabled educators to voice their views and have their practices acknowledged. This work has provided a fresh way of providing a contextualised, curriculum-embedded, hands-on form of support, which until recently has not been mainstream practice in Maltese schools.

My study has uniquely pinpointed enablers and barriers to children's participation in the Maltese context and has also contributed to the existing pool of literature on collaborative practice in occupational therapy and the role that OT's can

play in health promotion, prevention and intervention. In the participating school, it has also uniquely given a voice to the children and the educators alike, together with an opportunity for them to be involved in collaborating side by side an occupational therapy professional. My study has also underscored the important role senior leadership has in supporting a whole-school collaborative approach.

My study supports other researchers' work. Although specific to the Maltese context, I believe lessons can be learned and translated to other school systems and cultures.

10.4 A Way Forward For School-based Occupational Therapy in Malta

Occupational therapy services in Malta still fall under a medical model of practice, with therapists seeing children in a clinic-based setting and with minimal and inconsistent interaction and collaboration with teaching staff and schools.

The aim of my study was to understand better the challenges and needs of teachers in the Maltese school system. This study hopefully shed some light on the best way forward in developing school-centred practices, first by understanding the challenges and needs of Maltese educators in developing children's occupational roles. My ultimate goal as a researcher has been to try to discover the best way that occupational therapy services can be offered in natural environments to improve children's participation in school life.

10.5 Recommendations for Further Studies

Internationally, research into the day-to-day experiences of young children in the school setting is limited (Theobald et al., 2011), and it is practically non-existent in Malta. Admittedly, measuring and deciding how to measure childhood participation is not an easy feat. In addition, there is the importance of measuring the outcomes of SBOTTI-M that needs to be considered. This chapter discusses this point in the foregoing pages. My thoughts here prompt me to ask the following question: will it be possible to use the components that make up school-centred

practice, as identified in my study, to develop a fidelity measure to ensure SBOTTI-M is being carried out according to the precepts? This could be a way of keeping school-based occupational therapists on track.

My views are that developing a user-friendly classroom outcome measure that will focus on classroom occupations needs to be a collaborative effort owned by both educators and therapists, perhaps with the involvement of caregivers/parents. As occupational therapists, we need to be exploring and measuring how children are participating in everyday occupations in the classroom and in the playground, but to do this, educators and parents need to be aligned with the concept.

My study has provided insights into how routines may be supporting or hindering children's participation. This is not to say, however, that there is no room for further analysis of routines in Maltese schools and classrooms. Further studies in the local context exploring notions of fun, enjoyment and happiness in school occupations from children's points of view is desirable. No local studies at post-graduate level have explored such notions by listening to the children's voices themselves. Such endeavours would ideally extend across the primary school years and into secondary school.

Further studies need to be first and foremost looking at children's participation in other schools, potentially in the church and private sector. Such studies also need to look at implementing SBOTTI-M across the different school years, primary, secondary and even post-secondary. A large scale study exploring children's occupations in Maltese schools would aid the understanding, from an OS perspective, of how school-based occupational therapists can work more gainfully with stakeholders to support and develop the form, function and meaning of children's occupations to improve participation. More studies need to be carried out across the different strata of Maltese society to explore effective ways of involving parents in their children's occupations. No studies have been implemented locally to scrutinise maternal vs paternal involvement in their young children's education.

Ways of involving Maltese fathers in the therapeutic process need to be delved into and subsequently encouraged.

Finally, collecting evidence through post-graduate research into Occupational Performance Coaching and other methods to help parents enable their children's participation in occupation would be a novel area of study in the Maltese context. The recent availability of a fidelity measure (Graham, 2020) ensures that this can be done rigorously. Once occupational therapists become more involved in school-based practice, it is imperative that such practices are evaluated so that research can include Maltese occupational therapists' perspectives on their own practices in the schools, and also the perspectives of significant others, like educators on SBOTTI-M.

10.6 Conclusion

The focus of this study was on understanding children's participation in school occupations in order to develop a school-based model of occupational therapy for Malta. Occupation is anything and everything that individuals do to occupy themselves in everyday life. These are named, organised and given meaning by the people taking part in these occupations (Hasselkus, 2011). Furthermore, participating in meaningful occupations which result in positive emotions helps build resilience and fuel mental well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The school is a child's second home, and there a multitude of occupations are carried out and a child spends the best part of the day. It should be the place where children grow and develop occupations through participating in school life that supports and builds their physical and mental wellbeing in school. Research into children's occupations in schools is necessary to continue to enlighten us how to serve children better.

I end this section with a summary of the essential characteristics of what could be developed into a potentially new model of practice for the early years. Here I am referring to school-centred practice - a practice framework that upholds the primary importance of the physical, social and learning environments to support a child-centred, play-based curriculum; this curriculum shall be delivered by adults who are passionate, humble and open minded, who adopt the right attitude and flexibility whilst offering choice and the opportunity for active participation, fun and enjoyment for each child. Educators and therapists with a strong professional identity work inter-professionally, exchanging knowledge on educational pedagogy and occupational therapy theory while simultaneously dedicating time to building relationships. School-centred practice embraces invitational leadership, always keeping the person at the centre of any interaction. Further research and practice may serve to develop this into a working model for Malta.

10.7 The Process from a Personal Perspective: My Journey

To end this thesis, I shall provide an in-depth reflection of the research process to give the reader an inside view of my thinking and reflections throughout the research process.

10.7.1 Reflections from the Dance Floor and the Balcony

I chose to present my reflections in line with leadership concepts from Heifetz and Linsky (2002): reflections from the Dance Floor and the Balcony⁵⁶. These epithets seemed appropriate to describe my binary experience as a participant-observer on the “dance floor” with the educators on the one hand, while contrastingly taking a back seat, namely a balcony view, as the researcher, thus

⁵⁶ The concept of the Balcony and the Dance Floor (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). The Dance Floor is important to affect what is happening. It was important for the researcher to understand what the educators were experiencing in the classrooms and school.

being the critic that brings the outsider perspective. This chapter will move between my perspectives as a participant immersed in the school's day-to-day realities and my perspectives from a distance as a researcher.

My aim is not only to give the reader a better idea of the “behind the scenes” process of the data collection, but also to provide a picture of what challenges and strengths one may be faced with when working in a school setting. It may be of comfort and support to any school-based occupational therapist as well as give insights to anyone who may want to embark on a similar journey. The chapter contains my reflections that served to challenge me as much as keep me focused and engaged with the research process for its duration.

10.7.2 Immersing Myself in the School Setting: October to December, 2019

The journey started with the approval of my study from UCC as well as UM ethics. The first task I had was to choose a school. I recall my encounter with Dr Cheryl Missiuna in March 2016 at a conference in Plymouth. She is the occupational therapist who has pioneered the Partnering for Change project in Canada, has been elaborated upon in the literature review, and which focuses on capacity building through collaborating and coaching in context. I had the opportunity to discuss my research intentions with her. I remember her word clearly that that the most important thing to consider when choosing a school was that the administration and educators needed to be interested in my project, and that other factors were secondary. So I set out to find my school on that premise. I was careful not to opt for a school where the people knew me or that was in some way “privileged”. I wanted a school that reflected the reality of the Maltese culture, was diverse and inclusive. I set out with the mind-set that I would go into the school with no expectations, that I would be the one to adapt to the school culture rather than the reverse; change and setbacks would be part of the journey, and I would accept them agreeably. Most important of all, I would “look at every challenge as an opportunity to change” (reflective diary, 16th September, 2018).

I believe that I have a growth mind-set and that I embrace change; I am a risk taker and am perseverant in my endeavours. From the start, I knew that I was the one who had to adapt to the context: “Keep telling yourself that you need to find ways to collaborate with the educators” (28th October 2017).

The weeks leading up to the choice of school were somewhat tense and I found them rather anxiety inducing. Would I find schools keen to participate? Would Senior Management take the study on board? I started off by approaching three schools that were interested and that fitted into my inclusion criteria, and went through a painstaking process of meeting with all the educators in these three schools and explained what the study would involve. I was happy that after this process all the three schools were keen to participate. At the same time I was a bit worried that I would have to turn two of them down. I was not entirely surprised by this: although I had feared I would not have participants for my study, I knew deep down that schools and educators craved support and would probably look upon my study as an opportunity to get that support. Such an expectation was a danger in itself, but it is only to be expected that everyone expects something in return. I knew I would never find a school if the latter perceived no gain for themselves. In the end, I chose my school, and regretfully I turned down the other two that had shown an interest.

A meeting with the head of school was my first encounter with the chosen entity. I experienced an overwhelmingly positive response and interest, and I was extremely happy. This was short lived, however, as the headship of the school changed a few weeks before the school was due to start. Back to the drawing board...I decided I would still retain the chosen school if the new headship was keen to participate. The new head of school was very interested in my study and when communicating to him that I would be there once a week on the same week day for the whole scholastic year he replied “Then, you will become part of our school”. This

meant a lot to me as having not even started I was already being considered ‘ “member of staff”. On this positive note, my experience commenced.

The initial stages of my data collection consisted of a total immersion in the setting: I had no room that I could call my own, just a safe place to put my belongings, and off I went into the corridors, the classrooms, the yard, the administration office; just being, observing, and listening, listening and listening to stories, giving a helping hand where necessary, blending in in the classrooms and getting to know the children, greeting the parents when they dropped off their children in the morning and, sometimes, consoling a crying child or a distressed parent.

I could observe how busy the school environment was, and the people were on the go all the time. I could sense some apprehension and lack of trust that gradually unfolded into more trust as educators realised that I was an ally rather than the enemy, that I was there to fall in with the classroom routine and get my hands dirty, rather than sit back and merely observe. The educators were very open in sharing the strengths and challenges they faced, and I could observe these with my own eyes.

My initial concerns over collecting data in a school that had just assumed new headship, housed many pupils and a staff complement of over 120 educators lessened as the days went by (“Not all the teachers may want to have an outsider in the class” I had been told gently by senior management in an initial telephone conversation prior to being told “then you will become part of our school” in my introductory encounter). Listening to the educators’ stories trying to be non-judgemental enabled me to immerse myself in the school culture. I became cognisant of the fact that many learning support educators did not have the adequate training, but very often there was the will to learn. My reflections often were “one cannot give of what one does not have” (reflective diary 6th Nov, 2017). My other constant reflection was my noting that when there was the right attitude

there was harmony and the capacity to change, but the opposite was also true; thankfully, I witnessed this only with a minority of the educators. I was struck by the dedication of the teaching staff. Their stories were the first evidence of resilience I saw. Having barely stepped foot into the school, I sensed a positive feel of what my experience was going to be like in the coming months.

My data collection was carried out every Wednesday throughout the whole scholastic year. I made it a point to stick to the day, unless Wednesday fell on a public holiday. I did this to enable myself to mimic a potentially real timeline, if my study was eventually used as a model of practice for the delivery of school-based OT. I, as the researcher, wanted to investigate how this would work, as it was not envisaged, in terms of recruitment, that any OT service provider in Malta would be in a position to provide more than one full-time occupational therapist per week per school. The feedback given by the school stakeholders was consistently positive on issues related to continuity, timeliness of intervention and support. I felt that the consistency of keeping the same day, the fact that I was there from the start to the end of the school day, and that my visit was a consistent weekly occurrence helped me to develop a sense of belonging. Also, the educators anticipated my presence while even the parents noted my consistent presence. Often the educators and parents alike waited for my arrival at 8.20 am to catch me before starting their school day.

10.7.3. Collaborating with Educators: January to March, 2018.

During this period, the data for the second phase of my study was collected. I was seeking to understand how my OT involvement using a collaborative framework supported children's participation. Therefore, I was involved in more "doing" in this phase, meaning that I spent prolonged hours in the classrooms and with educators, discussing and implementing classroom strategies. I became one with the classroom while retaining the professional distance necessary as a researcher. The students, the teacher, the learning support educators and myself engaged in

discussion on various strategies that could potentially support the children's participation. We would then proceed to try them out with the whole class, and refine them. This went on for the whole term.

Being in the school and classrooms made me reflect on the complexity of running a school and surviving in it for six hours a day, the ongoing activity and a positive energy but riddled with daily "out of the blue" situations. I experienced good days and bad day. There were days when I was positive about my contribution and days when I felt discouraged. My apprehension often disappeared as soon as I set foot inside the school. Small talk about the weather, food, other daily routine things occurred regularly with the "front of house" receptionist and the secretaries. The interaction with the children, I must admit, was a primary source of energy. My hesitations disappeared as soon as I was greeted by the children, whom I kept as the focus of my involvement. That being said, I constantly asked myself: how am I (with my OT hat on), making a difference? Often another questions presented itself: am I making a difference?

The class teachers, their positivity, their warmth and their enthusiasm also kept me positive. I often questioned my involvement, asking myself "Where do I fit in, where does OT fit in?" I can say that on every single day I was at school there was one comment, one experience, one person that gave me the confidence to end the day saying, "Yes I do fit in, yes OT does fit in". Such a comment could have been from a healthy discussion with an educator on a child's individual education plan; problem solving with an LSE on a strategy to make it work for a particular child; a classroom lesson that was beneficial for all the students; a simple thank you; a whatsapp message, such as the following, sent to me by one of the educators: "Thank you for the positive energy that you bring to the school" (Reflective Diary, 5th April, 2018).

The lack of time was often a source of frustration throughout the whole school year. An example of this is agreeing on times to meet with educators, which

would end up being postponed, cancelled or made shorter, often due to no fault of the educators, but to some emergency or other, such as managing a more important situation or crisis.

The hands-on sessions with the educators in the classrooms were a pleasure to carry out. The sense of anticipation by the children and their enjoyment was a great motivator. The majority of educators were with me and wholly engaged in the process, but I observed at times that some educators were not engaged. This made me reflect on the fact that there was such limited time for educators to have a breathing space from the constant “minding” of the children and any opportunity to have a break from the children was taken. Such a situation may be a danger to collaboration, as any professional supporting educators needs their collaboration. In similar instances, however, my reflections always centred around the notion that if educators had ongoing, timely and in-school professional support, then maybe there would be less of this “abuse” of others’ presence to “catch their breath”. This also made me reflect on the importance of looking after educators and their wellbeing.

The occupational therapist’s role in such an approach is to join forces with the educator and not take over the children or class; I did perceive a sense of relief in the teachers when I worked with them, because for that little window of time they were not entrusted with the full responsibility of the children, but instead it was shared by both of us.

This fact, although frustrating, made me reflect once again on the importance of caring for the well-being of the staff, giving them the opportunity and a space to rest and support and train them in a way that they do not feel the constant need to escape from their role as educators.

As for parental involvement, this was a big challenge not only in terms of setting up focus group meetings with them, but also to motivate them to attend meetings on matters that could aid the upbringing of their children. It made me appreciate how important it was to find ways of engaging parents in their children’s

education and care. I used all sorts of methods, including picture handouts and in-class hands-on sessions with parents together with sharing simple information through the class teacher's Facebook group. And yes, there was a change of attitude, and parents started to participate in greater numbers in various ways.

Throughout my research, I found that educators could take on only a certain amount of novelty at a time in small chunks. They also needed to feel secure in the knowledge that any change would not affect the children negatively and, most importantly, that children in every classroom, especially if in the same year group, were treated equally.

One thing that the vantage point of being a professional in a school helped bring to the foreground was that the school continued to run irrespectively of the involvement of the "significant others". The pupils would continue to come to school day after day, and would somehow survive. However, I asked myself: Will the quality of inclusive education have an impact on school staff while professionals were involved in the school as collaborators? Yes, I believe so. It is evident from the educators' feedback and my own observations that SBOTTI-M, one day a week did make a difference.

Engagement in informal discussion sometimes took the form of addressing personal concerns and issues. If this then resulted in the educators having a mind free from worries to support their students more effectively, then it was worthwhile. In situations where hesitation was perceived, I believe this was due to an element of uncertainty: either that the children's routine was going to be disrupted, or the apprehension that increase in work for the educators would ensue. It was evident that due to the lack of time for educators to meet up, or even to break the daily routine, or to engage in discussion between themselves, every opportunity they had to receive support was welcomed and used to the full. Throughout this process I understood that educators needed time to assimilate change, most likely because they were being requested to make constant changes to the curriculum; pedagogy,

changes in trends in children's attitudes, behaviour and motivation; emergent notions of family; cultural adaptations; and so much more.

Educators are more readily criticised than praised, and there is usually only a handful of grateful parents/caregivers. My experience with parents was varied, but a number of them were truly grateful; others were indifferent possibly because they had their own baggage that might have clouded their awareness.

Do parents take the school so much for granted that they forget to be thankful? Are they thankful deep down, but do not express this? Could it be that maybe in our culture education is perceived as a right so that the need to show gratitude is neutralised? The highlight of the second term was the classroom-embedded strategies, which we - the educators, the children in the chosen classrooms and myself - looked forward to. They were not free from challenges, but they taught me so much about the children, the teacher and the classroom. It was a good opportunity to reflect on my OT practice.

10.7.4 Wrapping Up and Preparing the Way Forward: April to June, 2019

Having had prior experience of working in a school, I was rather apprehensive at the start of the final term as I knew that time would fly and I might not finish or accomplish all I had set out to do. I could observe that as the term progressed educators were on the one hand getting tired, while on the other hand, those teachers who had children with challenging behaviour had finally accepted and mastered skills to support the child. I feel that during this term I continued to strengthen the bond with the educators and could take our discussions to a different level; possibly, being more open and a bit more critical without the worry that anyone would be offended or upset.

This was possible once I had gained their trust and we were on an equal footing: I was learning about educational pedagogy, and they were learning about OT theory. An assistant head requested a review of the school behaviour policy and a critique of it through the lens of occupational therapy, and we discussed how OT

theory could be embedded in it to support children's positive behaviour. It was a great learning experience, and it was further confirmation of the level of trust I had acquired and of the value educators perceived in what OT had to offer in school. This continued with my involvement in the school SDP, whereby I sat alongside different educators for the whole day and pooled in my OT knowledge to support the educators' expertise.

My discussions with educators gave me various insights into the dynamics and relationships between teachers and learning support educators. Whilst it was evident that LSEs did not feel that they are equal to the teachers, it was clear that they possessed a skill set that teachers did not, especially when it involved working with children with disability. There often seemed to be a dynamic interaction between the LSEs and the educators, and when this was the case knowledge translation and sharing of expertise occurred. There were situations, nevertheless, in which there were some differences in the ways LSEs and teachers worked with the children; it appeared to boil down to their own beliefs, attitudes and training. LSEs did share that on paper a lot was said about inclusion, but in reality a lot of educators are very set in their ways and were using strategies that were no longer effective in the 21st century.

10.8 My Experience of Data Collection as a Researcher

When reflecting on my experience of data collection in the school, I relive feelings of satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction. Collecting data in a school is no easy feat. In my case, it was extremely challenging to find the space and time to carry out the interviews with the educators. Some interviews were held when students went to lessons with their peripatetic teachers. This meant that it was a race against time to get done in 40 minutes. There were times when planned interviews had to be cancelled as the peripatetic teacher did not turn up. It was also hard to carry out interviews with senior management, and I was at times on edge that we would be interrupted, as in fact it did happen on several occasions. I listened

to those audio tapes of the transcribed data time and time again to try to extract more in-depth understanding from what the participants had shared with me.

It was also a challenge to record all my observations on every school day I attended. It was not appropriate for me to be seen taking notes all the time. I wanted to blend in with the environment, and walking about all the time with a notebook and pen in my hands would have run counter to this. Likewise, leaving the classroom to audio record my own experiences would have been undesirable. Besides, I frequently participated with the educators in whatever was going on. For this reason, after every school day I resorted to retreating to a quiet place where I would spend another 2 hours logging all my reflections about anything I had observed, how I spent my time and any other details I considered pertinent. I adhered religiously to this very tiring processing every week for a whole academic year. It was exhausting by the end of it, but I think that is the reality of working in a school, over and above which I had to collect data consistently and meticulously.

Another difficulty I encountered was that some educators had found difficulty with expressing what they wanted to say or to understand what I was requesting: teachers are doers and potentially may find it hard to verbalise their day-to-day workings. Notwithstanding, many educators gave me good feedback. They said that thinking and reflecting about what I had asked helped them reflect on their own practices.

Another frustration I had to deal with was cancellation of meetings and other dates due to unforeseen circumstances. In the process of understanding the nature of the procedures in a school, I was often worried that I would not collect the data I needed. As I stated previously, I had set out with the mindset that I would not expect the school to adapt in any way to my needs, and to go with the flow. This was easier said than done, and just as there were days when I left school feeling satisfied and happy, there were days when I felt so discouraged and frustrated that I would not complete the research gathering process. I felt the most concerned about my data

collection in the last term as I tried to find the time to slot in final interviews and focus groups while I was keenly aware of the days going by, knowing that in the last term educators would be tired.

I must say that the focus groups with the parents were a great challenge and I feel somewhat that I did not fully succeed in getting the parents on board. It was almost impossible to find days and times suited to all. More often than not, parents would cancel at the last minute, or simply did not turn up. Sometimes they came and brought the children with them. I managed to rope in a nice group of parents from diverse backgrounds who committed to share their experiences and I was very grateful for that, even if it was not what I had planned originally, as I wanted to have larger numbers. But I think this state of affairs reflected the nature of working with parents in schools. Regretably, there was a very low rate of parent participation in any school educational activities for them, unless in some way what was being delivered appealed to the parents or put them in direct contact with their children within the school setting.

My experience of working with “kindergarten parents” was overwhelmingly positive. 80% of them attended an in-class session with their children, and this enlightened me to the fact that parents too needed to be in the classrooms to see what their children were doing, rather than merely being talked to. These sessions often evolved into deeper discussions on various levels and proved supportive of parents in different ways.

By the end of the term I was left feeling very tired. I was exhausted but happy: I guess this is what educators must feel on a regular basis. I got to experience the fast pace of school life. On the one hand, it was all fast paced and unrelenting, allowing no time to the educators to find a breathing space to stop and reflect on their practices. I believe, on the other hand, that being in the presence of children is always an enriching experience, which gives you the energy to keep going. That happens when one's profession is more of a vocation, when one

experiences flow whereby going to school on a daily basis is part and parcel of one's life and not a job that earns one a salary. The latter is necessary, of course, but it should never be the prime motivator. Who would work in a school solely for monetary gain? Nobody, I guess.

10.9 Concluding Reflections

As a researcher and occupational therapist with a focus on occupation, I set out at the start of this journey with a growth mind-set and a vision endorsed by the social model of disability. I viewed disability as being a consequence of an inadequate environment, and changes to the environment, peoples' attitudes on ableism and positive attitudes and motivation as supportive of inclusion in schools. I still firmly believe in this. My research also showed that it was not the child's diagnosis that was the main stumbling block to participation, but other factors, such as building trust, attitudes, knowledge and skills of the educators amongst others proved to be deleterious.

OT school-based services may lessen the gap mostly in supporting a shift from an impairment focus to one that promotes participation. The parents need to be involved and supported to accept this too.

Throughout the period of my data collection, there were times when it was evident that the stakeholders and the school educators forgot that I was a researcher. This had both positives and negatives. On the one hand, it allowed participants to be sincere. In fact, some educators shared rather personal thoughts with me and entrusted me with some of their deepest secrets. On the other hand, at times it created more expectations from me as the researcher. Throughout the year I was invited to some of the school activities involving students as well as social events. On reflection, this to me meant that I was appreciated both as a person and as a professional, and many of the invites were the school's way of acknowledging my presence and input. They were a symptom of their desire to show how the

school was integrating the knowledge they received into their daily school life. They continued to invite me to school celebration days as well and Christmas parties.

There were moments in the school day when even I forgot I was a researcher. There were moments when I experienced flow, when, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (2009, 2014), I was so absorbed and involved in the particular setting or situation that I literally forgot myself. I was very aware of my need to retain professional boundaries, but the situation was conducive to befriending whoever I met along the way.

I was struck by a presentation at a conference on Invitational Leadership that I attended during the period of my data collection. I was attracted to this leadership style, which puts the person at the forefront, advocating that ultimately the personal contact and person-centred approach was what matter most in educational leadership. The premise of this leadership style is that people need people to survive, not just resources and pedagogies that work. Occupational therapy person-centred care advocates similar concepts. Personal care can be provided in various forms: empathy, support, and an overall positive attitude. Occupational therapists, with a background in family-centred care, occupation and the environment, can, I feel, be a great support to schools and education professions on different levels.

“When a flower does not bloom, you fix the environment it grows in not the flower” Alexander Den Heijer (Contemplative Monk, 2020). Participation of children in their school occupations is dependent on many factors that are pertinent primarily to the physical, social and learning environment. These include the curriculum and the child, but it does not stop there. It is all about the ways that adult educators, including the parents, carry out their occupation: their attitude; flexibility; the choice they offer; the relationship they build with the children and adults surrounding them. It is about the amount of child-centredness they embrace. Parents are key stakeholders in supporting this participation, as they lay the foundation skills that

children need to feel secure, in this way developing autonomy and self-esteem that makes them confident learners. This study was founded on collaboration, connectedness and an openness to change: the occupational therapist collaborated with parents and educators, where the latter ranged from the teacher and learning support educators in the classroom to the school principal. Through relationship building and knowledge exchange, an inclusive school community was enhanced.

The journey I embarked on in these past six years has been possible only because I embraced similar principles to those I feel school-based occupational therapists need in order to survive and thrive in the school setting: sound occupational therapy theory and knowledge; professional identity; a positive attitude; flexibility; and an open mind-set. But even more crucial are a passion for collaborating and connecting with people, and the humility that enables learning, as has been my experience, from the educators whilst being open and receptive to change. I hope that, together with other researchers who have a passion and drive towards SBOT, we can commit internationally to cutting edge, evidence-based practice that will inform new ways of working. Starting from home, I believe that as occupational therapists, but even more so as school-based occupational therapists, we need to constantly think creatively on ways to make this work, without overlooking the fact that the starting point is founded in leadership: invitational leadership that keeps the person as the centre. Beck Ericksen's (2010) words, documented a decade ago, still have great significance today. The concluding sentence that follows may remind us that we have to be the catalysts for change.

The question is not "should we?" The question is "how do we get there, given that we started?" Our charge, as school-based therapists, is to move towards a vision of client-centred occupation best practice; how sad it will be if the constraints come from within us (OTs) rather than from others." (p. 67, lines 35, 26, 37; p.68 Ln 30, 31, 35, 36)

Earlier in this chapter, I documented my reflections on the research process in line with the concepts of the dance floor and the balcony, developed by Heifetz et al. (2009). My research participants came from “the dance floor”, whereas my own reflections, while focusing on the bigger picture from above and away from my research participants, came from “the balcony”. As a researcher, I was constantly moving back and forth between the dance floor to the balcony.

I augur that this study will inspire all those in the “balcony”, policy makers and directors, as well as any other professionals, namely educators, working with children on the “dance floor” to reflect on their practices and work more collaboratively. Introducing occupational therapy to early years classrooms in Malta has created a window of opportunity, and I hope this opportunity will not end here. My dream is that one day in the near future occupational therapists will be supporting children’s occupations in Maltese school, collaborating side by side the educators. As an academic and practitioner, I always ask myself what use is research if not to change practice! I firmly believe that introducing collaborative ways of working and school-based occupational therapy in schools is the road we need to take in Malta. Although this is a big feat, I have learned in life that change needs to begin with myself, in my capacity as a university educator. Although it takes time for change to take place, I can be its agent, gradually working with others to see a more widespread change.

This study has hopefully shed some light on how this can be done: by bringing Maltese occupational therapists on board and fostering their willingness to change despite the barriers they will encounter. I quote from Braveman and Colleagues’ (2010) account of a tribute to Gary Kielhoffner, whom Clarke (2010) describes as one of the most dedicated, passionate influential and multifaceted OT scholars of the past 30 years: “life takes on meaning in the minute-by-minute reality in which we experience ourselves achieving the ordinary things”. I think this is so

true when working with children in schools. The words from another established scholar from the OT world should encourage us all to continue to reflect on how we can continue to change our practices to support inclusive schools where all children participate.

“We must welcome change as a challenge, not a burden. We should embrace innovations, practice flexibility, and take time to reflect on practice”.
(Hinojosa, 2007/2011, p.587) .

The end of this doctoral journey, is only the beginning. As a researcher and practitioner, I now aspire to collaborate with others to put this work into practice, acknowledging the challenges but also rewards that lie ahead. My journey continues.

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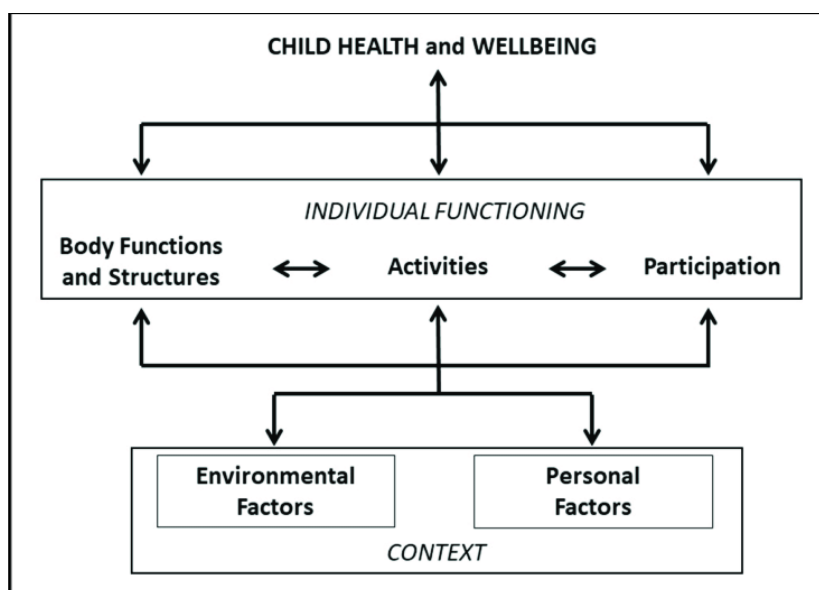
Appendix A

The International Classification of Function, Health and Disease, Children and youth (ICF-CY)

The ICF-CY (2007) is a universal framework that developed from the original ICF (2001) with a particular focus on participation in children and youth. Figure 1 depicts the components of this framework. Rather than the consideration of disease or disorder by the previous version (WHO 2001), this version depicts child's health and wellbeing and hence is strengths-based.

Figure 1

The interactive ICF-CY model, adapted from WHO (2007).



(Reproduced with the permission of the copyright holder)

ICF-CY moves away from the traditional biomedical model and looks at disability in terms of function rather than dysfunction. It stipulates parameters for activity, participation and functional engagement. ICF-CY is ecological and builds on a bio-psycho-social framework, with key considerations of the environment. It is

therefore in keeping with a bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The ICF is a universal framework that can be used across professional groups and in this study, education and health professionals are important stakeholders to support and take forward the outcomes. The ICF- CY considers a number of domains and processes that are relevant to the practice of occupational therapy in schools: the child; body functions and structures; activities; and environmental accommodation, all leading to the child's health, well-being and participation.

In ICF-CY (WHO, 2007), participation is operationalised as observed performance in natural contexts. In this case, it is the participation of children in school occupations and activities. ICF-CY acknowledges that every individual's participation, irrespective of their impairment, is influenced by the cultural, physical and social environment and the nature of activities, whilst the environment also contributes to the way children perform their activities (Maciver et al., 2019a). This is where ICF-CY is supportive of a social model of disability that this study embraces.

In line with occupational therapy theory, the ICF puts the child, activity and occupation at the centre, making the framework very pertinent to this study. Participation in school activities is essential, if learning is to take place and so is the school as the basis for achievement of personal independence and experience of participation in communal activities (Eriksson et al., 2007; Simeonsson et al., 2001). In a nutshell, the importance of ICF-CY for this study is that, whilst being compatible with theoretical models of occupational therapy, this is a broader and universal framework that health and education professionals can identify with, and therefore it situates the study within a wider global context. The forthcoming section is a review of the final conceptual framework for this study, which is specific to occupational therapy practice. This is a study about occupation and occupational therapy and hence it needs to be grounded in an occupation-centered, based and focused model of practice.

Appendix B

A Timeline of Malta's Educational Attainments in Parallel with European and International Legislation.

1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1956	First provisions for students with disability with two special classes for hearing impaired children
1960	Convention against discrimination in Education
1964	Malta gained Independence
1974	Malta became a Republic
1979	Malta no longer occupied by a British colony
1987	Establishment of the National Commission for persons with Disability
1988	Education Act
1989	UNCRC (Convention on the rights of the child).
1989	Opening of three special schools
1990	Malta Ratified UNCRC.
1990	Policy for mainstream schooling for all students espoused by central government
1990	World Declaration on Education for All (United Nations)
1990	Child Development Advisory Unit (CDAU) set up.
1993	First National Policy for Special Education launched Report published by NCPD ⁵⁷ recommending the adoption of a new inclusive education policy.
1994	UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for action (Malta is a signatory to this).
1994	Revision of Education Act with references to Inclusion
1999	Creating the future together
2000	Equal Opportunities Act for persons with Disability(Government of Malta)
2000	New National Minimum Curriculum became law: a new vision of Equity and Entitlement.
2002	Creating Inclusive Schools
2004	Malta joined the EU
2005	Spiteri report on special needs and inclusive education.
2005	For All Children to Succeed – Proposed decentralisation of state schools into colleges.
2006	UNCRPD (Convention on the rights for persons with disability)
2006	Proposals for curriculum reform included the creation of 2 directorates one for educational services and one for quality and standards in education were translated into law.
2009	Harmonization of Church schools with state provision
2009	Review of National Curriculum Framework (NCF) launched
2010	Reform of special schools into resource centres
2011	The National Curriculum Framework consultation Document Published
2011	Elimination of 11+ exam and introduction of Benchmark exam
2012	Ratification of UNCRPD by Malta
2012	NCF became law. ⁵⁸
2014	Education for all: Special and Inclusive Education in Malta- External Audit Report
2014-2024	Launch of a Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta: aimed at providing students with necessary skills for employability and citizenship.
2015	Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle
2016	Launch of National disability Strategy consultation document
2019a	A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (Ministry for Education and Employment)
2019b	A National Inclusive Education framework (Ministry for Education and Employment)
2020	Revised guidelines for the statementing of children with special needs to benefit from support.

⁵⁷ National Commission of Persons with a Disability.

⁵⁸ The NCF was the first curriculum framework based on EU competencies framework. Learning Outcomes Framework aimed at giving schools the freedom to develop programmes that fulfil the needs of learners in the individual schools

Appendix C

School Occupations Cited in the Literature

Occupations in Schools				
Education	Play	Personal care/ ADL	Social Participation and community integration	Source
	Playground			Bart, Jarus et al.(2011)
Active learning , work	Player	Self carer	Friendships	Chapparo & Lowe, (2012)
Reading,Maths Writing, Science, PE Circle time	Break time			Eriksson et al. (2007)
Reading	Quiet recreation, solitary play			Imms et al.(2008)
Academic activities, handwriting and physical exercise		Dressing		Jarus et al.(2011)
Education	Quiet recreation	Personal care		law et al .(1999)
Looking at books	Playing alone			La Vesser & Berg (2010)
	Social and Passive Play			Lynch (2009)
Classroom	Playground	Cafeteria		Mancini & Coster (2004)
Daily routines				Mc Namara & Humphrey (2008)
Academic related activities	Choice time and play			Miller & Amon,(2009)
Academic activity, drawing , writing, cutting	Play in playground			Missiuna, et al (2007)
			Social Participation	Rosenberg et al., (2011)
Classroom, computer, written work	Playground	Bathroom Mealtime Personal care, hygiene	Social conversation	Schenker et al.(2005)
Computer lab. PE, Library, School assemblies School paper	Playground games, Recess, Gym, class games,	Eating in Cafeteria	School clubs, Field trips	Simmeonsson et al. (2001)
			Friendships, social recreation	Solish et al.(2010)
Solitary activities				Tam & Skar (2000)
			Social Participation	Tsao ,et al. (2008)
Major life areas: Education. Learning and applying knowledge		Self care	Interpersonal interactions and Community social and civic life relationships	WHO (2007)
Work, writing, instruction, sitting thinking, listening	Play		Friendship	Ziviani & Muhlenhaupt (2009)



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Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Permission to carry out Doctoral Research

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

10 May 2017 at 11:57

To: victor.agius@um.edu.mt, victor.agius@ilcarn.edu.mt

Dear Mr Agius

Thankyou for the time you dedicated to meet with me this morning, whereby i briefly outlined the nature of my study entitled:

Children Participating in School Occupations: A Collaborative Project Introducing Occupational Therapy in Maltese Early Years Classrooms.

One of the schools that fits my inclusion Criteria is ~~St Mary's Primary School, St Theresa's College~~. I kindly ask for your approval as College Principal to carry out my research at this school .

I Thank you in advance

sincerely

Nathalie

Nathalie Buhagiar.

Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork

MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)

Assistant Lecturer

Occupational Therapy Dept

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ta' Malta

408

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Permission to carry out Doctoral Research

Agius Victor MEDE <victor.agius@gov.mt>

10 May 2017 at 18:20

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>, Agius Victor <victor.agius@gov.mt>

*Dear Ms Buhagiar,**Permission granted.**Kindly now refer requested to Curriculum Directorate.**Regards***Victor Agius**

College Principal

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MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Kindly consider your environmental responsibility before printing this e-mail

B Bontadini Street, Mriehel, BIRKIRKARA, MALTA

{Quoted text hidden}





Re: UREC Approval

Victoria Perici <victoria.perici@um.edu.mt>

7 August 2017 at 11:43

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Dear Dr Buhagiar,

Yes your proposal has been approved and returned to the Faculty. You may contact ~~Ms. Christabel Vella~~ regarding this.

Best regards.

Victoria
Office for Human Resources Management & Development
University of Malta
Tel : 23402810

[Quoted text hidden]



Log 2017-051 Nathalie Buhagiar - Approved

Ethics Committee, Social Research <srec@ucc.ie>
To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

9 June 2017 at 13:14

Dear Nathalie

The Social Research and Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved your application Log 2017-051 entitled "Children Participating in School Occupations: A Collaborative Project introducing Occupational Therapy in Maltese Early Years Classrooms".

The committee wishes you every success with your research and thanks you for your patience during the application process.

All the best

Liz

From: Nathalie Buhagiar [mailto:nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt]
Sent: 02 May 2017 16:07
To: Ethics Committee, Social Research
Subject: Research Proposal for Review, Nathalie Buhagiar 115221087

Kindly find attached my research proposal for review by the social ethics research committee.

I look forward to your feedback

thankyou

Nathalie

Nathalie Buhagiar.

Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork

MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)

Assistant Lecturer

Occupational Therapy Dept

Faculty of Health Sciences

University of Malta

Appendix G



Children Participating in School Occupations: A Collaborative Project Introducing Occupational Therapy in Maltese Early years' classrooms

Dear Participants

I am a doctoral student in Occupational Science at University College Cork and an assistant lecturer at the University of Malta undertaking a research project at B'Kara primary school. The aim of my research is to explore childhood occupations /activities in the early years classrooms and the extent and quality of children's participation in such occupations. The ultimate aim is to determine how an occupational therapy service can best be integrated and applied into the school system.

In order to do this, I need your collaboration by accepting to participate in my study. If you think you would be interested in participating, kindly read the attached information sheet and sign the consent form. If you are a parent and you think your child would like to take part in this study sign the attached consent form on behalf of your child and return it to your child's class teacher. If you agree, I explain the research to your child and ask him or her to be part of this study.

Yours sincerely

Nathalie Buhagiar

Doctoral Student in Occupational Science

University College Cork

Assistant lecturer University of Malta

nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt

mobile no: 79260371

Date:

May 2017

INFORMATION SHEET

Therapy services for children in Malta including occupational therapy are largely delivered in out-patient clinics and health centers and the few services delivered in schools usually adopt a pull out one to one approach. The need for school based services has been acknowledged even by local authorities in educational leadership.

The study is concerned with exploring childhood school occupations in early years students and how a collaborative occupational therapy project in kindergarten and year one classrooms through collaborative consultation with the teachers and learning support assistants can positively enhance all children's participation in school activities/occupations. The study aims to launch a whole-school and whole-class approach that works preventatively as well adaptively with students using principles of best practice from occupational therapy as well as incorporating principles of universal design.

What will the study involve?

My study will use Action research. It will involve initially obtaining teachers, parents and the children's own views about the barriers they (boys and girls aged 4 to 6 years from a centrally located state school) face in participating in school occupations. It aims at developing a whole school, class-based collaborative project. This will use principles of best practice in school based occupational therapy whilst taking into consideration local cultural context and needs. Such a project will embed occupational therapy strategies in the general classroom for the benefit of all students. The researcher will collaborate with administrators, teachers, parents and children at all times throughout this project.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part because you as a school community including administrators, teachers, parents and children play a key role in enabling children's participation in school based occupations/activities.

Do you have to take part?

May 2017

No Participation is voluntary.

Can I withdraw at any time?

You have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinue your participation even after data collection has started. You may also withdraw within two weeks of participation and ask to have the data collected by the researcher destroyed.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

I will ensure that your identity will remain anonymous and that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give?

The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to me and my research supervisor. It will be securely stored on a hard drive. Any forms or questionnaires filled in will be placed in sealed packets and stored at the faculty of health sciences. On completion of the project, they will be retained for minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I think there are no disadvantages in you taking part. This collaboration and reflection may enlighten all of us as to how children can be more active participants in the classroom through knowledge of occupational therapy theory and practice.

What if there is a problem?

Any problems that arise may be openly discussed with the researcher who will seek advice from her supervisors if she cannot address the issue herself.

Who has reviewed this study?

The Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC as well as the University of Malta's ethics committee has reviewed this study before it was approved. The head of school, College principal as well as the directorate for standards and education have also given their consent .

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me on:

Nathalie Buhagiar

Occupational Therapy Dept, University of Malta

E mail: nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt Tel: 00356 79260371

If you have any concerns about the research being carried out please do not hesitate to contact my supervisor:

Dr Helen Lynch

E mail: h.Lynch@ucc.ie Tel: 00353 21 4901569

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form provided

[Over...



Consent Form: Professionals

- I have read the attached information sheet which explains the research project and I understand the nature and purpose of the study
- I am participating voluntarily and I give permission for any interviews and focus groups with *Nathalie Buhagiar* to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview/focus group may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications and that the researcher might present the information at conferences or seminars.

I the undersigned agree to participate in this study

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Print Name : _____

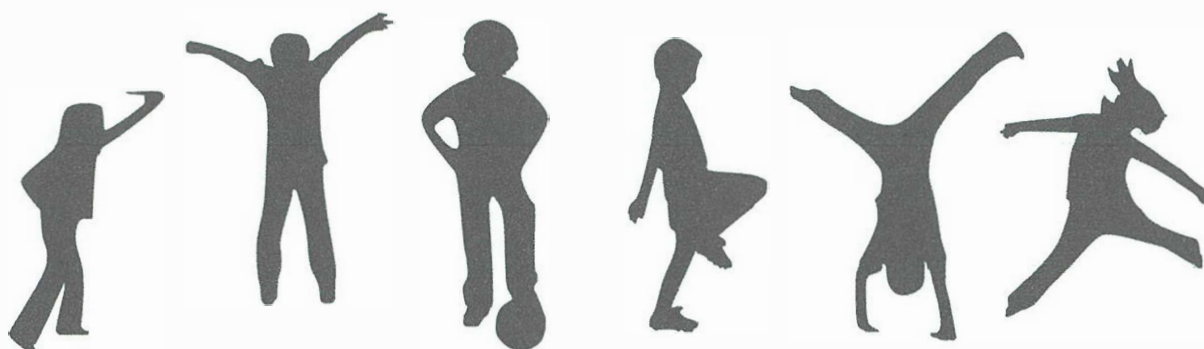
Signed: _____

Researcher: Nathalie Buhagiar

Signed _____

Supervisor: Dr Helen Lynch

Children's Information Sheet



Hello

My name is Nathalie

I would like to know more about the things you do at school so I can understand which activities you like participating in and those you don't like so much

I would love you to share your thoughts and ideas with me so that together with your teacher we can come up with more activities that will help you learn.

If you agree to take part:

- ❖ We will talk about the things you like to do at school
- ❖ We will talk about the things you don't like so much too.
- ❖ We will be working in groups with some of your classmates.
- ❖ We will find out what is important to you to help you learn better and to enjoy your day at school.

Don't worry...

- ❖ Anything you say about the project is confidential; this means we will not share what you said with your parents or teachers.
- ❖ I will not be using your names in our project. We will use different names so no-one will know who said what.
- ❖ You **DO NOT HAVE TO** do this project. It is your choice.
- ❖ If you do not feel like taking part you can stop at any time.

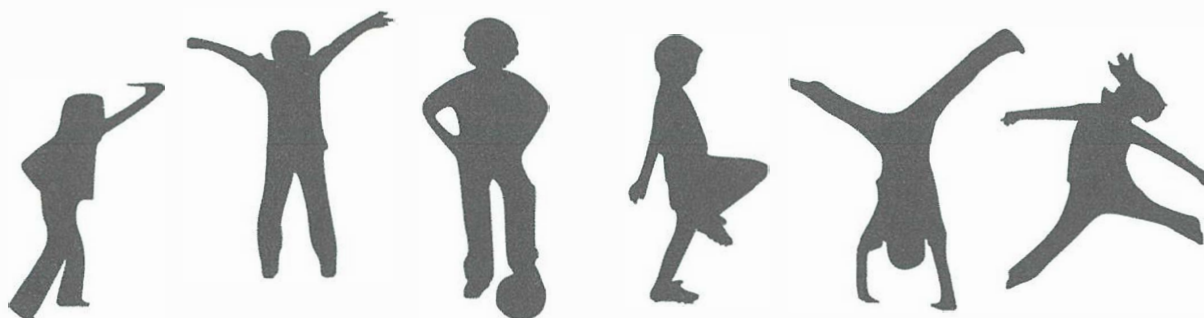
If your parents or guardians would like to contact me, they can email or call me

Nathalie

E mail: nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt

Tel: 79260371

Informazzjoni Għat- Tfal



Hello

Jiena Jisimni Ms Nathalie

Nixtieq nsir naf fuq l-affarijiet li taghmel L-iskola biex nifhem aktar xinhuma dawk l'attivitajiet li thobb tippartecipa fihom kif ukoll dawk li ma jghogbukx daqahekk.

Niehu gost jekk taqşam mieghi l-ideat u l-hsibijiet tieghek dwar dan biex flimkien ma l-ghalliema tieghek jiena nista nfassal attivitajiet li ha jghinuk titghallem izjed bil - qalb.

Jekk tiddeciedi li tiehu sehem inkunu nistghu naghmlu dawn l-affarijiet flimkien:

- ❖ Nitkellmu fuq l-affarijiet li taghmel l-iskola
- ❖ Niddiskutu l-affarijiet li thobb.
- ❖ Niddiskutu l-affarijiet li ma tantx thobb.
- ❖ Niskopru x'inhuma l-ahjar modi biex titghallem ahjar u biex il gurnata ta l-iskola tkun izjed pjacevoli.

Dan ha naghmluh fi grupp ma xi uhud minn shabek. Tinkwetax !.

- ❖ Kul ma ha tghid ha jinzamm bejnietna. Il - genituri u L-ghalliema mhux ha jkunu jafu inti xghid f'dan il grupp.
- ❖ Minix ha nuza ismek meta nikteb dwar ir risposti tieghek allura hadd m'hu ha jkun jaf inti x'ghidt.
- ❖ **Mhux bil fors** tippartecipa f'dan il- proġett. **L-ghazla hija tieghek.**
- ❖ Jekk tiddejjaq tiehu sehem tista' tieqaf meta trid.

Il – genturi jew minn jiehu hsiebek id –dar jista jikkuntatjani jekk ikollhom xi mistoqsijiet dwar dan il- proġett.

Grazzi

Nathalie

E mail: nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt

Tel: 79260371



Parent Consent Form

I have read the attached information letter which explains the research project.

☐

I understand that the letter is asking me to consent to my child participating in a focus group to explore his/her experiences and perspectives on school based occupations

☐

I understand that the letter is asking me to consent to my child participating in any classroom activities or strategies in line with the programme Ms Nathalie Buhagiar is implementing

☐

I understand that the letter is asking me to consent to my own participation in a focus group to share my views about classroom occupations as well as to give my feedback on any aspects of the programme being carried out in my child's class.

☐

I understand that all the information obtained will be kept confidential which means that the name of my child will not be included in any written reports, presentations or publications.

☐

I understand that in addition to my child's participation being voluntary, he/she has the right to withdraw from participating in the research at any stage before or during the sessions.

☐

I also understand that I may change my mind and withdraw my consent for my participation at any time before, during or after the focus groups without providing a reason

☐

I also understand that I may change my mind and withdraw my consent for my child's participation at any time before, during or after the focus groups without providing a reason.

☐

I understand that this research will be published in a research report and that the researchers might publish the information in academic journals. I understand that the researchers might present the information at conferences and seminars.

☐

(Please tick the box to indicate if you consent to participate)

☐ I AGREE to participate in this research

☐ I DO NOT AGREE to participate in this research

(Please tick the boxes to indicate whether or not you give your consent to your child's participation)

Name of Child: _____

☐ I AGREE to my child being involved in this research

☐ I DO NOT AGREE to my child being involved in this research

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Contact number: _____

Researchers name: Nathalie buhagiar

Researcher's signature: _____

Supervisors Name: Dr Helen Lynch

Supervisor's signature _____

Date: _____

Researcher's contact details:

nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt

Mobile: 79260371



Kunsens mill- Genituri

Jiena qrajt l-informazzjoni li tispjega dan il -progett.

☐

Nifhem li littra qed titlobni biex nghati l-kunsens lit - tila/tifel tieghi tiehu sehem f'dan l-istudju u jaqsam/taqsam l-esperjenza tieghu/taghha fuq ix xogholjiet/attivitajiet li tiehu/jiehu sehem f'ijhom fil klassi u fl-iskola.

☐

Nifhem li littra qed titlobni biex nghati l-kunsens lit tila/tifel tieghi tiehu sehem f'xi attivitajiet li jsiru fil klassi minn Ms Nathalie Buhagiar flimkien ma l-ghalliema .

☐

Nifhem li littra qed titlobni biex nghati l-kunsens tieghi li jiena stess nippartecipa f'dan l-istudju billi niehu sehem f'"focus Group" flimkien ma genituri ohrajn biex naghti l-oppinjoni tieghi fuq l attivitajiet li t-tifla/tifel tieghi jippartecipa f'ijhom fil klassi kif ukoll biex nghati l-opinijoni tieghi fuq xi aspetti tal programm li ha jsir fil klassi tat tifel/tifla tieghi.

☐

Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li ha naghti ha tibqa kunfidenzjali u isem it tifel/tifla tieghi mhix ha tidher f'ebda rapport, prezentazzjoni, jew pubblikazzjoni.

☐

Nifhem li lpartecipazzjoni tal tifel/tifla tieghi huwa volontarju u li l-tifa/tifel tieghi jista jiddeciedi li jieqaf mill partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju meta jrid/trid.

☐

Nifhem ukoll li nista nbiddel hsiebi u niddeciedi li ma rridx nippartecipa izjed f'dan l-istudju qabel waqt u sahansitra wara li jkun beda minghar il bzonn li naghti spjegazzjoni.

☐

Nifhem ukoll li nista nbiddel hsiebi u niddeciedi li ma rridx li tifel/tifla tieghi tippartecipa izjed f'dan l-istudju kemm qabel, waqt u sahansitra wara li jkun beda minghar il bzonn li naghti spjegazzjoni

☐

Nifhem li din ir- ricerca tista tigi pubblikata go rapport jew gurnal akkademiku kif ukoll l-informazzjoni minn din ir ricerca tista tigi ipprezentata f'xi Konferenza jew " seminar".

☐

(Immarka il kaxxa jekk trid tippartecipa)

- ☐ Naqbel li niehu sehem
- ☐ Ma nixtieqx niehu sehem f'dan l-istudju

(Immarka l-kaxxa li tindika li il kunsens tieghek biex li t-tifel jew tifla tieghek tippartecipa)

Isem it tifel/tifla: _____

- ☐ Naqbel li it tifel/tifla tieghi tiehu/jiehu sehem
- ☐ Ma nixtieqx li t –tifel/ tifla tieghi tiehu sehem f'dan l-istudju

Firma ta' genitur/ gwardjan legali: _____

Isem ta' genitur/gwardjan legali: _____

Numru ta mowbaji / telefon: _____

Firma ta' supervisor: _____

Isem ta' supervisor: Dr Helen Lynch

Data:

Children's Consent Form



If you would like to take part in this study please write your name here:

Researcher's Name: Nathalie Buhagiar

Researcher's Signature: _____

Supervisors name: Dr Helen Lynch _____

Supervisor's Signature: _____

Kunsens ta' tfal



Jiena nixtieq niehu sehem f'dan l-istudju.

Isem (firma) ta' tifel/tifla

Firma Tar –ricerkatrici _____

Isem tar-ricerkatrici: Nathalie Buhagiar

Firma ta' Supervisor _____

Isem ta' Supervisor : Dr Helen Lynch

Data:

Appendix H

Interview Questions: Teachers: Phase 1

1. What constitutes or should constitute school based occupation from your perspective as a teacher?
2. What Occupations are children participating in, in your classroom and school?
3. Talk to me about the enablers to participation in these occupations in early year's classrooms from your experience and in your school?
4. Talk to me about the barriers to participation in these occupations in early year's classrooms from your experience and in your school?

Focus Group Questions: Parents: Phase 1

1. What constitutes or should constitute school based occupation from your perspective as a parent?
2. What Occupations are your children participating in, in their classroom and school?
3. Talk to me about the things that enable your child participate in school based occupation/activities in your child's school and classroom?
4. Talk to me about the things that make it more difficult for your child to participate in school based occupation/activities in your child's school and classroom.

Interview Questions: Other Stakeholders: Phase 1

1. What Occupations are children participating in your school?
2. Talk to me about the enablers to participation in these occupations in early years classrooms from your experience and in your school?
3. Talk to me about the barriers to participation in these occupations in early years classrooms from your experience and in your school?

Focus Group Questions: Children

What are the things you like to do at school?

What are the things you do not like at school?

What are the things that help you learn and make you happy at school?

You can draw a picture or talk to me about your experiences at school.

In addition to the focus group, children were asked to take photos of the activities they like doing in class.

“Focus Group” mat - tfal

X'inhuma L-affarijiet li thobb taghmel l-iskola??

X'inhuma l-affarijiet li ma tantx thobb jew li ma tantx jghogbuk?

X'inhum importanti ghalik biex titghallem ahjar u tihu gost l-iskola ?

It Tfal jistghu jigu mitlubin ipingu stampa tal- klassi taghhom li tinkludi l-affarijiet li jhobbu u dawk li ma tantx ihobbu. Din ha tghinhom biex jesprimu ruhhom ahjar

It –tfal jistghu jigu mitluba jiehdu ritratti tal-attivitajiet li jghogbuhom fil klassi u mbad dawn jintuzaw bhala bazi tad- diskussjoni. (NB. Ritratti li juri xi ucuħ tat tfal jigu distrutti mal-ewwel)

Appendix I

Phase 2

Interview Guide

Questions for Educators: Teachers, learning support Educators and SMT

Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about your overall experience of having occupational therapy involvement in your school this year?
2. What changes if any in children's participation do you envisage following occupational therapy involvement in your school through collaborative consultation?
3. In your opinion, how may the structure, content and process of the early years curriculum in Maltese schools be influenced through Occupational Therapists collaborating with educators in schools.
4. What does an OT need to know and understand if this project was to continue? what skills and attributes in your opinion would the OT need to have in order to be able to understand and work with educators effectively in schools?
5. Please feel free to add any other comments, critique on your experience and suggestions on how you think having a school based occupational therapist can support you as a teacher, learning support educator and senior management team member in carrying out your role.

Questionnaire (Any educators that were involved in the school)

Describe briefly your overall experience of having occupational therapy involvement in your school this year?

MARK WITH A (+) ALL THOSE YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED

- Professional Development Sessions:
Strategies to Support Children's Participation
The Chill Out Room
- Curriculum Development time
- Discussion on use of Chill out Room with Individual Students
- Other OT advice with individual students
- Classroom Embedded Strategies
- Involvement of OT in IEP
- Resources shared and discussed by and with the OT through email, the school's website or as handouts
- Leaflets on Attention, backpack awareness, handwriting etc
- Sessions with KG classes involving the parents
- Sensory motor activities with KG classes.
- Parental morning and evening talks/sessions.
- Let's Move Weekly Activity
- Other _____

WHAT HAVE YOU VALUED MOST AND WHY?

Has OT involvement (see above) in your school supported you and your staff in any way?

yes no

If YES

How?

- In enabling you to work better with the children?
- In making your school more Inclusive?
- In providing you with support to enable the children to participate more in school life?
- Other

Please Elaborate

Have you other experiences of OT? YES NO

If you answered YES, how has this experience of occupational therapy involvement in your school been different to any other experiences you have had related to provision of occupational therapy?

If not- what was good and bad about it?

What does an OT need to know and understand if this project was to be developed into a service?

what skills and attributes in your opinion would the OT need to have in order to be able to understand and work with educators effectively in schools?

What changes if any in children's participation do you envisage following extended OT consultation in your school?

In your opinion, how may the structure, content and process of the early years curriculum in Maltese schools be influenced through Occupational Therapists collaborating with educators in schools.

Please feel free to add any other comments, critique on your experience and suggestions on how you think having a school based occupational therapist can support you as a SMT member in carrying out your role .

THANKYOU VERY MUCH!

Nathalie

Sample of Intervention Log

Date	Year group	Where?	Intervention	With whom and Duration
22/11/2017	Year 1	Class and assembly	Discussed with Ms the items for sensory back pack including slinky, tangle toy, putty and play foam and straws. Z did not really like slime. We spoke about a timetable for sensory activities and I helped N insert heavy work activities into the timetable. Also agreed to show Ms N how to do deep pressure activities next week in sensory room. We also got a move and sit cushion for Z and he appears to sit better with it. We will continue to try out and then handover to relatives to support child	Z (30 minutes)
	Ms B Year 1	Class	Demo and helped children with copying their name. Observed that some children couldn't copy their name with a visual cue namely by having a model of their name on the table. These were D and Iz Spoke to Ms S about Z and we discussed her need for me to share some resources	Whole class (20 minutes)
	Ms R Year 1	Class	Demo to children on craft activity: stick cotton wool and eyes on ghosts and scarf faces. LSE observed some sensory sensitivity to cotton wool in one child. One other child was reluctant to participate	Whole class (20 minutes)
	Ms C Ms T	Class and out room	Worked with LSE to try limit setting for S and trying to engage in activity in the classroom. Ms T got the pop up tent which S retreats to ever so often. Session in SM room jumping on bobath ball . stereotypic behaviour noticed, but girl more alert. Discussed with Ms T to try and take child to SM room and to involve S in circle song and to get other kids to hold her hand.	Child and LSE (30 minutes)
	Year 1	Class	Observation of all children colouring, and encouraging educators what to observe in terms of corrected posture on chair pencil grip ,paper.	Children/LSE/ Teacher (5 minutes)
	Ms N year 1	Class	Pd session on ideas to support the occupation of literacy. Eg. scissor skills. Demo to show use of scissors and various classroom tools.	Teachers years 1 to 3 (90 minutes)
29/11/2017	PD session	School Hall	Parent education session. Demo Move and sit cushion Weighted turtle Info on attention behaviour Sensory sensitivity Heavy work activities OT contact	A group of 50 parents. (60 minutes)

Date	Year	Where	Intervention	With Whom and duration
14/12/2017	Year 3	Class	Discussed with teacher re sensitivity issues of M and gave her handout to pass on to students mother. Teacher said she would like the info sent to her too. Sent teacher a classroom version of sensitivity handout.	Teacher/Mother (15 minutes)
24/1/2018	SMT		Meeting with ass. Head Ms M	(45 minutes)
31/1/2018		Class	Curriculum embedded strategies year 1 Spoke to all teachers of kg classes re sensory motor groups	
7/02/2018	KG 1 and 2	Class	Sm groups with KG1 and 2 Curriculum embedded strategies yr 1s Discussion with Ms N re Z	3KG1 4KG 2 (120 minutes)
15/02/2018	KG 1 and 3	Class and school yard	SM groups with KG1 and 2 Meeting re Nathan samwel E mail re strategies for K identified at risk sent to Mrs B	4 KG1 3 KG2 (360 minutes) (10 minutes)
28/02/2018	Year 1 Yr 1 -6	Class. Chill out room School Hall	Classroom embedded strategies with year 1 Set up chill out room together with supplier and INCO. Spoke to Ms K re A Prepare for PD PD session 230 till 430	Teacher (30minutes) (180 minutes) (15 minutes) LSE (120 minutes) Whole primary school
5/03/2018	Yrs 1 & 2	Class Literacy Room	CD time with teachers of year 1 and 2 Spoke with teacher about a boy with difficulties. Gave her my e mail so mum can contact me. Spoke to literacy teacher Ms J re my role and promised to send info she can use to reinforce writing and other ways to support the occupation of literacy	Teacher RSS
18/05/2018	Yr 1	Class SLP room Class	Liaison with LSE ZAC Liaison with class teacher: child Liaison with LSE: Child Discussion with SLP and Early intervention teacher: selene In class activity year 1Ms R In class activity year 1 Ms B KG 1 session in class whole class plus parents KG 2 session in class whole class plus parents	LSE Teacher LSE RSS' Children/LSE/Teacher Children/parents/ KGE (120 minutes)
30/05/2018	KG 2 Year 1	School Yard	2 KG sessions with parents Scooter board activity with yr 1 classes (two) and 3 KG classes	Parents (120 minutes)
4/06/2018	Year 2	Board Room	Met parent of XG to give support and discuss concerns re handwriting. Also gave handout on sentence and letter formation . passed this on through the teacher	Parent (30 minutes)

¹ Relevant Support Staff

Field Note**Term 2****Week 4****Wednesday 3rd February 2018**

Today year 1 classrooms were supposed to have a meeting and I was meant to spend the whole day to get to know the parents in person especially prior to the focus groups. Unfortunately due to a union directive the parents meetings were cancelled. I still went to school to meet Ms N to show her some self - regulation exercises for Z. We went up to the sensory room which was matted and had a n exercise ball and three soft shapes. A visual hung from the ceiling and this has plastic thin ropes that light up at the edges. The room is rather run down but there are plans to refurbish it and Mr A the assistant head did ask me for suggestions.

So I showed and explained the following exs for Z:

- Forward rolls
- Bouncing and floppy on the ball
- Jumping over shapes.
- Lying on the floor with deep pressure applied by a cushion or the ball.
- Pushing the large exs ball towards Z and he has to push back.
- Throw bounce catch ball against wall.

I advised N to have a visual schedule of the activities she wanted Z to do so that he would have some structure and to give warning of one last activity before departing the room. We tried this and it worked well. Z transitioned without problems.

Another boy came along to the room and Z went up to him and greeted him which was good considering he does not like to play or interact with kids at breaktime. It may be since the boy had an I pad but anyway they did greet him and was happy to see him. The other boys Isa said that last year they did meet in the SM room. This LSE joined in our session and I explained to both LSE what and why I was doing.

Back in class Ms N asked me to stay a while and observe Z doing some activities with the other children

She said he really liked the slime I had given him and asked if he could use it to wait whilst she prepared the next activities. I said that yes it was great as a transition tool. She then said that she got Z to use the cushion intermittently and I confirmed this was the best as if he used it all the time it would not be so effective. She was also concerned about his participation in social studies as children had the task of colouring the objects in their SS book that were found in the classroom. Z did not like colouring. I told her that as long as he identified the objects it was fine . he didn't have to colour. So instead she made him indicate the correct objects by placing a star on the picture. I told her this was good as not only was he doing the task but he was using his fine motor skills to pick up the stars and stick them.

We also spoke about the assembly with the class teacher and that social story would ideally be read at school the day before at the end of the school day and in the evening at home. I told Ms N that initially Z could also stay for part of the assembly and if she realised he was

becoming dysregulated than she could transition him out of assembly before he got upset . Each assembly would be lengthened as Z got used to it.

My reflections

Whilst working with Z in the classroom I noticed what a calm atmosphere there was. All the children were sitting at their tables and colouring. I did notice that the chairs were too low for some children and that children still held their books straight in front of them rather than with a tilt.

I managed to have a chat with Mr A about the SM room and he said that the precincts office had been informed about the work and that they were to start with the refurbishment of the rooms namely removing the curtains adjusting lighting and other. I also saw Ms A and spoke to her about Silene the girl in KG 2. She informed me that IEPs were called off until the union directive held.

She also explained to me that the way things worked was that unfortunately the “worst” Isas were left for the kg classes assuming that children could learn by play from each other. Whilst the better ones were given to the older students. Whilst understanding this I was rather shocked. I have been observing the kg classes and yes some of the Isas appear to not have much experience or knowledge on how to work with the children. I have experienced this lack of professionalism even in the interview I have conducted so far. This leaves a lot of food for thought....the crucial early years children given the worst educators!!! I think if I know this as a parent I would home school my child! And ironically educators are fighting for a rise in pay....well most educators deserve it but with good salary come competent professionals I hope!

Gave child an envelope for his mum with info to enrol him in a sports class on Saturday morning

Appendix L

SBOTTI Documented Evidence/Data Set for this study

- Sample of Observation log
- Sample of documented feedback from Tier 1 intervention : Curriculum time
- Sample of Tier 1 Intervention delivered by e mail.
- Sample of Tier 3 Intervention
- School development plan with embedded intervention form OT Documentation of IEP meeting.
- Resume of Senior Management Team Meeting through E mail.
- E mail discussion with school Inclusion Coordinator
- E mail Feedback from Parent

Observation week 10

Ms B

The class were doing a numeracy activity when I entered. Ms B was going around to see how the children were doing and to help them if necessary. As usual an informal atmosphere prevailed in the class. Some children came to greet me and chatted with me. Ms B after greeting me, went on supporting the children. The LSAs were also sitting by the children they support and helping them with the task. Ms B thanked me for the pd session and said it was really interesting. I asked her how the parents evening went. She spoke to me about one child Jean who had difficulties with letter recognition and number recognition too I asked her what she felt was the main difficulty and she said that she felt this boy had a general delay. I said that maybe we could guide the mum to reinforce the letters and numbers through some other sensory strategies using sand foam sky writing and some other strategies and she said it was a good idea. Also we discussed the factt that in January the complimentary teacher may be involved to assess Jeans literacy skills further. The children got excited as I had a hoppity ball with me . She did not shout at them to remain seated but gently asked them to return to their seats. I have to date rarely or never heard Ms B raise her voice. One boy finished his work and asked Ms B if he could go in the tent. She said yes. I have noticed the tent being used by the children whereby they sit init and read a book if they finish their work sooner than others

Ms B told me that today she would be doing a treasure hunt to reinforce the concept of shapes. She first got the children in class to draw the main shapes square , rectangle and circle. She then put three large models in middle space in the classroom and asked the children to come out and drive a car around the shapes as if they were roads. The middle space in the classroom is a great working space and gives the children an opportunity to move whilst the seating arrangements allow a more informal learning environment but one that enables the teacher to reach all children. Following this the teacher asked the children to get their copybooks and pencils and line up for the treasure hunt. The children searched for shapes in the school yard and drew whatever shapes they saw. This allowed exploration, freedom, the opportunity to move and for the children to interact with the educators.

Mr K

The children were on the mat and Mr K was calling them out one by one to write the letters on the smart screen. The children greeted me and Mr K continued his activity. The children were naming objects with the letter B and I joined in. giving them hints to other words, The children were very responsive and Mr K joined me in giving the children cues to other words. Mr K tried to give equal chances to all the children involving even the children who were more reluctant to participate. Then Mr K practiced the Christmas action song with the children. All the children weer involved and eager to participate. He repeated the first part of the song they had already learnt and then went on to a new bit. Mr K is firm with the children raising his voice now and again but praising the children for their efforts.

Ms J (went in to check M cushion)

Went in to class to check on Ms cushion which appears ok. Ms J spoke to me about Amir saying how tired she was that he was hitting the children and then the SMT did not take her seriously. She said that she had bought some of the things I suggested and that she heard from PD session but they didn't work. Then she took the children to the toilet and apparently Amir damaged the flushing she said. She came back in a fluster shouting at Amir saying get up from the floor aggressively and pulling him and shouting in front of all the other children. "I can't take this any more. I'm going to speak to higher authorities. Its me or him in the class" The shouting and anger went on for a few minutes. I remained

silent and helped out with putting on the children's jackets. This behaviour made me reflect on the influence of adults on children. I don't think such behaviour is appropriate in front of young children, it is clear that this woman is tired of teaching and maybe she should quit sooner rather than later, the boy has been referred for further assessment so that he may get some support but I don't think that with better management his behaviour will improve. LSA in class cannot contribute much because of other girl.

Ms N

Spoke to Ms noelen who updated me on Z. We had agreed that he would use a social and sensory story to be able to tolerate assembly but he does not want to participate in assembly or go down in the Yrd In breaktime. Its as though he wants to retain his safe space in the classroom and use his computer and the things he knows. We discussed some options including him standing at the back of the yard rather than in the crowd. Persevering with going into the yard. Going in with a friend. Using a different entrance to yard .Ms Noelene asked me about the reason for this and I explained that the noise level is very high and the environment rather disorganised in assembly as well as in break. Re break we spoke about Z having something to do that may entice him to participate. Noelen is to explore some options. Noelene is trying really hard and she expressed her frustration and concern that nothing seems to work. I did try to explain that the noise and sensory overload is a real thing and it is clear that Z dislikes this. I observed him to pit his hands over his ears everytime children are going down for break and there is a lot of noise. I reassured her that although we should keep on trying to help him participate in assembly we should not insist to the point that we loose the rest of his participation in other activities such as classroom tasks and individual tasks. I also explained that the more organised and predictable tasks and time slots were the better for Z and that is why he probably dislikes assembly and break time so much.

Ms C

Ms C was carrying out an activity. The children were sitting on the mat. namely children were assigned a colour and they had an instrument . when she shouted out their colour they had to play their instrument. MS C prompted the children when they played their instrument without taking note of their colour. **Ms C uses a firm voice with the children but is king and sweet with them. She is noted to give concrete feedback on the children's behaviouir and expects compliance by all the children even those with needs/ disability.** After this activity Ms C asked them if they wanted to do some dancing to which they responded positively. In these 15 minutes it was interesting to note how many skills the teacher tapped in on. Auditory for the instrument playing colours, listening and movement. Ms C likes to use the words "give me your ears" for the children to listen and she persists till everyone is listening. She uses a loud tone of voice to show assertion but then displays gentle gestures with the children. I have noticed that The teacher is always in control of the class.

PD session

Parents were really attentive

Curriculum Development time for KG1 and KG 2.**Addressing areas of Learning Outcomes within the School Action Plan****4th and 7th February 2018****Bkara Primary School**

The following are in line with the School Development Action Plan that this year includes :

1. Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle through Physical activity
2. Promoting Positive Behaviour
3. Nurturing and Sustaining Positive Behaviour

This session will focus on explaining and sharing some tips to promote positive behaviour through better self - regulation and physical activity.

Discuss with educators how:

- How to manage physical well -being
DISCUSS WITH CHILDREN/PARENTS THE MEANING OF PHYSICAL WELL BEING. GIVE EXAMPLES. HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY, RELATE TO AND EXPLAIN BODY ENGINE.
- How to help children regulate emotions using different sensory strategies .They will be guided on how to Seek opportunities to develop the body's potential through the appropriate sensory motor activities

AWARENESS OF HIGH LOW AND JUST RIGHT ENGINES. PRACTICE ACTIVITIES THAT CALM AND ALERT. INCLUDING HEAVY WORK ACTIVITIES. LINK THESE TO PHYSICAL WELL BEING. (REFER TO SOFT TOYS)

- Demonstrate self -care skills in school. The importance of children's participation in daily chores and will be given practical hints on what are the best activities for children. We will engage in a discussion about rules and routines in children's daily life and encouraged to adhere to them with the provision of practical examples. The importance of these activities to enhance positive behaviour will be discussed

WE WILL DISCUSS THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF CARE SKILLS IN SCHOOL

- Prewriting skills.

**PRESENT THE 4PS AND PRACTICE THEM
POSTURE AND PREPARATION , PAPER and PENCIL GRIP**

GAMES to support the above**FOR KG1 AND KG2**

- Obstacle courses for children to move under over down up through.
- Make shapes using their body or in groups
- Simon says
- Ball games (throw catch, under, over etc)
- Jumping to a given number
- Support the child to walk along a give line: straight, curved, diagonal, use the yard and draw lines with chalk or use tape indoors.
- When out walking try moving in different ways.
- Painting with brushes with water, drawing with chunky chalk on a wall (if available)

Chores for 3 and 4 year olds: To share with Parents

- Brush teeth
- Get dressed and undressed
- Water plants
- Put toys away
- Dry cutlery
- Wipe the table
- Fold pants
- Match socks
- Empty a small paper bin

ACTIVITY OF THE WEEK: LETS MOVE. WEEK 8

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@ucm.edu.mt>
 to Das, Maria; Maria, Maria; Josephine, Rosemarie; Audrey, emilycardona; Claudine, bnc; Anna, bcc; Ede

WHEELBARROW HAND WALK

Children can work in pairs. One child lies prone (on tummy) on the floor. The other child grasps his/her ankles while he or she pushes up and walks on his/her hands. The child should weight bear on extended fingers.

For younger Children: do this in the playground where the floor is matted and ensure children can lift their body weight on their hands.

The teacher and LSA can provide additional support by providing support at the knees and hips as needed.

This is a good activity for promoting upper body strength and stability. Also the head is upside down and the child is moving so the child is stimulating the vestibular system. This activity also provides proprioception to the arms. A great activity to prepare body and hands for writing!

ENJOY!
 Have a good week!

Nathalie

Nathalie Buhagiar,
 Doctoral Candidate In Occupational Science, University College Cork

IEP Meeting Report

NM

Year 1.2

Ms E and Ms M

Services:

N attends OT sessions at POTTS and is being seen by Ms L: X1 weekly

He receives school intervention from INSPIRE from Ms Y once weekly.

Persons present were N's mum, his class teacher and LSA, Ms A, INCO, Ms F, Assistant Head and myself.

Main concerns: Feeding. N still has mashed and pureed food. He can easily choke if food is not mashed. He has no teeth and hence cannot chew. However he appears to have sensitivity and particular preferences for tastes and dislikes textures. Parent was worried about next years Isa feeding him and said that unless person is trained then nico may choke if he is not fed properly. At this point we discussed with Ms A the INCO the importance of a proper handover by having the new ISA shadow Ms M for a good period of time. No professional appears to be dealing with the oral motor issues.

Other significant matters to OT emerging were:

- N has difficulty going down the stairs. We discussed the practice with physical and verbal prompt and encouragement and chanting 1,2,1,2,1,2
- He has difficulty throwing and catching the ball: we discussed practice throwing and catching different sized balls and balls with different textures and weights: foam, basketball, plastic(a heavier ball would be ideal to provide more proprioceptive feedback) and increasing the distance. Also throwing ball into a basketball net would be a good activity.
- He has poor hand strength and fine motor difficulties. We discusses writing with chalk on chalk board in classroom or in the playground on the walls. This will improve shoulder girdle strength. This activity to be done in all fours whilst writing on a big cartboard with a thick feltpen.
- The mouthing of inedible objects was discussed. It was decided that this issue merits more dedicated time for discussion.
- He is not yet toilet trained. Discussion centred around regular routine and practice of this skill with the use of visual and other prompts and the continued practice at home.
- He only eats mashed food. N has no teeth and hence cannot chew
- He can undress and this was to be continued and encouraged in context such as after getting home from school.
- Difficulty with dressing: Techniques like backward chaining , prompting and modelling were discussed
- He cannot do zips and buttons. Discussion centred around the practice of buttoning and zip on different garments and not combined with a dressing activity. Again through the use of backward chaining.

- He is sensitive to touch on his hands: expose to jelly, cream, shaving foam, play foam, peat, sand, flour.
- Discussion around oral motor issues occurred: sensory or behavioural. He mouths different objects so it appears that he is seeking and hence is more likely to have poor registration rather than sensitivity. The pickiness with eating is probably related to taste. The mouthing of objects and large ones too may be because he is proprioceptive seeking. Since N does not eat solids he cannot get that stimulation from the food and hence the mouthing. So maybe if we give a lot of sensory input to the mouth than he won't mouth objects any more. Electric tooth brush, blowing activities eg whistle, bubbles, sipping through a straw and bottle were discussed and decided upon
- Positive behaviour phrases were discussed and their use encouraged such as using "good work" rather than "good boy"
- N has some attention difficulties.
- N dislikes attending music lessons. He appears to be auditory sensitive yet likes the "banda". Possible the room is not acoustically good. We discussed the possibility of him being given something to do during the lesson such as bang on a drum then this proprioceptive input may dampen the auditory sensitivity. Also the rhythmic drumming or even music may be calming for N and since he is making the music himself he feels "safer"
- Discussion around physical prompts in writing. These should be reduced but verbal prompts should continue and physical prompts should fade away.
- Discussed supports for child to participate better in religion lessons though relevant material on web sites.

Action

- ❖ Discussion on oral motor skills toileting with class team and parents
- ❖ Discuss fine motor and hand strength strategies with LSE that can be integrated into the class routine especially during craft activities.
- ❖ Oral motor stimulation modelling and coaching LSE prior to and during snack time
- ❖ Ball skills integrated into the classroom literacy and numeracy activities
- ❖ Going down stairs in context as in before break time: Demonstrate to LSE and Class teacher, model method and ensure it is observed
- ❖ Activities for adaptation of music lesson (ask Ms M... when this is held)

School Development Action Plan

KEY AREA: Learning and Teaching

Priority Development Target	Cross-curricular approaches whilst implementing Continuous Assessment	Link to national policies <i>Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024</i>
Success Criterion/Criteria	A continuous assessment process will provide an opportunity for learners to be assessed through different modes throughout the scholastic year. Unleashing Talent – Bringing out the best in yourself and the learners you serve Enhancing a <i>We are all learners</i> mentality. Using technology to personalize, not standardize	<i>For All Children to Succeed</i> <i>National Policy & Strategy for the Attainment of Core Competences in Primary Education</i> <i>National Curriculum Framework</i> <i>My Journey</i> <i>Learning Outcomes Framework</i>

Implementation: Kindergarten to Year 6

Actions	Steps to be taken	Timescale	Coordinator	Monitoring and evaluation
Early Years Kindergarten 1 & 2 and Years 1 & 2 Project based assessment	----- ----- ----- Half an hour once a day dedicated to physical activity Brain gym – Promoting healthy lifestyle Emphasis on <i>I can</i> statements Project-based approach – Kindergarten assistants and teachers in Years 1 & 2 will enhance the importance of	First Term Throughout the scholastic year	Ms Nathalie, Occupational Therapist will lead the two-hour kindergarten curricular session. <i>(This can be done in the children if they R. there is KGAs will observe & can model approaches)</i>	Head and Assistant Head of School will monitor the outcome of children's unique strengths through routine activity in the classroom. Head of School and Assistant Head will ensure that: All educators are in possession of the necessary resources Photos/videos of learning experiences are collected in separate class digital folders Student class assessment tasks are stored separately for opportune retrieval SMT will monitor and evaluate that learning has moved from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi to programmes that

**Resume of SMT meeting , 10th January 2018**

3 messages

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

11 January 2018 at 10:34

To:
at i
<m
<ro

Good morning to All

Firstly THANKYOU very much for your attention and feedback yesterday. I really enjoyed the session and look forward to implementing what we spoke about.

To recap:

1. Professional Development with LSA's on use (and abuse)of the Chill Out room
2. Attend Curriculum time with all the year groups to discuss function and use of Chill Out Room as well as agree on best way to share with them the classroom embedded strategies i will be trialing in year 1.
3. Classroom embedded strategies for the 2 year 1 classrooms I am working with (still to be discussed with teachers) but also sharing with other year 1 classrooms.
4. Liaise with ~~Ms Mifod~~ sensory motor activities for KG 1 students
5. Carry out sensory motor activities with KG 2 students in the two chosen KG 2 classrooms(Ms Charlene and Mr Kirsten) but also introduce and guide their implementation with the other KG 2 classrooms.
6. The use of simple equipment will be introduced at breaktime: skipping ropes and foam balls for the older students and chunky chalk, hopyity balls and foam balls (discussion with KG 2 teachers first) with the KG1 and KG 2 students.
7. A set of information leaflets compiled by my OT final year students (both in english and maltese) will be made available for both parents and staff. We discussed that possibly the best way is to send by e mail or put on facebook groups (Those not present if u have any more ideas dont hesitate to tell me)
8. Follow up of the IEP recommendations with KG 2 and year 1 students by meeting with the parents and Isa's.
9. PD evening session for parents : 26th january at 7pm.

If i have forgotten anything else we discussed that needs acting upon let me know.

have a good weekend . ill be at school next week on Thursday

NB attached the power point for those of you who could not make it ad the recipe for date and walnut slices....will make them again for those who missed them!

Nathalie Buhagiar.

*Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork
MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)
Assistant Lecturer
Occupational Therapy Dept
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Malta*

2 attachments

Date and Walnut Slices.pdf
225K



SMT Meeting Presentation.pptx
3043K

11 January 2018 at 13:49

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>



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Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

movement breaks and heavy work

14 messages

At
To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

6 January 2018 at 08:05

Dear Nathalie,

I am going through some new IEPs and behaviour plans for year 4 students. I am finding a common factor for a lot of students. They need some planned movement activities and heavy work activities. As you know, I have been suggesting these strategies for a long time now. I also provide a list of the exercises the LSAs can do with the students. However, somewhat, the LSAs are still at a loss!

I was thinking about creating 'heavy work activity cards'. They will consist of a series of cards with a number of exercises to be followed and practised either in the yard or in class. Similar to a gym workout. I will distribute these according to the students' needs (e.g. a class workout for students who need a class movement break). The aim is to also provide a different learning opportunity and a useful movement break apart from the trampoline!!!! At the moment the trampoline is very popular and it is being overloaded and misused.

Can you please give me your opinion about this, and maybe some feedback too...

Thank you.
Regards,

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

6 January 2018 at 08:45

Thats an excellent idea!! i am currently preparing the classroom intervention strategies for phase 2 of my phd research and movement breaks is on my list . The need for more movement and physical activity came out strongly in most of the interviews. Obviously ill be focusing on the younger kids. However there are 2 programmes that can help you in this "the stickkids" as as well as ideas from the alert book (williams and shellenberger): I can lend you both.. id be happy to meet you and we can discuss what activiites to best include for older students.

agree re overuse of trampoline.....but i have other suggestions for school playground nd MR grech has given me the go ahead to introduce them so we can discuss a way of doing this even with the older students although Im mostly involved with the young ones.

Ill also be sharing my suggestions with you next wednesday and some can be applied to the older students lets find some time to talk further. let me know when youre available

gd day

Nathalie

Nathalie Buhagiar.
Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork
MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)
Assistant Lecturer
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[Quoted text hidden]

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

7 January 2018 at 21:42

Unfortunately I cannot be with you next Wednesday as I have a Literacy meeting planned on the same day. However I would be glad if we can meet on another day so that you can brief me about the room.

regards,

A

[Quoted text hidden]

445

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

8 January 2018 at 08:27

To:

what a pity! i would have valued your feedback esp on phase 2 of my project. i would really like to meet you to discuss the classroom embedded strategies.
mela what if i send you the powerpoint i am preparing . go through it. Then if u give me some options to meet we can discuss the calming room as well as the cards for movement and heavy work and you can also give me your feedback on the classroom strategies i plan to implement

gd day

nathalie

*Nathalie Buhagiar.**Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork**MSc (Uk) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)**Assistant Lecturer**Occupational Therapy Dept**Faculty of Health Sciences**University of Malta*

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A

8 January 2018 at 09:03

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

I have some time on Monday 15th and Monday 22nd January. Can you make it on any of these days??

[Quoted text hidden]

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

8 January 2018 at 09:58

To: A

Monday 22nd would be ok . what time best for you?? if u like we meet for coffe at tra amici

*Nathalie Buhagiar.**Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork**MSc (Uk) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)**Assistant Lecturer**Occupational Therapy Dept**Faculty of Health Sciences**University of Malta*

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A

8 January 2018 at 11:58

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

10am? Or earlier? Any time is good for me. Tramici is good

[Quoted text hidden]

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

8 January 2018 at 12:05

To: /

10am monday 22nd january fine for me tra amici 😊

will send you powerpoint when ready and will bring resources re heavy work for you to view

natx

*Nathalie Buhagiar.**Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork*

MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)
Assistant Lecturer
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8 January 2018 at 13:43

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Just to check whether I am on the right track, these are the worksheets I am preparing for the LSAs. They will use a workout as a time out/movement break. I am planning these for year 4 upwards, mostly students with ADHD / SEBD. If you can please pass on the message to the head next wednesday that we need to purchase some basic material like scooterboard and gymballs!! I plan to include therabands for the classroom section. what do you think?

[Quoted text hidden]

 Heavy work Routine Activities -Scooterboard.docx
35K

Nathalie Buhaqiar <nathalie.buhaqiar@um.edu.mt>

9 January 2018 at 09:11

To: _____

good morning

yes these are all great ideas. i was under the impression that the sm room is to be matted hence how is the scooter board going to be used??

mind you the scooter board can also be used in the yard. if used in the room we have ensure adequate safety and ideally children wear a helmet . also staff have to be vigilant as very often most children try to stand on the scooter board.

another good activity is using a hoola hoop to provide resistive exs . so while the child sits on the scooter the adult and child both hold the hoola hoop and the adult provides different types of movement.

it would be ideal to show staff these exs in a practical session with the real kids.

my students have compiled a handout on heavy work activiites as part of their assignment and i will forward it to you when ready

great work audrey. im bringing the alert book when we meet as it has a lot of visuals and cards you can copy and use

nat

Nathalie Buhagiar.
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University of Malta

[Quoted text hidden]

11 January 2018 at 05:39

To: Nathalie Buhaqiar <nathalie.buhaqiar@um.edu.mt>

Hello Nathalie,
I hope that yesterday's session was successful! We will discuss further on the 22nd so I can explain what I have in mind and how I got this idea.

Regards,

[Quoted text hidden]

11 January 2018 at 08:07

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

To: Audrey <audrey1025@gmail.com>

447

good morning audrey

yes it went really well . here is the power point. will give you feedback when we meet.

gd day

nathalie

Nathalie Buhagiar.

Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork

MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)

Assistant Lecturer

Occupational Therapy Dept

Faculty of Health Sciences

University of Malta

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Al

11 January 2018 at 08:16

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Wow! This is great!! I really look forward for seeing the cool down room in use!!

Thanks!

~~Audrey~~

[Quoted text hidden]

Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

11 January 2018 at 08:27

To: i

i suggested the name Chill out(ghamilt naqra ta vox pop fil holidays ma xi tfal !!!)...everybody liked the word chill out.



Nathalie Buhagiar.

Doctoral Candidate in Occupational Science, University College Cork

MSc (UK) Dip OT SROT (UK, Malta), SI cert(USC, USA)

Assistant Lecturer

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Faculty of Health Sciences

University of Malta

[Quoted text hidden]



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Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Handout on fine motor and pencil grip

Claudio Cassar <cassarclo@um.edu.mt>

8 January 2018 at 20:27

To: Nathalie Buhagiar <nathalie.buhagiar@um.edu.mt>

Yes indeed Mrs. Buhagiar.

Last Friday during their sleep over we started with some drawings and also Play-Doh. He made them like balls and attached them on a piece of paper with a circle shape.

After we tried some paper cuttings with scissors (this was a difficult task for him) but after some instructions and scissor handling he did well.

He was feeling very happy practising in fact once finished he asked to stick his work on the fridge! (Pics attached)

Your notes were greatly helpful. I feel Lane can succeed!

Many thanks for your help Mrs. Buhagiar

Best regards,

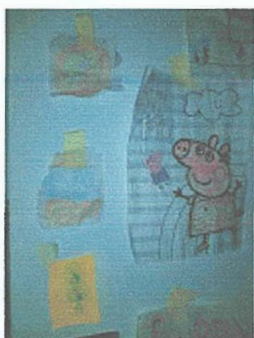
~~Claudio Cassar~~

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2 attachments



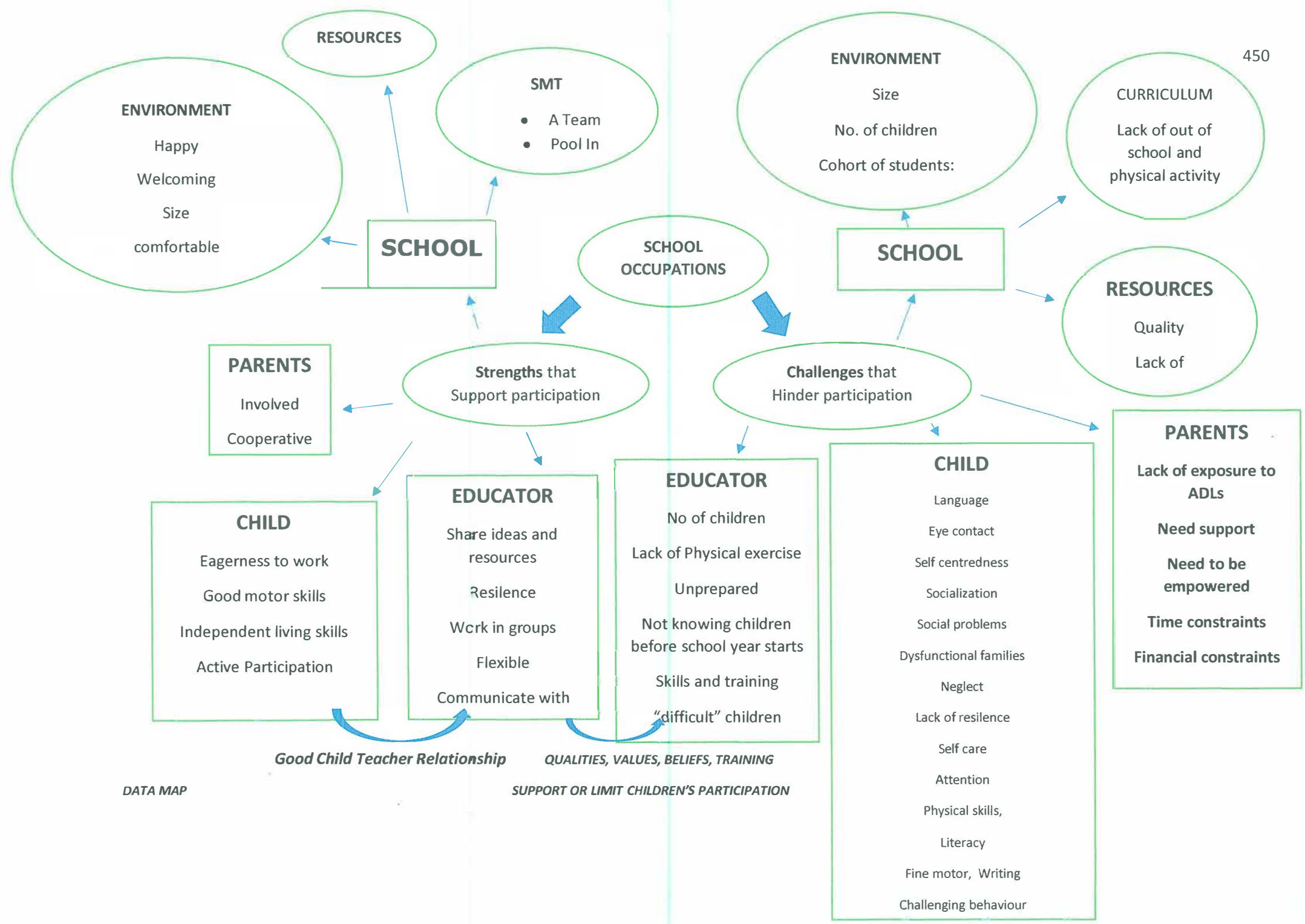
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Appendix M

Example of Data Map



DATA MAP