A "revolution" or a "transformation"?
A study of system-wide educational reform in Malta

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Abstract

A growing body of research in educational reform investigates how system-wide changes influence teaching practices, curriculum implementation, and school leadership. However, the literature predominantly focuses on large-scale, centrally administered educational systems, often overlooking the challenges of implementing reforms in post-colonial small-island states. These unique contexts present distinct socio-economic, cultural, and governance characteristics that require tailored approaches to reform implementation.

Specifically, in Malta where this research was conducted, there is scant systematic investigation of how educational policies, such as the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF), are conceived, implemented, and enacted by school leaders and teachers. The LOF represents a significant national reform aimed at modernising education by shifting from content-based to outcomes-based learning. Focusing on the context of enactment and its place-based interacting socio-economic and educational characteristics, this thesis offers an in-depth examination of how educational leaders and teachers in Maltese schools experience and respond to system-wide reform in small-island states. This thesis investigates the enactment of the LOF in Malta's primary schools, with a particular focus on the challenges of leadership, resource allocation, and teacher professional capacity. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data, including a survey of over 400 teachers and leaders across state, church, and independent schools. In parallel, interviews with key stakeholders, including a ministry official, a head of a college network, an education officer, school leaders and teachers, provided depth and width to the understanding of the lived experiences of those enacting the reforms.

The findings of this study reveal a complex interaction between policy directives, school leadership practices, and the realities of resource constraints in such a context. Malta's educational system, shaped by its colonial legacy, continues to reflect a centralised decision-making structure, which limits the autonomy of school leaders. This dependency on a top-down approach hinders the adaptability of reforms like the LOF, which require more flexible, context-responsive implementation. Additionally, resource constraints typical of small-island states aggravate these challenges, with school leaders and teachers struggling to reconcile policy expectations with the specific needs and realities of their schools. Despite these barriers, the resilience and collaboration fostered by school leadership underscore the importance of leadership in mitigating the effects of these systemic constraints.

This thesis offers an understanding of system-wide change in post-colonial small-states, providing insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers. The study concludes by offering recommendations for enhancing the flexibility of policy enactment, improving professional capacity, and fostering school leadership autonomy in reform implementation. These findings contribute to the ongoing global conversation on educational reform, particularly relevant to small-island states and contexts of similar structural challenges to sustainable and autonomous development.

Keywords: educational leadership, educational reform, Learning Outcomes Framework, policy enactment, Malta, primary education

Dedication

This work is dedicated to primary school leaders and teachers in Malta, whose efforts, care and dedication continue to shape the future of education. Your passion and resilience inspire change and transformation in the lives of our children.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

aHoS	Assistant Head of School
CoPE	Community of Professional Educators
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EO	Education Officer
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HCN	Head of College Network
HoD	Head of Department
HoS	Head of School
LOF	Learning Outcomes Framework
LSE	Learning Support Educator
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment (until November 2020)
MEDS/MFED	Ministry for Education and Sports + Ministry for Education (between Nov 2020 and Dec 2022)
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (as of January 2023)
MMR	Mixed-Methods Research
MUT	Malta Union of Teachers
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
OBE	Outcomes-based Education
SfCE	Secretariat for Catholic Education
SLT	School Leadership Team
UEA	University of East Anglia
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Malta's educational system has undergone significant changes over the past decade, particularly with the introduction of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in 2015. This reform, aligned with broader European Union (EU) educational policies, was designed to modernise the national curriculum and promote a more flexible, outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning. The terms "revolution" and "transformation" have been used in official policy and publicity documents to characterise the nature of the LOF reform. For instance, the Maltese National Curriculum Framework (NCF, MEDE, 2012) initially described the LOF as a revolution by emphasising its radical intent to overhaul the education system by fostering greater autonomy in teaching while promoting the development of more relevant and adaptable programmes. More recently, the Maltese National Education Strategy 2024-2030 (MEDE, 2024) has shifted to describing the LOF as a transformation, reflecting an approach that seems to prioritise long-term systemic adjustments over immediate, radical shifts.

Malta's unique status as a postcolonial, small-island state adds further complexity to this reform process. As a nation that must balance local needs with international expectations, particularly those of the EU, enacting educational reforms like the LOF presents opportunities and challenges. This context influences how reforms are implemented, experienced, and sustained, particularly within the realities of limited resources and a closely-knit educational community. Despite the ambitious nature of the LOF, there remains a gap in empirical research exploring how this reform is being enacted and experienced by curricular leaders, school leaders and teachers. This study aims to address that gap by critically analysing the implementation and impact of the LOF within the context of Malta's unique educational environment.

1.1 The research story – inside the school hall

My journey into the world of educational research was not one born out of abstract academic curiosity but rather a response to a deeply personal and resonant experience in the heart of Għargħur Primary School, a *small* primary school in Għargħur, a *small* village in a *small*

island state, that of Malta. The notion of 'smallness' is important for this research (Friggieri, 1996; Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). As a seasoned primary school teacher in this state-run school, I dedicated nine years of my career to nurturing young minds within (and outside of) those classroom walls. This school made me fall in love with teaching and being a teacher.

Around 2015, during one of the so-called School Development Plan (SDP) days, now commonly known as Community of Professional Educator (CoPE) sessions, a whisper of change brushed through the school's corridors. It was revealed that a "revolution" was on the horizon, poised to reshape the foundations of how teachers taught and children learned. Seated in the school hall, I could not help but ponder the implications of this impending shift. It was my sixth year of teaching, and I had witnessed my fair share of what were often referred to as 'reforms' - though in truth, they more frequently felt like fleeting attempts at change.

Beside me sat a colleague, her gaze fixed on the speaker at the front. He was someone from the Ministry, or so we were told. In our eyes, he was a 'messenger', delivering news to *our* school. In a hushed undertone, she offered a candid observation: "dejjem ibiddlu," she remarked. In Maltese, this phrase encapsulated a sentiment of perpetual change, a commentary on those unseen figures in the Ministry, whose decisions rippled down to us, the "just teachers". The term "aħna biċċa teachers," uttered by someone else in the room, underscored the perceived distance between those shaping policies and those implementing them. The room seemed to pulse with a mixture of emotions - agreement, dissent, resistance, acceptance - all etched across the faces of my colleagues. At that moment, my curiosity surged. I yearned to dissect the very essence of how this message was delivered to us, the "just teachers", and how it resonated within the hearts and minds of my fellow educators and our School Leadership Team (SLT).

Turning to the messenger from the Ministry, I sought answers to the multitude of questions echoing in my mind. Why this reform? Why now? And perhaps most importantly, why not? How would this change unfold, and when could we expect its impact? The response I received was a nebulous refrain of uncertainty, a declaration that everything was "being discussed" and no concrete answers were available. I wondered if other teachers in this school hall felt like me. Are other teachers in different schools feeling like me? Were other teachers

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in other schools told about this change? What were they told? Is this only happening in government schools, or is it also happening in church and independent schools?

In that instant, a seed was sown - a resolve to embark on a research journey that would unveil the intricacies of educational change in primary education in my country, Malta. It was a personal odyssey to seek the why, the how, and when of reforms that held power to shape primary education in my country. This research study emerged not as an abstract pursuit but as an intimate exploration, born from the very heart of the classroom, where change was not a theoretical construct but a tangible force shaping the future of education. Nevin (2006), in her keynote address, highlighted that while individuals are more than just their roles, these roles can significantly influence their approach to research by either constraining, dictating, or motivating their efforts.

This moment marked the beginning of my professional curiosity about system-wide educational reform, particularly how this change would be enacted in practice.

1.2 Statement of the problem – dynamics of educational reform

This study focuses on Malta's largest current educational reform, primarily driven by the LOF introduced in 2015. This reform represents a shift towards an outcomes-based approach to education. As a reform, it must be understood within Malta's unique position. It presents distinct challenges in balancing local educational needs with external pressures from international bodies such as the EU. In fact, Schembri (2020) explains how the LOF was developed to align with EU directives such as the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018) and the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (2021). It aims to modernise the curriculum, decentralise decision-making, and address gaps in student achievement.

Moreover, the LOF is the result of a partnership between the Maltese Government (the customer) and the Institute of Education at University College London. Brian Creese and Professor Michael Reiss were the primary contributors to this cooperation, "and was developed in collaboration with the Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment and 25 subject experts across the University College London's Institute of Education" (UCL, 2022).

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This raises a further inquiry regarding the effectiveness and pertinence of the knowledge and skills possessed by academics from the United Kingdom (UK) in offering advisory services on the curriculum for Malta's education system. While the engagement of foreign consultants can offer international perspectives, there are inherent limitations when external expertise is privileged over local knowledge. Malta's contexts require reform approaches that are rooted in the realities of a small island state with complex colonial legacies (Bezzina, 2013; Mifsud, 2020). Foreign consultants, often unfamiliar with the dynamics of Malta's educational structures, may advocate solutions that are technically sound yet culturally misaligned. Studies on policy transfer caution that imported models rarely account for the local complexities essential for successful enactment (Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Consequently, reliance on foreign consultancy risks reinforcing top-down reform processes that marginalise local educators' voices, reduce ownership, and diminish the sustainability of change efforts. A contextually sensitive approach, drawing upon Maltese educators' lived experiences and professional insights, is therefore critical to achieving reforms that are both meaningful and enduring.

The NCF (MEDE, 2012) and the Maltese Education Strategy 2014-2024 (MEDE, 2014) framed this reform as a "revolution", positioning it as a radical shift in the education system. The term "revolution" suggested a fundamental overhaul of established educational practices, promoting greater autonomy for schools and educators and focusing on equity and adaptability in learning. However, in the Maltese Education Strategy 2024-2030 (Ministry for Education, Youth, Sport, Research, and Innovation, MEYR, 2024), the narrative changed, with the reform (and other reforms) now being described as a "transformation". This shift reflects the evolving understanding of the reform's scope - no longer seen as an immediate, all-encompassing change, but rather a series of gradual, systemic adjustments that work within existing structures. Despite this shift in rhetoric, the reform remains under-researched in terms of its implementation and impact. There is a notable lack of empirical studies that examine how the LOF is being enacted by school leaders, curricular leaders, and teachers - the key figures responsible for translating policy into practice. Throughout this thesis, I refer to these individuals as actors, drawing on Touraine's (2000) concept of social actors as autonomous agents who engage with, interpret, and transform the environments in which they operate.

Touraine's actor-oriented sociology challenges the view of individuals as passive recipients of systemic forces, instead positioning them as central to the processes of change and resistance. This perspective is particularly relevant for this study, as it underscores the dynamic and situated nature of policy enactment. School leaders, curricular leaders, and teachers are not merely implementing the LOF; they are actively negotiating its principles within the constraints and opportunities of their professional realities. Their experiences, decisions, and adaptations shape how the LOF manifests in practice, highlighting the interplay between policy design and localised action. Framing these individuals as actors enriches the study's analytical approach by acknowledging their agency and relational contexts. It emphasises that understanding the success or challenges of the LOF requires exploring systemic structures and also the lived realities of those tasked with enacting reform.

Moreover, the specific context of Malta adds layers of complexity to the reform process. The unique challenges presented by this context - including the tension between local educational needs and broader EU directives - remain largely unexplored in existing literature. Understanding how these factors influence the enactment of the reform is essential for a complete analysis of the LOF's context of implementation and the actors of this implementation. This research's central problem is the perceived disconnect between policy-makers' intended educational reforms and the on-the-ground realities of policy implementation. The LOF has been met with a mixed reception. While some have welcomed the shift towards more flexible and student-centred approaches, others have expressed concerns about the level of support provided (European Commission, 2020). Previous studies, such as Debono (2018) have highlighted tensions in the implementation phase of various reforms, particularly the lack of adequate contextual adaptation and teacher training. This study seeks to explore how this reform is interpreted and implemented within Malta's unique socio-political and cultural context and how policy intentions translate into practice at the classroom level.

This research addresses the gap in empirical analysis by investigating how the LOF reform is experienced, understood, and applied in Malta's primary education system. It seeks to identify the factors influencing the successful or limited enactment of this system-wide reform, providing insights into the challenges and complexities inherent in implementing such significant changes.

1.2.1 A revolution?

The study will explore the notion that a genuine educational revolution in Malta requires a fundamental shift in social interactions, influenced significantly by socio-historic conditions. It will evaluate whether the current educational reform can be considered a revolution, questioning if it merely disrupts or fundamentally reconstructs the hierarchical and multidimensional Maltese educational system. This resonates with Hargreaves & Shirley (2009)'s inquiries. They describe three dynamic dimensions of educational reform, i) initiating innovative teaching methods that place students at the epicentre of creative pedagogy. However, they note that this approach resulted in inconsistent success, eroding public trust. Further, the authors delineate ii) the development of competitive markets as the second wave of reform, followed by a third way that seeks to iii) synthesise market competition with government control. Hargreaves & Shirley's articulation culminates in a proposed fourth way, which envisions a profound cultural change underpinning educational reform. It is this fourth way that the present study will consider in the Maltese context, evaluating the extent to which the current reform is reflective of a shift towards this vision of systemic cultural transformation. Hargreaves & Shirley's work resonates within Malta's educational context, where successive waves of reform have similarly faced challenges regarding consistency, public trust, and the balance between competition and state control.

Moreover, the potential for a collaborative approach to change within Malta's highly structured educational system will be examined. This aspect will explore how the reform efforts mirror Tyack and Cuban's (1995) perspective on revolutionary change. It questions whether the reform is merely surface-level modifications or represents a substantive overhaul that meets the criteria of a 'revolution' - one that not only challenges but also reconstructs existing educational paradigms.

1.2.2 A transformation?

The study will explore the notion of the perceived educational transformation within the Maltese context. It is designed to ascertain whether the reform initiatives signal a radical restructuring of the existing educational systems and processes or represent incremental changes within the pre-established LOF. Investigating the dual potential of reformative

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change to engender beneficial outcomes and unintended adverse effects is imperative, thereby challenging the notion that transformation is inherently positive. It is acknowledged that not all changes or reforms culminate in improvement; some may inadvertently introduce new complications or intensify current dilemmas.

In this vein, the study will problematise the Vision Statement from the United Nations Transforming Education Summit (2022), articulating an urgent political mandate for the countries' shared future. According to the Secretary-General, teachers should evolve into producers of knowledge, facilitators, and navigators in understanding complex realities. They must be equipped and empowered to shift from passive recipients to active participants, from the traditional hierarchical and unidirectional approach to one that is collaborative and reciprocal. They are to foster learning grounded in experience, inquiry, and curiosity, and cultivate and revel in the discipline and the intellectual satisfaction of problem-solving. This vision calls for a substantial transformation that resonates with the essence of the educational reform being proposed in Malta.

The Vision Statement (2022) also aligns closely with the objectives of Malta's LOF. The UN's Vision emphasises the importance of cultivating inquiry-based learning, fostering critical thinking, and equipping students with the skills needed to tackle complex global realities. These principles resonate with the LOF's aim to shift from a content-driven to an outcomes-based approach, promoting student-centred pedagogies that empower learners to engage actively with their education. In concluding this statement of the problem, this research seeks to shed light on the complex interactions that occur in the 'middle space', where top-down directives intersect with grassroots efforts. This will set the stage for an introduction to curricular change in primary education, establishing a context for comprehending the reform's broader implications.

1.3 Background to the study – primary education and the Learning Outcomes Framework

Malta's educational system reflects the nation's complex historical, political, and socio-economic realities. Structured around a highly centralised framework, the system is governed by the MEYR, which sets national curricula, syllabi and educational standards for all schools.

Malta's schools are categorised into three sectors: state, church, and independent. While state schools are fully funded and managed by the government, church schools operate under the authority of the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE), which oversees the administration of these schools in alignment with the principles of the Maltese Catholic Church. Church schools receive partial funding from the state but maintain a degree of autonomy. Independent schools, meanwhile, operate privately but must adhere to national regulations set by the Ministry.

The primary education sector in Malta is foundational to compulsory education. It spans six years, from Year 1 to Year 6, and serves children aged 5 to 11. The curriculum for primary schools is designed to develop skills in literacy, numeracy, science, and humanities, while promoting social and emotional development. Recent reforms have focused on creating inclusive and digitally-rich environments that cater to students with a multitude of abilities and interests. These initiatives imply that Malta is trying to provide equitable access to education. The LOF introduced in 2015, represents the most extensive reform in recent Maltese educational history. Born out of a need to modernise and decentralise the curriculum, the LOF is rooted in a broader global movement towards outcomes-based education. The LOF was introduced to seek to empower schools - across state, church, and independent sectors - by promising to grant them greater autonomy to design their curricula in a way that meets the specific needs of their student bodies (MEDE, 2015). By shifting away from rigid, content-driven teaching models, the LOF promises flexibility, student-centred learning, and continuous assessment.

The LOF's origins can be traced back to the NCF (MEDE, 2012) which called for an overhaul of the educational system to better align with EU directives. These directives emphasised skills like critical thinking, digital literacy, and communication, which the LOF tried to embed into Malta's primary syllabi. Within the LOF, learning is structured around key competences rather than subject-specific knowledge, allowing for a more holistic development of the child. Despite its ambitious goals, the implementation of the LOF has encountered several challenges. Teachers and school leaders have expressed concerns about the adequacy of training and resources, and questions remain about maintaining quality assurance across different schools. Moreover, while offering schools greater flexibility, the decentralisation process raises important questions about consistency in educational

standards across schools from the three sectors (Schembri, 2020). The balancing act between autonomy and oversight, particularly in ensuring schools adhere to national standards while innovating within their contexts, has proven complex. These dynamics, particularly the role of primary education and the LOF, will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2, where the context of Malta's education system is further analysed.

1.4 The aim, the objectives and the research questions

This section delineates the aim, the objectives, and the research questions that guide this study. It is structured around one central aim, four specific objectives, one main research question and three sub-research questions, that collectively frame the inquiry into Malta's LOF reform.

1.4.1 The aim

This research aims to critically analyse the engagement of the reform actors (the leaders and teachers) in Malta with the LOF, focusing on their implementation strategies within the unique context of a postcolonial, small-island state. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute to the broader field of policy implementation, providing insights into systemic and curricular reforms and their practical implications.

1.4.2 The objectives

The first objective is to investigate how educational leaders and teachers engage with and implement the LOF, focusing on their strategies, interpretations, and actions in response to the framework. This objective is essential for understanding how the LOF is enacted and contributes to analysing their experiences.

The second objective is to critically examine the enactment of system-wide curriculum reform in Malta, considering the unique challenges and opportunities posed by its postcolonial, small-island state context. This objective situates the research within the

broader socio-political and historical realities of Malta, providing a contextual understanding of educational reform.

The third objective is to derive and analyse insights from implementing the LOF reform in Malta. These insights will contribute to discussions on educational reform, with potential relevance for both Maltese and international contexts. This objective connects the specific case of Malta to broader discourses on educational transformation.

The fourth objective is to advance the scholarly discourse on educational reform by synthesising empirical findings from the Maltese context with broader theoretical frameworks on policy implementation and curriculum change. This objective aligns with my contribution to academic knowledge and aims to foster a deeper understanding of policy implementation in education.

1.4.3 The research questions

In 2015, at that meeting in the school hall where I was told about the LOF reform, certain curiosities surfaced. As I delved deeper into the literature review (detailed in Chapter 3), these curiosities were systematically re-evaluated and re-shaped. This process ultimately led to the formulation of research questions. With this in mind, this main question and three sub-questions will guide my research:

Main question: What is the experience of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms, such as the LOF, in the postcolonial small-island state of Malta?

This main question sets the stage for a deeper inquiry into the specific factors that shape the reform process, leading to the three sub-questions.

Sub-question 1) What are the main factors affecting the enactment of system-wide educational reforms in Malta?

Sub-question 2) How do school leaders, curricular leaders and teachers in primary education in Malta experience and respond to system-wide educational reforms?

Sub-question 3) How can understanding the enactment of the LOF reform inform future policy change strategies in education?

Figure 1 illustrates this interconnected structure of the research questions guiding this study. The diagram positions the main research question - focusing on the experience of system-wide reform within Malta's postcolonial small-island context - at the beginning of the inquiry. The three sub-questions then branch out, addressing specific aspects of the reform process. The sub-questions are not standalone but collectively contribute to addressing the main question, creating a scaffolded framework for analysing the LOF's implementation in Malta.

Main Research Question

Main Research Question

What are the main factors affecting educational reforms in Malta?

How do leaders and teachers in Malta respond to educational reforms?

How can LOF reform inform future policy change strategies in education?

Main Question: Experience of system-wide change in primary education in Malta

Sub-Question 1

Sub-Question 1

Factors affecting reform enactment

Sub-Question 2

Sub-Question 2

Leaders and teachers' experiences and responses

Sub-Question 3

Sub-Question 3

Informing future policy strategies

Figure 1 - Flow of the research questions.

1.4.3.1 Main research question

The main research question "What is the experience of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms, such as the LOF, in the postcolonial small-island state of Malta?" encapsulates the core focus of this study, aimed at exploring the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of both leaders and teachers within Malta's primary education sector during significant systemic changes. This inquiry is crucial, as Fullan (2001, 2007) emphasises the complexity of educational reforms, noting that understanding these reforms requires a deep insight into the experiences of those on the ground implementing these policies. Similarly, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) highlight the importance of examining the perspectives of different stakeholders involved in educational reforms, asserting that their experiences significantly shape the success or failure of policy implementation. The emphasis on 'experience' in this research question suggests adopting a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews, to gather comprehensive insights. This approach aligns with the recommendations of qualitative researchers who advocate for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives to understand complex phenomena like educational reform (Creswell, 2013).

1.4.3.2 Research sub-question 1

Research Sub-Question 1, "What are the main factors affecting the enactment of system-wide educational reforms in Malta?" examines the complexities of educational change in Malta's unique geopolitical and cultural context. While there is a substantial body of research on educational reforms in larger or more developed contexts, there is limited empirical investigation into how such reforms are enacted in postcolonial, small-island states like Malta. Existing studies often fail to account for the unique socio-political challenges such contexts face in implementing global education policies. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the specific factors influencing educational reform in Malta, where local and global dynamics shape policy enactment. Delving into Malta's cultural, economic, and political environments, as Crossley and Watson (2003) advocate, underlines the importance of local context in educational reform. Knight (2008) also underscores the influence of global educational trends and international policies, marking them as indispensable in this discourse.

The transformational approach to globalisation described by Tikly (2001) is interwoven with these considerations. This perspective acknowledges the intensified global interconnectedness while recognising the pervasive nature of globalisation. Such a viewpoint assists in understanding Malta's educational reforms as part of a broader, interconnected global world. Moreover, Tikly (2001) illuminates how a transformational stance on education struggles with social stratification within the local context. This is particularly relevant to Malta, where the historical trajectories have shaped distinct societal structures. Incorporating Tikly's analysis provides a more comprehensive view of the multi-layered impact of globalisation on Malta's educational reforms. It emphasises that reforms are not only a response to internal imperatives but also to the dynamics of an interdependent world, where international trends and discourses resonate within local settings, influencing and being influenced by Malta's characteristics.

1.4.3.3 Research sub-question 2

Research Sub-Question 2, "How do school leaders, curricular leaders and teachers in primary education in Malta experience and respond to system-wide educational reforms?" centres on understanding the direct, personal, and professional impacts of educational reforms on two crucial groups: leaders and teachers in Malta's primary education sector. While educational reforms are widely studied from a policy perspective, limited research has been conducted on the lived experiences of the actors in the reform. This research aims to address this gap by investigating how these key actors experience and respond to the LOF in Malta. This research question is essential for uncovering the subjective experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and challenges they face.

As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasise, the responses and adaptability of teachers and leaders are critical to the success of educational reforms. Their study highlights the importance of exploring how these individuals perceive and react to changes in their professional environment. This exploration is not only about personal experiences but also involves understanding the available support structures, resources, and overall readiness of these educators to implement and adapt to reforms, as noted by Hallinger and Heck (2010). Their work underscores the significance of organisational support in facilitating effective responses to educational reforms. By examining these aspects, this research question seeks

to provide a comprehensive understanding of the human element in educational reform, aligning with the view of Louis and van Velzen (2012), who argue that understanding the perspectives and capacities of educators is vital for the effective implementation of change. This exploration will offer insights into the enablers and barriers within Malta's educational system, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on educational leadership and teacher engagement in the context of systemic reforms.

1.4.3.4 Research sub-question 3

Research Sub-Question 3, "How can understanding the enactment of the LOF reform inform future policy change strategies in education?" targets a critical analysis of the LOF reform in Malta to extract lessons and insights to shape future educational policies. Although policy evaluations often focus on outcomes, there is a lack of research exploring how the process of policy enactment can inform future policy design. In Malta's case, the LOF has not been sufficiently studied to extract lessons that could improve future reforms. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the LOF's implementation and the insights it offers for future educational policies, both locally and in similar contexts globally. This research question underscores the importance of a reflective and analytical approach in evaluating the successes, failures, and unforeseen consequences of the LOF reform, mirroring the perspectives of scholars like Berman and McLaughlin (1978), who emphasise the necessity of understanding the outcomes of educational policies for effective future planning. By scrutinising the LOF reform, this question seeks to provide lessons about its impact, an approach echoed by Fullan (2007), who insists on learning from past reforms to improve future policy initiatives.

The focus on evidence-based recommendations for future strategies in educational reform aligns with the work of Levin (2012), who advocates for data-driven decision-making in educational policy development. This research question seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, contributing to policy development by offering practical, research-backed insights. By analysing the enactment of the LOF reform, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of educational reform in Malta and provide reflections that can be applied to similar educational contexts, thus enriching the global discourse on effective policy-making in education.

1.4.3.5 Integration of the research questions

The four research questions (one main and three sub questions) presented form a cohesive and interconnected framework, each augmenting and complementing the insights of the others, thereby offering a comprehensive exploration of educational reform in Malta. This holistic approach is essential, as highlighted by Fullan (2001), who argues that understanding educational change requires examining both macro-level factors and individual experiences. Collectively, these four questions encompass a broad spectrum of aspects regarding educational reform, ranging from macro factors affecting policy enactment to the individual experiences of key actors and extending to the practical implications for future policy development.

While I am aware that authors like Sandelowski (2014) challenge the assumption that mixed-methods research (MMR) is better than mono-methods research, I still believe that integrating these diverse research questions sets the stage for a MMR approach. Such an approach is particularly practical in educational research, as Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) advocate. This approach allows for combining empirical data collection with qualitative insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the educational reform in Malta. Such a methodology is particularly apt for exploring educational reforms' complex, multifaceted nature, as it enables examining both quantitative outcomes and qualitative experiences.

Moreover, the focus on the specific context of Malta, underscores the importance of context-sensitive research. As Levin (2012) points out, this is vital for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities that shape educational reforms in specific settings. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the Maltese educational system and contributes insights into educational reform in unique and diverse contexts. Crossley and Watson (2003) also emphasise that context is paramount in educational research, particularly when investigating reforms in distinctive environments.

1.5 Methodological approach to this empirical study

1.5.1 Reflections towards the methodological approach

Fullan (2007) emphasises the significance of using a holistic perspective to appreciate the changes in education fully. He asserts that this approach requires analysing educational institutions' intricate and interconnected components. A complete assessment would evaluate educational change or reform's multiple aspects and complexities. This would ensure that no critical problem is neglected, which is essential to ensure that the process is successful. Moreover, Aagaard-Hansen & Olsen (2009) argue that the approach to research being comprehensive has three issues: the time issue, as it is a long-term effort; the multi-audience issue, as various audiences would be interested in making use of the said research findings and the multi-modal issue, as there would be multiple ways in which the research process may be facilitated.

This study is empirical because it denotes a reliance on tangible facts and observations derived from the real world, rather than solely on theoretical or hypothetical constructs. This approach underscores the importance of grounding research in actual practices and outcomes observed within educational settings. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) support this perspective by emphasising the critical role of empirical evidence in deepening our understanding of the dynamics behind educational transitions. Empirical studies, foundational to this research, entail the meticulous collection and analysis of data from schools, leaders, and educators, providing a basis for investigating the sophistications of educational reform. Empirical education research illuminates the current state of educational systems and identifies effective interventions. As Snipes et al. (2002) suggested, focusing on empirical studies enables us to discern which interventions strengthen education systems, thereby offering solutions to the persistent challenges that disproportionately hinder quality education. This necessitates a comprehensive approach that seeks to understand the factors contributing to systemic improvement and emphasises the development of a critical, contextualised, historical, and reflective perspective on systems improvement. Such an approach is vital for addressing the multifaceted issues faced by education systems and ensuring that reforms, such as this one brought about by the LOF, are effective and equitable. By integrating empirical evidence with a critical and contextual analysis, this research aims to offer insights

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into the mechanisms of educational reform. This allows for a deeper understanding of how educational changes may be effectively implemented and sustained, particularly in addressing the needs of all students. Through this empirical investigation, the study seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on educational reform, providing evidence-based recommendations for policy-makers, leaders, and teachers committed to improving education systems. The dual approach is to obtain an awareness of the specific conditions surrounding the implementation of reforms in the sphere of education and the actual application of reforms. This approach is in line with the viewpoints of scholars such as Elmore (2004), in his work about school reform from the inside out, argues that to grasp the implementation of educational innovations, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the actual techniques and experiences of those who are directly involved in education. The author suggests that one needs to start by promoting school change from within rather than awaiting change to happen from outside or through outside forces. The disparity becomes even more apparent when one examines the many methods of change or development present within Malta's primary education system.

Examining educational reform dynamics involves critically analysing how policy objectives interact with classroom conditions. Cuban (1998) highlights the nature of educational reforms, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between schools and reforms, where schools have a profound influence on reforms and, in turn, reforms have a significant impact on schools. The reciprocal impact of these factors complicates the assessment of improvements, requiring a sophisticated approach. Tyack and Cuban (1995) offer a critical perspective on many reform initiatives, pointing out their lack of historical context. They argue that these plans often magnify existing problems and underestimate the difficulties associated with making systemic changes. They promote ways that enable teachers to enhance instruction from the inside, highlighting the significance of connecting changes with the democratic objectives of public education. In addition to this, Dueppen & Hughes (2018) argue that regardless of the terminology used to describe changes (such as reform, innovation, improvement, or transformation in the LOF's case), these programs always require educators to modify their practices and attitudes. This criterion emphasises the constant need for adjustment in all levels of education, from individual classrooms to whole school districts, to improve student learning results.

In the context of Malta, it is important to evaluate the changes that have been made to education not only based on policy documents and directives, but also by analysing how these changes have been implemented in classrooms and how they have impacted how teaching and learning are carried out.

Sahlberg (2011) in his work about educational change in Finland and what the world can learn from this, asserts that the environment significantly influences the development of educational innovations. Regarding how educational innovations are regarded, implemented, and maintained, a nation's cultural, historical, and social surroundings substantially affect how these innovations are carried out. Referring to the research carried out by academics who have examined systemic change in other contexts, it is necessary to understand the complexities involved in the educational reform process in Malta. Both Sarason (1996) and Fullan (2001) provide insights into the dynamics of educational growth. They highlight the necessity of considering the more extensive ecological system within education. The findings of their study highlight the necessity of taking into account not just educational institutions, but also the economic, political, and cultural concerns that affect educational policies and practices.

It is necessary to integrate global theoretical frameworks with local contextual understandings comprehensively and empirically to investigate educational reform in Malta that achieves significant results. Take into account, for example, the reform instigated in Finland's school system as outlined by Sahlberg (2011). Finland has become a worldwide model of educational success by implementing a comprehensive strategy that focuses on teacher training, collaborative learning, and student well-being. Indeed, it is consistently referred to during pre-service and in-service teacher training and CoPE workshops in Malta. Examining the elements contributing to Finland's achievement *might* provide valuable knowledge for implementing educational reform in Malta's primary schools.

In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence has brought about a thorough overhaul in the organisation and implementation of education. As a curriculum, it is *aimed at encouraging the integration of knowledge, skills and understanding across different areas of the curriculum"* (Humes, 2013, p. 82). The CfE strived to enable students to become confident people, responsible citizens, and productive contributors to society by emphasising the

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development of skills, knowledge, and traits. Studying how Scotland successfully managed the intricacies of curricular change **_might_** offer insights into Malta's educational progress.

When analysing these two reform cases, I use the term 'might' with a versatile interpretation. The premise of my study is that educational reform is not a universally applicable idea that can be easily implemented across many settings and historical periods. Instead, it must be closely connected to the precise geographical setting where it is put into action and the temporal conditions under which it occurs. Essentially, successful educational reform should be carefully customised to fit the specific characteristics of its surroundings and be in line with the current circumstances.

Initially, my interest lay in understanding leaders' experiences during large-scale changes in systems and curriculum reforms. However, as the research unfolded, it became evident that the roles of both leaders and teachers are pivotal in this transformative process. Hallinger's (2018) work has been instrumental in broadening the research scope, advocating for greater attention to the context of education leadership and change research. It mainly illuminates how macro- and micro-level contextual factors interact with implementing ambitious system-wide reform initiatives locally. These interactions can either inhibit change, treating context as a constraint, or enhance it, viewing context as an opportunity, thereby influencing the status quo.

At the *micro* level, school leaders are responsible for shaping the atmosphere and directing the course of change. Furthermore, teachers tasked with directly implementing policies wield significant influence over the execution of reform programs.

At the *mezzo* level, policy-makers, especially the high-ranking Ministry officials who oversee educational affairs, are central to the decision-making process and strategy deployment.

At the *macro* level, institutions like the EU significantly impact Malta's educational progress, adding a layer of complexity to the reform context and influencing overarching policy directions.

Figure 2 outlines these three levels encompassing system-wide educational change in Malta.
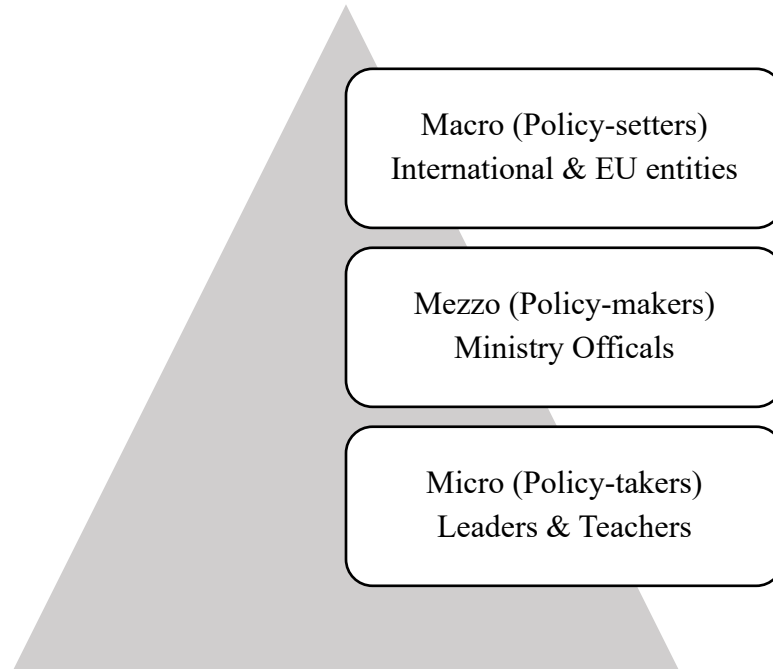
Figure 2 - The three levels encompassing system-wide educational change in Malta.

I am aware that multiscale approaches to policy reform do not always include this pyramidal approach. However, this approach is well-suited for this study and the context of Malta's implementation and postcolonial identity.

This research initiates by recognising a gap in empirical research within Malta's educational reform and aims to scrutinise several critical assumptions. Primarily, it problematises whether the rhetoric of policy-makers on reform is substantial or merely superficial. It delves into whether the narratives promoted by officials align with genuine transformational goals or signify only superficial modifications.

1.5.2 Pragmatism as the philosophical approach

This study adopts a pragmatist philosophy in its approach to understanding educational reform. Pragmatism prioritises what works in practice and focuses on solving real-world problems using methods best suited to the task at hand. It allows flexibility in research design, acknowledging that the most appropriate way to answer research questions may require a

combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This philosophical approach aligns with the study's goal of deriving meaningful insights into the complexities of system-wide reform in Malta's primary education system. Pragmatism recognises that the context of educational reform is dynamic, with multiple actors experiencing and interpreting change in different ways. Rather than adhering strictly to one methodological approach, the study employs a MMR design to explore both the broad patterns of reform and the individual, lived experiences of the educators involved (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The pragmatic focus on what works allows flexibility in addressing macro-level policy impacts and micro-level classroom experiences. This ensures that the study remains grounded in the practical realities of Malta's educational system, offering actionable and relevant insights to policy-makers and practitioners.

This empirical study is, therefore, not constrained by traditional paradigms but is guided by a commitment to understanding what works best in addressing the specific research questions (Dewey, 1929). As a philosophical framework, pragmatism emphasises the importance of practical outcomes, seeking solutions that are directly applicable to the educational challenges being examined. It allows the researcher to engage with both quantitative data (to capture broad trends and general attitudes) and qualitative data (to delve deeply into the nuances of individual perspectives), ensuring a holistic exploration of the reform process (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In line with pragmatism, the study embraces multiple realities experienced by different stakeholders within the education system, acknowledging that truth is constructed through practical engagements and actions (Cherryholmes, 1992). Rather than seeking a singular, absolute understanding, this research explores how various actors interact with and respond to system-wide reforms. This aligns with the pragmatic view that knowledge is best gained by examining its practical applications and the real-world consequences of actions (James, 1907).

By adopting a pragmatic lens, the study remains adaptable, allowing for the inclusion of various forms of evidence. The MMR approach, guided by pragmatism, reflects the need to balance breadth and depth in research. It ensures that the study captures the quantitative scope of leader and teacher engagement across Malta's education system and the qualitative richness of personal experiences and professional reflections (Morgan, 2007).

Moreover, pragmatism directs attention towards problem-solving and practical outcomes (Maxcy, 2003). It acknowledges that the educational reforms under investigation are not simply theoretical constructs but real changes that affect the day-to-day operations of schools and the experiences of educators and students. As such, the methods employed are designed to illuminate the practical implications of the LOF and its enactment in Maltese schools, contributing to evidence-based solutions for future policy decisions (Patton, 2015). The research aims to produce insights through this pragmatic methodological approach, enhancing understanding of how educational reforms are implemented in practice. This aligns with pragmatism's central concern: not just to understand but to improve and effect change in the real world, especially within the unique context of implementation.

Phase 1 composed of the quantitative phase, employs a questionnaire and data analysis, providing an initial quantitative overview of policy preferences, attitudes, and perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Subsequently, Phase 2, composed of the qualitative phase, conducted through in-depth interviews, delves deeper into the experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes of various actors regarding the LOF reform. This methodological amalgamation, complemented by the application of triangulation, strengthens the depth and rigour of the findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

1.5.3 Phase 1 - A quantitative exploration

In Phase 1, the pragmatist approach underscores the importance of capturing a broad understanding of the LOF reform's impact through quantitative methods. A structured questionnaire was disseminated, gathering responses from 408 participants. This comprised 185 curriculum and school leaders - including Education Officers (EOs), Heads of Schools (HoSs), Assistant Heads of School (aHoSs) and Heads of Departments (HoDs). Moreover, 223 primary school teachers across Malta's primary education in the three school sectors responded to the questionnaire. Using a quantitative approach, this phase provides measurable insights into perceptions of the LOF reform. The data allows for identifying macro-level patterns and trends, enabling a statistically valid understanding of how educational reforms are perceived across various roles within the education sector. Quantitative methods are particularly effective for large-scale educational research, where

generalisable trends are sought after (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, it provides the opportunity to explore relationships between variables - such as respondents' roles, experiences, and perceptions - offering a more nuanced understanding of how the reform is being received (Bryman, 2016).

Phase 1 serves as the empirical foundation for the subsequent qualitative phase, which dives deeper into micro-level experiences. The quantitative findings in this phase help shape the focus of the qualitative inquiry, ensuring that the MMR approach is comprehensive and aligned with the study's research objectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This pragmatist-driven approach reinforces the study's commitment to using methods best suited to answer the research questions effectively.

1.5.4 Phase 2 - A qualitative exploration

In Phase 2, the study shifts to a qualitative exploration to uncover the experiences and perspectives of 14 key actors. As outlined earlier, this phase delves deeper into the micro and mezzo levels, offering insights from five teachers, six school leaders and three Ministry officials. This offers a panoramic view of the policy enactment context and contributing to a more holistic understanding of the LOF's implementation. Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit detailed narratives. Qualitative research suits pragmatism, which values actionable insights and practical consequences. This phase allowed for the collection of rich, contextually grounded data, which complements the macro-level findings from the quantitative phase (Morgan, 2014). As noted by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), semi-structured interviews are ideal for exploring participants' experiences and interpretations, providing a flexible structure that can adapt to the lived realities of those engaged in the reform process. The interviews in this phase enable the study to probe into the subjective experiences of individuals working in different capacities within the Maltese education system. Teachers, who often bear the brunt of reform implementation and school leaders responsible for institutional management provided key insights into how the LOF reform affects their day-to-day work. Moreover, insights from policy-makers, particularly those in higher strata such as EOs and Ministry officials, help to bridge the gap between policy formulation and policy enactment (Mertens, 2015). This dialogue between different levels of stakeholders is crucial in understanding the real-world impact of reforms (Fullan, 2007).

Although the findings from Phase 2 offer helpful perspectives, they are not meant to be universally generalisable. The qualitative phase aims to provide a contextualised snapshot of how actors are experiencing and responding to system-wide changes, acknowledging that these experiences are shaped by individual perceptions, institutional cultures, and specific local challenges (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this phase is not to claim widespread applicability but to illuminate the rich, detailed stories that contribute to the broader picture of how reform unfolds in practice. As pragmatism posits, selecting methods must align with the research goals. In this context, qualitative inquiry enhances the quantitative findings by capturing the realities that numbers alone cannot explain. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this study offers a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of the LOF reform in Malta. This holistic view informs the academic discourse on educational reform and provides insights for policy-makers who are steering this reform effort (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

1.5.5 Integration of phases and triangulation

A key strength of this study lies in its sequential explanatory design, where integrating both Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings enhances the depth and credibility of the research outcomes. Triangulation is a critical technique to ensure rigour and validity in MMR. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives to cross-check and corroborate findings (Denzin, 2017). By drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data, this study triangulates the perspectives of different participants. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) advocate for integrating quantitative and qualitative data to mutually inform one another. In this study, Phase 1 provides a macro-level understanding of attitudes and perceptions, while Phase 2 digs deeper into the lived experiences behind those numbers. By employing triangulation, the research mitigates the limitations associated with each method. While quantitative data may sometimes lack the richness of context, qualitative insights compensate by offering a more personal and grounded perspective (Bryman, 2016). Conversely, the qualitative findings are supported by broader quantitative data, adding credibility and generalizability to the study's conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

1.6 The relevance of this study

This study is relevant to various stakeholders within Maltese primary education, including policy-makers, educational leaders, teachers, and researchers. Drawing on established models of educational reform (e.g. Ball, 1994; Fullan, 2007), it seeks to provide empirical evidence that informs policy decisions and practical implementation strategies. This study situates its findings within the context of EU educational objectives, contributing to comparative insights beyond the Maltese context (EURYDICE, 2023).

1.6.1 Linking policy to practice

This research aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice, a common challenge identified in educational reform (Levin, 2010). Understanding how stakeholders interact with educational reforms provides actionable insights for policy-makers and practitioners (Elmore, 2004). This study moves beyond theoretical discussions by offering concrete recommendations to inform future policy development and ensure that reforms like the LOF are implemented effectively in schools.

1.6.2 Contribution of this study

This research aims to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of educational reform and policy implementation. Theoretically, it extends existing knowledge on system-wide educational reforms by applying Peter Senge's systems thinking (2006) and Michael Fullan's theories on large-scale change, within a small-island context. The study also builds on Stephen Ball's work on policy enactment (1994, 2006, 2012), and Lawrence Stenhouse's work on curriculum, illustrating how policies like the LOF are negotiated, interpreted, and implemented by different actors. Practically, this study aims to offer insights. By highlighting the lived experiences, it informs strategies for future policy design and implementation that are sensitive to the unique challenges posed by Malta's context. Additionally, the MMR approach, with its strong empirical base, provides a blueprint for conducting research in similar small educational systems facing large-scale reforms.

1.6.3 Relevance of the study

The study aims to offer insights for EU-level organisations such as EURYDICE (2023), contributing to comparative research on primary education reforms. Empirical evidence from Malta enriches discussions on how EU member states address the complexities of system-wide curricular reforms (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). For policy-makers in Malta, this research offers a critical narrative of the LOF's implementation, providing insights into how national policies translate into school practices. The findings can inform the development of more effective strategies for aligning policy directives with the realities of classroom implementation (Leithwood et al., 2008). As primary implementers of policy, educational leaders and teachers will benefit from understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder reform (Hall & Hord, 2015). This study offers insights into how they can approach these reforms fostering a more strategic approach to managing (or leading) educational change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). For academics and students, this study provides a detailed case study of educational reform within Malta, contributing to the growing body of literature on context-specific educational reforms (Ball, 2012; Senge, 2006). It offers theoretical and empirical insights that can inform future research on curricular reforms and educational change in similar contexts.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter presents an outline of the research study, starting with the research story and the statement of the problem. It explains the study's research aim, objectives, and research questions, along with the methodological approach and my positionality.

Chapter 2 - The Maltese context of implementation

This chapter examines Malta's educational system, focusing on primary education and the LOF. It situates the LOF within the broader context of outcomes-based education, exploring how Malta's socio-historical, political, and cultural background influences its implementation.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

This chapter delves into the theoretical framework underpinning this research, incorporating key theories from Peter Senge on systems thinking and the learning organisation, Stephen Ball on policy and power, Michael Fullan on system-wide change and resistance, and Lawrence Stenhouse on curriculum reform. Through these theoretical lenses, the chapter explores the dynamics of large-scale educational change. The literature review then engages with scholarly works related to these theoretical perspectives, critically analysing how they apply to the Maltese context of curricular reform. Finally, the chapter culminates with the conceptual framework, linking the theoretical insights to the specific focus of this study on the LOF and system-wide educational reform in Malta.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

This chapter thoroughly expounds on the research methodology adopted for this study. It justifies the selection of a convergent mixed-method approach, explaining data collection procedures. This chapter also details the deployment of the two distinct data collection tools - questionnaires and interviews, all while addressing ethical considerations and limitations.

Chapter 5 - Analysis of Questionnaires

This chapter presents and analyses the quantitative data from the 408 questionnaire responses gathered by curriculum leaders, school leaders, and teachers, highlighting key trends and patterns.

Chapter 6 - Analysis of Interviews

This chapter presents the qualitative data from 14 interviews with teachers, leaders, and policy-makers, offering deeper insights into the lived experiences of educational reform implementation in Malta.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

This chapter synthesises the findings in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework and wider literature. It explores how concepts such as community, collaboration, resistance, and professional agency intersect with systemic reform processes. The chapter analyses the links between empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives, foregrounding the complexities of policy enactment and curriculum change within Malta's small-island educational context.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

This final chapter offers a reflective synthesis of the study's contribution to knowledge, originality, reflexivity and researcher positionality. It identifies the findings and new insights that emerged, discusses their implications for policy and practice, and reflects on broader themes such as the role of collaboration and resistance in reform enactment, the importance of context-sensitive CPD and CPL and the enduring influence of postcolonial dynamics. The chapter concludes by highlighting future directions for research and reform in Malta's education system.

1.8 Looking back and ahead

This chapter has laid the groundwork for an in-depth study of educational reform in Malta, establishing this research's aim, objectives, and methodological approach. The next chapter will delve into the Maltese educational system, exploring its socio-historical context, governance structure, and the LOF within the broader context of outcomes-based education.

Chapter 2 – The Maltese Context of Implementation

This chapter provides an overview of Malta's educational context, with a specific focus on the LOF. It begins by an exploration of Malta's small island characteristics and their relevance to educational reform. This is followed by examining the post-colonial influences on Malta's education system and their implications for policy and practice. Then, the chapter delves into the structure of Malta's education system and a thorough explanation of the LOF initiative in light of outcomes-based education (OBE) practices.

2.1 Education in smallness and islandness

Experiencing education in small and island communities presents complexity marked by distinct geographical, demographic, and socio-cultural dynamics. The literature explains the challenges and opportunities inherent in educational systems in small island states such as Malta. Malta, with a land area of 316 square kilometres and a population of approximately 500,000, exemplifies the concept of smallness in the context of island states (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). This relative smallness emphasises the importance of approaches to educational research and policy formulation that embed the unique characteristics of small island states. While Malta shares some characteristics with other small island states, such as resource limitations and high dependency on external trade and expertise, it is important to recognise its unique context. Unlike many small island states, Malta has a significant post-colonial legacy and a bilingual education system that reflects its British colonial history. Discussions of small island states in this study focus on those with similar characteristics, avoiding generalisations that may not apply to Malta's specific educational and cultural context.

The combination of smallness and islandness shapes small island states' socio-cultural and educational reality. Friggieri (1996) describes the unique atmosphere in which the Maltese mind operates, distinguished by isolation and intimacy. Similarly, Spiteri (2016) emphasises the widespread sense of isolation felt by residents of small-states such as Malta, both geographically and metaphorically. This sense of isolation is exacerbated by constant comparison with larger, more powerful countries, resulting in a never-ending cycle of

measurement and self-evaluation (Spiteri, 2016). Furthermore, the close-knit communities of small island states foster intimacy and monopoly, influencing social interactions and educational practices (Baldacchino, 1997). Despite limitations like their size and density, small states often thrive economically. Moncada et al. (2021) propose two explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, small island states enjoy several benefits, including greater social unity during tough times, increased agility in policymaking, and more effective governance enabled by an overarching perspective of national affairs. Secondly, the small scale of such countries as Malta has drawbacks, especially the reduced capacity to leverage economies of scale. Due to their diminutive domestic markets and scarce natural resources, small states must depend heavily on international trade, making them susceptible to global economic fluctuations and vulnerabilities. This situation is aggravated by their reliance on a limited array of export goods like tourism and specific agricultural products, alongside crucial imports such as food, fuel, and manufacturing inputs. Research suggests that the economic achievements of many small states are due to strategic policy interventions designed to mitigate or rebound from such adversities rather than their inherent economic scale. Without these policies, small states risk economic failure. When reading about this, I cannot help but wonder, what about education? Is education in Malta considered an imported solution, an exported asset, or none? What about the LOF? Are we only after "revolutions" or "transformations"?

Small island states' territorial organisation is critical to education provision and administration. Schembri and Sciberras (2020) describe the structure of the Maltese educational system. This territorial division impacts resource allocation, administrative processes, and educational experiences for students in various regions. Furthermore, including multiple educators, including Learning Support Educators (LSEs), in primary school classrooms reflects global trends in inclusive education and pedagogical developments (Borg & Schembri, 2022; Sciberras & Schembri, 2020). Collaboration and teamwork emerge as critical strategies for dealing with the challenges of smallness and islandness. Sciberras and Schembri (2020) advocate for establishing strong team identities and collaborative frameworks to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. This collaborative ethos is critical for developing a culture of trust, communication (Shaked & Schechter, 2017a, 2017b) and mutual support among educators. However, studies in Malta show that teachers often work in isolation, and collaboration happens rarely and few and far

between (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018). At the same time, literature shows that if teachers work together, there is a better outcome in teaching and learning (Attard Tonna et al., 2023) and that nurturing healthy relationships would help. Debono's (2019) study underscores the importance of cultivating positive relationships grounded in trust, care, and mutual respect as essential underpinnings of transformational leadership, particularly in contexts marked by reform-driven pressures.

Educational leadership and networking are important factors driving reform and professional development in small island states (Bezzina, 1999; Bezzina, 2006). Educational reform networks promote dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity, facilitating collective growth and innovation (Bezzina, 2006). Furthermore, the multicultural nature of small island states such as Malta complicates educational efforts. Schembri and Sciberras (2020) highlight Malta's multiculturalism, officially bilingual status, and informal polylingualism, emphasising the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive practices. Spiteri and Schembri (2023) and Parnis and Schembri (2023) investigate the effects of multiculturalism on educational equity and social cohesion, emphasising the importance of valuing diversity and encouraging intercultural understanding in such compact educational settings.

2.2 Historical context of education in Malta

Malta's education system has been heavily influenced by its colonial past. British colonial rule, which lasted until Malta gained independence in 1964, embedded hierarchical and paternalistic governance structures that extended beyond curriculum and language, reinforcing rigid power dynamics that continue to affect school governance and management (Zammit, 1984). This colonial imprint remains visible in Malta's resistance to decentralisation, a legacy that has hindered the transformation of the education system (Cutajar, 2007). For instance, Baldacchino (2021) highlights how colonial legacies continue to influence early childhood education practices in small island states, including Malta, through language policies and pedagogical approaches that may not align with local cultural contexts.

A pivotal moment in the development of Malta's education system was the appointment of Canon Peter Paul Pullicino as the first Professor of Pedagogy at the University of Malta in

1850, marking the early stages of establishing a national curriculum (Camilleri, 2017). However, British authorities resisted moving towards a locally relevant framework, prioritising anglicisation (Frendo, 1979). This tension between colonial control and local aspirations set the stage for continued struggles over the direction of Maltese education.

Legislative strides, such as the 1924 Compulsory Attendance Act and the 1946 Compulsory Education Ordinance, marked progress towards inclusivity by ensuring all children aged 6 to 14 received primary education (Sultana et al., 2019). However, these developments were more about reinforcing colonial socio-political agendas than empowering local education. These early reforms laid the groundwork for structural issues that continue to challenge Malta's education system, particularly in its attempts to transition to modern, inclusive education. A highly centralised system also constrained leadership during this period. Bezzina (1995) critiques the transactional leadership model of primary school principals, noting that they were focused on administrative tasks rather than pedagogical leadership. Bezzina (1999) later called for a paradigm shift towards 'authentic leadership', promoting trust, creativity, and relationships to overcome colonial legacies and move towards a more pedagogically driven system.

The post-colonial period introduced secondary education in 1970, expanding access and revealing tensions between the church and state over educational control (Sultana et al., 2019). The influence of colonial structures persisted in reforms like the NMC (Ministry for Education, Youth, Sport and Employment, 1999) which Borg et al. (1995) critique for perpetuating conservative ideologies that marginalised non-European cultures. Despite calls for decentralisation, the education system remains highly centralised, with schools largely dependent on directives from the Ministry of Education (Cutajar, 2007). While educators involved in the *Muviment Edukazzjoni Umana* have advocated for more democratic governance (Sultana, 1996), real school autonomy remains limited. This centralisation affects governance and limits schools' capacity to innovate and respond flexibly to local needs (Bezzina, 2006).

Malta's educational system retains several post-colonial characteristics inherited from British rule. This post-colonial legacy is evident in several aspects of its educational framework, governance, and policy direction, which continue to shape its present-day reforms. The

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adoption of the English language as a key medium of instruction, alongside Maltese, reflects the dual identity that emerged from colonial rule. This bilingual educational policy, while enhancing global connectivity, also places demands on curriculum design and teacher capacity. Centralisation is another hallmark of Malta's post-colonial education system. During British rule, education was administered through a rigid, hierarchical structure aimed at producing a workforce aligned with colonial economic interests (Cassar, 2022). Post-independence, this centralised model persisted, with the Ministry of Education retaining significant control over policy formulation and implementation. The LOF reflects this centralisation in its top-down design and enforcement. Its development, informed by partnerships with external consultants (UCL) from the former colonising country, embodies both the opportunities and challenges of post-colonial reform. While these collaborations brought expertise and innovation, they also risked imposing frameworks that may not fully align with Malta's unique socio-cultural and economic realities.

Another defining characteristic of Malta's post-colonial system is its reliance on external policy borrowing. The LOF exemplifies this trend, drawing heavily from British and European OBE models. Although these frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation, their transfer into Malta's small-island context necessitates careful adaptation. The challenges of translating broad, globally-oriented outcomes into practical, locally-relevant goals highlight the tensions between external influences and internal needs. Bray and Packer (2018), for instance, discuss the tension small states face between adopting global education imperatives and addressing local needs, a dynamic evident in Malta's approach to educational reform. Furthermore, Malta's colonial past contributed to a stratified education system, reflected in the co-existence of state, church, and independent schools. This division, institutionalised during British rule, perpetuates socio-economic disparities and complicates the implementation of uniform policies like the LOF. The LOF's aim to foster inclusivity and equity must therefore contend with these historical structures, requiring strategies that address entrenched inequalities.

Malta's small size and insularity further distinguish its education system from other European models. While the country aligns with global and EU educational standards, such as the Bologna Process, it retains a centralised structure, particularly in curriculum development and funding (CEDEFOP, 2010, 2016). However, as Cutajar (2007) points out, reforms often

fail to translate into meaningful change at the classroom level due to these rigid structures. This could be because without the institutionalisation of enduring support mechanisms, reform efforts often risk being perceived as transient, disconnected from the deep systemic change they seek to achieve. Despite efforts to introduce decentralisation mechanism, the Maltese education system remains characterised by strong centralised control. Bezzina (2019) highlights that policy initiatives in Malta often maintain centralised practices beneath a rhetoric of collegiality and decentralisation. Leaders are expected to enact centrally determined policies while exercising limited genuine agency at the school level, creating tensions between compliance and professional autonomy (Bezzina, 2019). This dynamic is particularly relevant to the implementation of reforms such as the LOF, where the absence of authentic decentralised governance structures shaped how policy-takers engaged with change.

Systemic issues such as the persistence of streaming practices, resource allocation challenges, and professional development limitations continue to affect the quality of education (Cutajar, 2007; Mifsud, 2020). Borg and Giordmaina (2012) and Schembri and Sciberras (2020) describe 'reform fatigue', noting that the constant stream of reforms has overwhelmed educators, many of whom feel unsupported in implementing change. Although various reforms have been introduced across Malta's educational system, a persistent challenge has been the absence of enduring, systemic support structures capable of sustaining meaningful change across the micro (classroom), meso (school), and macro (national policy) levels. Without such frameworks, reforms risk remaining rhetorical rather than transformational, as confirmed by the ongoing need for stronger anchoring mechanisms outlined in the 2006 Amendment to the Education Act (Government of Malta, 2006).

2.3 Structure of the Maltese educational system

Malta's education system is structured into three main levels: Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), compulsory education (covering primary and secondary schooling), and post-compulsory education. The following subsections (2.3.1 - 2.3.3) outline the governance and management structures of Malta's educational institutions (state, church and independent sectors), while subsections 2.3.4 - 2.3.6 focus on the levels of education, their objectives, and their alignment with national policies such as the LOF.

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2.3.1 State schools and college networks

Malta's state schools are organised into ten College Networks (Figure 3), each overseen by a Head of a College Network (HCN). According to the Ministry and the The Education (Amendment) Act, 2006, this structure aims to promote coherence in education delivery while granting individual schools autonomy to develop projects and engage in professional development. However, Polidano (2022) highlights that the autonomy offered to schools remains limited by centralised directives from the Ministry of Education. This tension between independence and centralised control is a recurring issue in Maltese education (Bezzina, 2006).
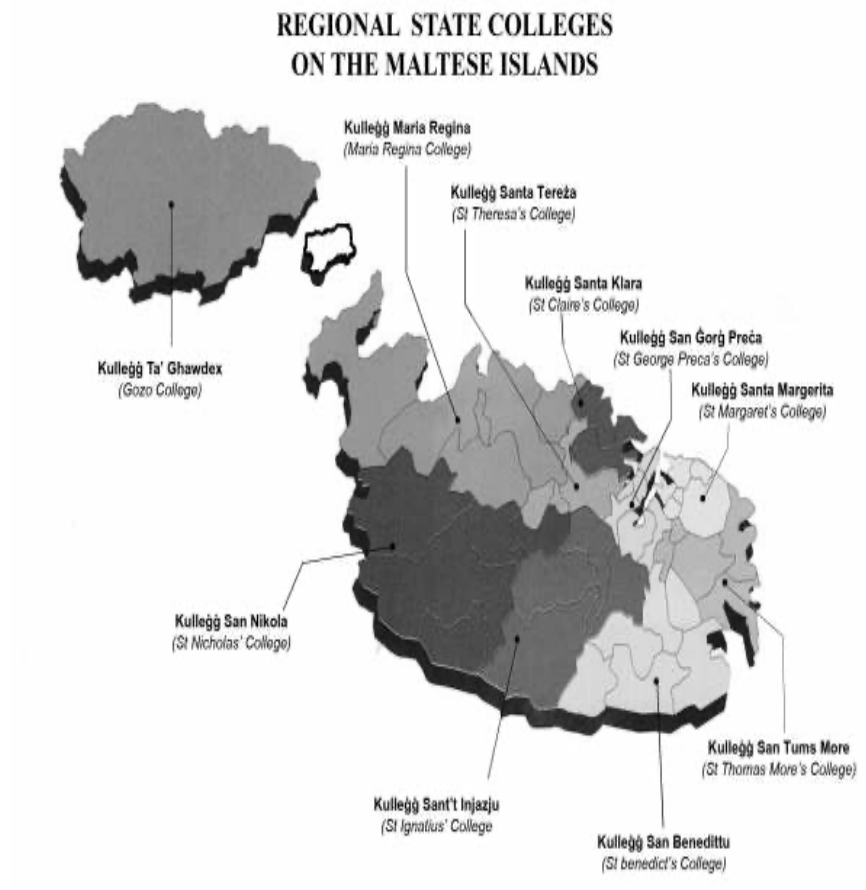
Figure 3 - The location of the 10 colleges formed by The Education (Amendment) Act, 2006 taken from Cutajar et al. (2013, p. 120).

Although the college network structure was intended to decentralise leadership and decision-making, Bezzina (2006) critiques it for failing to dismantle the hierarchical structures that dominate Maltese education. Similarly, Cutajar et al. (2013) argue that while the college networks were designed to promote distributed leadership, they have not significantly shifted

power away from the Ministry. Decision-making remains heavily centralised, limiting schools' capacity for genuine innovation.

The establishment of the college network represents a strategic effort to institutionalise system-wide reform by bridging micro, meso, and macro layers. However, as studies (Bezzina, 2013) have highlighted, the mere establishment of structural frameworks without corresponding resourcing, capacity-building, and genuine participatory governance often results in fragmented implementation. The tensions surrounding the college network reform in Malta, particularly the balancing of autonomy with accountability, have been extensively problematised by Mifsud (2020), who warns that imposed structures may unintentionally inhibit the very collegiality they intend to foster. System-wide change thus demands distributed leadership and professional development initiatives as well as embedded support structures that empower schools and educators over time. Cutajar and Bezzina (2013) critically analyse the introduction of the college system in Malta, arguing that while it was intended to foster collaboration and joint working among schools, in practice cultural resistance and entrenched traditionalism limited its impact. They highlight how systemic reforms often underestimate the complexity of building trust, collaboration and shared leadership in historically hierarchical educational environments (Cutajar & Bezzina, 2013). This analysis provides important context for understanding the challenges faced in enacting reforms such as the LOF.

2.3.2 Church schools

Church schools in Malta operate under the governance of the SfCE, based on an agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta. The Maltese government covers salaries and administrative costs, while the Church contributes through donations. Church schools are aligned with the national curriculum but emphasise religious and moral education, contributing to their perceived prestige and higher quality of education (Bartolo, 2001).

Sultana (1998) discusses the tension between secular and religious influences in Maltese education, particularly in relation to church schools. While they are often seen as more prestigious due to their resources and outcomes, the solid religious focus can conflict with

Malta's increasing diversity. In fact, the NSO (2024) published that the proportion of foreign nationals in Malta increased significantly from 5.5% in 2012 to 25.3% in 2022.

2.3.3 Independent schools

Independent schools, which are privately funded, provide alternative pathways for students while adhering to the national curriculum. These schools are recognised for their ability to tailor educational experiences to meet diverse student needs. The Independent Schools Association works to ensure cohesion across the sector while maintaining the independence of these institutions.

2.3.4 Early childhood education and care

ECEC is a critical phase in Malta's educational structure, providing foundational cognitive and social skills before formal schooling begins. Bezzina (1999) underscores the importance of authentic leadership in early childhood settings, noting that leadership should extend beyond administrative functions to foster creativity, trust, and relationships within the educational community. This emphasis on relationship-building is particularly important in ECEC, where the quality of leadership (Tucker, 2004) can profoundly impact staff and student development.

The National Standards for ECEC 0-3 Years (DQSE, 2021) and the ECEC (0-7 Years) National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo (DQSE, 2021) set out the government's objectives for optimising child development in early years settings. However, as Bartolo (2010) argues, while Malta has made strides in creating inclusive environments for young learners, political and social contexts often hinder the full realisation of these goals. The reliance on one-to-one support, such as LSEs, can isolate students with impairments rather than fully integrate them into the classroom. Bartolo's critique calls for a more systemic approach to inclusion, where all educators, not just LSEs, support diverse learners. This shift in focus also reflects the broader philosophical debate within Maltese education, where utilitarian and progressive views coexist, impacting the approach to inclusion (Said et al., 2024).

2.3.5 Primary and secondary education

Compulsory education in Malta spans from ages five to fifteen, covering primary and secondary education cycles. The primary cycle, aimed at students aged five to eleven, focuses on developing literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills, while the secondary cycle prepares students for further education, vocational training, or direct entry into the workforce. Muscat (2023), in a study examining misconceptions in Maltese primary schools, used teacher surveys to uncover persistent myths. The data collected through these surveys reveal the persistence of outdated educational myths in primary education, such as rigid learning styles and an overemphasis on homework. These beliefs hinder the adoption of evidence-based practices, such as those promoted by the LOF, which advocates for competency-based and student-centred learning. Muscat argues that addressing these misconceptions through targeted professional development is crucial for aligning teacher practices with the goals of the LOF. Farrugia's (2021) study offers compelling evidence from Malta that enhancing teacher agency in professional learning processes significantly improves relational trust, professional identity and collective efficacy within school networks. While CPD initiatives offer important avenues for teacher growth, they alone are insufficient to secure the cultural shifts required for sustainable system-wide reform.

For instance, Galea's (2020) research focuses on teacher attrition in Maltese schools, using narrative inquiry to gather stories from fifteen former teachers. This qualitative study identifies the main reasons for their departure, such as inadequate pay, excessive workloads, poor working conditions and lack of administrative support, which have implications for sustaining reforms like the LOF. This high turnover has severe implications for the successful implementation of educational reforms, including the LOF.

2.3.6 The role of certification and lifelong learning

At the end of compulsory education, students are awarded the Secondary School Certificate and Profile, recognising their achievements across formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. This certification reflects Malta's commitment to lifelong learning, a key aspect of

the country's educational strategy, designed to respond to local and European labour market demands. The structure of post-compulsory education in Malta aligns with broader EU frameworks, emphasising employability and adaptability in the 21st-century knowledge economy (CEDEFOP, 2016). The Central Bank of Malta (2021) reports that educational attainment has improved in recent years, particularly in tertiary qualifications. However, challenges remain, particularly in reducing the number of early school leavers and addressing the educational divide between older and younger generations. The report highlights the need for continued investment in lifelong learning initiatives, which are essential for ensuring that all members of society can participate fully in Malta's evolving economy.

2.4 A national educational reform - the Learning Outcomes Framework

The introduction of the LOF in 2015 marked a significant shift in Malta's educational reform history. Moving from a traditional content-based model to an OBE system, the LOF was designed to align with EU standards, promoting a competency-based approach that emphasises skills acquisition and holistic development rather than the transmission of content (Schembri, 2020). This reform sought to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century by focusing on critical thinking, flexibility, and lifelong learning.

The LOF is closely tied to the NCF (MEDE, 2012) which outlines Malta's educational policies from early childhood to secondary education. Both frameworks are aligned with the EU's Key Competences Framework (2006, 2012), emphasising essential competences like communication, mathematical proficiency, digital literacy, and civic engagement (MEDE, 2015). By adopting these frameworks, Malta aimed, or so it seems, to create a more flexible, learner-centred system focused on outcomes that would better prepare students for future global challenges.

However, the success of the LOF largely depends on effective school leadership. Pace Debono (2023), in a study examining positive leadership, explores the impact of trust, communication, and professional growth on school environments. Through interviews with primary school heads, the research shows that schools with strong leadership can better adapt to the demands of the LOF. Without such leadership, the LOF's goals risk being undermined by resistance or lack of understanding among educators. Moreover, Vella Demanuele and

Calleja (2023), in a mixed-method study which used both questionnaires and interviews with aHoSs, reveal the emotional challenges faced by educators and highlight the importance of emotional leadership from aHoSs, who provide the psychological and professional support necessary for teachers to embrace the LOF's outcomes-based approach. This aligns with broader research on the importance of leadership in fostering resilience during periods of educational change (Day & Sammons, 2013).

2.4.1 Implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework

The LOF divides Malta's education system into three distinct cycles: Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary Years. Each cycle specifies particular learning outcomes (LOs) that students are expected to achieve, moving from rigid content-based teaching to a more competency-driven approach. Teachers are encouraged to diversify their teaching methods, using continuous assessment as a central element of the learning process (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). **Figure 4** depicts the structure of the Maltese education system and its alignment with the LOF (Schembri, 2020).

Level of Attainment	Year	Diverse Needs	School Cycle	Educational Institution		Age
1–3	Childcare Kinder 1 Kinder 2	Gifted and talented learners / Learners with Special Education Needs	Early Childhood Education	Childcare Centres / Kindergarten School	Resource Centres	0–7
4	1, 2		Junior Years	Primary School		7, 8, 9
5	3, 4					
6	5, 6					9, 10, 11
7	7, 8 (Form 1, 2)		Middle Years	Middle School		11, 12
8	9, 10 (Form 3, 4)		Secondary Years	Senior Secondary School	Secondary School	13, 14
9	11 (Form 5)					15, 16
10						Lifelong

Figure 4 – The structure of the Maltese education system and its alignment with the LOF – taken from Schembri, 2020, p. 112).

The initial implementation of the LOF began in 2018 with Kindergarten 1, Year 3, and Year 7, with full rollout expected over four years. Professional development on learning outcomes, continuous assessment, and reporting strategies was provided to teachers and school leaders during the 2018–2019 scholastic year. However, Cutajar et al. (2013) criticise the distributed

leadership approaches introduced in Malta, arguing that these reforms added layers of bureaucracy rather than fostering genuine school-level autonomy. This reflects a broader issue within Maltese educational reform: the tension between policy ideals and the practical realities of school governance. Distributed leadership can achieve its transformative potential when nested within broader systemic frameworks that guarantee autonomy, resourcing, and sustained developmental support at the school level (Cutajar et al., 2013). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the rollout of the LOF, forcing schools to adopt online and hybrid learning models. The rollout was also paused. The Cov-EM study (Camilleri et al., 2022; Muscat et al., 2022) revealed that while teachers became more confident in using digital tools, maintaining the principles of OBE in a digital environment posed challenges. This disruption underscored the need for more flexible leadership models that could adapt to crises.

Despite these challenges, the LOF holds potential. Its focus on outcomes encourages schools to be more adaptive to individual learner needs, promoting inclusivity and supporting diverse learning pathways. As emphasised by Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016), the LOF's structure - encompassing eight Learning Areas, six Cross-Curricular themes, and 48 subjects - seeks to reduce content in favour of 21st-century skills, facilitating smoother transitions across educational stages and offering more personalised learning experiences.

2.4.2 Outcomes-based education and the Learning Outcomes Framework

The LOF's foundation lies in the principles of OBE, which shifts the focus from traditional content-based teaching to achieving clearly defined learning outcomes. The OBE approach draws from earlier educational theories, including Tyler's (1949) advocacy for aligning teaching processes with well-defined educational goals, and Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, which introduced the concept of mastery learning. Glaser (1963) and Skinner (1968) further developed these ideas through criterion-referenced assessments and structured learning environments, reflected in the LOF's emphasis on personalised learning experiences and skill attainment rather than content memorisation. Spady (1994, 1998), a key proponent of OBE, emphasises mastery learning, where students progress based on their ability to demonstrate competence in specific skills. His model argues that clarity in educational objectives ensures students achieve mastery at their own pace.

However, several concerns exist with regard to the LOF's outcomes-based approach. Educators must find a balance between ensuring students meet specific outcomes (through a four-option ticking system – not achieved, partially achieved, satisfactory achieved, fully achieved) and fostering more comprehensive intellectual growth. In light of this, critiques of OBE, such as those by Marzano (1994) and Brandt (1994), caution against reducing education to a checklist of measurable objectives.

2.4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of outcomes-based education

Implementing OBE within the LOF has introduced advantages and challenges for Malta's education system. Spady (1994) highlights OBE's core principles of clarity of focus, designing down, high expectations, and extended opportunities, all of which create a flexible learning environment tailored to individual student needs. This flexibility promotes inclusivity, supporting diverse learning pathways and ensuring that students can succeed at their own pace, which is particularly important in socio-economically diverse contexts (Biggs, 2011; Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani et al., 2012), such as Malta.

The learner-centred approach advocated by OBE encourages students to take an active role in their education (Willis & Kissane, 1995), fostering deeper understanding and retention of knowledge. Killen (1996, 2000) praises OBE for balancing control and flexibility, allowing teachers to adapt lessons to students' individual needs while maintaining oversight of educational quality. This approach aligns well with Malta's educational context, where diverse socio-economic backgrounds necessitate adaptable educational strategies (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016).

However, the shift to OBE has not been without its difficulties. Muscat (2023) argues that outdated educational myths, such as rigid adherence to learning styles and an overemphasis on homework, hinder the full adoption of evidence-based practices. These misconceptions conflict with the LOF's competency-based focus, which requires teachers to embrace more flexible and student-centred approaches. Addressing these beliefs through targeted professional development is essential for aligning teacher practices with the goals of the LOF.

Reform fatigue is another challenge. Chircop Zahra (2023), in a study focused on teachers in Malta, investigates their perceptions of the LOF's continuous assessment. Data was gathered through 34 qualitative online questionnaires and a semi-structured interview with an EO, providing insight into teachers' opinions on these educational changes and their implications on teaching and learning. The author points out that teachers, already burdened by the additional workload of continuous assessment, faced increased challenges during the pandemic. Many educators expressed concerns about reform fatigue as the demands of traditional grading systems and the new online requirements intensified. This highlights a critical tension within the LOF. While it promotes flexibility and continuous assessment, it requires substantial systemic support to ensure teachers can meet these demands without experiencing burnout.

Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016) highlight that while capacity-building programmes, such as 'Train the Trainer', successfully prepare educators for OBE, continuous professional development (CPD) is needed to prevent burnout and resistance to reform. Without sustained support, enthusiasm for the LOF's objectives may diminish over time. The decentralisation efforts accompanying the LOF, aimed at distributing leadership and responsibility across schools, have also faced criticism. Bezzina (2006) argues that similar reforms have failed to dismantle the centralised control structures that dominate Maltese education. This tension between centralised policies and the local autonomy needed for genuine school-level innovation has created additional barriers to the effective implementation of OBE.

Wolf (1995) and Young (1996, 2008), as Marzano (1994) and Brandt (1994) above, similarly argue that focusing too heavily on quantifiable results may lead to fragmented learning experiences, neglecting deeper cognitive development and abstract thinking. These concerns are especially relevant in the Maltese context, where educators must balance meeting specific outcomes and fostering comprehensive intellectual growth (Schembri, 2020).

2.4.4 Contextual importance of outcomes-based education in Malta

The adoption of OBE in Malta through the LOF represents a pivotal moment in the country's educational development. This shift aligns Malta with global educational trends, particularly within the EU, where competency-based learning and lifelong learning strategies are central

to educational policy (CEDEFOP, 2016). Exploring the application and implications of OBE across various global contexts sheds light on its adaptability, strengths, and inherent challenges. This exploration is crucial for understanding how OBE can be tailored to meet the unique educational needs of different countries. The LOF was designed by experts in London at UCL for the Maltese government, the client. It was funded through a European Social Fund project (ESF 1.228 project) titled *Design of Learning Outcomes Framework, Associated Learning and Assessment Programmes*. Crossley and Watson (2011) and Christie (2020) underscore the complexities of transferring policies across borders. Specifically, Christie (2020) highlights the necessity of adapting OBE to local cultural, social, and educational realities. This insight emphasises that while the principles of OBE may hold universal appeal, their success is contingent upon careful localisation. Hargreaves and Moore (2000) elaborate on this point by arguing that OBE encompasses diverse meanings and applications across different contexts. This diversity underscores the importance of an authentic approach that respects each educational system's unique challenges and goals, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all implementation of OBE is impractical.

International examples of OBE reforms, such as in South Africa, offer critical insights into Malta's journey. In South Africa, OBE faced significant hurdles due to cultural misalignment and systemic limitations, as noted by Jansen (1998), Botha (2002), Shalem et al. (2004) and Allais (2012). Similarly, Malta's educational reform must be carefully adapted to fit local conditions, ensuring that the LOF addresses both the strengths and weaknesses of the Maltese education system. Schembri (2020) emphasises that successful reform in Malta requires more than simply importing foreign models; it must involve a deeper understanding of Malta's historical educational challenges and the specific needs of its learners. In Australia, the discourse on OBE has been influenced by the works of Lyotard (1984) and Schubert (1982), who examine the implications of prioritising measurable outcomes in education. Lyotard's 1984 critique of the performativity of knowledge within the Australian OBE context highlights potential tensions between the drive for efficiency and the intrinsic value of learning. This tension is further explored in the Australian context, where the challenge lies in balancing the need for standardised outcomes with the diversity of student needs and the dual focus on academic and vocational education. Kember's (2005) study on OBE in China introduces a perspective from a non-Western educational culture, emphasising the challenges of aligning OBE with traditional values and practices. This analysis points to the necessity

of adapting OBE strategies to fit the cultural and educational ethos of different regions, reinforcing the theme of localisation.

While often seen as a constraint, the Maltese education system's small size also offers opportunities for more cohesive and adaptive reforms. Fullan (2015) suggests that small systems can be more responsive to change as there are fewer institutional barriers to overcome. However, the extent to which this advantage applies to Malta is tempered by the centralised control that continues to dominate the education system, even with the decentralisation efforts (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2012). While the LOF aims to empower schools and educators through distributed leadership and autonomy, the reality of Malta's hierarchical structures poses challenges to genuine reform.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a stark example of how the LOF has been tested in the face of unprecedented disruptions. The Malta Union of Teachers highlighted the sudden shift to hybrid and online learning models, which stressed the need for flexible educational practices aligned with the LOF's focus on continuous assessment and personalised learning. Unfortunately, the LOF and its continuous assessment (ticking system) were paused for two years. Moreover, the pandemic also exacerbated inequities within the system, particularly between state, church, and independent schools. Schools with greater access to resources were better equipped to adapt to online learning, while others struggled with infrastructure and digital divides. This disparity raises concerns about the equitable implementation of the LOF across Malta's diverse education post-pandemic.

The recovery period provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the LOF's implementation and address the systemic weaknesses exposed during the crisis. For Malta, the key to ensuring the long-term success of the LOF lies in building a resilient, adaptable system that can accommodate the diverse needs of students while maintaining the framework's focus on outcomes and competency-based education (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). The need for CPD and leadership support is crucial to this endeavour, ensuring educators are equipped to approach the complexities of modern educational reform.

Demographics also play an important role. The National Statistics Office (2024) reports that between 2012 and 2022, Malta's resident population rose by 28.6%, growing from 421,464

to 542,051. An increase in the foreign population mainly drove this population growth. Hence, cultural diversity is another crucial factor in the contextual importance of OBE in Malta. As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, with growing numbers of learners from migrant backgrounds, the need for culturally responsive teaching practices becomes even more pressing (Arnaud, 2023). The latter's cross-national comparative study focuses on the role of cultural intelligence in educational leadership within international schools in Malta. Data were collected through in-depth case studies and interviews with school leaders, providing insight into how cultural intelligence fosters inclusivity and supports reforms like the LOF. Leaders with high cultural intelligence are better equipped to foster inclusive environments that support both pedagogical innovation and the needs of diverse learners. The LOF's success, therefore, depends not only on its ability to modernise the educational system but also on its capacity to respond to Malta's evolving demographics.

While the LOF represents a forward-thinking approach to education, its success in Malta will also depend on how well it is adapted to the local context. The lessons learned from international experiences and a deep understanding of Malta's unique educational context will be essential in driving meaningful, sustainable reform. As the Ministry continues to embrace OBE, it must remain vigilant in addressing the cultural, structural, and systemic challenges that have historically hindered educational reform, ensuring that the LOF fulfils its promise of fostering an inclusive, student-centred learning environment.

2.4.5 Implications of Malta's educational context for system-wide reform

Malta's educational reform efforts must consider the complex cultural, political, and social dynamics. Fullan (2014) argues that successful reform requires addressing structural and cultural resistance to change, which has historically slowed progress in Malta. The LOF seeks to challenge these entrenched practices by promoting flexibility, learner-centred education and distributed leadership (Cutajar et al., 2013).

A challenge is the highly centralised nature of the Maltese education system. Bezzina (2015) critiques that despite reforms like the LOF, power remains concentrated at the Ministry of Education, limiting autonomy and innovation at the school level. The top-down governance model has led to friction between policymakers and educators, a tension that Bezzina and

Bufalino (2014) argue can only be resolved through a paradigm shift towards visionary leadership within schools.

Malta's small size should theoretically enable closer collaboration in implementing reforms, yet this centralisation has stifled opportunities for local decision-making and innovation (Bezzina, 2006). Bacchus (2008) also outlines the multifaceted challenges small states encounter, including limited resources and external dependencies, factors that are pertinent to understanding Malta's educational policy landscape. While the LOF aims to decentralise leadership, schools face barriers in practice due to a lack of support structures and insufficient autonomy (Cutajar, 2007). There is a need for clear policy frameworks that empower schools, but in Malta, the centralised system hampers such development. Borg and Schembri (2022) argue that this issue is compounded in smaller, more isolated contexts like Gozo, where the sociological perspectives of educators, particularly the conflict between traditional and collaborative practices, affect the success of education.

Political dynamics further complicate the reform process. Successive governments have introduced new policies that reflect shifting priorities, impacting the continuity of reforms. This volatility and limited resources often lead to inconsistency in reform implementation, leaving educators to experience a constantly changing policy reality. Internally, leadership styles affect reform success. Distributed leadership, seen as a way to promote grassroots innovation, has yet to fully dismantle Malta's hierarchical school structures (Mifsud, 2015). As Bezzina (2006) points out, these entrenched power dynamics limit the influence of teachers and middle leaders, reinforcing a traditional approach to decision-making despite the LOF's focus on flexibility and autonomy. Bezzina (2006) argues that Malta's preference for top-down governance is deeply ingrained, making it difficult for new policies like the LOF's continuous assessment to take root. Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016) emphasise the importance of stakeholder engagement in overcoming these barriers, advocating for participatory approaches that involve teachers, parents, and policymakers to foster a sense of ownership and reduce resistance.

A gap between policy rhetoric and practical realities persists, as Evans (1996), Harris (2002) and Hargreaves & Fink (2003, 2006) caution. In Malta, educators often struggle to balance traditional assessment methods with the LOF's continuous assessment model, leading to

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reform fatigue (Chircop Zahra, 2023). This issue is compounded by insufficient professional development, which leaves teachers underprepared for the demands of the LOF (Vella Demanuele & Calleja, 2023). Continuous professional learning initiatives are essential to building leadership capacity and guiding schools through these challenges, aligning with Fullan's (2014) view that strong leadership is critical to reform success.

As the national context evolves, it becomes increasingly evident that systemic reforms must be underpinned by robust support structures rather than relying solely on technical solutions such as CPD provision or distributed leadership models. True transformation necessitates a deliberate intertwining of structural, cultural, and pedagogical reforms, with sustained investment at all levels of the system. Otherwise, as this study and prior research attest, reforms risk dissipating before real improvements in teaching and learning outcomes are achieved.

2.5 Looking back and ahead

This chapter has outlined factors shaping Malta's education system. By analysing the structural features of education and the impact of reforms like the LOF, I set the foundation for examining how these changes are experienced by policy-makers, school leaders, and teachers within this post-colonial small-state.

The next chapter will explore the theoretical foundations of this study, examining educational leadership, system-wide change, and curricular reform. This literature review will provide the conceptual framework needed to understand the complexities of reform implementation, connecting theoretical insights to the practical challenges discussed here.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of literature that supports the investigation of system-wide educational reform in Malta, focusing on the LOF, which is central to the reform under study. The review begins by outlining the process used to identify relevant literature, detailing the databases, key search terms, and selection criteria that ensured a thorough examination of both theoretical and empirical studies.

The theoretical framework guiding this research incorporates four key areas: system-wide change, policy dynamics, resistance to change, and curricular reform. These themes are explored in relation to the LOF and the Maltese educational context. By grounding this review in the LOF, the literature is directly aligned with the study's research objectives, ensuring relevance and focus. This chapter critically analyses the literature, connecting existing research to the challenges faced in implementing the LOF in Malta. The chapter concludes by synthesising the theoretical insights into a conceptual framework, which will serve as the foundation for analysing educational reform in a small-island, post-colonial context such as Malta.

3.2 Literature search methodology

I adopted a systematic approach to identifying and selecting sources to ensure a comprehensive and balanced literature review. The literature was sourced using a combination of international academic databases such as JSTOR, Springer, Taylor and Francis, SAGE, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Education Resources Information Center, as well as other resources, including the University of East Anglia's library catalogue, the University of Malta's library catalogue and Maltese academic journals such as the Malta Review of Educational Research, the Malta Journal of Education, the MCAST Journal of Applied Research and Practice, and The Educator, which the MUT publishes. I am a member of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society and have consulted the society's published journals.

In addition to global perspectives on educational reform, including local sources ensured that the study remained firmly rooted in the Maltese context, reflecting both international and local insights into system-wide educational reforms and the specific challenges faced by Malta as a small island state with a post-colonial legacy.

A key strategy involved the use of carefully selected search terms and keywords, such as the ones outlined below:

- "Curricular reform"
- "Educational leadership"
- "Educational management"
- "Educational policy enactment"
- "Educational reform in small-island states"
- "Empirical studies on educational reform"
- "Implementation of educational policies"
- "Learning Outcomes Framework"
- "Malta education reform"
- "Maltese primary education"
- "Micro-states"
- "Post-colonial education systems"
- "Primary education in Malta"
- "Public policy in education"
- "Resistance to educational change"
- "School leadership in educational reforms"
- "Small-island education systems"
- "System-wide curricular reform"
- "System-wide educational reform"
- "Teacher engagement in educational reforms"
- "Theoretical frameworks in education reform"
- "Transition in education policies"

These keywords were combined and refined throughout the review process, ensuring that broad theoretical perspectives and specific empirical studies were included. The search was conducted iteratively, allowing for adjustments as new literature emerged and was assessed. Throughout the literature search process, I maintained a critical approach. As the researcher, I was particularly mindful of balancing recent, relevant studies with established, canonical literature that continues to inform current discussions. In selecting the literature, I emphasised studies that offered empirical evidence and contributed to theoretical discussions pertinent to the Maltese context. This critical approach ensured that the literature reviewed directly supported the analysis of policy enactment and reform while offering a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of the context.

3.3 A theoretical framework

Constructing a theoretical framework is fundamental in academic research, serving as the structural core that connects research design, empirical data, and theoretical discourse. In this study, the framework is not just an organisational tool but a lens through which the complexities of policy enactment, resistance, and system-wide curricular reform are examined. Reichel and Ramey (1987) argue that frameworks must transcend mere description, linking disparate research elements into a coherent narrative. Smyth's (2004) critique of traditional frameworks highlights the limitations of simplistic tools like concept maps, which fail to capture the complexities of reform. Smyth advocates for a dynamic structure that engages with the interplay between policy, leadership, and pedagogical change. This aligns with Goetz and LeCompte's (1984) view that frameworks should actively shape research methodology and analysis. Such a framework is essential for unpacking the LOF's system-wide reform in Malta, where local idiosyncrasies and global trends intersect.

Osanloo and Grant (2016) reinforce the importance of a well-defined framework, likening it to a 'blueprint' that guides research through inquiry, analysis, and knowledge production. Sinclair (2007) adds that a robust framework bridges the gap between abstract theory and empirical application - a transition crucial for analysing the LOF. In Malta, where systemic reforms often face tensions between policy directives and on-the-ground realities, this framework provides the rigour to examine the roles of school leaders, teachers, and policymakers in enacting reforms.

The contributions of Senge, Ball, Fullan, and Stenhouse are central to developing this study's framework. These scholars offer perspectives on systemic reform, leadership, policy enactment, and curriculum development that, when synthesised, provide a multi-scalar lens for analysing the LOF's enactment. Senge's (1990) concept of learning organisations highlights the role of schools as adaptive entities capable of approaching complex changes through continuous learning processes. In Malta, schools must reconcile post-colonial legacies with contemporary educational standards. Ball's (1994) work on policy sociology provides critical insights into the interpretive processes shaping policy enactment across systems, especially where power dynamics and localised resistance mediate the implementation of reforms. Fullan (2007) focuses on the leadership and emotional dimensions of reform and examines the role of school leaders in fostering or resisting change. Stenhouse's (1975) contributions to curriculum theory explore how teachers mediate top-down curricular directives with the realities of classroom practice, experiencing tensions between policy and pedagogy.

3.3.1 The crossroads of curricular reform

One initial conceptualisation of reform viewed processes as distinct, linear pathways advancing independently. This parallel approach divided educational reform into separate tracks - policy, systemic change, curriculum development, and resistance - each moving in isolation (**Figure 5**).
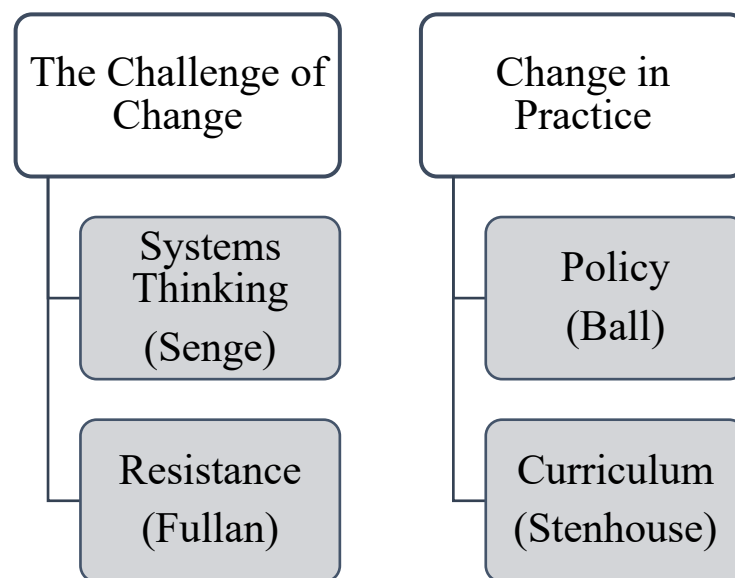
Figure 5 - Parallel approach dividing educational reform into separate tracks.

While this model offers simplicity, it overlooks the deeply interwoven nature of reform. The parallel approach suggests that reform processes function independently, oversimplifying the interplay between actors and elements. Reform is not a series of isolated events but a multi-dimensional process where systemic change, policy enactment, resistance, and curricular development continuously intersect and influence one another. This theoretical fragmentation, though convenient, does not capture the contextual intricacies of real-world reform, especially in a small island state like Malta, where historical legacies, power dynamics, and local classroom realities shape reform. To treat these processes as detached misses the fundamental point: reform is a site of convergence, not divergence. Given these inadequacies, the crossroads approach emerged as a more accurate conceptualisation of reform's multi-scalar, interdependent nature. In this framework, reform dimensions intersect at critical points, creating a complex network of interactions between policy, power, resistance, and curriculum.

The crossroads model (**Figure 6**) presents a more sophisticated understanding of reform as a convergence of these interdependent processes, rejecting the linearity implied by the parallel model.
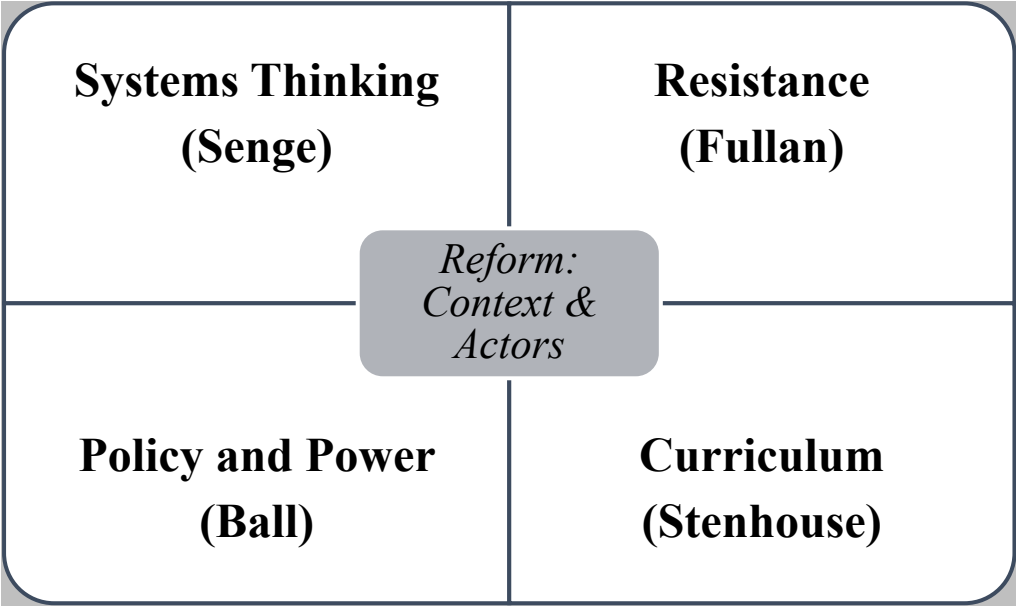
Figure 6 - The crossroads of curricular reform (Schembri, 2024).

- **Systems Thinking (Senge):** Senge's (1990) systems thinking shows that reform cannot be compartmentalised but is an adaptive process driven by interconnected actors. In Malta, the LOF is shaped by the synergy between schools, policymakers, and communities, each influencing the other through feedback loops. Systems thinking demands a holistic view - considering the system as a whole rather than focusing on isolated parts.

- **Policy and Power (Ball):** Ball's (1994) analysis of policy as a site of negotiation highlights the fluidity of policy enactment. Policy is continuously interpreted and contested by actors at various levels. In Malta, where power asymmetries exist between government bodies, school leaders, and teachers, reform processes are often reinterpreted through localised resistance and practical limitations.

- **Resistance (Fullan):** Fullan's (2007) theory frames resistance as a necessary component of reform, offering critical feedback on reform efforts. In Maltese schools, where the LOF's objectives clash with entrenched pedagogical practices and limited resources, resistance drives refinement and adaptation rather than simply blocking reform.

- **Curriculum (Stenhouse):** Stenhouse's (1975) view of curriculum as a site of teacher agency is critical in understanding how reform unfolds in classrooms. Teachers actively negotiate the curriculum to reflect both policy and the realities of their students. In Malta, where the LOF demands significant curricular shifts, teachers are essential in translating reform into practice.

At the crossroads of these theoretical perspectives lies the reality of reform: a complex, iterative process shaped by context and the actors engaged with it. Reform does not follow a linear path but unfolds through systemic forces, policy negotiations, resistance, and curricular adaptations. By embracing the crossroads approach, this framework allows for a more complex, contextually embedded analysis of the LOF's implementation in Maltese primary schools. Reform processes are not isolated but are mutually constitutive, with each process informing and being informed by others. In the following sections I will systematically examine the contributions of each theorist and the respective themes (**Figure 7**). This analysis will establish their foundational principles and critically evaluate their relevance to educational reform dynamics, particularly within Malta's context.
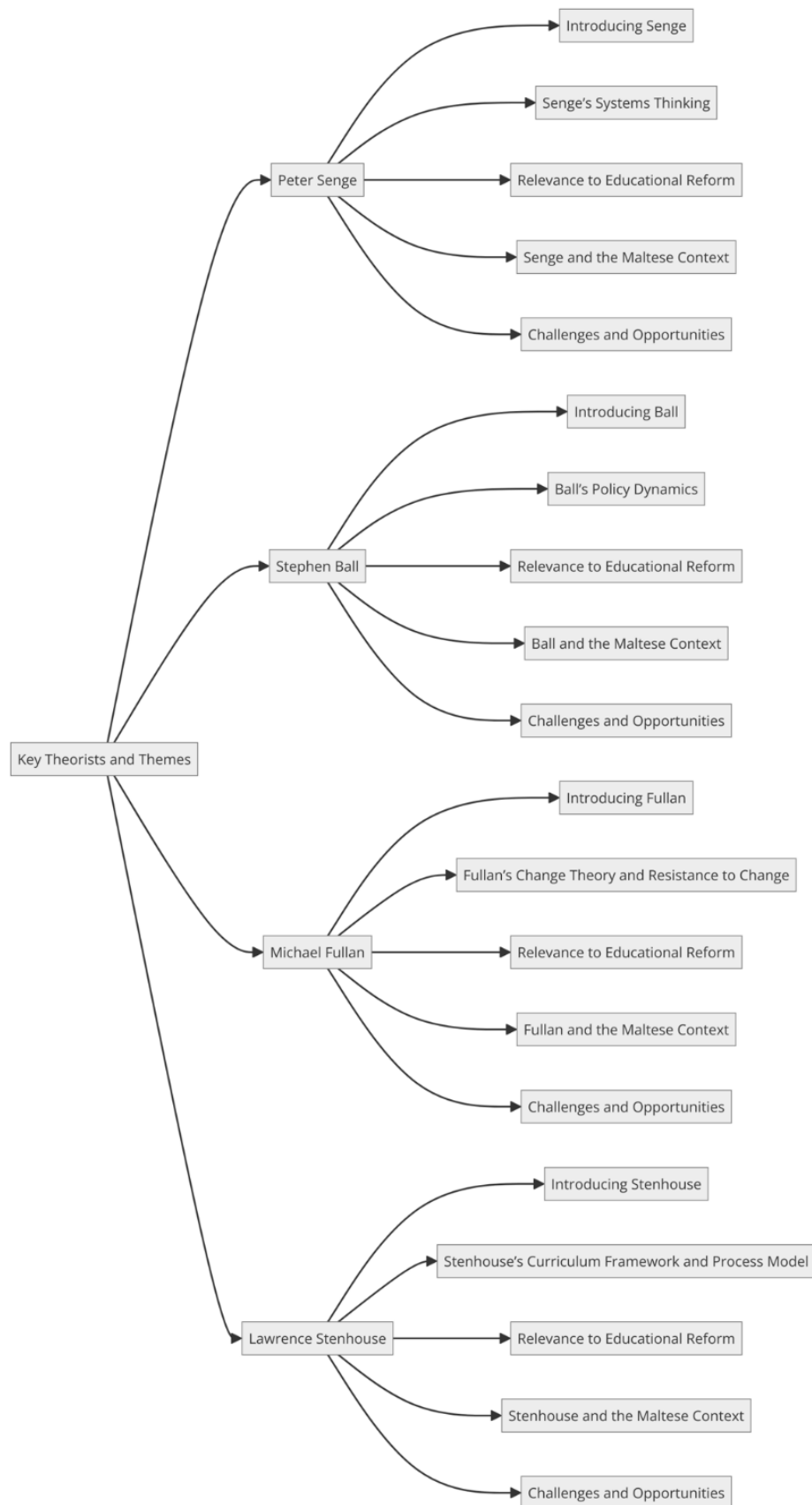
Figure 7 - Key theorists and themes in the crossroads of curricular reform.

3.3.2 Peter Senge

3.3.2.1 Introducing Senge

Senge's (1990) Systems Thinking, a fundamental concept from *The Fifth Discipline*, emphasises the need to consider the interdependencies within organisational systems. In the context of educational reform, Systems Thinking provides a framework to understand how changes in one part of the system affect others. In Malta's LOF, this approach becomes critical for analysing the ripple effects of curriculum, policy, and pedagogical changes across the educational system.

3.3.2.2 Senge's systems thinking

Systems Thinking encourages a shift from viewing individual components of a system in isolation to focusing on the relationships between them. Senge's (1990) model for a learning organisation is built around five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. These disciplines interact to form a comprehensive strategy for organisational learning and reform. Research into these disciplines has shown their relevance in education. For example, personal mastery and team learning improved teacher collaboration and innovation in educational studies (Sciberras & Schembri, 2020). Shared vision has been identified as critical for school reform efforts, fostering a collective sense of purpose that enables schools to pursue long-term goals (Kotter, 2012). Mental models shape teachers' and leaders' decisions, often reinforcing traditional practices unless deliberately challenged (Argyris & Schön, 1974). These findings reinforce the importance of challenging entrenched beliefs when implementing systemic reforms.

Research (Spillane et al., 2002) has shown that teachers' mental models impact their adaptation to reforms. When teachers view changes as aligning with their own beliefs, reforms are more likely to succeed. In Malta, as educational reforms push towards competency-based outcomes (MEDE, 2015), systems thinking helps identify leverage points where small changes in teacher training or assessment methods can create major shifts in student learning outcomes (Meadows, 1999).

3.3.2.3 Relevance to educational reform

Systems Thinking is a valuable tool for policy-makers seeking to understand educational ecosystems as interconnected wholes. Instead of focusing on isolated interventions, it emphasises interactions, feedback loops, and how changes in one part of the system affect the whole (Sterman, 2000). Empirical evidence supports this. Studies into assessment methods, such as Black and Wiliam's (1998) formative assessment research, demonstrate how adjusting assessment practices can transform classroom teaching and enhance student outcomes, a key objective of Malta's LOF.

Systems Thinking also highlights the importance of feedback loops in reform processes. For example, Sterman (2000) shows how feedback within educational systems can either reinforce or hinder reform efforts, depending on how policies are enacted and interpreted by teachers and leaders. In Malta, these dynamics are critical, as the LOF represents a shift in pedagogy and assessment, requiring continuous adaptation by educators to ensure its success. Research (Fullan, 2007) indicates that reforms supported by strong feedback mechanisms are more likely to be sustained and adapted over time.

3.3.2.4 Senge and the Maltese context

Senge's principles provide a critical framework for understanding Malta's educational reforms, particularly the LOF. These reforms aim to create a more dynamic, outcomes-based educational system, but the success of such reforms depends on their alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Bezzina (2006) highlights how reforms in Malta often struggle due to a lack of systemic alignment, where changes in one area - such as curriculum - are not adequately supported by professional development or assessment strategies. Other studies in Malta (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016; Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2010, 2018) have shown that teacher training and support are critical for successful reform implementation. Systems Thinking clarifies that reforms such as the LOF are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes without aligning curriculum development, teacher support, and assessment methods.

In the Maltese context, resistance to change is another challenge that Systems Thinking helps to explain. Research (Argyris & Schön, 1978) suggests that resistance often arises not from individual reluctance but from the system itself - ingrained cultural and structural barriers. In Malta, resistance to the LOF has been linked to longstanding educational traditions, where teachers and leaders are hesitant to adopt new approaches (Bezzina, 2000). Systems Thinking offers strategies to address this resistance by fostering a shared vision and involving stakeholders in creating an adaptive system (Senge, 1990).

3.3.2.5 Challenges and opportunities

While Systems Thinking offers profound insights, its application in educational reform is not without challenges. Sterman (2000) highlights the difficulty many educators face in grasping the complexity of systems, where interactions and feedback loops are not always immediately visible. In Malta, educators often struggle to see how changes in assessment or curriculum affect the broader system, leading to resistance or incomplete implementation of reforms.

However, Systems Thinking also provides opportunities. It enables more resilient, adaptive educational systems by fostering collaboration and encouraging collective problem-solving (Sciberras & Schembri, 2020). Studies (Meadows, 2008) have demonstrated how identifying recurring patterns of behaviour can help policy-makers predict and mitigate unintended consequences of reforms.

3.3.3 Stephen Ball

3.3.3.1 Introducing Ball

Ball is a highly influential figure in the sociology of education, known for his work on educational policy, power relations, and policy enactment. Ball (1993) argues that educational policies are not neutral; they are deeply influenced by social, economic, and political forces, and they are enacted through a complex process of interpretation by educators and school leaders. This makes his theories particularly relevant to the Maltese

education system, where national reforms, such as the LOF, are shaped by both local dynamics and international pressures (MEDE, 2015; Schembri, 2020). Ball's work provides a critical lens to understand how policy actors in Malta interpret and adapt these reforms, often influenced by their own experiences and the contextual realities of their schools (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016; Borg & Schembri, 2020; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002).

3.3.3.2 Ball's policy dynamics

Ball (1993) challenges the traditional view of policy as a straightforward directive, suggesting instead that policy is a dynamic discourse shaped by power relations and contextual factors. Policies are not simply implemented as written; they are interpreted, negotiated, and adapted by educators in practice. Ball et al. (2012) found that teachers, as policy actors, engage in processes of policy translation, adapting and modifying policies to align with the realities of their classrooms. This is particularly evident in Malta, where teachers must reconcile the ambitious aims of the LOF with the practical limitations they face regarding resources and traditional pedagogical practices (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016).

Studies such as those by Harris (2008) and Harris (2014) support Ball's view, showing that teachers and school leaders often negotiate and adapt when implementing policies. Harris found that leadership is critical in mediating policy directives and classroom practice. This dynamic is highly relevant in Malta, where school leaders often hold multiple roles within the system (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). Woods and Jeffrey (2002) also highlight the complexities of policy interpretation, arguing that teachers do not merely follow policy but actively shape and modify it based on their professional judgment and local conditions. This aligns with Ball's assertion that policy enactment is not a one-size-fits-all process but is heavily influenced by the contextual realities of each school.

Furthermore, when expressed in written form, policy acquires a dynamic character within the educational setting. Teachers, regarded as policy enactors, participate in discussions to ascertain its interpretation and applicability in their specific teaching contexts. For example, Akkary (2014), when writing about educational reforms in the Arab world, such as Morocco, Qatar and Jordan, explains that teachers need to be critical when choosing which practices to adopt and that they should potentially reflect on home-grown approaches relevant to their

contexts. Akkary talks about the process and argues that this "should aim at loosening the bureaucratic rigidity by relaxing the rules so as to accommodate the variability of emerging needs during the implementation process" (p. 13). The complexities of this process are intricate; educators may conform to, challenge, or adapt policy directions based on various factors such as professional judgment, available resources, and the perceived needs of their students (Ball & Bowe, 1992). This case study of four schools drew findings based on two concerns; "to explore the actual engagement of departments with the policy texts and the other to explore the engagement with and responses to the constraints and responsibilities arising within the changing contexts within which the departments operate" (p. 101). A meticulous and contemplative approach is necessary to comprehend and execute policies effectively, as elucidated by Woods and Jeffrey (2002).

3.3.3.3 Relevance to educational reform

Ball's exploration of power relations in educational policy provides a framework for understanding how policy is enacted in Malta's education system. In *The Education Debate*, Ball (2013) argues that educational policies are often shaped by the interests of those in positions of power and that broader socio-political dynamics influence policy enactment. This is evident in Malta, where policies such as the LOF are shaped by governmental priorities (MEDE, 2015) and demands for internationalisation in educational standards (Schembri, 2020).

Understanding these pedagogical developments requires understanding teachers' critical role as policy agents. Coburn (2001), using an in-depth case study of one California primary school, argues that teachers play an essential role in developing policy rather than simply implementing it. Their teaching methods demonstrate their engagement with policy texts. Coburn argues that:

> This portrayal of collective sensemaking - both as playing a key role in shaping the ways messages about reading actually become a part of classroom practice and as a complex process unfolding differently in many parts of the school raises key questions for policy. From a policy-maker's perspective, it may seem that schools and teachers - in reconstructing and reinterpreting policy messages - are subverting the intent of policy or thwarting

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implementation. After all, teachers did not always make sense of messages from the environment with colleagues in ways that policymakers might have hope (p. 162)

Honig (2006) emphasises the teacher's responsibility in this topic, arguing that the amount of active participation in policy implementation can impact pedagogical transformation. Studies in Malta have shown that teachers and school leaders often play a proactive role in shaping how policies are implemented. Bezzina and Cutajar (2012) found that Maltese teachers frequently adapt national curriculum policies to meet the specific needs of their students, reflecting Ball's argument that policy enactment is a process of interpretation and negotiation. This is particularly relevant in the context of the LOF, where teachers must balance the framework's competency-based goals with the realities of their classroom environments (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016).

International scholars such as Harris (2008) and Fullan (2014) also argue that policy enactment is a social process where power dynamics and leadership play key roles in shaping how reforms are understood and implemented at the school level. These insights are crucial for understanding the Maltese context, where school leaders must go through and experience multiple layers of power and influence, balancing government directives with the practical realities of teaching and learning (Bezzina & Camilleri, 2001). Moreover, policy formulation frequently reflects a community's current social and economic dynamics, impacting educational techniques that may exacerbate existing imbalances (Lingard, 2011). The latter focuses on studies conducted in Malaysia and the Indigenous education policy in Australia to outline the effects of policy as numbers. Mifsud (2014) offers a Foucauldian perspective on how Maltese school networks reproduce relations of power through policy-mandated structures, showing that reforms intended to foster decentralisation often reinforced hierarchical control mechanisms instead.

3.3.3.4 Ball and the Maltese context

Ball's theories on policy enactment and power structures provide critical insights into the Maltese education system, where the centralised nature of policy-making often creates a gap between policy formulation and classroom realities (Mayo & Borg, 2006). This is

particularly relevant to the LOF, where teachers face challenges in aligning the framework's goals with the realities of their classrooms (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016).

Ball's analysis of policy as a process of translation helps illuminate the challenges Maltese teachers face when trying to implement the LOF. Schembri and Sciberras (2020) note that teachers in Malta often act as mediators, adapting national policies to fit the needs of their students while also experiencing the power dynamics between government authorities and local school communities. This reflects Ball's view that policy enactment is not simply about following directives but about interpreting and reshaping policies to align with local contexts and needs. Bezzina and Calleja (2017) argue that Maltese teachers and school leaders frequently exercise professional autonomy in adapting curriculum reforms like the LOF. This aligns with Ball's assertion that policy enactment is a dynamic process shaped by educators' agency and their schools' specific realities (Ball et al., 2012). In Malta, where the education system is tightly interconnected, these dynamics are further complicated by the overlapping roles of stakeholders, many of whom are involved in policy-making and policy implementation (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020).

3.3.3.5 Challenges and opportunities

Applying Ball's theories in the Maltese context reveals challenges and opportunities. One of the key challenges is the disconnect between policy and practice in a centralised education system like Malta's, where reforms such as the LOF are often designed without sufficient input from teachers and school leaders (Mayo & Borg, 2006). As Ball (2013) argues, policies are often shaped by those in power, leading to a mismatch between policy goals and the realities of classroom implementation. This challenge is particularly evident in Malta, where teachers must cope with the tension between the competency-based outcomes of the LOF and the traditional teaching methods still prevalent in many schools (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). The challenge of achieving authentic decentralisation in Maltese educational reform has been critically highlighted by Cutajar et al. (2013). They argue that while reforms such as the College system were intended to distribute governance, in practice, hierarchical traditions remained dominant, and real power-sharing was limited. Their analysis reveals that systemic reform efforts often fall short when structural changes are not accompanied by deep cultural shifts toward trust, collaboration, and shared leadership (Cutajar et al., 2013). This

critique resonates with the findings of this study, which identified persistent tensions between policy discourse and practice.

However, Ball's work also highlights opportunities. Recognising teachers as active policy agents rather than passive implementers makes it possible to develop more inclusive and context-sensitive reforms. Studies (Ball et al., 2012; Harris, 2008) show that the likelihood of successful implementation increases when teachers are involved in the policy creation process. In Malta, this approach could help bridge the gap between policy intention and classroom practice, leading to reforms that are more attuned to the cultural and educational complexities of the island.

3.3.4 Michael Fullan

3.3.4.1 Introducing Fullan

Fullan is a leading authority in educational reform, recognised for his research on the dynamics of systemic change within educational institutions. His work focuses on how reform efforts unfold in complex systems, stressing the significance of moral purpose, collaborative cultures, and the balance between drivers of change and the forces that oppose it as outlined by various studies by Fullan (1993, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002). Fullan's framework is critical to understanding the resistance to change in education, a persistent barrier in reform contexts, including Malta, where national reforms such as the LOF are reshaping educational scenarios (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). Fullan's emphasis on moral purpose and collaborative leadership provides a lens to analyse the challenges and opportunities of implementing large-scale reforms like the LOF (Fullan, 2000a, 2014).

3.3.4.2 Fullan's change theory and resistance to change

Fullan's (1993) *Change Forces* offers a compelling analysis of the interaction between educators' personal commitment, institutional objectives, and broader societal forces, which either propel or impede reform. Fullan underscores the importance of moral purpose, which is defined as the deep commitment to improving student outcomes. This moral imperative often faces resistance arising from a fear of disrupting established routines and practices

(Evans, 1996). In Malta, this resistance can be seen in the reluctance of some educators to embrace the LOF, as it challenges teaching methods and assessments (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016; Schembri, 2020). Fullan (2001) highlights the role of moral purpose as a driver of change, arguing that reform efforts are more likely to succeed when educators and leaders share a vision focused on student improvement. However, Fullan (2014) warns that reforms driven by mere compliance often fail to achieve meaningful impact. This is relevant in Malta, where the LOF's implementation is sometimes viewed as a top-down directive rather than a genuine opportunity for pedagogical advancement. Fullan's work suggests that meaningful change requires a shift from rule-based reforms to reforms rooted in collective moral purpose. Fullan's insights into resistance to change are particularly relevant in understanding the barriers educators face in Malta. Resistance is often not due to reluctance to improve but stems from uncertainty and discomfort with the unfamiliar (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Teachers may perceive reforms as threats to their professional autonomy, particularly when reforms like the LOF require significant shifts in teaching practice (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016; Evans, 1996). Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrate how changes in assessment policies are met with resistance, not because educators are opposed to improvement but because they lack clarity and support in implementing the changes.

3.3.4.3 Relevance to educational reform

Fullan's theory of change is particularly well-suited to understanding the complexities of educational reform in Malta, a small island state with deep historical ties to colonial education systems, as argued in a tracer study of teachers in Malta (Baldacchino, 1997). The resistance to change that Fullan identifies as a natural response to reform is amplified in Malta by its tight-knit educational community and the centralised nature of policy-making (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). Fullan's emphasis on collaborative cultures and collective capacity-building becomes crucial in this context, where reforms like the LOF also depend on the active engagement of all stakeholders.

Studies by Cutajar (2007) and Cutajar et al. (2013) show that Maltese teachers often exercise professional autonomy in interpreting and adapting national policies. This reflects Fullan's argument that educators are not passive recipients of reform but actively participate in shaping how reforms are enacted (Fullan, 2001). In Malta, where the resistance to

change is often rooted in the desire to preserve traditional pedagogical practices, Fullan's call for shared moral purpose offers a way to align reform efforts with the cultural and educational values of the local context. This could also help with the concept of path dependency, as what happened in the past might still be affecting the present and hence why resistance occurs. Fullan's framework also highlights the importance of CPD and support systems for educators, often lacking in Malta (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). Without these, reforms risk being seen as superficial adjustments rather than meaningful improvements. Prensky (2010) argues that for change to be sustained, educators must be provided with the resources and support needed to implement new practices.

3.3.4.4 Fullan and the Maltese context

Building upon the foundational concepts introduced in the previous sections on Fullan's change theory, I can further contextualise his work within the Maltese educational context. Fullan's understanding of change as a complex, culturally embedded process (Fullan, 2007) resonates with the specific challenges faced by Malta's education system, which is deeply rooted in its colonial history and traditions (Baldacchino, 2002). The resistance to change, therefore, can be seen as a natural extension of this historical context, where educators are more inclined to maintain proven methods rather than venture into uncharted pedagogical territories. The cultural fabric of Malta, characterised by its close-knit societal structure (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020), often amplifies the socio-political dimensions of change (Harris, 2008; Sultana, 1996). While a source of strength, this interconnectedness can also result in a heightened sensitivity to change, particularly when it threatens to disrupt well-established networks and hierarchies. Mifsud (2020) critically examined how collegial school networks in Malta, while aiming to promote quality education, often risk reproducing hierarchical power structures if not carefully cultivated. Fullan's emphasis on creating a collaborative culture and developing collective capacity (Fullan, 2016) becomes particularly relevant here. It suggests that fostering a shared vision and building consensus could mitigate resistance by valuing and integrating local insights into the reform process (Cutajar, 2017). In applying Fullan's framework to the Maltese context, it becomes apparent that the 'moral purpose' of reform, a commitment to the betterment of student outcomes, must be communicated and embraced by all stakeholders to overcome the inertia of tradition (Fullan, 2001; Shaked and Schechter (2017b). Furthermore, the 'shared coherence' Fullan (2016)

advocates for is crucial in aligning the diverse stakeholders' efforts toward a common goal, thus reducing fragmentation and the dilution of reform efforts.

The barriers created by a compliance-focused mentality, as discussed by Fullan (2014), are also evident in Malta's educational reforms. Fullan's insights prompt us to question whether the reforms are driven by a genuine desire for improvement or a response to external pressures (such as politics) and accountability measures (such as over-assessment of learning). This reflection is integral to understanding the complexity of implementing change within Malta's educational system and ensuring that reforms are not only adopted but also internalised by the educators themselves. In synthesising Fullan's theories with the Maltese educational context, I can see the importance of engaging educators as implementers and active participants in the change process. Fullan's notion of 'deep learning' (Fullan, 2007) can serve as a guiding principle to analyse Malta's educational reforms, advocating for a transformative (as suggested by the LOF proponents) approach that moves beyond superficial adjustments to effect profound pedagogical and systemic change.

3.3.4.5 Challenges and opportunities

Fullan's framework reveals several challenges and opportunities for educational reform in Malta. One of the primary challenges is overcoming the resistance to change that stems from deeply entrenched cultural values and the centralised nature of policy-making (Mayo & Borg, 2006). Fullan (2014) argues that reforms often fail when imposed from above without sufficient input from educators. However, Fullan's work also points to opportunities. By fostering a collaborative culture and building collective capacity, Malta's small size could be leveraged to create a more cohesive and adaptive educational system (Fullan, 2007). Fullan's emphasis on moral purpose suggests that reforms like the LOF can succeed if they are seen not as compliance-driven mandates but as part of a broader vision for educational excellence. In this sense, Fullan's framework provides a tool for understanding the complex dynamics of educational reform in Malta and developing strategies to overcome resistance and drive meaningful change.

3.3.5 Lawrence Stenhouse

3.3.5.1 Introducing Stenhouse

Stenhouse transformed the field of curriculum theory, shifting the focus from rigid, prescriptive models to more dynamic, flexible processes. His process-based approach empowered teachers not only as implementers but also as researchers of the curriculum (Stenhouse, 1975). Stenhouse argued that curriculum should foster investigation and adaptation, allowing teachers to shape educational experiences that are responsive to student needs and evolving societal demands.

3.3.5.2 Stenhouse's curriculum framework and the process model

Stenhouse's process model (1975) revolutionised curriculum theory by rejecting traditional, outcome-driven models that emphasised content and predetermined objectives. Instead, he proposed that curriculum should be a fluid process led by teachers, characterised by continuous experimentation and investigation. This approach acknowledges that the true value of a curriculum lies not in its documentation, but in the intellectual stimulation and engagement it fosters in both teachers and students.

Stenhouse emphasised teacher autonomy, arguing that educators should be free to adapt the curriculum based on their professional judgement and the unique demands of their educational context (Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985). This autonomy is essential in fostering an environment where teachers can respond to students' evolving needs and societal shifts. This principle resonates with contemporary pedagogical approaches promoting inquiry-based learning and student-centred education (Craig, 2009). In Malta, where educational reforms are increasingly focused on outcome-based learning (MEDE, 2015), Stenhouse's model offers a compelling alternative - one that values the process of learning as much as the outcomes.

Stenhouse's approach aligns well with Malta's reforms, particularly the LOF, which prioritises skills over rote learning (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). His process model advocates for a curriculum that emerges through the interaction of teachers, students, and

subject matter, allowing for a more flexible, exploratory learning environment (Schwab, 1969). In contrast to traditional models that outline the content in a rigid, linear fashion (Tyler, 1949), Stenhouse's emphasis on teacher-led adaptation creates space for collaboration and reflection - qualities that are increasingly valued in modern education systems as outlined by Biesta (2005, 2010, 2015).

3.3.5.3 Relevance to educational change

Stenhouse redefined the teacher's role as active researchers in their classrooms, promoting the idea of curriculum as research (Stenhouse, 1981). This approach encourages teachers to evaluate their teaching methods critically, adapt their strategies based on students' needs, and contribute to the broader knowledge of what constitutes effective education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Teachers are no longer seen as passive recipients of policy but as reflective professionals engaged in the continuous improvement of educational practice.

In the context of Malta's ambitious reforms, Stenhouse's model provides a framework that empowers teachers to take a leading role in shaping curriculum changes. The LOF can benefit from Stenhouse's insights by encouraging educators to use evidence-based practices to guide their teaching, ensuring that reforms are grounded in real classroom experiences. By viewing teachers as researchers, Stenhouse's model supports a bottom-up approach to reform, where changes are informed by evidence and adapted to the unique context of each classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Stenhouse's vision also aligns with efforts to professionalise teaching in Malta, promoting a flexible curriculum responsive to learners' diverse needs (MEDE, 2015). His curriculum-as-research paradigm encourages teachers to take ownership of reform initiatives, ensuring that changes are not simply imposed from above but are the result of collaborative inquiry and reflective practice (Zhao, 2012). This model is particularly valuable in today's fast-paced educational environment, where CPD is essential for fostering innovation and adaptability (Florian & Pantić, 2017). Farrugia (2021) demonstrates that within Maltese schools, traditional CPD models often inadvertently undermine teacher autonomy and argues for a systemic shift towards more teacher-led, contextually grounded professional learning approaches.

3.3.5.4 Stenhouse and the Maltese context

Stenhouse's process-based approach holds potential for reshaping curricular reforms in Malta, particularly in relation to the LOF. His view of the curriculum as a continuous inquiry process rather than a fixed set of instructions aligns with the LOF's goal of promoting skills-based learning (MEDE, 2015). By empowering teachers to act as curricular developers, Stenhouse's model encourages educators in Malta to customise the curriculum to meet the unique socio-cultural needs of their students (Elliott, 1991). This approach resonates with the emphasis on fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bezzina, 2019). Stenhouse's focus on teacher autonomy is particularly relevant in Malta, where the education system is characterised by a centralised policy structure (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). While centralisation offers consistency, it can also limit the flexibility required for teachers to respond to the specific needs of their students.

By adopting Stenhouse's principles, Malta can move towards a more dynamic, responsive educational system where teachers are encouraged to experiment, reflect, and innovate (Wain, 2004). This shift would align with the LOF's goals of creating a learner-centred curriculum that prioritises competencies over content. Recent Maltese research (Abela Cascun, 2020) reinforces the critical role of curriculum leadership in times of reform, highlighting that distributed leadership models and collaborative curriculum work are essential to sustain change at the school level.

Furthermore, Stenhouse's idea of curriculum as research offers a pathway for enhancing professional development in Malta. By fostering a culture of continuous reflection and collaborative inquiry, educators can develop the skills necessary to adapt to the evolving demands of the 21st-century classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The authors, who focus on research both in the United States (US) and abroad (Finland, Japan and Singapore), argue that:

> Collaborative approaches have been found to be effective in promoting school change that extends beyond individual classrooms. When whole grade levels, schools or departments are involved, they provide a broader base of understanding and support at the school level. Teachers create a critical mass for improved instruction and serve as support groups for each other's

improved practice. Collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection into teachers' own practice, allowing teachers to take risks, solve problems and attend to dilemmas in their practice. (p. 7)

This approach supports the creation of an educational system that values teacher autonomy and promotes ongoing innovation, transforming the classroom into a laboratory of learning (Wain, 2004). Stenhouse's principles also align with Malta's push towards collaborative professionalism, a concept explored by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), which emphasises the importance of collaborative inquiry in driving educational reform. This model can help Malta address the challenges of harmonising educational standards with diverse learning environments, ensuring that the curriculum remains flexible and responsive to changing societal needs (Sultana, 1996).

3.3.5.5 Challenges and opportunities

One of the primary obstacles is the need to shift teachers' mindsets from seeing themselves as mere implementers of policy to creators and researchers of the curriculum. This shift requires breaking away from long-established teaching traditions and embracing a culture of professional autonomy and reflective practice (Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985). The centralised nature of Malta's education system may also pose a challenge, as it limits the flexibility required to implement Stenhouse's model fully (Mayo & Borg, 2006).

Despite these challenges, Stenhouse's model offers potential for professional growth and curricular reform in Malta. His focus on critical thinking, teacher autonomy, and student-centred learning aligns with the LOF's objectives and fosters innovation and adaptability in the classroom (MEDE, 2015). By embracing Stenhouse's principles, Malta can create a more equitable and responsive educational system, where the needs of students and teachers alike shape the curriculum.

3.4 Forces shaping the crossroads of reform

Following the discussion of key theorists, this section shifts focus to the four primary forces shaping educational reform: system-wide change, policy dynamics and power structures, resistance to change, and curricular development (**Figure 8**). Drawing on Senge's systems thinking, Ball's policy dynamics, Fullan's work on resistance, and Stenhouse's views on curriculum reform, I will critically examine how these forces interact at the crossroads of educational reform.
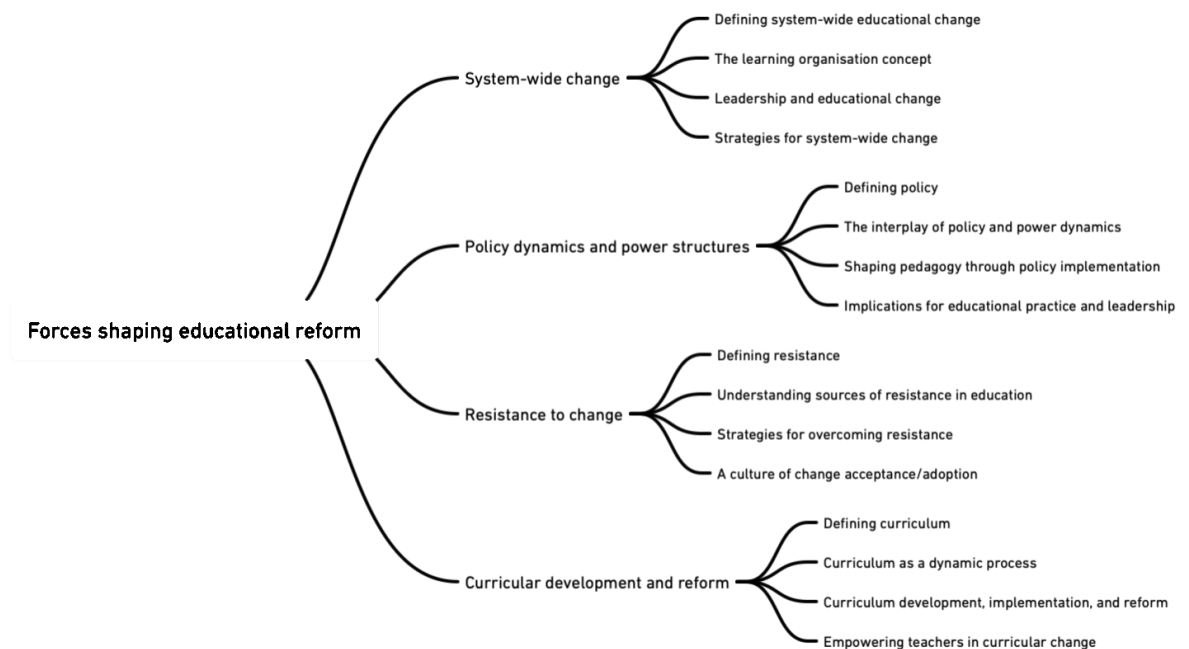
Figure 8 - Primary forces shaping educational reform.

3.4.1 System-wide change

3.4.1.1 Defining system-wide educational change

System-wide change has been a focal point in educational reform literature, with roots in von Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory. This theory, foundational to understanding interconnected and interdependent elements within systems, is crucial when examining educational reforms (Bates, 2013; Bodhanya, 2016). Von Bertalanffy emphasises that reforms should not be viewed through a linear lens; rather, they must be understood as

complex, adaptive processes where changes in one part of the system ripple through the entire structure (Mason, 2008).

This holistic view of educational systems is echoed by McCalman et al. (2016), who argue that the capacity of organisations to tackle change is a marker of success. This notion resonates with Senge's (1990) 'learning organisation' ethos in educational settings, which frames schools as adaptive entities capable of continual evolution. Senge et al.'s (1999) concept of system-wide change and the challenges to sustain momentum aligns with research by Bezzina and Camilleri (2001), who found that collaborative teamwork improved reform implementation in Maltese schools. This approach contrasts with Langley's (2005) critique of top-down reforms, which can alienate teachers and foster resistance (Fullan, 2014; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003).

Building on this, Becker's (1976) rational choice theory introduces an economic dimension to system-wide change, suggesting that incentives influence individuals' decisions. Yet, when applied to education, this view is complicated by evidence showing that teachers' decisions are driven by more than just economic motivations. For instance, Airini et al. (2007) found that in New Zealand, teachers' engagement in reform was largely influenced by their personal values and professional autonomy, aligning with Hargreaves' (2009) observations on the interplay of professional judgement and policy enactment. Lehman's (2015) assertion that education must continually adapt to external changes is supported by research in Chile (Anderson et al., 2021), which found that most reforms target implementation within existing structures rather than overhauling systems entirely. They also found that the "differentiating factor centred on the actions of local agency leaders who responded to capacity gaps and lack of direction from government authorities as either constraints on change or as an opportunity for innovation" (p. 1). In Malta, the LOF reflects this by seeking to adapt existing educational practices while embedding systemic improvements (Bezzina, 2019; MEDE, 2015).

3.4.1.2 The learning organisation concept

The concept of a 'learning organisation', pioneered by Senge (1990) and extended by Goh and Richards (1997), offers a pragmatic approach to system-wide change. Senge's work, often applied in contexts like the US and Canada, conceptualises learning as an ongoing,

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collective process (Pedler et al., 1996). Goh and Richards' research, based on 632 questionnaire responses in various large organisations, further supports this, finding that organisations which fostered team problem-solving and shared vision were more successful in achieving reform. They argue that:

> The concept of organizational learning is of vital importance to both private and public organizations. Organizational life currently features shorter product cycles, global competition, increased workplace diversity, and the constant need to 'do more with less'. In such an environment, faster learners will have a distinct advantage: they will find ways to improve work processes and will find breakthroughs in product and service development before their slower learning competitors. But, if managers are to improve the ability of organizations to learn, they should approach it systematically by focusing on specific interventions designed for this purpose (p. 581)

This approach contrasts with von Bertalanffy's (1968) more theoretical systems thinking, emphasising open systems' unpredictable nature. However, Senge's (1990) concept is grounded in the practicalities of educational environments, as demonstrated by Bezzina's (2013) work in Malta, where continuous learning and leadership support were crucial in reforming schools. Vella (2018) and Vella (2020) add that in Maltese contexts, school leaders must provide class-based assistance to foster professional development, resonating with Watkins and Marsick's works (1993, 1996) who emphasis continuous learning and knowledge transfer within schools.

While Goh and Richards (1997) offer concrete steps for creating learning organisations, studies highlight varying challenges. For instance, Kiziloglu's (2015) research, through a quantitative study encompassing 272 questionnaires in Turkey, emphasised that organisational commitment to learning and shared vision were pivotal but difficult to cultivate in hierarchical systems. This aligns with the challenges faced in Malta, where reforms often struggle against traditional power structures (Baldacchino, 2002).

3.4.1.3 Leadership and educational change

Leadership is fundamental to driving educational reform. Bush (2007) argues that "there is recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers if they are to provide the best possible education for their learners" (p. 391). Leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), are critical in complex changes. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate staff, fostering a shared vision for change, as seen in Harris' (2008) study of Australian schools, where such leadership models led to improved outcomes in teaching and learning.

Hussen (1994) sheds light on the guiding principles essential for educational reform, noting the necessity for such reforms to be part of comprehensive social changes and perceived as internal needs within the educational system. These principles emphasise that educational reforms are inherently slow and require broad consensus. Grint (2005) complements this by suggesting that leadership itself is a subjective phenomenon constructed socially through a psychological contract between leader and follower. Therefore, leadership's legitimacy is contingent upon the followers' acceptance and is critical to the success of educational change.

Western (2011) brings forth the concept of eco-leadership, grounded in connectivity and ethical stewardship, essential for educational leaders who aspire to cultivate sustainable practices and collaborative learning communities. This approach finds resonance with collaborative leadership styles advocated by Manz and Sims (1993), Chaleff (1995), and Kouzes and Posner (2002), which highlight the leader's role in facilitating teamwork and shared goals. Moreover, Kelley, when arguing about the power of followership (1988) and Pearce and Conger, when they argue about shared leadership (2003), advocate for a shared leadership model, proposing that a decentralised distribution of leadership roles can bolster organizational performance through collective responsibility.

The ability to respond effectively to change is the hallmark of adaptive leadership, a style discussed by Wheatley (1992), Heifetz (1994), and Schneider and Somers (2006). This leadership approach emphasises problem-solving and organisational adaptation through learning and flexibility, particularly relevant in educational reform. Complementing this, Hickman (2004) introduces the notion of invisible leadership, which operates subtly to guide

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the change process, ensuring that group dynamics are maintained even without formal recognition. Moreover, Bezzina (2013) and Bezzina and Bufalino (2014) talk about leaders who develop authentic connections, which require time and dedication to flourish. Investing time and attention promotes collegial ties. Leaders who prioritise their school's goals and staff's interests build trust and loyalty, ensuring their dedication to the organisation's progress plan.

However, Debono (2019) warns that without fostering a culture of authentic collegiality and emotional connection among educators, reforms risk superficial compliance rather than meaningful engagement. Fullan (2014) also warns that focusing too heavily on leadership risks overlooking the role of teachers as co-creators of reform. His longitudinal study involving over 100 schools in Canada demonstrated that successful reforms required balancing leadership with teacher agency. This is further reinforced by Vella's (2018) research in Malta, which found that teachers must feel empowered to implement changes; otherwise, top-down directives may fail. Farrugia (2021) warns that unless systems create supportive conditions for agency and reflection, reforms risk being absorbed into existing practices without genuine transformation, a risk particularly acute in small island contexts such as Malta. Evidence from Scandinavian schools (Western, 2011) shows that eco-leadership, which prioritises connectivity and ethical stewardship, fosters environments where collaboration and innovation can flourish. This contrasts with more traditional leadership models, such as the control-oriented styles discussed by Etzioni (1961) and Taylor (1911), which may stifle creativity. In Malta, leaders adopting eco-leadership or transformational styles are better equipped to address the complexities of LOF implementation (Bezzina, 2019; Schembri & Sciberras, 2020).

3.4.1.4 Strategies for system-wide change

System-wide change requires strategies that account for the complexities of educational ecosystems. Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1996) argue for fostering a learning culture within organisations, a view supported by research from Pedler et al. (1996). Their study of UK schools found that collaborative problem-solving and shared leadership were essential for sustaining reforms, a finding echoed in Malta by Bezzina and Camilleri (2001), whose research underscores the importance of teamwork in successful educational change.

Strategic leadership is critical in this process. Mintzberg (1994) and Davis et al. (2005) argue that adaptive, strategic leadership is essential for approaching the unpredictable nature of educational reforms. Mintzberg's (1994) study of Canadian educational institutions highlighted the role of experiential learning in effective leadership, while Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) found that collaborative teaching practices in Maltese schools led to more successful reforms under the LOF. Moreover, the work of Schembri & Sciberras (2020) in Malta demonstrates that collaborative leadership styles foster environments where teachers feel supported in implementing reforms. Their study highlights the need for leaders to actively engage with teachers to create a shared vision for change, aligning with Bass and Avolio's (1994) transformational leadership model, which emphasises reciprocal influence between leaders and staff.

Elmore (2007) provides insights into the challenges of pedagogical transformation. Based on his research in the United States, Elmore's work on strategic interventions advocates for reforms guided by explicit theories of action. Moreover, Zhao & Qiu (2010) also provide similar insights when analysing China as a systemic educational reform case study. They argue about the "Chinese way of decentralisation" (p. 352) and that "structural changes are easier than cultural changes" (p. 359). This is relevant for Malta, where reforms must be strategically aligned with both global educational trends and local socio-cultural realities (Bezzina, 2006).

3.4.2 Policy dynamics and power structures

3.4.2.1 Defining policy

Frameworks and perspectives shape education policy-making, influencing professional practices and identities within educational institutions. Ball et al. (2012) highlight the pervasive impact of policy discourse on shaping educational practices, underscoring how policy narratives can influence the professional identities of educators. Ball (2003) characterises the spread of educational policy initiatives as an 'epidemic,' drawing attention to the rapid dissemination of policy across educational systems, such as implementing school

accountability policies in the UK and the USA. This perspective invites scrutiny of the long-term implications of such widespread policy initiatives.

Stronach and Morris (1994) and Stronach (2010) warn of 'policy hysteria,' where top-down mandates can incite fear and resistance among educators. This response was particularly evident in their study on implementing market-driven educational policies in the UK, where teachers expressed concerns over losing professional autonomy. Such emotional responses to policy illustrate the need to critically engage with policy discourse to understand its actual impact on educational outcomes.

Bell and Stevenson (2006) explore the interaction between state and institutional policies, focusing on how power dynamics shape the alignment of institutional autonomy with state directives. Their work examines the tensions in the UK's policy-making processes, particularly regarding the competing interests of government and educational institutions. Similarly, Simon (1988) explores the centralisation of policy-making in the UK, where decisions are primarily driven by state values, often reducing the scope for institutional flexibility. Kogan's (1975) analysis, grounded in studies of policy formation in British schools, categorises educational policy into social, economic, and institutional values, providing a value-centric approach to understanding how policy objectives align with societal goals. Kogan's framework was later applied to assess the UK's national curriculum, demonstrating the complexity of integrating diverse values into educational policy.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) emphasises the importance of translating policy objectives into tangible educational outcomes, highlighting policy implementation as a critical phase of the policy cycle. Based on cross-country analysis, their report stresses that effective policy implementation requires a strategic focus on context, stakeholder engagement, and capacity-building initiatives. Marshall et al. (2020) similarly discuss the political dimensions of policy-making, using data from a range of case studies across Europe to show how competing interests shape policy outcomes (Fullan, 2014).

Wadi (1995) provides further insights into policy's dynamic and directive nature, conceptualising policy as a set of decisions that guide future actions. This work differentiates

between vertical and horizontal policy-making, showing how the top-down and collaborative policy formulation models produce varied outcomes regarding teacher agency and policy adaptation.

3.4.2.2 The interplay of policy and power dynamics

Power dynamics are central to understanding how educational reform is enacted. Sparr (2018) highlights the critical role of leadership in such power relations, examining change management strategies. Sparr's research, which involved qualitative interviews with school leaders, revealed that effective change management relies heavily on leaders' ability to foster collaboration and organisational readiness. McCalman et al. (2016) argue that defining success criteria is crucial in change situations, noting the complexity of implementing reform in systems where power and influence are unevenly distributed. Empirical research by Mifsud (2014) demonstrates that distributed leadership within Maltese college networks remained largely rhetorical, with leadership and autonomy tightly constrained by centralised state control.

Keow (2019) asserts that leaders exert power through interpersonal relationships and resource allocation, shaping policy implementation. The findings suggest that leaders must balance influence and access to resources to drive change effectively. Similarly, Bezzina and Calleja (2017), drawing on case studies from Malta, highlight that leadership's role in policy implementation extends beyond technical application to managing the socio-political elements of reform. Further research explores how policy development interacts with organisational structures. French and Bell (1999) advocate for a systemic understanding of educational institutions, critiquing reductionist views that treat organisations as mechanistic systems. Their critique is supported by Bodhanya (2016), who examines large-scale systematic change, noting that systems should be understood as interconnected and adaptive. In their study, Aarrevaara et al. (2019) caution against viewing strategy work as a linear process, showing that policy implementation requires adaptation over time in response to evolving organisational dynamics. They argue "that a strategy has meaning for practitioners and actors in strategy formulation when it is useful to those practitioners" (p. 228).

Broader socio-political factors also shape educational policies. Harman et al. (2016) critique the implementation of standardised testing in the USA, arguing that accountability measures often stifle creativity in leadership. Their study, based on survey data from school administrators, highlights how such policies can lead to narrowing educational objectives. Conversely, Levin (2012) advocates for adaptive strategies in policy implementation, drawing on evidence from Canadian education reforms that emphasise the need for policies to be flexible to accommodate diverse educational contexts. Parker (1997) raises concerns about policymakers' over-reliance on technical rationality, a critique grounded in her research on school reform. Parker argues that reducing education to measurable outcomes neglects the broader socio-political contexts within which education operates. Ball and Junemann (2012), analysing policy shifts, echo this concern, calling for analyses that examine both changes and continuities in educational practices, particularly how power is exercised and contested within schools.

3.4.2.3 Shaping pedagogy through policy implementation

Policy implementation impacts pedagogy, shaping teaching practices and outcomes. Pulkkinen et al. (2019) explore policy convergence driven by international organisations like the OECD, examining how globalised educational agendas influence national reforms. Their study, including data from Finland, revealed how policy alignment with international standards affects curriculum design while highlighting the gap between policy intent and practice (Levin, 2012). Ball (1998) discusses policy enactment within schools, focusing on how teachers mediate policy in their classrooms. Ball's study highlights the interpretive nature of policy implementation, with teachers adapting national standards to suit their local contexts. Moreover, there is this notion that "new policies feed off and gain legitimacy from the deriding and demolition of previous policies" (p. 125). Avidov-Ungar and Arviv-Elyashiv (2018) further explore this notion of teacher agency, whose work on Israeli schools emphasises the need for flexible policy frameworks that allow for professional autonomy. This study, which included 663 teachers, 250 elementary school teachers and 413 middle or high school teachers, suggests that "policymakers and school principals should seek to create an empowering environment and to develop models to enhance teachers' sense of empowerment, as a resource that motivates, challenges, and encourages" them (p. 167).

Leadership also plays a key role in how pedagogy is shaped through policy. Portin et al. (2006) emphasise the significance of school leadership in policy enactment, with their study of American school leaders showing how principals act as mediators between policy and practice. Levin (2012) supports this view, arguing that distributed leadership models, based on evidence from Canadian reforms, empower educators to contribute to policy implementation, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for educational outcomes. Penney (2017) examines the global and local dimensions of policy development, using data from schools to argue for context-sensitive approaches to policy formulation. Diem and Welton (2021) call for inclusive policy conversations, particularly in their analysis of education policy reforms, highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement in shaping policy outcomes. This aligns with the OECD's (2018) findings on the need for evidence-informed policy-making and feedback loops to support continuous improvement.

3.4.2.4 Implications for educational practice and leadership

The implications of policy on educational practice and leadership are profound. Mintzberg and Quinn (1992) conceptualise strategy as a multi-dimensional construct, while Hickson et al. (1971) focus on the role of power in decision-making processes. These perspectives are critical in understanding how leadership addresses policy challenges, as demonstrated in Portin et al.'s (2006) study, which shows that school leaders must balance structural reforms with the values and goals of their school community. Day et al. (2000) explore how leadership can align external policy mandates with school values, using data from the UK to demonstrate that successful policy implementation relies on transparency and integrity in leadership practices. Ball et al. (2012) critique the constraints of accountability policies, showing how such mandates limit professional autonomy in schools. This contrasts Shaked and Schechter's (2017a) study with 59 school principals and Shaked and Schechter's (2019) study with 65 middle leaders, both based on research in Israeli schools. The studies outline that school principals and middle leaders are pivotal in bridging the gap between policy development and classroom practice. The first study shows that "to mediate between reform policy demands and teachers' attitudes and needs, principals used two complementary strategies: earning teachers' support towards the reform, and adjusting the reform to the teachers' attitudes and needs" (p. 31). The second study shows that "to perform well during an education reform, teachers need detailed instructions" (p. 425).

3.4.3 Resistance to change

3.4.3.1 Defining resistance

Various organisational dynamics, stakeholder interests, and contextual factors shape resistance to change in educational contexts. McCalman et al. (2016) highlight the challenge of managing change, particularly in fast-evolving environments, stressing that management teams must design adaptive organisations capable of taking on such shifts. In contrast, Friedman et al. (2003) and Burke (2008) note that inflexibility in dynamic environments can stifle innovation. These viewpoints reflect a tension between the need for stability and the demand for innovation, posing questions about how educational settings can optimally balance continuity with change (Ball, 1987; McCalman et al., 2016).

Studies such as those by Datnow et al. (2002), focusing on reform initiatives in American schools, underscore the difficulties of sustaining reforms over time, often due to poor implementation and scalability issues. They also argue that it is important to consider the context, which, in turn, helps to elicit data to develop a grounded theory for understanding reform implementation. This highlights the importance of contextualising reforms to foster long-term sustainability. Drawing on data from OECD countries, Woessmann and Hanushek (2007) argue that resource constraints can hinder effective change, particularly in educational settings where budgets and staff shortages are prevalent.

Kogan's (1975) pluralist perspective on policy development emphasises the democratic processes needed to reconcile competing values. This contrasts with Ball's (1987) work, which identifies resistance to change stemming from threats to vested interests and professional identity. These sources of resistance demonstrate that opposition to change is rarely monolithic; it is driven by various motivations, including ideological concerns and the preservation of professional status (Ball, 1987; Kogan, 1975).

Levin (2012), based on his research in Canadian education, warns against assuming universal acceptance of reform initiatives, underscoring the importance of aligning reforms with local contexts. Datnow and Stringfield (2000), in research based on findings from 16 projects and more than 300 case studies, outline that the interactions of educators and policymakers at

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other levels were also consequential, and system integration in US schools between the district, state, and school levels strongly influenced reform sustainability. They argue that:

> reform adoption, implementation, and sustainability, and school change more generally, are not processes that result from individuals or institutions acting in isolation from one another. Rather, they are the result of the interrelations between and across groups in different contexts, at various points in time. In this way, forces at the state and district levels, at the design team level, and at the school and classroom levels shape the ways in which reforms fail or succeed. There is often value in bringing in external advice and often school restructuring designs. Yet research is clear that those experts and/or designs are not in and of themselves cure-alls. Rather, better designs work when well-supported local educators engage with the ideas and help shape them into improvements in necessarily unique local contexts (p. 1999)

Moreover, Datnow (2005), in a qualitative study based on a longitudinal case study in 13 schools in one urban district, identifies poor implementation due to insufficient planning and inadequate educator support as barriers to change. Datnow argues that:

> reforms that placed more demands on the system and its resources tended to face greater difficulty in sustainability. Some school reform models require substantial funding to initiate, implement, and sustain over time. In the face of budget cuts, reform models that require a continual financial outlay might find themselves at risk of expiration, or at least instability. Yet, the reforms that are the most comprehensive and the most meaningful are often the most resource hungry. Therefore, establishing a stable resource base that can last through leadership and political changes is important (p. 147)

These findings resonate across different contexts, illustrating that resistance often arises from mismatches between reform objectives and on-the-ground realities (Datnow & Park, 2009; Levin, 2012).

3.4.3.2 Understanding sources of resistance in education

Sources of resistance to change in education can be understood by analysing organisational dynamics, leadership practices, and policy contexts. McCalman et al. (2016) emphasise the pivotal role of leadership in addressing resistance, suggesting that leaders need to manage competing interpretations of reform within their organisations. Elmore (2007) highlights the complexity of systemic problems, advocating for multidimensional interventions based on explicit theories of action. This is evident in his study of US educational reform, where the resistance stemmed from unclear policies and fragmented implementation.

Resistance also emerges from top-down reforms, where teachers feel excluded from decision-making (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Langley, 2002). This was highlighted in research by Ball (1987), which found that changes imposed without teacher input often lead to opposition, particularly when reforms challenge established professional practices. Braun et al. (2010), in an audit of the policies encountered in four case study schools in the south-east of England, further explore policy enactment, arguing that educators play a key role in interpreting and implementing reforms, often shaping them in ways that align with their professional realities. This process of 'policy translation' process highlights educators' agency and their role in mediating top-down reforms (Ball et al., 2012). Ball (1998) also argues that "most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice" (p. 126).

Studies conducted in Malta (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2018) show how local educators resist externally imposed changes, primarily due to misalignment between policy and practice. These findings reflect broader global patterns where educators, constrained by inadequate resources and unclear directives, struggle to adapt to reforms, leading to resistance. Levin (2012) also emphasises the negative impact of policy rhetoric that undermines trust in educators, further complicating efforts to introduce change. This mirrors Deng's (2015) analysis, which argues that shifts towards competency-based education can sideline traditional knowledge-based approaches, creating tensions between competing educational paradigms. Moreover, Hoyle and Wallace (2007) caution against the persistence of the policy

machine, which may justify interventions based on past failures and explain resistance further by arguing that "the irony of practice is the reciprocal of the irony of policy" (p. 17).

3.4.3.3 Strategies for overcoming resistance

Overcoming resistance to change requires a versatile approach incorporating leadership, stakeholder engagement, and strategic change management. Fielding (2006) highlights the need to challenge existing concepts and assumptions about change, advocating for a deeper understanding of the complex processes that influence educational development. McCalman et al. (2016) assert that systems-based interventions are essential for addressing the root causes of resistance. Their research, grounded in case studies across various industries, highlights that successful change requires understanding the broader organisational dynamics. In the educational sector, Keow (2019) emphasises the importance of leadership in overcoming barriers to change. His study of leadership found that leaders who focused on results and communicated effectively successfully managed resistance.

Lewin's (1951) three-stage change model - unfreezing, changing, and refreezing - offers a framework for understanding the change process, with strategies for overcoming resistance at each stage. In their study of educational reform, Hussain et al. (2018) present a critical review of Lewin's model and found that gradual implementation and consistent support were key to reducing resistance. French and Bell's (1999) work on organisational change similarly stresses the need for continuous learning and adaptation, recognising that change processes are rarely linear and require constant refinement. This is especially important in educational contexts, where reforms often intersect with deeply entrenched cultural and professional practices.

Mintzberg's (1978) concept of 'emergent strategy' highlights the need for flexibility in responding to resistance. His research on strategic management in public institutions suggests that change efforts must evolve in response to unforeseen challenges. This aligns with the findings of Aarrevaara et al. (2019), whose study of policy implementation in schools highlights the importance of dialogue and participation in shaping successful reforms. They argue that for Nordic countries, "without a dialogue and engagement role, the content of strategies is not relevant" (p. 229).

Darlington-Hammond et al. (2009), Lambert (2003), and Leithwood and Jantzi (2002) emphasise the importance of building professional networks to engage teachers in ongoing dialogue and reflection, promoting commitment and achieving effective and sustainable change. Studies by Dimmock (1993) and Leithwood and Riehl (2003) also stress the central role of teachers in the change process. Dimmock's study of school leadership found that teachers engaged in decision-making were more likely to embrace change. In contrast, Leithwood's research in schools underscored the importance of fostering professional networks for dialogue and collaboration. Fullan's (2008) research on change in education highlights the importance of building capacity within schools, arguing that collaboration and the celebration of success are key to sustaining reform efforts. Fullan's findings, based on case studies from various educational contexts, suggest that resistance can be overcome when educators feel empowered to shape reforms rather than merely implement them (Fullan, 2008).

Senge (1990) emphasises the need to create 'learning organisations' where continuous learning is part of the culture, a concept that is echoed by Hargreaves (2014), who advocates for self-improving schools driven by decentralised leadership and argues that this is vital (p. 711) as "it moves teachers from caring about their own students to accepting a commitment, both moral and practical, to the achievement of all students in the subsystem not just in their own school". Hargreaves' research on educational reforms shows that decentralised leadership models, which encourage collaboration and shared responsibility, are more effective at fostering change than hierarchical approaches. Overcoming resistance requires a combination of strategic leadership, stakeholder engagement, and a flexible approach to reform. The literature suggests that leaders who empower educators and foster a culture of collaboration are more likely to succeed in addressing resistance (Fullan, 2008; Hargreaves, 2014; Senge, 1990;).

3.4.3.4 A culture of change acceptance/adoption

Building a culture that embraces change is essential for overcoming resistance in educational settings. McCalman et al. (2016) advocate for structured change management processes, but Bodhanya (2016) takes this further by introducing systems thinking to understand the

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interconnectedness of different elements within educational organisations. His research in schools shows that successful change efforts must address both the technical and human aspects of reform, creating an environment where stakeholders feel invested in the process.

Murphy (1992) and Fullan (2007) both emphasise the role of leadership in fostering a culture of change. Murphy's research on educational leadership in schools suggests that distributed leadership models are particularly effective in creating a sense of ownership among staff. At the same time, Fullan (2007) argues that leaders need to cultivate ethical responsibility and collaboration to drive sustainable change. These perspectives are echoed by Scerri (2013), whose research in Maltese schools highlights the need for leaders to invest in personal and professional growth to lead effective change efforts.

Chitty (1997) critiques the dominant perspectives on school effectiveness, arguing for a more critical understanding of schooling as a social, political, and cultural process. The author argues that:

> changes have to be simultaneous and interactive, not undertaken serially. School effectiveness takes on a new meaning if it is clearly understood that education's main function is to enable people, regardless of social origins, to take the action they choose and need to improve their lives (p. 60)

This aligns with Ball et al. (2012), who highlight the importance of empowering teachers and promoting professionalism in educational reforms. Their research shows that when teachers are given greater autonomy and professional recognition, they are more likely to support change initiatives (Ball et al., 2012).

Batra (2005), in a review of the national curriculum in India, and Bell and Stevenson (2006), in a range of research-based case studies highlighting the application of policy in a range of situations worldwide, advocate for collaborative approaches to policy development, arguing that stakeholder engagement is key to fostering a culture of change. Firestone (1989) and Heller and Firestone (1995) similarly outline leadership strategies that promote change, emphasising the importance of vision, resource acquisition, and adaptability in driving reform efforts. Creating a culture of change acceptance requires strong leadership, collaborative approaches, and a focus on empowering educators to take ownership of reform

initiatives. The literature suggests that when educators are actively engaged in the change process and supported by distributed leadership models, resistance can be reduced (Ball et al., 2012; Fullan, 2007; Murphy, 2002). Moreover, Firestone (1989) gives a practical tip:

> The use of reform is facilitated by participation that gives teachers real influence over issues important to them with a minimum of time expenditure. Teacher participation can have two benefits. First, it facilitates upward communication, helping planners in the temporary system understand how the reform will affect the daily life of people in the school and what those people can offer to the reform. Thus, the design will be more sound technically. Second, it builds ownership. Teachers and principals will be more supportive of an innovation they helped design. This last effect will probably be limited to those directly involved in the planning, however. Because teachers have few opportunities to discuss their work, they tend to operate as individuals rather than as representatives. Thus, the enhanced support of those who participate is not likely to transfer to those who do not.

3.4.4 Curricular development and reform

3.4.4.1 Defining curriculum

The concept of curriculum has evolved considerably over time, with various interpretations and frameworks contributing to its understanding. Originally from the Latin term *currere* - meaning "to run" - the curriculum has transformed from its historical origins as a racecourse to its modern use in education, yet its meaning remains contested (Curzon, 1985; Grundy, 1987; Kelly, 2009; Stenhouse, 1974). Tyler (1949) developed a rational approach to curriculum, which emphasised clear, measurable behavioural objectives and a structured, linear design. His framework has been particularly influential in the US, where education policies have often focused on standardisation and accountability. Tyler's model is widely used in countries with highly centralised curricula, such as the US and the UK, where national assessments focus on predetermined learning outcomes. In contrast, Stenhouse (1974) argued for a more dynamic, inquiry-based approach involving teachers and students collaboratively engaging in the curriculum process. His work stresses the importance of flexibility and

responsiveness in curriculum design, particularly in addressing local needs and fostering student-centred learning. Similarly, Cornbleth (1990), in her study of US classrooms, critiques the traditional focus on rigid objectives, suggesting that such models often fail to consider the realities of classroom practice. Cornbleth's research on inner-city schools in the US reveals how standardised curricula often ignore the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalised communities. Her findings support the call for a curriculum that is more adaptable and reflective of the unique contexts in which it is implemented, an idea also endorsed by Stenhouse (1974) in his critique of rigid educational models.

Kelly (2009) explores the complexities inherent in defining curriculum, highlighting that it is interpreted in various ways depending on philosophical, political, and cultural contexts. His work suggests that a curriculum's effectiveness depends on how well it aligns with broader educational goals and the societal context in which it is applied. This aligns with Deng's (2015) critique of contemporary curriculum theory, where he argues for a more specific focus on content selection and practical application, where curriculum reforms have struggled to balance traditional values with modern competencies. In fact, Deng argues that:

> curriculum theorists need to have a more sophisticated understanding of what schools do informed by a fuller sociological account of schooling as a public institution and a wide range of empirical evidence […] They need to take broad social and cultural perspectives to analyse the demands and challenges created by the changing global economy and explore the implications for the selection and organization of curriculum content (p. 729)

Bernstein (1996) offers a contrasting view, focusing on curriculum as a tool for fostering individual empowerment through skill development. His research, based in various countries such as Chile, Portugal and Spain, explores how curriculum decisions can either promote or hinder social mobility. Bernstein's work reflects the growing recognition in post-colonial contexts that curricula should aim to empower students by fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills rather than merely focusing on content delivery. The diverse perspectives on the curriculum offered by scholars such as Tyler (1949), Stenhouse (1974), and Bernstein (1996) underscore the tensions between traditional content-focused models and more dynamic, student-centred approaches. These debates reflect the broader challenges

educators face in designing curricula that balance structure with flexibility to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

3.4.4.2 Curriculum as a dynamic process

Curriculum is often viewed as a dynamic process that evolves in response to societal changes, educational reforms, and technological advancements. Various scholars have written about the curriculum and added sociological reflections. For instance, Dewey (1899) perceives the curriculum as a reflection of societal values and experiences, advocating for student-centred learning and democratic education. Bloom (1956) developed a taxonomy of educational objectives to facilitate the students' experience through a structured curriculum design and assessment, while Popham (1969) emphasised the importance of observable student behaviour in assessing educational objectives. Wheeler (1967) proposes a curriculum design model focused on clear classroom objectives, aiming to enhance LOs. Keddie (1971) critiques curricula that impose knowledge alien to students' lived experiences, advocating for culturally relevant and inclusive approaches. Blenkin (1980) and Blenkin et al. (1992) advocate for curriculum planning based on specific targets, providing a framework for focused teaching and assessment. Barrow (1984) critiques process-based curricula, highlighting the need for clarity and specificity in defining educational objectives.

Barrenechea et al. (2023), in their systematic literature review of 33 peer-reviewed papers on system-wide curriculum reforms, argue that successful curricular development is driven by governance, human capital, and the availability of resources. Their study reveals that "the need to design governance mechanisms that could bridge macro curricular decisions with everyday pedagogical practices is a fundamental challenge for the improvement of educational systems" (p. 494) and that governance structures influence the design and implementation of curriculum reforms, particularly in addressing equity and inclusion issues. Similarly, Stabback (2016) underscores the importance of designing curricula that prepare students for meaningful participation in society. He highlights the need for curricula to be contextually relevant, particularly in regions where education systems are under-resourced. However, he critiques the failure of many reforms to account for how societal shifts, such as urbanisation and the rise of digital technologies, affect the relevance of traditional educational models. Moreover, Clark (2022), in a study conducted in the small island

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developing state of Jamaica, highlights the variability in curriculum impact due to factors such as teacher positioning within the system and external influences. Clark argues that "the teacher education curriculum experience should allow (the pre-service teachers) to be reflexive and reflective on their practices and abilities to identify and implement sustainability solutions that are specific to the context within which they will teach" (p. 150).

Bobbitt (1918, 1928) and Taylor (1911), whose work on curriculum focused on preparing students for industrial life in the early 20th century, advocate for models that align educational activities with specific societal needs. However, their approaches have been criticised in more contemporary contexts, particularly in rapidly modernising countries like Singapore and South Korea, where education systems must now prepare students for the complexities of a global knowledge economy. Longhurst (2016), when discussing curriculum renewal in a small island state, addresses this critique by proposing a more systemic view of curriculum that aligns content, pedagogy, and assessment within a holistic educational framework. Longhurst argues:

> Curriculum theorists attempt to teacher-proof their prescriptions. This was attempted in this case study by adopting the development principle of ownership, crowding the curriculum with local content, providing extensive professional development and resources, providing autonomy to school principals and supporting the curriculum by legislation. However, advisors who were appointed after the curriculum program was completed, reverted to the importation of a foreign curriculum package and minimised the use of rich tasks (p. 76)

The role of leadership in driving curriculum reform is also significant. In their study of school leadership, McCalman et al. (2016) discuss how leaders play a pivotal role in aligning curriculum changes with broader organisational goals. Their findings highlight that successful curriculum reform requires a well-designed strategy and leadership that understands the cultural and social dynamics of the school environment. Similarly, research from Nordic countries (Aarrevaara et al., 2019) suggests that flexible leadership, which adapts to the changing needs of students and staff, is critical in fostering an innovative and effective curriculum. Null (2011) and Miller (2011) offer further insights by categorising curriculum theorists into distinct groups, such as linear, holistic, and critical. Null's work

focuses on systematic approaches, while Miller advocates for more critical examinations of how curricula can either perpetuate or challenge societal inequalities. Their studies suggest curriculum development must systematically reflect broader social, cultural, and political context.

3.4.4.3 Curriculum development, implementation and reform

Curriculum development, implementation, and reform are complex processes that require balancing standardisation with flexibility to meet diverse learner needs. O'Day and Smith (2016), in their analysis of curriculum reforms in the US, argue that continuous improvement, coupled with a focus on outcomes and processes, is key to successful reform. Their research reveals that effective curricula must engage all educational actors - teachers, students, and administrators - in an ongoing process of reflection and adaptation to ensure relevance and impact.

Taylor's (1911) work on scientific management offers a contrasting view, emphasising efficiency and systematic planning in curriculum design. His approach, which has influenced curriculum models in industrialised countries like Germany and the US, prioritises measurable outcomes and standardised processes. However, Morrison (2004) critiques such models as too rigid and calls for more innovative, student-centred approaches to curriculum development. Morrison's work highlights the need for education systems to move beyond industrial-era models and embrace curricula that foster creativity and critical thinking, particularly in countries where education systems aim to cultivate 21st-century skills.

Priestley (2011) critiques centralised control over curriculum reforms in the UK, advocating for greater autonomy at the local level. His research on Scottish curriculum reform reveals that empowering local educators to adapt national frameworks to their unique contexts leads to more effective educational outcomes. Similarly, Levin (2012) discusses the challenges of maintaining continuity in curriculum reforms amidst shifting political priorities. His research underscores the importance of sustained governmental commitment to ensure that changes in political leadership do not disrupt curriculum reforms, a challenge also seen in countries like South Africa, where educational reform has been impeded by political instability (Jansen & Sayed, 2001).

3.4.4.4 Empowering teachers in curricular change

Empowering teachers is essential to the successful implementation of curriculum reforms. Aarrevaara et al. (2019), in their research on Northern Europe (Finland, Norway and Sweden) education reform, highlight the importance of teacher engagement in curriculum decision-making. Their study reveals that teacher involvement at all stages of the reform process leads to greater buy-in and more effective implementation. This is supported by Levin (2012), who found in his analysis of Canadian education reforms that collective efforts among teachers, administrators, and policymakers were crucial to achieving higher levels of student achievement. Snipes et al. (2002), in their study of urban school reform in the US, found that focusing on teacher development and student learning as central drivers of systemic improvement was essential to overcoming resistance to change. Their research suggests that when integrated with curriculum reforms, professional development empowers teachers to take ownership of the reform process, leading to more sustainable outcomes.

However, the literature also points to challenges in empowering teachers within highly centralised systems. For example, Fullan (2009), in his study of UK education reforms, argues that accountability mechanisms often limit teacher autonomy, making it difficult for educators to engage meaningfully in curricular changes. Fullan's findings reflect broader concerns about the tension between top-down mandates and teacher agency, a challenge also noted in countries like South Africa, where teachers often face constraints in adapting curricula to local contexts (Jansen, 2001).

I noticed three peculiarities in the review of literature about empowering policy 'actors' to embrace curricular change. These include divergent perspectives on time, tensions between stability and adaptability, and the gap between idealistic aspirations and institutional realities.

The first peculiarity is divergence on time. Hargreaves (1994) delves into the relationship between educators' perceptions and experiences of time in the context of curriculum implementation. Administrators often view time through a technical-rational lens, treating it as a finite resource to be managed efficiently to achieve predetermined educational objectives. In contrast, educators' lived experiences of time vary, with some emphasising the need for

flexibility and responsiveness to the evolving needs of students and communities. This highlights the tension between top-down policy directives that emphasise efficiency and educators' day-to-day experiences that require adaptability and responsiveness to the complexities of classroom practice. The second peculiarity is the tension between stability and adaptability. Glatthorn et al. (2017) advocate for incremental change in curriculum development, emphasising the importance of stability and deliberation in the reform process. However, Dueppen and Hughes (2018), in a case study through 16 individual interviews with practitioners who participated in the implementation of a reform in a school in America, highlight the dynamic nature of educational reforms, calling for continuous adaptation and innovation to meet evolving demands. This underscores the inherent tension between the desire for stability in educational systems and the imperative to respond effectively to emerging challenges and opportunities. Balancing stability with adaptability poses a challenge for curriculum developers and policy-makers seeking to foster meaningful change while maintaining coherence and continuity in educational programs. Dueppen and Hughes (2018) suggest that other schools and systems to:

> Plan strategically for reforms to succeed. This strategic planning role cannot be overlooked in the context of a complex reform, especially given the fact that everyone involved has a leadership role to play. Someone, or a group must be responsible for acting as the leader of the reform. This person or group must be equipped with sufficient perspective to view the entire reform comprehensively and plan for its implementation and communication across stakeholder groups. The most logical place for this particular type of leadership is at the district level because of the inherent responsibility to provide oversight and support for multiple schools within a district. Though housed at that level, leadership is required at all levels, and oversight needs to be collaborative and invested in at all levels for any chance at sustainability (p. 31)

The third peculiarity is the gap between idealistic aspirations and institutional realities. Elmore (1995) illuminates the stark gap between idealistic visions of educational practice and the practical constraints of institutional contexts. While scholars like Wiles (2009) and Dufour (2004) advocate for collaborative leadership and professional learning communities as vehicles for educational improvement, Elmore (1995) highlights the formidable challenges

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of implementing such models within existing institutional structures. This underscores the need for a realistic assessment of institutional capacities and constraints when envisioning and implementing educational reforms. Bridging the gap between idealistic aspirations and institutional realities requires careful attention to the organisational context and strategic allocation of resources to support collaborative initiatives effectively. This collision is not merely logistical, it also reflects deeper structural and cultural contradictions inherent in educational reform processes (Courtney & Gunter, 2015; Gunter, 2012). Aspirational policy narratives often overlook the bureaucratic practices, institutional inertia and uneven capacities across schools, thereby widening the gap between intended and enacted reforms. As such, meaningful change demands more than vision statements; it requires a sustained interrogation of the systemic forces that mediate, distort or constrain reform enactment at multiple levels.

In light of the various theoretical and empirical perspectives discussed in this chapter, it is necessary to synthesise these insights into a coherent framework that will guide the analysis of educational reform in Malta.

3.5 Synthesising the crossroads: a conceptual framework

In this section, I synthesise the four key theories into a comprehensive conceptual framework (**Figure 9**). This framework provides a structured approach for analysing how these concepts interact at the crossroads of educational reform in the context of the LOF in Malta.
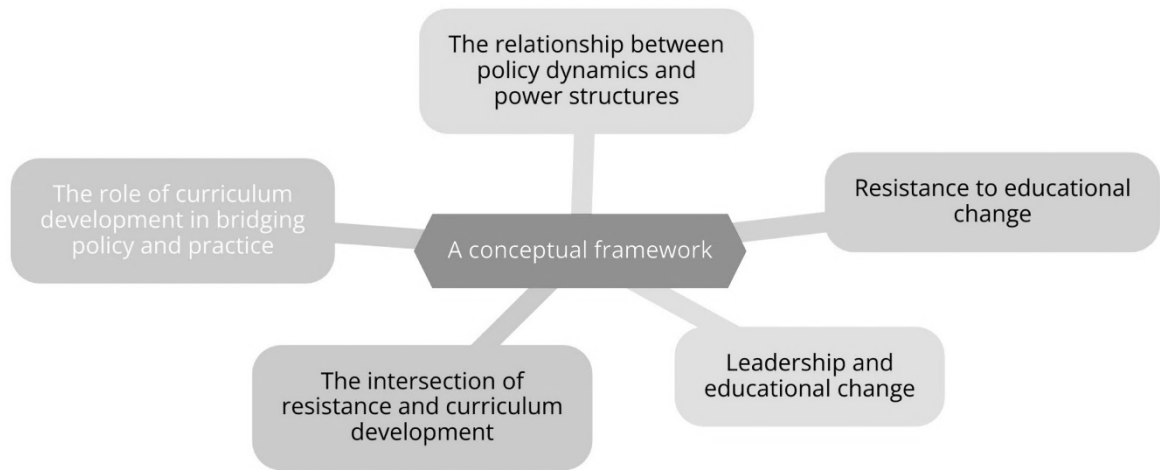
Figure 9 - The conceptual framework guiding this study.

3.5.1 The relationship between policy dynamics and power structures

Policy dynamics and power structures form the backbone of educational reform, shaping the processes by which policies are created, negotiated, and implemented. As highlighted in the review of literature, Ball (2003) characterises educational policy as an "epidemic," where the rapid proliferation of policy initiatives reflects the widespread desire to transform educational systems. However, these policies are not neutral; they are shaped by power relations that influence whose voices are heard and whose interests are prioritised. Kogan (1975) provides a value-laden perspective on policy, suggesting that educational policies often embody broader social, economic, and political objectives. This aligns with the work of Bell and Stevenson (2006), who argue that policy development is shaped by the interplay between state and institutional actors, raising questions about autonomy and control in policy-making processes.

At the crossroads of policy and power, educational reform often becomes a battleground for competing interests. For example, in Maltese educational reform, the LOF was developed as part of a broader agenda to align national education policies with EU standards. The LOF reflects the technical goals of improving student outcomes and the political objective of demonstrating Malta's alignment with EU educational policies. This political dimension of policy highlights how power structures shape educational reform development and implementation.

Empirical studies have shown how policy dynamics are affected by the concentration of power within certain actors, such as government agencies or international organisations. In Finland, for instance, the central government plays a role in shaping educational policy, particularly in areas such as curriculum reform and teacher professional development (Sahlberg, 2011). Similarly, implementing the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland reflects a top-down approach to policy reform, with central government actors driving the initiative (Priestley et al., 2013). These examples demonstrate how policy dynamics are often influenced by the power structures that govern education systems, with centralised decision-making processes playing a critical role in shaping reform outcomes.

3.5.2 Resistance to educational change

Resistance to change is a central theme in the discourse on educational reform, with numerous scholars highlighting the challenges policymakers face in implementing new initiatives. As discussed by McCalman et al. (2016), resistance often emerges as a result of competing interests and values within an organisation. In educational contexts, resistance may manifest as a reluctance to adopt new teaching practices, opposition to curriculum reforms, or scepticism towards policy changes. Fullan (2009) points to the importance of understanding the human dimension of change, arguing that resistance is not merely a barrier to overcome but a signal of deeper systemic issues that must be addressed.

In Malta, resistance to the LOF reform was evident among educators who felt that the new framework imposed additional burdens without adequate support. This reflects broader global trends, where top-down reforms often face resistance from teachers and school leaders who feel excluded from the policymakers. Datnow (2005) emphasises the importance of involving educators in implementing reforms, arguing that a lack of consultation can lead to poor implementation and eventual failure of reform efforts. This is echoed by Baker and Wiseman (2005), who highlight the need for reform initiatives to align with local contexts and values to ensure sustainability. Moreover, Baker (2014, 2015) explains the concept of the schooled society and how this affects educational reform.

Studies from various countries provide insights into the nature of resistance to educational change. In the US, for example, resistance to implementing the Common Core State Standards was widespread, with many educators and parents expressing concerns about the impact of standardised testing and the loss of local control over curriculum decisions (Ravitch, 2010). Similarly, in the UK, the introduction of the National Curriculum was met with resistance from teachers who felt that the new standards limited their professional autonomy and reduced the flexibility of classroom practice (Ball, 1994). These examples illustrate how resistance to change often arises when reforms are perceived as being imposed from above without sufficient input from those who are expected to implement them.

The power dynamics that underlie resistance to change are closely linked to policy enactment. As Ball et al. (2012) note, policy is not simply implemented; it is interpreted and reinterpreted by different actors within the education system. This process of policy enactment creates opportunities for resistance as educators, school leaders, and other stakeholders negotiate the meaning and implications of reform initiatives.

3.5.3 The role of curriculum development in bridging policy and practice

Curriculum development is a key mechanism through which policy is translated into practice. As discussed in the literature review, curriculum theory has evolved, with scholars such as Tyler (1949) and Stenhouse (1975) offering competing perspectives on the nature of curriculum design. Tyler's rational model emphasises the importance of clear objectives and structured learning experiences. In contrast, Stenhouse's process model advocates for a more flexible, inquiry-based approach that encourages teacher and student collaboration. These differing views reflect broader debates about the role of curriculum in shaping educational experiences. In the context of educational reform, curriculum development serves as a bridge between policy goals and classroom practice. The LOF in Malta, for example, was designed to shift the focus of education from content knowledge to the development of key competencies, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. This shift reflects a broader trend in curriculum reform, seen in countries such as Finland and Singapore, where curriculum frameworks have been redesigned to promote 21st-century skills (Sahlberg, 2011). However, as Bernstein (1996) argues, curriculum reform is not just about what is

taught but also about who controls the curriculum and how it is implemented. The persistence of vertical power flows and limited genuine collaboration, as observed by Mifsud (2014), continues to pose major obstacles to reform enactment, particularly in attempts to foster professional agency and distributed leadership cultures.

Studies highlight the challenges of translating curriculum reforms into practice. In Finland, the national curriculum emphasises autonomy for schools and teachers, allowing them to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their students (Sahlberg, 2011). This decentralised approach has been credited with fostering innovation and improving student outcomes. However, in other contexts, such as the US and England, more centralised approaches to curriculum reform have been criticised for limiting teacher autonomy and stifling creativity in the classroom (Apple & Apple, 2004). These examples underscore the importance of considering the broader policy context when designing and implementing curriculum reforms.

3.5.4 Leadership and educational change

Leadership plays a pivotal role in managing the crossroads where policy, power, resistance, and curriculum development intersect. Effective leadership is essential in the complexities of educational reform and ensuring that policy changes are successfully implemented at all levels of the education system. As Fullan (2009) argues, educational leaders must manage the technical aspects of reform and engage with the emotional and cultural dimensions of change. This involves building trust, fostering collaboration, and addressing the concerns of stakeholders who may resist change.

Leadership plays a crucial role in translating policy directives into practical strategies for classroom practice. In Malta, for example, school leaders were tasked with implementing the LOF, which required them to balance the demands of the new framework with the realities of their school environments. This reflects broader trends in educational leadership, where principals and other school leaders are increasingly seen as agents of change who must experience the tensions between top-down policy mandates and bottom-up resistance from educators and other stakeholders (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). As Dueppen and Hughes (2018, p. 31) suggest:

Develop leadership at all levels. One of the genuinely significant findings of this study is that leadership does not always equate to having positional or supervisory authority. Leaders are those who establish learning centered priorities, provide opportunities for others to learn, encourage and support others in their work, work alongside others collaboratively and practically as they learn, and trust others to succeed. Therefore, it is important for all within education to understand and accept that as an educator, they have a leadership role. Educators need to realize that someone is looking at them for leadership at all times.

3.5.5 The intersection of resistance and curriculum development

A critical tension between innovation and tradition lies at the intersection of resistance and curriculum development. Educational reforms often seek to introduce new approaches to teaching and learning, such as competency-based education or inquiry-based learning, which challenge established norms and practices. This can lead to resistance from educators who are more comfortable with traditional methods of teaching or who feel that the necessary resources or professional development do not adequately support the new approaches. Stenhouse's (1974) curriculum-as-process model emphasises the importance of teacher agency in curriculum development, advocating for a collaborative approach in which teachers are actively involved in designing and implementing the curriculum. For instance, Abela Cascun (2020) argues that without the cultivation of strong collaborative professional cultures, curriculum innovation risks remaining superficial. Ball et al. (2012) noted that policies designed and implemented without sufficient input from educators are often met with resistance. In Malta, for instance, many teachers initially met the LOF reform with scepticism and felt they were not adequately consulted during the policy development phase. This reflects broader global trends, where teachers often resist reforms they perceive as being imposed from above without their involvement. Resistance to curriculum reforms is often rooted in deeper concerns about education's direction and the values underpinning policy

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changes. For example, Deng (2015) critiques the shift towards competency-based education, arguing that it often sidelines important content knowledge in favour of generic skills. This reflects a broader debate about the purpose of education and the role of the curriculum in shaping students' intellectual development. In this context, resistance to curriculum reform can be seen as a defence of traditional educational values, such as transmitting knowledge and developing critical thinking skills, against the perceived encroachment of neoliberal or market-driven educational agendas (Apple & Apple, 2004).

Despite the challenges posed by resistance to change, curriculum reform can also serve as a mechanism for addressing resistance and fostering innovation. As noted by Fullan (2009), successful educational reforms often engage educators in the process of professional learning and development, helping them to adapt to new approaches and integrate them into their practice. This requires a shift from viewing resistance as a barrier to be overcome to understanding it as a natural part of the change process that can be addressed through dialogue, collaboration, and professional support. However, curriculum reform alone is not sufficient to address resistance. As noted by Datnow (2005), successful reform efforts must address the broader systemic issues contributing to resistance, such as inadequate resources, lack of professional development, and misalignment between policy goals and classroom realities. In this sense, curriculum reform must be part of a broader strategy for educational change that includes ongoing support for educators, alignment of policy and practice, and a commitment to addressing the underlying causes of resistance. Mifsud (2020) further argues that stakeholders' diverging notions of 'quality' complicate the enactment of curriculum reforms, highlighting that without a shared vision, structural changes risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

3.5.6 Reflection on the conceptual framework

This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive lens for analysing educational reform by combining the themes of policy dynamics, power structures, resistance to change, and curriculum development. At its core, the framework recognises that educational change is a complex, multidimensional process shaped by the interactions between policy, power, and resistance. Curriculum development serves as both a site of contestation and a mechanism for addressing resistance, bridging the gap between policy goals and classroom practice. The

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framework highlights the importance of understanding how power dynamics shape the development and implementation of educational policies. Policies are not neutral instruments; they reflect the interests and priorities of those in positions of power, and they can either empower or marginalise different groups within the education system. This is particularly evident in the case of curriculum reform, where decisions about what knowledge is valued and how it is taught are inherently political. The framework also underscores the role of leadership in the complexities of educational reform. Influential leaders must manage the tensions between policy mandates and resistance from educators, building trust and fostering collaboration to ensure reforms are successfully implemented. Resistance to change is not simply an obstacle to be overcome but a signal of deeper systemic issues that must be addressed. Policymakers can build more sustainable and meaningful reforms by engaging with resistance and involving educators in the reform process. Curriculum development, in particular, offers a powerful tool for addressing resistance, as it allows educators to take ownership of the reform process and adapt it to their specific contexts.

Synthesising these dimensions reveals that educational reform cannot be understood through isolated categories; rather, it emerges through the links between policy agendas, power relations, resistance movements and curricular practices. Policy initiatives are inherently shaped by prevailing power structures, which determine not only the content of reforms but also the modes of their enactment. Resistance, in this light, is not reactive as it reshapes policy through contestation and negotiation, particularly at the site of curriculum development, where teachers' agency can either reinforce or subvert reform agendas (Ball, 2012; Lingard, 2011). Thus, successful reform depends less on the hierarchical transmission of policy and more on the capacity of systems to engage relationally with resistance, redistribute power and foster curriculum spaces where ownership and adaptation become possible. This conceptual framework, therefore, positions reform as a fluid, negotiated and context-dependent process, not a linear implementation of top-down mandates.

This framework will guide the analysis of the LOF in Malta, providing an approach to understanding how policy dynamics, power structures, resistance, and curriculum development have shaped the implementation of this reform. By examining the intersections of these concepts, I aim to uncover the underlying factors that have influenced the success and challenges of the LOF reform.

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3.6 Looking back and ahead

This chapter has critically examined the theoretical underpinnings of educational reform, systematically unpacking the intersecting forces of system-wide change, policy dynamics, resistance to reform, and curriculum development. The conceptual framework developed, the Crossroads of Educational Reform, synthesises these dimensions, revealing the complex and often contradictory pressures that shape educational practices. This synthesis makes it evident that while the existing literature offers insights, gaps remain - particularly in understanding how these theoretical constructs interact within small, post-colonial contexts like Malta, where unique socio-political dynamics complicate reform processes.

The need to bridge theory with empirical realities is clear. The next chapter will outline the methodology adopted to address the research questions. By focusing on research design, data collection, and analytical approaches, I will bridge the theoretical framework with an empirical investigation into how the LOF reform is enacted in Malta's primary education system. This transition from conceptual to practical inquiry is essential for advancing a more nuanced understanding of system-wide educational change in Malta.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological approach adopted to explore the experience of system-wide educational reform in Maltese primary schools, with a particular focus on the LOF.

The chapter begins by outlining the underlying ontology, epistemology and research methods chosen for the study, which aligns with MMR the paradigm. This approach allows for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in policy enactment.

Following this, the chapter delves into the research design and strategies, explaining the rationale behind the sequential explanatory design. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the sampling procedures and participants involved in the study.

The chapter then discusses the data collection approaches and processes in depth, beginning with the questionnaire used to gather quantitative data, followed by the qualitative interviews designed to explore the emerging themes. The data analysis techniques employed in both phases are explained, ensuring the reader understands how the findings from each phase are integrated to address the research questions.

Finally, the chapter considers the quality and trustworthiness of the methods, discussing validity, reliability, and the measures taken to ensure rigour involved in data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical implications of the research, reflecting on the steps taken to safeguard participants confidentiality and ensure the research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

4.1.1 Research aim, objectives and questions

This research aims to critically analyse how educational reform actors (school leaders and teachers) engage with the LOF within the distinct context of Malta. This LOF has been described, or better, presented, as both revolutionary and transformational. By examining the perceptions, the lived experience and the implementation strategies employed by these actors, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that shape the enactment of system-wide curricular reforms. Theoretical perspectives inform this analysis on policy enactment, such as Ball et al.'s (2012) notion of the policy enactment framework, which highlights how educational reforms are mediated through local contexts and actors, and Spillane et al. (2002), who emphasise the role of leadership and sense-making in policy implementation. Through this lens, the study seeks to inform both local and international discourses on policy implementation, offering insights into how reform is experienced in different educational contexts.

This study has four objectives, outlined in Chapter 1. These research objectives are addressed through a sequential explanatory MMR design, allowing the study to capture broad trends and in-depth experiences. The initial quantitative phase (questionnaire) explores the general perceptions of educational leaders and teachers on the LOF reform, while the subsequent qualitative phase (interviews) delves deeper into the personal experiences and challenges encountered during the reform process.

Based on these objectives, the following research questions guide the study:

- Main research question: What is the experience of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms, such as the LOF, in the postcolonial small-island state of Malta?

This overarching question sets the foundation for a detailed exploration of the specific dynamics in Malta's reform process. Three sub-questions complement it:

1. Sub-question 1: What are the main factors affecting the enactment of system-wide educational reforms in Malta?

2. Sub-question 2: How do school leaders, curricular leaders, and teachers in primary education in Malta experience and respond to system-wide educational reforms?

3. Sub-question 3: How can understanding the enactment of the LOF reform inform future policy change strategies in education?

These research questions are central to shaping the study's design and influence the choice of methodology and data collection tools. The combination of quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative interview data ensures that the study addresses both the breadth and depth of the research questions, offering a well-rounded analysis of the reform process in Malta. Through this approach, the study generates insights into how educational reforms are enacted in contexts often under-explored in global discussions on policy implementation.

4.2 Research philosophy and paradigm

Choosing a research philosophy and paradigm is central to ensuring the study is methodologically coherent and philosophically sound. In educational research, paradigms frame how researchers view the nature of reality, the process of knowledge generation, and the methodologies chosen to collect and analyse data. Cohen et al. (2018) highlight that paradigms are not just methodological preferences but are tied to worldviews that shape the entire research process. This study adopts a pragmatic paradigm, which aligns with the MMR approach used to investigate the LOF in Malta.

Educational research is a complex field, integral to understanding and improving educational practices, policies, and outcomes. As Jackson (1968) and Hargreaves (1999) have noted, schools operate as distinct societies, each with its unique environment. This complexity necessitates a flexible research paradigm like pragmatism, which can account for the inconsistent and unpredictable behaviours of teacher populations (Griffiths, 1998). Pragmatism allows researchers to adapt methodologies to these distinctive environments, making it particularly suited to studies of system-wide reforms like this one. As Whitty (2006) explains, unlike broader education studies, educational research focuses on

enhancing policy and practice. This study, grounded in a pragmatic paradigm, aims to offer insights into the implementation of the LOF in Malta, directly informing policymakers, leaders, and teachers on current practices.

Given the complexity of educational reforms and the policy enactment dynamics discussed in Chapter 3, the pragmatic paradigm offers methodological flexibility to explore quantitative trends and qualitative experiences. This paradigm was chosen because it accommodates the dual perspectives of policy implementation and individual interpretation, making it the most appropriate for understanding the macro and micro-level realities of the LOF reform.

4.2.1 Pragmatism

Pragmatism as a research philosophy is rooted in practicality and problem-solving, rejecting rigid adherence to positivist or constructivist paradigms. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) and Morgan (2014) argue, pragmatism allows researchers to focus on what works best to answer the research questions, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches based on the nature of the research problem. In the case of this study, pragmatism is particularly suitable for examining the LOF reform, where broad quantitative data from questionnaires and rich qualitative insights from interviews are necessary to fully explore how educational leaders and teachers in Malta engage with and enact the reform. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) note that pragmatism supports MMR by bridging the gap between objective data (quantitative) and subjective experiences (qualitative), making it an ideal fit for this study.

The pragmatic paradigm enables a pluralistic approach to understanding the real-world application of the LOF. As discussed in Chapter 2, Malta's historical and political context influences how educational policies are interpreted and applied in schools. The flexibility of pragmatism allows the study to capture both structural elements of policy enactment and personal experiences, creating a comprehensive view of the reform. Pragmatism's adaptability is a key strength of this research. By not being tied to one ontological or epistemological stance, the paradigm allows for the exploration of multiple realities - from the objective structures of the LOF as a policy document to the subjective experiences of educators experiencing its implementation. A constructivist paradigm, which

emphasises co-constructed realities and subjective meaning-making, was deemed incompatible with the design of the quantitative strand, which required a more objectivist stance.

4.2.2 Ontological considerations

Ontology, the study of the nature of reality, is a crucial philosophical foundation that shapes how researchers approach their study. Blaikie (2007) and Bryman (2016) describe ontology as determining whether reality is seen as objective and independent of human perceptions or constructed through human experience. This study adopts a pluralistic ontological stance, recognising that objective realities (such as the existence of the LOF as a formal policy) and subjective realities (the individual experiences of educators implementing the reform) are valid and necessary to understand the reform.

In light of Malta's postcolonial educational context, as detailed in Chapter 2, the reality of educational reform is not a single, monolithic entity. Instead, it is shaped by the specific socio-political conditions of the island, where global educational policies must be adapted to fit local needs. Ball et al. (2012) argue that policies are interpreted and enacted differently depending on contextual factors, and this is evident in Malta, where the LOF is implemented within a historically layered and resource-limited education system.

The quantitative questionnaire data used in this study provides an objective overview of how the LOF reform is being enacted across various schools, while the qualitative interviews allow for the exploration of subjective interpretations of the reform. This dual ontological approach is essential for capturing the different 'shades' of the reform process, particularly in a small island state like Malta, where localised interpretations of global and EU policies shape educational outcomes.

4.2.3 Epistemological considerations

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how researchers acquire and validate it. In this study, a pragmatic epistemology is adopted, allowing for the integration of

both empirical data and contextual understanding. Cohen et al. (2018) emphasise that epistemological considerations are crucial in determining the kinds of data collected, the methods used to gather it, and how it is interpreted.

Given the multi-layered nature of the LOF reform, which involves both policy directives and individual responses, MMR provides the best means of acquiring valid knowledge. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) argue that combining quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the validity of the research, as it allows for a more holistic understanding of the research problem. As Hammersley (2000) argues, educational research is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing from fields such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. This diversity enriches the research but also requires careful alignment with pragmatic epistemology, which accommodates multiple perspectives and allows researchers to draw on quantitative and qualitative approaches to fully capture the complexities of educational reform.

This study's pragmatic epistemology reflects the need to balance theoretical knowledge and practical insights. Spillane et al. (2002) noted in their sense-making theory work that educational leaders and teachers are not passive policy implementers; instead, they are active interpreters who reconstruct policies based on their own experiences and the specific contexts of their schools and classrooms. This interpretive approach to knowledge acquisition is critical for understanding how this Maltese educational reform is experienced in practice.

4.3 Research methodology

Research is more than a process of gathering information or documenting facts. Thornhill (2003) highlights that research is an organised and systematic inquiry designed to uncover new knowledge and deepen the understanding of various phenomena. Expanding on this, Leedy and Ormrod (2001) argue that true research goes beyond simple data collection, requiring a structured approach to analysis and interpretation. This systematic process aligns with the objectives of this study. Research methodology plays a crucial role in systematically guiding the process of inquiry. In educational research, understanding diverse and complex environments is paramount for yielding insights. This section delves into the specific

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methodological approach employed in this study, drawing on the rich body of existing literature to justify the use of an MMR strategy framed by pragmatism as a guiding paradigm, as outlined in the previous section.

4.3.1 Methodological considerations

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) highlight that selecting appropriate methods in educational research requires sensitivity to the characteristics of the environment and participants' values. This study's MMR approach reflects this careful consideration, using both quantitative and qualitative tools to capture the broad and specific dimensions of the LOF reform.

4.3.1.1 Quantitative approach

Quantitative research systematically tests theories, establishes facts, demonstrates relationships between variables, and predicts outcomes (Van der Merwe, 1996). In the context of this study, the quantitative approach was essential for gathering broad, generalisable data on how the LOF reform is being implemented across Maltese schools. Cohen et al. (2018) describe quantitative research as critical for identifying patterns and trends across large populations, which, in this case, provided an objective measure of how educators perceive the LOF reform. Weinreich (2009) further asserts that quantitative methods, derived from the natural sciences, ensure objectivity, generalisability, and reliability, making it possible to uncover broad trends through empirical investigation.

Moreover, quantitative research involves converting data into numerical form for statistical analysis. As Williams (2007) explains, this is a defining characteristic of the approach, which typically involves data collection through structured questionnaires, followed by statistical calculations to draw conclusions. In this study, structured questionnaires were used to capture key aspects of the implementation of the LOF reform, including the challenges and successes experienced by educators and the overall level of engagement with the framework. The questionnaire was designed to collect measurable data from a sample of teachers and leaders, allowing for unbiased representation and ensuring that the findings could be generalised

across the broader population of Maltese schools. This random sampling process enhanced the objectivity and generalisability of the study, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives were included.

4.3.1.2 Qualitative approach

Qualitative research focuses on understanding complex phenomena within their natural contexts (Van der Merwe, 1996). This study provides in-depth insights into the experiences of school leaders and teachers implementing the LOF in Malta. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe, qualitative research is an interpretive, naturalistic approach that explores how participants make sense of their experiences, particularly in real-world settings. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather narratives from participants, offering flexibility to probe deeper into their experiences while maintaining a structured comparison across responses (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009). These interviews provided thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), which captured the details of participants' daily interactions with the LOF, a key advantage of qualitative methods as noted by Worthen and Sanders (1987). The immersive nature of qualitative research, where the researcher engages closely with participants, aligns with Weinreich's (2009) emphasis on understanding participants' perspectives directly.

Blumer (1969) highlights that qualitative research allows for the discovery of relationships between data categories, essential in exploring the interpretive dimension of policy enactment, as discussed by Ball et al. (2012). In this study, thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns in the participants' responses. As Patton (1990) argues, this method helps capture the complexity of human experiences, especially in small, purposefully selected samples. It provided critical insights into how educators interpret and implement the LOF within their roles.

As noted by Cohen et al. (2018), qualitative research addresses the "why" and "how" of human experiences, offering deeper insights into participants' interpretations of educational reform. This means that qualitative research seeks to understand behaviour through theoretical lenses rather than testing hypotheses quantitatively. The semi-structured

interviews enabled educators to voice their perspectives, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they faced while implementing the LOF reform.

4.3.1.3 Mixed-methods research approach

MMR integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex research problems (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Fetters & Freshwater, 2015). This methodology recognises that neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone can sufficiently capture the intricacies of educational research. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) describe MMR as combining the strengths of both methodologies, enabling researchers to address both the broad, generalisable patterns (quantitative) and the in-depth, contextual experiences (qualitative) required to fully explore educational phenomena.

After reviewing qualitative and quantitative approaches distinctively, MMR was chosen for my study as the most appropriate approach to investigate the LOF reform in Malta due to its capacity to address diverse research questions and contexts. The quantitative questionnaires (Appendix 6) offered a systematic exploration of teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of the LOF, while the qualitative interviews (Appendix 9) allowed for an in-depth examination of individual experiences, offering insights into the challenges faced during policy implementation. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) stress the importance of using structured methodologies to analyse and interpret data, a notion reflected in this research as MMR facilitates structured yet flexible inquiry, balancing the need for empirical rigour with an understanding of real-world educational practices. By employing this approach, this study captures the full complexity of educational reform in Malta, providing a comprehensive understanding of policy enactment at both systemic and individual levels. The combination of methods also ensures data triangulation, enhancing the validity of the findings and providing deeper insights into the experienced challenges and successes. Moreover, the pragmatic approach allowed for the reconciliation of varied perspectives by focusing on the context-specific nature of policy enactment.

However, the choice of pragmatism presents challenges in MMR, particularly in ensuring that it remains aligned with the pluralistic ontological stance adopted. Given that multiple realities were considered, there is a risk of over-complicating data integration. To address this, particular attention was paid to ensure that the findings from each phase were allowed to speak to their respective research contexts before attempting to merge them into a cohesive analysis. MMR provides what Creswell and Creswell (2020) refer to as "enhanced richness" by allowing for deeper data integration within a single study. Fetters and Freshwater (2015) further argue that the synergy produced by mixing methods creates insights greater than either method could provide independently. This approach is also critical for capturing the complex interplay between policy and practice, as described by Åkerblad et al. (2020), who highlight the need for balance between methods to ensure validity and capture the full dimensions of a research phenomenon.

Despite the benefits of MMR, it has faced criticism, particularly from paradigm purists who argue that quantitative and qualitative methods are incompatible due to their differing origins and epistemologies (Ary et al., 2010). However, this study adopts a pragmatic approach, which, as Greene (2008) suggests, rejects this purist view and instead utilises all available methods to understand the research problem comprehensively. This flexibility aligns with Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009) view of MMR as the third methodological movement, which transcends paradigm limitations and emphasises practicality in answering research questions.

4.3.2 Sequential explanatory design

Since my data was not collected simultaneously, this study follows a sequential explanatory design, where quantitative data collection and analysis precedes qualitative inquiry (Ivankova et al., 2006). In a sequential design, the results from the initial quantitative phase guide the development of the qualitative phase, which aims to explain and contextualise the statistical trends observed earlier. This is particularly important in educational research, where numerical data often need contextual elaboration to understand the participants' responses. By first analysing questionnaire data, this study was able to identify key themes, which then informed the semi-structured interview guide, ensuring that the qualitative data collection was driven by the need to understand trends rather than random exploration. This

would help me understand if the change was really revolutionary, transformational or none at all.

The sequential explanatory design aligns with Leedy and Ormrod's (2001) perspective that research is a dynamic process that requires careful sequencing of data collection and interpretation. By first analysing quantitative questionnaire data, this study identified patterns in how LOF is perceived and implemented across Maltese primary schools. The subsequent qualitative phase provided the necessary depth to explore why these patterns may exist, shedding light on the personal and contextual factors that shape policy enactment. For example, if the quantitative results suggested that a large percentage of teachers perceive limited autonomy in implementing the LOF, follow-up interviews were designed to explore how and why teachers felt constrained and what specific leadership or policy factors contributed to this perception. This methodological framework, thus, facilitates a more in-depth and comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

The decision to prioritise quantitative data collection first allowed for a broad understanding of LOF implementation across Malta. However, one critical challenge with the sequential explanatory design was ensuring that insights from the questionnaire phase did not prematurely shape or bias the qualitative phase. This was particularly evident when quantitative data pointed to higher satisfaction levels among school leaders, which could have overshadowed the more critical perspectives that emerged from teacher interviews. To address this, interview questions were intentionally designed to allow open-ended responses, ensuring that participants could articulate frustrations or challenges that quantitative data might not have captured.

4.3.3 Justification of methods

Apart from data integration, MMR also allows for methodological triangulation. Greene et al. (1989) emphasise that triangulation increases the validity of findings by comparing and contrasting data from different sources, thereby reducing the risk of bias. This is particularly relevant for policy research, where educational reforms like the LOF must be understood from multiple perspectives - those of policymakers, school leaders, and classroom teachers alike. This triangulation allows for a deeper, more immersive exploration of educational

reform, echoing the emphasis on immersion in research advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). By integrating quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative interviews, this study provides a broad overview and a detailed, context-specific account of how LOF is enacted in Malta.

4.4 Research design

Research design serves as the blueprint for structuring and guiding the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data within a research project. It aligns the research purpose, questions, and methodologies to ensure the investigation effectively addresses its objectives (Leedy, 1997; MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Cohen et al. (2018) stress the importance of research design as a structured framework that provides consistency and flexibility, ensuring data collection is systematic and can yield valid, reliable results. Similarly, Terre Blanche et al. (2006) emphasises that research design bridges research questions and the practical strategies necessary for their implementation.

4.4.1 Key components of research design

Hanson et al. (2005) explain that the three major components of research design are the study purpose, the research questions, and the type of data collection. In this study, the purpose was to explore the system-wide implementation of the LOF, focusing on how educational leaders and teachers engage with and respond to the reform. This purpose dictated the structure of the research design, aligning the methodological strategies with the study's objectives. The research questions played a pivotal role in shaping the research design, as they guided the choice of data collection tools and influenced the sequencing of the study phases. As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) note, in MMR, the research questions often demand multiple forms of data collection. The third component of research design is the data collection strategy, which in this study was driven by the sequential explanatory design.

In such a design, the research involved two phases: Phase 1, gathering quantitative data through an online questionnaire administered via Microsoft Forms©, which gathered quantitative data on the experiences of teachers and school leaders with the LOF

reform. Phase 2, conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews that were informed by the questionnaire results, with a purposively selected sample of teachers, school leaders, and Ministry officials.

4.4.2 Data integration and triangulation

Data integration is a foundation of MMR, requiring the researcher to skillfully combine findings from different methodological approaches. Bazeley (2018) argues that data integration should occur throughout the research process, not merely at the point of interpretation, allowing the researcher to adjust methods and analyses as the study progresses. This iterative approach is critical in educational reform research, where findings from one phase of data collection inform the subsequent phase, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities posed by the LOF. Fetters and Molina-Azorin (2017) describe data integration in MMR as the process by which different forms of data are brought together to provide a more holistic understanding.

This process aligns with the broader conceptualisation of research as a structured and systematic inquiry (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Thornhill, 2003). In this study, integration occurs through the analysis of questionnaire data and the thematic interpretation of qualitative interviews. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) further explain that such integration can uncover hidden patterns and relationships that might otherwise be overlooked.

Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016) suggest that successful MMR designs require careful attention to how data from different phases are combined to generate a synergistic understanding of the research problem. In this study, triangulation was used to ensure the findings from both phases complemented each other, enhancing the credibility and validity of the overall conclusions.

Moreover, as Creswell and Creswell (2020) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) note, integrating multiple methods requires careful planning and considerable time to ensure that the data from each phase are complementary and provide a coherent overall picture.

Potential discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative findings must be addressed, often requiring further analysis or data collection to resolve contradictions.

4.5 Data collection tools

This section provides an overview of the tools used for data collection, including the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews during the sequential exploratory design (**Figure 10**). Each tool was designed to align with the study's objectives and collect data to address the research questions.
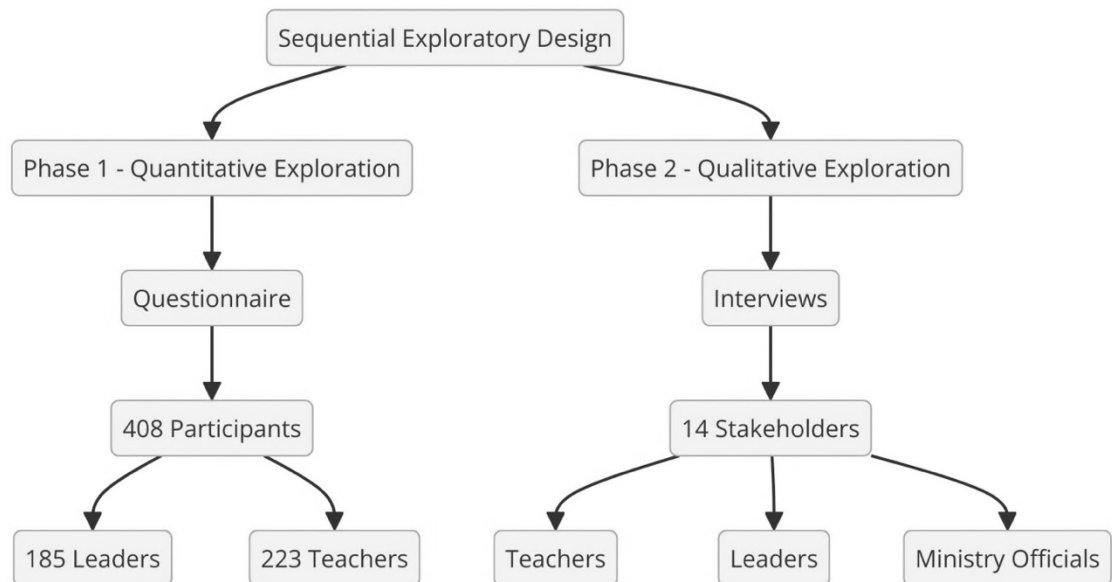
Figure 10 - Sequential exploratory design: phase 1 (quantitative) and Phase 2 (qualitative) research process.

4.5.1 Phase 1 – The questionnaire

Phase 1 of this MMR study was composed of a questionnaire with leaders (EOs, HoDs, HoSs and aHoSs) and teachers (classroom teachers, peripatetic teachers and support teachers). Queirós et al. (2017) describe questionnaires as an efficient method for collecting structured data from participants, and capturing their behaviours, perceptions, and opinions. This questionnaire (Appendix 6) adhered to several essential requirements for effectiveness, including a clear purpose, well-defined research questions, and comprehensive coverage of

the research objectives (Cohen et al., 2018). The questionnaire aimed to capture a broad set of data related to the LOF implementation across state, church, and independent primary schools in Malta. The development of the questionnaire was grounded in a thorough review of relevant literature, ensuring alignment with the theoretical and empirical frameworks guiding this study.

4.5.1.1 Questionnaire structure and content

The primary instrument used for the quantitative data collection was Microsoft Forms®, an online questionnaire platform. This tool was selected as it was the official platform affiliated with the University of East Anglia (UEA), ensuring compliance with institutional protocols and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards. While I have previously used Google Forms for other research projects, the decision to use Microsoft Forms® was driven by the need to retain data within the UEA system, providing greater security and ensuring that data was handled in compliance with privacy regulations. The online format was particularly suited to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted in-person data collection. As Denscombe (2014) highlighted, online surveys offer cost efficiency, accessibility, and flexibility, allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience.

The questionnaire was designed following an extensive review of existing literature and other instruments used in previous research. Gillham (2008) asserts that a well-designed questionnaire is directly relevant to the research objectives, which, in this case, focuses on understanding the implementation of the LOF in Malta.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections to capture demographic details, perceptions, and practices related to the LOF implementation. These sections included a combination of close-ended (e.g. Likert-scale) and open-ended questions, balancing quantitative and qualitative data collection.

1. Demographic data (Questions 1-8) – Section 1 gathered essential details about respondents' roles, the sector in which their school operates (state, church, or independent), and their teaching experience.

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2. System-wide changes (Questions 9-13) – Section 2 explored participants' experiences with system-wide educational reforms in Malta, focusing on changes such as the introduction of the LOF and its broader implications.

3. Primary schooling (Questions 14-16) – Section 3 addressed the elements contributing to good teaching, preferences for types of assessment, and participants' views on different curriculum models.

4. The LOF (Questions 17-35) – Section 4 consolidated section examined multiple aspects of the LOF, including:
   o Its perceived impact on teaching, assessment, and engagement (e.g., teachers, students, parents).
   o The training (professional learning opportunities) respondents received on the LOF included its format, strengths, and areas for improvement.
   o Overall perceptions of the LOF's success as a system-wide curriculum change.

5. Way forward for Malta (Questions 36-38) – Section 5 allowed respondents to provide suggestions for future system-wide changes in Maltese education.

Appendix 7 outlines the justifications for the inclusion of every question in the questionnaire. This streamlined structure ensured that the questionnaire captured comprehensive data on the LOF's implementation and its influence on educational practices in Malta. By combining closed and open-ended questions, the instrument provided both quantifiable trends and qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perspectives.

To provide a clear understanding of how the various sections of the questionnaire align with the research questions guiding this study, **Table 1** delineates the connections between the questionnaire components and the overarching and specific research inquiries. This structure ensures that each part of the questionnaire systematically contributes to addressing the central research objectives.

Questionnaire Section	Content Focus	Related Research Questions	Justification
Section 1 - Demographic Data	Collects demographic and professional details of respondents, including roles, sectors, and teaching experience.	None directly, but provides essential context.	This section provides a foundational understanding of the respondent pool, enabling the interpretation of data within the specific contexts of Malta's educational system. It ensures that variations in responses are contextualised based on educators' backgrounds and roles.
Section 2 - System-Wide Changes	Explores educators' experiences with reforms such as the LOF and other system-wide changes.	Main Research Question, Sub-question 1, Sub-question 2	This section identifies the scope of educators' exposure to systemic reforms, offering insights into the factors influencing the enactment of these changes (Sub-question 1) and how they are experienced by different stakeholders (Sub-question 2).
Section 3 - Primary Schooling	Examines key elements contributing to good teaching, assessment preferences, and perceptions of curriculum models.	Main Research Question, Sub-question 2	This section connects directly to the overarching research question by addressing educators' experiences with systemic and curricular reforms. It also explores their practical responses, linking to Sub-question 2's focus on experiences and reactions to reforms.
Section 4 - The LOF	Investigates the LOF's impact on teaching, assessment, and engagement, as well as training quality and overall perceptions.	Sub-question 2, Sub-question 3	By assessing the LOF's perceived effectiveness, this section provides insights into its impact on educators' practices (Sub-question 2) and informs strategies for future policy improvements (Sub-question 3).
Section 5 - Way Forward for Malta	Captures open-ended feedback on future improvements and suggestions for educational reforms.	Sub-question 1, Sub-question 3	This section allows respondents to reflect on factors influencing reform implementation (Sub-question 1) and propose actionable recommendations for enhancing future policy frameworks (Sub-question 3).

Table 1 - The connections between the questionnaire components and the main and sub-research questions.

4.5.1.2 Questionnaire piloting and refinement

Piloting the questionnaire was an important step in the design process, ensuring its validity and reliability within the context of this study. The pilot involved administering the questionnaire to four individuals representing the target population. These participants provided feedback on the instrument's clarity, relevance, and overall structure, which was integral to refining its design. For instance, their input led to minor adjustments in question-wording and sequencing and the inclusion of an additional option in the demographic section that had initially been overlooked. These revisions enhanced the instrument's ability to comprehensively capture the intended data. This approach aligns with Cohen et al. (2018), who emphasise the necessity of piloting research instruments to confirm their alignment with the study's objectives. While the pilot feedback predominantly informed meaningful improvements, some suggestions reflected individual preferences and were not implemented to maintain focus on the research aims.

4.5.1.3 Questionnaire sampling and data collection

The questionnaire targeted a cross-section of actors within Maltese primary schools, including leaders and teachers. Leaders comprised EOs, HoDs, HoSs and aHoSs, while teachers included classroom teachers, peripatetic teachers, and support teachers. This diverse target population was selected to capture varied perspectives on the implementation and the perceived impact of the LOF across different roles and school types. The sampling strategy employed aligns with voluntary response sampling, a form of random sampling often utilised in educational research to select participants based on their relevance to the research objectives (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach enabled collection from participants actively engaged in the reform, ensuring alignment with the study's goals. The response rate for teachers could be calculated with reasonable accuracy, given that NSO (2023) data indicate that there were 2,129 primary teachers nationally in 2022. In this study, 223 teacher respondents participated, representing 10.5% of the total teaching population. By contrast, calculating the response rate for the 185 leadership respondents proved more challenging. Comprehensive data on the exact number of leadership roles, particularly within the independent and church school sectors, where additional senior leadership positions beyond

the traditional government structures exist, were not available. Consequently, it was not possible to compute an exact response rate for leaders.

Given the voluntary nature of participation, the sampling strategy presented inherent limitations. Voluntary response sampling risks bias, as individuals with strong opinions or particular interests in the LOF might have been more likely to respond. Efforts were made to mitigate this by targeting a diverse range of participants from state, church, and independent schools, representing various leadership and teaching roles. However, challenges were encountered, particularly in accessing participants from state schools.

The gatekeeping process in state schools required multiple levels of approval, beginning with the MEDE through the HCNs (Appendix 2) and subsequently from the respective HoSs (Appendix 2), who then shared the questionnaire with the teachers working within that state school. EOs further facilitated this process by disseminating the questionnaire to HoDss and Support Teachers. Similarly, in church schools, approval was required from the SfCE (Appendix 3) before contacting individual HoSs, who then shared the questionnaire with the teachers working within that church school. Conversely, the process in independent schools was more straightforward, requiring permission directly from the respective Heads of Schools. When contacting the state, church, and independent schools, I used the school's generic email addresses listed on official websites and addressed them to the HoSs and the SLT.

Hence, the questionnaire was emailed to:

- EOs to complete this themselves and disseminate it to their teams of HoDs and/or Support Teachers, if applicable. The EOs represented a diverse range of subjects, which are listed here in alphabetical order: Art, Assessment, Assessment for Learning, Drama, Early Years, Education for Sustainable Development, English, Literacy, Maltese, Maths, Migrant Learners Unit, Music, Personal, Social, Career Development, Physical Education, Quality Assurance Department, Religion, Science, Social Studies, and Specific Learning Difficulties,
- the SfCE to send it to the respective curriculum leaders (the equivalent of EOs, HoDs and Support Teachers in state schools),

- all HCNs and HoSs (for state schools) to send it to the respective teachers,
- all HoSs (for church schools), to send it to the respective teachers, and
- all HoSs (for independent schools) to send it to the respective teachers.

This distribution strategy, incorporating gatekeeping and snowball sampling elements, as described by Cohen et al. (2018), was designed to achieve comprehensive coverage of the target population. The MUT circulated the questionnaire to its members through an official circular 031/2021 (Appendix 10) to further enhance participation.

Two follow-up reminder emails were sent to non-respondents one week and two weeks after the initial distribution to encourage participation. This follow-up strategy proved effective, culminating in 408 valid responses, comprising 185 school leaders and 223 teachers. **Table 2** shows an example of this reminder process (church schools).

Sector	School	Email	1st Email	2nd Email	3rd Email	Notes
Church			26th April			forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April			forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	4th May	13th May	
Church			26th April			forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	forwarded to teachers
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church			26th April	3rd May	13th May	

Church	26th April	3rd May		forwarded to teachers
Church	26th April	3rd May	13th May	forwarded to teachers
Church	26th April			forwarded to teachers
Church	26th April	3rd May	13th May	
Church	3rd May	13th May		forwarded to teachers
Church	3rd May			forwarded to teachers
Church	3rd May			forwarded to teachers
Church	3rd May	13th May		forwarded to teachers

Table 2 - Example of the questionnaire reminder process.

4.5.1.4 Strengths and limitations of questionnaires

Questionnaires are widely regarded as an effective tool in educational research for standardising data collection across large samples. In this study, the questionnaire's design and online format offered several strengths, aligning with the recommendations of Cohen et al. (2018), who highlight that questionnaires are cost-effective, provide anonymity, and reduce social desirability bias. These attributes were particularly relevant to this study. The online format further enhanced these strengths, allowing participants to respond at their convenience without the pressures of face-to-face interaction. This may have encouraged more candid responses, particularly from participants critical of the LOF.

Including both closed-ended (e.g., Likert-scale) and open-ended questions enabled the collection of a mix of data. While the Likert-scale questions quantified trends in perceptions of the LOF, the open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on specific issues, capturing insights into their experiences. This dual approach was particularly practical for exploring complex topics, such as system-wide reform, where participants' views are likely to vary based on their roles and school contexts.

However, as Kumar (2011) notes, questionnaires have limitations. A limitation of this study was the self-selection bias inherent in voluntary response sampling. Participants with strong opinions about the LOF, whether positive or negative, may have been more inclined to respond. Moreover, the questionnaire's length, dictated by the need to include both demographic and substantive sections, posed another challenge. As Denscombe (2014) warns,

lengthy questionnaires can lead to respondent fatigue, potentially impacting the quality of responses. While including open-ended questions provided qualitative insights, it may have increased the cognitive load for participants, particularly when responding after completing a series of Likert-scale items. In this study, some open-ended responses were incomplete or tangential, suggesting that fatigue may have influenced the depth and relevance of the qualitative data collected.

Moreover, fixed-choice questions, such as Likert-scale items, inherently limit participants' ability to fully articulate complex views. While these items are indispensable for identifying trends, they may oversimplify complex perspectives on the LOF's implementation, particularly among educators experiencing diverse school contexts. Conversely, open-ended questions, though rich in detail, sometimes yielded ambiguous or off-topic responses, as noted by Beiske (2002). This highlights the trade-off between depth and clarity in questionnaire-based research. Another limitation arose from the reliance on Microsoft Forms® for distribution. While this platform is GDPR-compliant and convenient for online data collection, it posed accessibility challenges for respondents with limited digital literacy, although supposedly all leaders and teachers in schools in Malta should have obtained ECDL certification showing they are digitally literate.

Despite these limitations, the questionnaire successfully captured a robust dataset reflecting educators' experiences and perceptions of the LOF. Nevertheless, the findings must be interpreted cautiously, acknowledging the constraints posed by self-selection bias, respondent fatigue, and the inherent limitations of fixed-choice questions.

4.5.2 Phase 2 – The semi-structured interviews

Phase 2 of this MMR study utilised semi-structured interviews as the primary method for collecting qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable in educational research because they capture rich data, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Seale (2004) argues that interviews facilitate an interactive and in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences, which complements quantitative findings.

Interviews were chosen in this study for their capacity to provide comprehensive insights into the implementation of the LOF in Maltese primary schools. Kvale (1996) aptly describes interviews as "construction sites for knowledge," where the dynamic interaction between interviewer and interviewee generates valuable understanding. Given the complexity of educational reforms such as the LOF, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and depth, enabling the exploration of predetermined themes while remaining open to emergent issues (Given, 2008).

4.5.2.1 Interviews structure and content

The semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 9) designed to explore participants' perspectives on the LOF and its implementation in Maltese primary schools. Drawing on the findings from the quantitative phase, the interview schedule was developed to probe deeper into the most significant themes identified, ensuring alignment with the study's design. This approach ensured that the interviews built upon the themes identified in the questionnaire, allowing for a deeper exploration of the challenges, successes, and perceptions surrounding the LOF. This alignment exemplifies Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) recommendation to use qualitative data to elaborate on quantitative findings, enhancing the study's overall coherence.

The interview guide consisted of ten broad questions with targeted prompts, ensuring consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The topics covered included:

1. Career background and role (Question 1) - Participants were asked to provide an overview of their career trajectory and current role within the educational system. Prompts explored changes in their career and how these related to curriculum development, setting the foundation for contextualising their experiences with the LOF.

2. Teaching practices and curriculum (Question 2) - Participants shared their preferred teaching approaches, and prompts encouraged reflections on how these related to curricular changes. Questions probed whether the LOF influenced teaching methods and student learning outcomes.

3. Assessment practices (Question 2) - Discussions focused on how the LOF affected assessment strategies, with prompts exploring specific challenges, such as inadequate professional learning opportunities or ambiguous expectations.

4. Leadership practices (Questions 1 and 6) - School leaders were asked to reflect on whether and how the LOF influenced their leadership practices. This section also included prompts to identify specific leadership challenges introduced by the reform.

5. Perceptions of the LOF (Questions 3-6) - This section invited participants to articulate their overall views on the LOF, including its roots, rationale, and evolution as a policy. Prompts were tailored to participants' roles, exploring topics such as the effectiveness of continuous professional development, the quality of LOF materials, and its perceived impact.

6. System-wide changes (Question 7) - Broader discussions explored participants' perspectives on system-wide educational changes in Malta, situating the LOF within a continuum of past reforms.

7. Suggestions for future reforms (Questions 8 and 9) - Participants provided recommendations for improving future curriculum reforms and educational changes, drawing on lessons learned from the LOF implementation.

8. Final reflections (Question 10) - Participants were encouraged to share any additional insights or comments they deemed relevant, allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes.

The interview schedule was designed to balance consistency and flexibility, ensuring key topics were addressed and allowing participants to elaborate on their unique experiences. Open-ended questions encouraged reflective responses, while prompts ensured depth and focus (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). This structure facilitated a rich exploration of the LOF's enactment.

4.5.2.2 Interviews piloting and refinement

The piloting and refining of the interview guide was a step in ensuring its alignment with the pragmatic research paradigm guiding this study. Pragmatism, emphasising practical solutions and the generation of actionable insights, shaped the development of the interview guide by prioritising questions that could effectively bridge theoretical frameworks and real-world

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experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Piloting and iterative refinement ensured that the guide captured the complexities of the LOF implementation but also aligned with the MMR approach employed in this study.

The initial draft of the interview guide (Appendix 8) was reviewed by my supervisors, whose feedback helped me refine its structure and content. Their suggestions emphasised the need to ensure that the questions elicited reflective, open-ended responses while remaining connected to the research objectives. This feedback was important in enhancing the guide's capacity to probe into participants' roles, experiences, and perceptions of the LOF, ensuring that it captured data capable of informing theoretical and practical implications.

In addition to this academic feedback, I sought input from a trusted friend who was also pursuing a PhD at the time. This friend, who had been a source of guidance throughout my doctoral journey, provided a practitioner-oriented perspective, helping to balance the guide's theoretical robustness with its practical application in the interview setting. Their insights highlighted the importance of a logical flow in the questions to ease participants into the discussion, ensuring a conversational yet focused tone. They also underscored the necessity of flexibility to accommodate participants' unique experiences and provide a guide to adapt to developing themes during the interviews.

A trial interview was conducted with a participant representative of the target population to pilot the guide, a seasoned Head of School (HoS) from a state school. This pilot revealed several areas for improvement, leading to refinements. First, certain questions were rephrased to avoid ambiguity and ensure clarity across participants from the three sectors. Second, more probing prompts were added to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses, addressing a potential gap in the depth and richness of the data. Third, the sequencing of questions was revised to ensure a gradual progression from introductory topics to more complex and sensitive issues, creating a structure that facilitated rapport and deeper engagement. Finally, questions addressing the emotional impact of the LOF were introduced, recognising that reforms often evoke emotional responses, which are critical for understanding the broader implications of policy enactment.

4.5.2.3 Interviews sampling and data collection

The qualitative phase of this study employed purposive sampling to select participants for semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling is a well-established strategy in qualitative research, enabling the researcher to intentionally select individuals who can provide rich, detailed insights relevant to the research objectives (Cohen et al., 2018; Patton, 2002). This approach was particularly suitable for this study.

A total of 14 participants were selected based on their roles within the Maltese educational system and their involvement in implementing the LOF. The sample included:

- 1 Director
- 1 Head of College Network (HCN)
- 1 Education Officer (EO)
- 3 Heads of Schools (HoSs) (one state, one church, one independent)
- 3 Assistant Heads of Schools (aHoSs) (one state, one church, one independent)
- 5 Teachers (two state, two church, one independent)

This intentionally diverse sample ensured representation from policy, leadership, and classroom levels. Participants were drawn from the three school sectors in Malta. Ball et al. (2012) argue that capturing perspectives from different institutional levels is essential for understanding the complexities of educational policy enactment.

All interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams®. While remote interviews ensured participant safety and convenience, they presented certain challenges, such as the absence of non-verbal cues and the potential for digital fatigue. These limitations were mitigated by designing concise yet flexible interviews, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, with two interviews extending beyond 60 minutes to accommodate participants' detailed reflections.

Participants could respond in either Maltese or English to respect Malta's bilingual educational context. Most participants began in English but frequently switched to Maltese during the discussion, particularly when describing complex or emotionally charged

experiences. This bilingual approach ensured participants could articulate their thoughts naturally and comfortably, enriching the quality of the data collected.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Given the pragmatic orientation of this study, the data collection process prioritised insights into the LOF's enactment while ensuring methodological rigour and ethical compliance. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details were removed during transcription and analysis.

Additionally, efforts were made to reduce potential bias by ensuring the sample included participants with varying experiences and perspectives, rather than those exclusively supportive or critical of the LOF. Saturation was reached after conducting 14 interviews, as no new themes or insights emerged. By the twelfth interview, participants from diverse roles and school contexts were providing consistent accounts, affirming the adequacy of the sample size for addressing the research questions comprehensively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4.5.2.4 Strengths and limitations of interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a widely recognised method in qualitative research for exploring complex phenomena in detail. Their flexibility enables researchers to adapt questions, clarify ambiguous responses, and probe for deeper insights during the interview process (Ary et al., 2010; Kumar, 2011). This adaptability was crucial in this study, as it allowed participants to share their experiences with the LOF in a way that reflected their professional roles and personal perspectives. By complementing the quantitative phase, the interviews bridged broad trends with context-rich insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

One significant strength of semi-structured interviews is their capacity to generate rich data by encouraging participants to articulate their views in their own words. As Hochschild (2009) highlights, interviews allow researchers to delve deeply into participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, uncovering layers of meaning that might otherwise remain hidden. In this study, the conversational nature of the interviews facilitated candid discussions about the challenges and successes of the LOF's implementation. Moreover, the inclusion of 'feeling questions' in the interview guide, as recommended by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006)

(e.g. how does system-wide change make you feel?), enabled me to capture emotional responses, such as frustration, pride, or optimism, adding a valuable dimension to the data.

Conducting interviews remotely via Microsoft Teams® offered additional practical benefits, including cost-efficiency, ease of scheduling, and accessibility for participants across Malta's state, church, and independent school sectors (Maurer, 2020). This approach also eliminated geographical constraints (e.g. travelling to Gozo, the sister island of Malta), enabling the inclusion of diverse perspectives from various school types. Furthermore, participants could express themselves in either Maltese or English, reflecting the bilingual nature of Malta's educational system. This flexibility ensured that participants could communicate their thoughts in their preferred language, leading to more authentic and detailed responses.

Despite these strengths, interviews are inherently time-intensive, requiring preparation, execution, and analysis (Adams, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). Developing the interview guide, piloting, and conducting the interviews required planning to align with the study's objectives. Transcription and analysis presented further challenges, particularly given the bilingual nature of the interviews. Translating responses from Maltese to English while preserving their meaning and context required careful attention to linguistic details.

While logistically advantageous, the remote format posed its own challenges. The lack of face-to-face interaction limited my ability to observe non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which are often critical for interpreting participants' emotions and attitudes. This limitation was particularly significant when discussing sensitive topics, such as the increased workload or resistance to the LOF. Additionally, digital fatigue, exacerbated by the extended nature of some interviews, may have influenced participants' engagement levels, potentially reducing the depth of their responses. To mitigate these challenges, interviews were kept conversational and flexible, ensuring participants felt at ease throughout the process.

Another critical consideration is the potential for bias in interviews. Both interviewer and interviewee biases can influence the quality of the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, participants may shape their responses based on perceived expectations, while the researcher's framing of questions or reactions during the interview may inadvertently

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influence participants' answers. A consistent interview guide was used to address these risks, and I adopted strategies such as active listening and neutral phrasing to minimise bias. Additionally, using pseudonyms and removing identifying details during transcription helped protect anonymity and reduce the potential for subjective interpretation of responses.

Semi-structured interviews are also constrained by their limited generalisability. While the purposive sampling strategy ensured a diverse sample of key roles involved in the LOF's implementation, the findings remain context-specific and cannot be generalised to the entire population (Patton, 2002). However, as Cohen et al. (2018) argue, the value of qualitative research lies in its ability to provide depth and richness of understanding rather than statistical generalisability. In this study, the interviews captured a wide range of perspectives, offering a comprehensive view of the LOF's enactment in Malta's primary schools.

4.6 Data analysis

Using a concurrent triangulation design, the quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed statistically, while the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews underwent thematic analysis. By analysing these datasets separately and integrating them in subsequent discussions, the study captured the complexities of this system-wide educational reform, offering insights into its enactment.

4.6.1 Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data derived from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise and explore response patterns. Microsoft Excel® was employed for data entry, analysis, and visualisation, offering sufficient functionality for the research requirements despite its limitations in advanced statistical techniques (Rose et al., 2015). Through Microsoft Excel®, numerical coding of closed-ended responses facilitated statistical analysis, while graphical tools such as bar charts and pie charts were used to present trends and patterns visually, enhancing the accessibility and interpretability of the findings.

The raw data were exported from Microsoft Forms® to Excel®, where closed-ended responses were systematically analysed. Open-ended responses, while qualitative in nature, were thematically coded to complement the statistical findings, providing richer context and deeper insights. This integration of quantitative and qualitative data reflects the study's pragmatic paradigm, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the LOF's impact.

Williams (2007) asserts that quantitative research achieves depth by translating objectivity into meaning. By combining descriptive statistics with thematic coding, this study ensured a rigorous and multidimensional analysis of educators' experiences with the LOF. This methodological approach strengthened the reliability of the findings and highlighted the dynamics of system-wide educational reform in Malta, laying a solid foundation for the qualitative analysis.

4.6.2 Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, a robust and widely adopted method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This was conducted by following the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). After the interviews were transcribed, the analysis proceeded through a six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes by collating codes into potential thematic groupings; (4) reviewing themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to develop from the data itself, and deductive, informed by the study's conceptual framework around policy enactment, leadership, power dynamics and curriculum development. Strategies to enhance rigour included iterative reading, critical dialogue with peers, and maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions of the LOF, ensuring that both explicit responses and underlying meanings were captured. By employing a systematic coding and theme development process, the analysis adhered to methodological rigour while remaining flexible to emergent insights (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.6.2.1 Transcription and translation

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and sections conducted in Maltese were translated into English where necessary. This dual-language approach ensured accessibility for non-Maltese readers while preserving the original meaning of participants' responses. Recognising that translation is not a neutral process (Nikander, 2008), particular attention was paid to maintaining the authenticity and meaning of the original text. By grounding the analysis in the original transcripts and focusing on participants' phrasing, alternative interpretations were made possible, ensuring transparency and fidelity to their voices (Ochs, 2000).

4.6.2.2 Coding and theme development

A codebook was developed to systematically organise the data into categories, ensuring consistency in the coding process. Microsoft Excel® was employed to track responses, codes, and emerging themes, enabling efficient organisation and cross-referencing. The coding process involved multiple iterative cycles, with each interview being reviewed thoroughly to assign relevant codes to data segments. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that captured patterns across participants' responses. Themes were continually refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, aligning with the study's objectives and theoretical framework (Ary et al., 2010). Special attention was given to code-switching between Maltese and English, recognising this linguistic fluidity as an important aspect of participants' narratives.

4.6.2.3 Revealing themes

Thematic analysis revealed a range of key themes that captured the challenges and opportunities associated with the LOF implementation. These themes were examined across participants' roles (teachers, school leaders, and policymakers) and school types (state, church, and independent), enabling an understanding of sectoral and role-specific perspectives. The themes were refined through constant cross-referencing with the coded data, ensuring their accuracy and relevance. For example, teachers frequently cited concerns

about insufficient training, but school leaders emphasised systemic challenges, such as balancing reform demands with existing administrative responsibilities. This comparative approach showed variations in how different actors experienced and enacted the LOF.

4.6.3 Triangulation, reflexivity and integration

Triangulation and reflexivity were important in this study's MMR design, ensuring the findings were credible and nuanced. As outlined in Section 4.4.2, triangulation involved integrating quantitative and qualitative data. This process, described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), enhances validity by cross-verifying data from multiple sources and perspectives. The study moved beyond surface-level observations by comparing trends in quantitative data with themes from qualitative analysis.

The integration of findings revealed areas of convergence and divergence, enriching the analysis. For example, quantitative data showed that a majority of teachers viewed the LOF as impacting student engagement. This was corroborated by qualitative interviews, where teachers provided detailed examples of how the LOF fostered student-centred practices. However, triangulation also exposed tensions. While quantitative results indicated broadly positive perceptions among school leaders, qualitative insights from teachers revealed frustrations with the reform's practical implementation. These discrepancies underscored the varied experiences of actors and demonstrated the importance of examining reform from multiple angles to achieve a balanced understanding.

In keeping with the pragmatic stance adopted in this research, these divergent findings were not treated as contradictions but as valid reflections of leaders' and teachers' differing contexts and responsibilities. This approach aligns with the view of Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) that MMR allows researchers to accommodate complexity, recognising the multifaceted nature of social phenomena. The iterative process of integrating data ensured that the LOF's successes and challenges were captured.

4.6.3.1 Reflexivity in research practice

As Mauthner and Doucet (2003) emphasised, reflexivity involves critical self-awareness of the researcher's influence on the research process. Throughout this study, I engaged in reflexivity to ensure that my positionality as an insider in Malta's education system did not unduly shape the data collection, analysis, or interpretation. My dual role as a researcher and a practitioner with experience in curriculum reform posed opportunities and challenges. While my familiarity with the LOF provided contextual knowledge, it also required vigilance to avoid over-interpretation or bias in representing participants' voices (Heath & Devine, 1999).

Regular discussions with my supervisors and a trusted colleague, as well as maintaining a reflexivity journal, supported this process. These discussions helped to challenge my assumptions and provided alternative perspectives on the data, minimising the risk of confirmation bias. For example, when teachers expressed frustrations with LOF professional learning opportunities, I critically examined how my own experiences with professional development initiatives might shape my interpretations. By documenting these reflections, I maintained transparency and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than my own preconceptions.

Reflexivity extended to the analysis and reporting phases, where I was acutely aware of the choices involved in interpreting and presenting data. As Reinharz and Davidman (1992) notes, the researcher's decisions on which quotes or themes to prioritise inevitably shape the narrative of the findings. To mitigate this, I adhered closely to participants' original phrasing during analysis and sought to balance diverse perspectives. This approach ensured that both dominant and marginalised voices were represented.

4.6.3.2 Reflexivity in data integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings also required reflexivity. As Rogers et al. (2005) highlight, researchers often operate within cultural models shaped by their own experiences. In this study, I was mindful of how my background might influence the weight given to certain themes, such as the tensions between policy design and practical implementation. By critically reflecting on these dynamics, I sought to present a balanced

interpretation of the data, acknowledging the systemic factors that shape experiences with the LOF.

For instance, while leaders' positive perceptions of the LOF were supported by their proximity to policy design and decision-making processes, teachers' concerns about workload and resource constraints highlighted the operational challenges of reform implementation. Recognising these differing contexts, I adopted a reflexive approach that validated each perspective within its specific framework, aligning with Macbeth's (2001) call for reflexivity to challenge cultural hegemonies and produce real research accounts.

4.6.3.3 Reflexivity and research integrity

As an insider researcher, I embraced the ethical responsibility to conduct research *with*, rather than *on*, participants (Costley et al., 2010). This involved fostering reciprocal relationships during data collection and ensuring participants' voices were authentically represented. Reflexivity encouraged ongoing scrutiny of my role as both a facilitator of dialogue and an interpreter of data, promoting methodological rigour and transparency (St. Pierre, 1997). This approach ensured that the findings were both robust and ethically sound, contributing to the study's overall credibility.

4.7 Establishing rigour in mixed-methods research

Ensuring validity, reliability, and generalisability is fundamental to establishing the credibility and rigour of any research study. In MMR, these principles apply differently to quantitative and qualitative components, necessitating a context-specific and methodologically integrated approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study employed multiple strategies to address these criteria.

4.7.1 Validity and authenticity

Validity in research refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect the phenomena under investigation and align with the study's objectives. In this MMR study,

validity was operationalised differently for quantitative and qualitative data to ensure methodological appropriateness.

Phase 1 - The questionnaire was designed to align with the research questions and be grounded in the relevant literature, ensuring content validity (Cohen et al., 2018). Piloting the questionnaire with educators prior to distribution further enhanced its validity by identifying and addressing ambiguities or irrelevant questions (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). Construct validity was supported by the inclusion of Likert-scale items, enabling measurement of attitudes and perceptions across defined constructs such as workload, engagement, and leadership effectiveness. However, it presented challenges, particularly the inability to clarify ambiguous responses or verify participant honesty, highlighting the limitations of self-reported data. Data triangulation with qualitative insights was employed to mitigate these risks, cross-checking quantitative trends against richer, contextual qualitative narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phase 2 - Validity in qualitative research is more closely aligned with authenticity, reflecting the degree to which the findings represent participants' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit in-depth responses, allowing participants to articulate their views freely. Conducting interviews bilingually, offering participants the choice between Maltese and English, further enhanced authenticity, enabling respondents to express themselves in their preferred language. Reflexive practices, such as critical examination of my positionality as a researcher and insider in the Maltese educational system, were employed to ensure the validity of interpretations. Although social desirability bias remained a concern, particularly among leaders, the triangulation of qualitative data with questionnaire findings provided a cross-verification mechanism that strengthened the study's internal validity.

4.7.2 Reliability and dependability

Reliability concerns the consistency and replicability of research findings over time and context (Joppe, 2001). In this study, reliability was addressed through systematic design, rigorous analytical procedures, and reflective practices tailored to the distinct needs of the two phases.

Phase 1 - Reliability in the questionnaire was supported by its structured design, incorporating standardised Likert-scale items to ensure consistent responses across participants. The piloting process further reinforced reliability, identifying areas for refinement and ensuring that questions were unambiguous. Data analysis followed consistent procedures, employing descriptive statistics to summarise patterns and trends. Visual representations provided a transparent presentation of findings. However, the reliance on a single point of data collection, without repeated measures, limits the study's test-retest reliability, a recognised constraint in cross-sectional surveys (Bryman, 2016).

Phase 2 - Reliability in qualitative research is conceptualised as dependability, reflecting the stability of findings over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was achieved through meticulous transcription, translation, and coding processes. Transcripts were cross-checked with audio recordings to ensure accuracy, and translations were reviewed collaboratively with a bilingual colleague to preserve original meanings. Thematic analysis followed a systematic coding framework, with iterative reviews ensuring internal consistency within themes and external consistency across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity was critical in maintaining reliability, as I engaged in regular self-reflection and discussions with supervisors to minimise interpretative biases.

4.7.3 Generalisability and transferability

Generalisability, in the traditional quantitative sense, refers to the applicability of findings to broader populations, while transferability, relevant to qualitative research, focuses on the extent to which findings resonate with other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Phase 1 - The sample size of 408 teachers and leaders supports a degree of generalisability within the Maltese primary education system. The random sampling strategy achieved representation across sectors and roles, providing a foundation for extrapolating trends related to LOF implementation. However, the reliance on voluntary participation introduces potential biases, as those with strong opinions may have been overrepresented. These limitations highlight the importance of interpreting quantitative findings within the specific context of Maltese education.

Phase 2 - Purposive sampling in the qualitative phase prioritised depth over breadth, selecting 14 participants based on their relevance to the research questions. While this approach limits statistical generalisability, it enhances transferability by providing rich, contextually grounded insights into the enactment of LOF. Detailed descriptions of the Maltese educational context and participants' experiences allow readers to assess the relevance of findings to similar settings, which aligns with Bassey's (1981) concept of 'fuzzy generalisation'. The study's focus on a small island state offers insights into comparable educational contexts, particularly those undergoing system-wide reforms, and limits such 'fuzzy generalisations', which might not have exceeded the level of confidence needed.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations underpin the integrity and credibility of this research, mainly when dealing with human participants. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the UEA, ensuring that participants' rights, dignity, and well-being were safeguarded throughout the research process. Ethical principles were integrated across all phases, from design to dissemination, to maintain trustworthiness and academic rigour.

4.8.1 Ethical permission and institutional approvals

Securing ethical approval was fundamental in ensuring compliance with international and institutional guidelines. This study underwent a review by the UEA Ethics Board, where a detailed research proposal addressing objectives, methodology, and ethical protocols was evaluated. Approval was granted (Appendix 1) after multiple rounds of submissions, confirming adherence to participant safety, data confidentiality, and compliance with GDPR.

In Malta, additional permissions were required to access schools and educators. Authorisations were obtained from the MEDE for state schools (Appendix 2), the SfCE for church schools (Appendix 3), and individual heads for independent schools/ These approvals

underscore the collaborative nature of ethical research, particularly in approaching different gatekeeping processes within educational institutions in the same country.

4.8.2 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Informed consent ensures that participants understand the study's purpose and their rights. Comprehensive participant information sheets (Appendices 4 and 5) were provided, outlining the study's objectives, data usage, and confidentiality measures. Consent forms, signed by all participants, guaranteed voluntary participation and their right to withdraw without consequences (Cohen et al., 2018).

For the questionnaire, informed consent was embedded at the start (Appendix 4), requiring participants to agree before proceeding. This format aligned with ethical standards for digital data collection, ensuring transparency while safeguarding participants' anonymity. All questions were optional, respecting participants' autonomy and reducing the pressure to answer.

Semi-structured interview participants received both verbal and written (Appendix 5) briefings, reiterating their rights and emphasising confidentiality. This dual consent approach fostered a secure environment, encouraging open and candid discussions about their experiences with the LOF reform.

4.8.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was paramount, particularly in Malta's close-knit educational community. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and contextual identifiers, such as school names or locations, were omitted to mitigate the risk of identification. While this approach protected participants, it required careful balancing to preserve the richness of their insights (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). Data storage adhered strictly to GDPR and the Malta Data Protection Act (2018). Digital files, including transcripts and consent forms, were encrypted and stored on password-protected devices accessible only

to me and my supervisors. Data will be securely deleted following the study's conclusion and final grading.

4.8.4 Avoiding harm

Minimising harm was a central ethical priority. The study design ensured questions were neutral and non-leading, allowing participants to share their views without fear of judgment. I was particularly aware of which probes to include in the semi-structured interviews, and particular care was taken during interviews, where sensitive topics, such as increased workloads or systemic challenges, were addressed respectfully. This way, I avoided moral harm. Moreover, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question, reinforcing their autonomy and comfort. The research avoided physical harm by conducting all interactions remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. This approach adhered to public health guidelines while ensuring participant safety. Moreover, business harm was minimised as school names were not included, and interviews were held after school hours to minimise disruptions.

4.8.5 Researcher responsibility

Reflexivity was integral to maintaining ethical and analytical rigour throughout the study. As an insider researcher within the Maltese educational system, I was acutely aware of how my positionality could shape interactions and interpretations (Costley et al., 2010). Regular self-reflection and discussions with supervisors helped mitigate biases, ensuring participants' voices were authentically represented. Acknowledging the inherent power dynamics in research, I sought to create an environment where participants felt respected and valued, regardless of their professional roles. Throughout my PhD journey, I have published a practical guide about conducting research in schools in Malta (Schembri & Sciberras, 2022) and I tried to follow this guide as much as possible.

4.8.6 Trust and reciprocity

Building trust was fundamental to this research, requiring ongoing communication with participants about their rights and the study's goals. By fostering a reciprocal relationship, participants were not treated as mere data sources but as co-constructors of knowledge. Their insights informed the study's findings and broader discussions about educational reform in Malta. This participatory approach aligns with ethical educational research practices, ensuring that the study was conducted with participants rather than on them (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Reciprocity was reflected in the commitment to present findings constructively, focusing on systemic challenges rather than individual shortcomings, thereby contributing to meaningful dialogue about policy and practice.

4.9 Looking back and ahead

This chapter has detailed the methodology adopted to investigate the implementation of the LOF reform in Maltese primary schools. The MMR approach, integrating quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews, was designed to capture the complexities of educators' experiences and perceptions. Methodological rigour was maintained through careful attention to validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process.

Having established a methodological foundation, the study now transitions to the analysis phase. Chapter 5 will delve into the quantitative findings, providing a statistical and visual account of the questionnaire responses. This analysis will highlight the trends and patterns and serve as a precursor to the qualitative exploration in Chapter 6, where the participants' experiences will come to the forefront.

Chapter 5 – Analysis of Questionnaires

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the questionnaire conducted as part of this study, which aimed to investigate the experiences and perceptions of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms among school leaders and teachers in primary education in Malta.

5.1.1 Purpose of the questionnaire

The primary purpose of this questionnaire is to gather comprehensive insights from primary school educators in Malta regarding the implementation and impact of the LOF (the context of implementation). By collecting and analysing the views of the policy actors (the teachers and leaders), this research aims to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current educational practices and identify areas for future improvement.

The decision to use a single questionnaire for both teachers and leaders was motivated by the aim of ensuring a standardised data set, thereby facilitating coherent analysis and presentation of findings. While it is valid to question the rationale behind administering a unified questionnaire despite the variation in demographic questions applicable to each group, this approach was considered in consultation with my supervisors.

Through these discussions, it became evident that using a single instrument would allow both leaders and teachers within the primary education system, regardless of their hierarchical position, to engage with the same fundamental questions. This inclusive approach ensures that every actor in the system has an equal opportunity to contribute their perspectives, avoiding the potential risk of creating a sense of hierarchy that might arise from administering separate questionnaires.

5.1.2 Sections of the questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix 6), designed as discussed in Chapter 4, was structured into five sections:

Section 1: Demographic data (questions 1-8)
Section 2: System-wide change (questions 9-13)
Section 3: Primary schooling (questions 14-16)
Section 4: The Learning Outcomes Framework (questions 17-35)
Section 5: Way forward for Malta (questions 36-38)

Section 5.2 delves into the demographic data, providing a comprehensive overview of the participants' roles, experience, and background. This section establishes the foundation for understanding the context in which the subsequent findings are interpreted.

Section 5.3 explores the responses related to system-wide changes within Maltese education. This includes an examination of the various reforms and initiatives implemented over the years and how these have been perceived and experienced.

Section 5.4 focuses on primary schooling, analysing factors contributing to effective teaching and learning in primary education. This section includes evaluating assessment methods, curricular preferences, and the overall teaching environment as perceived by the respondents.

Section 5.5 investigates the LOF, a recent reform in the Maltese education system. This section presents detailed findings on the implementation and impact of the LOF, including the changes it has brought to teaching practices, assessment methods, and student learning outcomes. The effectiveness of training related to the LOF and the overall reception of this reform by educational professionals are also discussed.

Section 5.6 addresses the way forward for Malta's educational system. This section gathers suggestions and recommendations from the respondents regarding future reforms and improvements needed to enhance the educational framework in Malta.

5.1.3 Questionnaire analysis presentation

The questionnaire yielded 426 responses including members of the SLT (HoSs and aHoSs), Curriculum Leaders (EOs and HoDs), and teachers (classroom teachers, support teachers, and peripatetic teachers). However, 18 responses were deemed invalid and subsequently omitted, as these were from Kindergarten Educators and LSEs, who were not the target participants for this study. This adjustment leaves a total of 408 valid responses for analysis.

The response rate for teachers could be calculated with reasonable accuracy, given that NSO (2023) data indicate that there were 2,129 primary teachers nationally in 2022. In this study, 223 teacher respondents participated, representing 10.5% of the total teaching population. By contrast, calculating the response rate for the 185 leadership respondents proved more challenging. Comprehensive data on the exact number of leadership roles, particularly within the independent and church school sectors, where additional senior leadership positions beyond the traditional government structures exist, were not available. Consequently, it was not possible to compute an exact response rate for leaders.

The analysis of the questionnaire results is presented in a systematic and structured manner. Each section is presented question by question. The questionnaire comprised close-ended and open-ended questions, enabling an MMR approach to data analysis aligned with my pragmatic approach to this study. Quantitative data are presented through statistical representations while qualitative data derived from open-ended responses, are presented in a narrative format. These qualitative data are sometimes presented individually to highlight specific viewpoints and other times collectively to identify common aspects.

5.2 Demographic data

The first section of the questionnaire sought to collect demographic data from both leaders and teachers. This section consisted of eight questions, some of which were relevant only to leaders, some only to teachers, and the majority pertinent to both groups.

Question 1 targeted both leaders and teachers, aiming to identify the type of school setting they work in: state, church, or independent school. **Table 3** summarises the school settings, including total counts and percentages. There were no 'Unknown' responses as this was a compulsory question.

School Setting	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
State School	125	67.56	136	60.99	261	63.97
Church School	47	25.41	61	27.35	108	26.47
Independent School	13	7.03	26	11.66	39	9.56
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00	408	100.00

Table 3 - School settings for leaders, teachers, and combined.

The distribution of school settings among leaders and teachers in the sample highlights notable trends. State schools constitute the majority of responses, with 67.57% of leaders and 60.99% of teachers reporting their affiliation with state institutions. This aligns with the larger proportion of state schools in Malta, where 68 out of 100 primary schools are state-run.

Leaders (25.41%) and teachers (27.35%) from church schools represent a smaller, but still important, portion of the sample. This is reflective of the broader Maltese educational framework, where church schools comprise 23 out of 100 primary schools. Independent schools account for the smallest proportion of respondents in the sample, with 7.03% of leaders and 11.66% of teachers. This corresponds to the limited number of independent schools in Malta, which totals 9 out of 100 primary schools.

Question 2 aimed to determine the current role of the respondents, presented in **Table 4**.

Role	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)
Head of Department	21	11.35	0	0
Assistant Head of School	84	45.41	0	0
Head of School	56	30.27	0	0
Education Officer	24	12.97	0	0
Classroom Teacher	0	0	151	67.72
Peripatetic Teacher	0	0	48	21.52
Support Teacher	0	0	24	10.76
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00

Table 4 - Roles of leaders and teachers.

The distribution of roles between leaders and teachers in the sample highlights distinct trends reflective of the educational hierarchy within Maltese primary schools. Among leaders, aHoSs represent the largest group (45.41%), indicating a proportion of participants in mid-level management roles within the sample.

Heads of School account for 30.27% of the leadership subsample, while EOs and HoDs constitute smaller proportions (12.97% and 11.35%, respectively). These figures provide insight into the range of leadership roles included in the study.

Among teachers, the majority are Classroom Teachers (67.72%), a finding consistent with their central role in delivering teaching and learning in schools. Peripatetic Teachers (21.52%) and Support Teachers (10.76%) represent smaller but important subgroups, reflecting the presence of specialised roles that support various educational needs, such as special education, subject-specific teaching, and supplementary services.

Questions 3 and 4 asked for the highest qualification (**Table 5**) and the discipline of the highest qualification (**Table 6**).

Qualification	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)
Bachelor's Degree	65	35.14	144	64.57
Master's Degree	100	54.04	64	28.71
PhD/Doctorate	10	5.41	5	2.24
Other	10	5.41	10	4.48
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00

Table 5 - Qualifications of leaders and teachers.

The distribution of qualifications among leaders and teachers in the sample reveals notable differences in educational attainment. A majority of leaders possess a Master's Degree (54.05%), which aligns with the advanced educational requirements typically associated with leadership roles. In comparison, the majority of teachers hold a Bachelor's Degree (64.57%), reflecting the standard qualification for teaching positions in Maltese primary schools. The percentage of leaders with a PhD/Doctorate (5.41%) is relatively low, indicating that while advanced research degrees are valued, they are not commonly held by individuals in leadership roles. Among teachers, the proportion with a PhD/Doctorate is even lower (2.24%), highlighting the rarity of such qualifications within the teaching profession. The 'Other' category accounts for 5.41% of leaders and 4.48% of teachers in the sample, likely representing certifications and diplomas that complement or enhance their professional roles.

Discipline	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Education	85	45.95	140	62.78	225	55.15
Admin or Management	30	16.21	0	0	30	7.35
STEM	20	10.81	35	15.70	55	13.48
Humanities	25	13.51	20	8.96	45	11.03

Social Sciences	15	8.11	15	6.73	30	7.35
Arts	0	0	5	2.24	5	1.23
Other	10	5.41	8	3.59	18	4.41
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00	408	100.00

Table 6 - Discipline of highest qualification.

The discipline of Education is the most common field of study, with 45.95% of leaders and 62.78% of teachers holding qualifications in this area, reflecting the standard requirements for teaching and leadership roles. Administration or Management qualifications are specific to leaders (16.22%) and absent among teachers, aligning with the administrative responsibilities of leadership positions.

STEM qualifications are represented among both leaders (10.81%) and teachers (15.70%), while Humanities are held by 13.51% of leaders and 8.97% of teachers. These figures indicate some diversity in academic backgrounds within the sample, with Education remaining the dominant discipline.

Question 5 is split into 3 parts, and all related to tenure: 5a asks for the tenure in the current role (**Table 7**), 5b asks for the current school type and tenure (**Table 8**) and tenure in current school (**Table 9**) and 5c asks for the years of experience in the Education Sector (**Table 10**).

Years of Experience	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)
Less than a year	10	5.41	15	6.73
1 to 2 years	20	10.81	30	13.45
3 to 5 years	40	21.62	80	35.87
6 to 10 years	50	27.03	50	22.42
11 to 15 years	35	18.92	25	11.21
15+ years	25	13.51	15	6.73
N/A	5	2.70	8	3.59
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00

Table 7 - Tenure in the current role of leaders and teachers.

The tenure distribution in the sample highlights patterns of stability and experience levels among leaders and teachers in Maltese primary schools. Among the leaders in the sample,

the largest group has 6 to 10 years of tenure in their current roles (27.03%), suggesting a stable and experienced leadership workforce. This is followed by leaders with 3 to 5 years of tenure (21.62%).

For teachers in the sample, the largest group reports 3 to 5 years of tenure in their current role (35.87%). This indicates that a proportion of the teacher subsample consists of individuals relatively new to their current roles. Teachers with 6 to 10 years of tenure (22.42%) represent the second largest group, contributing to a balance of recent and moderately experienced educators in the teaching subsample.

School Setting	Less than a year %	1 to 2 years %	3 to 5 years %	6 to 10 years %	11 to 15 years %	15+ years %	N/A %
State School	3.02	5.66	37.74	26.42	15.09	10.57	1.51
Church School	3.76	7.52	37.59	22.56	15.04	11.28	2.26
Independent School	2.67	6.67	40.00	26.67	13.33	9.33	1.33

Table 8 - School type and tenure.

Across all school types in the sample, the highest percentage of respondents fall into the 3 to 5 years tenure category: 37.74% for state schools, 37.59% for church schools, and 40.00% for independent schools. This consistent pattern suggests that a proportion of respondents across school types have been in their current roles for a moderate duration.

State schools and independent schools share a similar pattern, with the second-highest percentage of respondents in the 6 to 10 years tenure category (26.42% and 26.67%, respectively). Church schools also exhibit a comparable trend, with 22.56% of respondents in the 6 to 10 years category. These findings reflect a broadly stable tenure distribution among the respondents within the sample.

Years of Experience	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)
Less than a year	8	4.32	20	8.97
1 to 2 years	15	8.12	40	17.94
3 to 5 years	45	24.32	70	31.39
6 to 10 years	50	27.03	55	24.66
11 to 15 years	40	21.62	25	11.21
15+ years	22	11.89	10	4.48
N/A	5	2.70	3	1.35
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00

Table 9 - Tenure in current school.

In question 5b, the tenure distribution in the sample shows that the largest proportion of leaders have been in their current school for 6 to 10 years (27.03%), followed by 3 to 5 years (24.32%). Additionally, 21.62% of leaders report 11 to 15 years of tenure, reflecting a notable presence of experienced leaders within the sample. Among teachers, the majority report 3 to 5 years of tenure in their current school (31.39%), reflecting a moderately experienced group within the sample. Teachers with 6 to 10 years of tenure account for 24.66%, while 8.97% of teachers report less than a year in their current school, suggesting a larger proportion of more recent placements compared to leaders within the sample.

Duration	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)
Less than a year	2	1.08	5	2.24
1 to 2 years	10	5.42	15	6.73
3 to 5 years	25	13.51	30	13.45
6 to 10 years	40	21.62	50	22.42
11 to 15 years	45	24.32	60	26.91
15+ years	55	29.73	58	26.01
N/A	8	4.32	5	2.24
Total	185	100.00	223	100.00

Table 10 - Tenure in the education sector.

In question 5c, leaders with 15+ years of experience in the education sector represent the largest group in the sample (29.73%). This suggests that a proportion of the leadership subsample comprises individuals with extensive experience. Those with 11 to 15 years (24.32%) and 6 to 10 years (21.62%) of experience collectively form a majority, reflecting a mix of long-serving and moderately experienced leaders.

Among teachers, the largest groups have 11 to 15 years (26.91%) and 15+ years (26.01%) of experience, indicating that the teacher subsample includes many respondents with substantial experience in the sector. Teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience account for 22.42%, adding to the representation of an established teaching workforce. A small percentage of teachers in the sample (2.24%) report less than a year of experience in the education sector, reflecting a limited presence of early-career teachers within this sample.

In **Table 11**, I present the current year group taught by classroom teachers.

Year Group	Teachers Count
Year 1	20
Year 2	25
Year 3	30
Year 4	35
Year 5	25
Year 6	16
Total	151

Table 11 - Year group currently taught by classroom teachers.

The distribution of classroom teachers across year groups in the sample shows notable patterns. The highest number of teachers in the sample is assigned to Year 4 (35), followed by Year 3 (30), and this could be because the roll-out of the LOF started in these year groups. Year 2 and Year 5 each have 25 teachers, reflecting balanced staffing levels for these middle years. The lowest number of teachers are assigned to Year 6 (16). This may be related to the timing of the questionnaire administration in May, coinciding with the period when Year 6 teachers and students typically prepare for Benchmark assessments, which occur at the end of the month.

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Question 7 explored the school population size led by Heads of School, and I decided to link this data to their tenure for deeper analysis in **Table 12**.

Years of Tenure	Less than 500 (Count)	Less than 500 (%)	More than 500 (Count)	More than 500 (%)
Less than a year	3	10	1	3.85
1 to 2 years	4	13.33	2	7.69
3 to 5 years	8	26.67	5	19.23
6 to 10 years	6	20.00	8	30.77
11 to 15 years	5	16.67	4	15.38
15+ years	4	13.33	6	23.08
Total	30	100.00	26	100.00

Table 12 - Heads of school' tenure and school population.

For Heads of School managing smaller schools (fewer than 500 students), the most common tenure categories are 3 to 5 years (26.67%) and 6 to 10 years (20.00%). Additionally, 23.33% of Heads of smaller schools report less than 3 years of experience, suggesting that newer leaders in the sample are often assigned to smaller schools.

For Heads of School leading larger schools (more than 500 students), the highest proportions fall into the 6 to 10 years (30.77%) and 15+ years (23.08%) tenure categories. This pattern may indicate that more experienced leaders within the sample are frequently responsible for larger schools.

Question 8 was about the specific areas of responsibility for aHoSs. To gain further insights I linked the areas of responsibility to the tenure of aHoSs. This linkage, presented in **Table 13**, helps me understand how experience levels may influence the distribution of responsibilities.

Area of Responsibility	Less than 1 year (%)	1 to 2 years (%)	3 to 5 years (%)	6 to 10 years (%)	11 to 15 years (%)	15+ years (%)	Total (%)
Continuous assessment	2.38	3.57	5.95	2.38	2.38	1.19	17.86
Curriculum	7.14	5.95	11.90	5.95	3.57	1.19	35.71
Examinations	1.19	2.38	3.57	2.38	1.19	1.19	11.90
Inclusive education	1.19	2.38	4.76	2.38	2.38	1.19	14.29
Pastoral care/Behaviour	2.38	3.57	5.95	4.76	2.38	2.38	21.43
All of the above	1.19	1.19	1.19	1.19	1.19	0	5.95
Other	1.19	1.19	0	0	0	1.19	3.57
Total	16.67	19.05	32.14	18.10	12.50	8.33	100.00

Table 13 - AHoSs' tenure and areas of responsibility.

The data highlights a progression where newer aHoSs appear to engage more with responsibilities closely tied to student support, such as continuous assessment and pastoral care. As tenure increases, there is a diversification of roles, with a greater focus on curriculum and broader responsibilities like inclusive education. Experienced aHoSs, particularly those with 11 or more years in their role, are represented across areas such as the curriculum, indicating the expectation that senior staff manage more strategic responsibilities.

5.3 System-wide change

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of leaders and teachers regarding system-wide changes within the Maltese educational system. These changes, affecting the entire educational framework, can have implications for leaders and teachers. The questions in this section were designed to capture the respondents' awareness, experiences, and attitudes towards these broad reforms. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for evaluating the impact of system-wide changes and identifying areas for improvement.

Question 9 asked about the system-wide changes respondents have experienced while working in primary schools. This question aimed to gauge the extent to which leaders and teachers have encountered reforms and changes within the educational system. However, I wanted to cross-analyse this with the respondents' tenure influences their likelihood of having experienced system-wide changes (**Table 14**). This could reveal whether more experienced educators are more likely to report such changes.

Tenure	Experienced System-Wide Change (Yes)	Experienced System-Wide Change (No)	Total Count	Yes (%)	No (%)
Less than a year	15	4	19	78.95	21.05
1 to 2 years	28	8	36	77.78	22.22
3 to 5 years	60	20	80	75.00	25.00
6 to 10 years	70	20	90	77.78	22.22
11 to 15 years	45	15	60	75.00	25.00
15+ years	32	10	42	76.19	23.81
N/A	0	2	2	0	100.00
Total	250	79	329		

Table 14 - System-wide change experience and tenure.

Across all tenure groups, most respondents reported experiencing system-wide changes, with percentages ranging from 75% to nearly 79%. This indicates that system-wide changes are a pervasive experience in the Maltese educational system, affecting educators regardless of their tenure.

Question 10 asked respondents to specify which system-wide changes they have seen being introduced. This question aimed to gather specific examples of the reforms and changes educators have encountered in the Maltese educational system (**Table 15**).

System-Wide Change	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Introduction of Common Entrance Exams	40	21.62	60	26.91	100	24.51
Abolition of Common Entrance Exams	35	18.92	50	22.42	85	20.83
Introduction of College Networks	50	27.03	65	29.14	115	28.19
Abolition of Streaming	45	24.32	70	31.39	115	28.19
Introduction of Benchmark Assessment	55	29.73	80	35.87	135	33.09
Introduction of Co-Education in Secondary Schools	30	16.22	45	20.18	75	18.38
Introduction of Interactive Whiteboard	65	35.14	90	40.36	155	37.99
Introduction of Nurture Classes	25	13.51	40	17.94	65	15.93
Introduction of Ethics in Primary Schools	35	18.92	50	22.42	85	20.83
Introduction of Banding	20	10.81	35	15.70	55	13.48
Introduction of One Tablet per Child (OTPC)	50	27.03	70	31.39	120	29.41
Abolition of Half Yearly Exams	30	16.22	45	20.18	75	18.38
Introduction of Continuous Assessment	60	32.43	85	38.12	145	35.54
Introduction of My Journey in Secondary Schools	40	21.62	55	24.66	95	23.28
Other	15	8.11	20	8.97	35	8.58

Table 15 - System-wide changes introduced in Malta.

The introduction of interactive whiteboards was the most cited change, with 37.99% of respondents indicating this experience. This reflects a shift towards integrating technology into classrooms. Similarly, the OTPC initiative, noted by 29.41% of respondents, reinforces the emphasis on digital literacy. Continuous assessment, reported by 35.54% of respondents,

stands out as another change. Closely tied to the implementation of the LOF, this shift reflects a move away from traditional summative approaches towards more formative and ongoing assessment practices. Structural reforms also feature prominently, with 28.19% of respondents reporting both the introduction of college networks and the abolition of streaming.

Question 11 asked respondents to mention any additional system-wide changes in the Maltese education system that they have experienced. This open-ended question was designed to capture any reforms not listed in the previous question (**Table 16**).

System-Wide Change	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF)	35	18.92	45	20.18	80	19.61
Introduction of Digital Learning Tools	25	13.51	30	13.45	55	13.48
Changes in Assessment Methods	20	10.81	25	11.21	45	11.03
Inclusion Policies	15	8.11	20	8.97	35	8.58
Professional Development Reforms	18	9.73	22	9.87	40	9.80
Curriculum Updates	22	11.89	28	12.56	50	12.25
Parental Involvement Initiatives	10	5.41	15	6.73	25	6.13
School Infrastructure Improvements	14	7.57	18	8.07	32	7.84
Special Education Support Enhancements	12	6.49	16	7.17	28	6.86
Policy Revisions and Updates	16	8.65	19	8.52	35	8.58
Other	8	4.32	10	4.48	18	4.41

Table 16 - Additional system-wide changes experienced.

The responses show that 19.61% of respondents mentioned the LOF as an additional system-wide change they have experienced. While this indicates that the LOF has been noted by a notable proportion of respondents, it is not as widely mentioned as might be expected given its system-wide scope. This suggests that, while the LOF is recognised as a reform by some educators, it may not have been equally visible or impactful across the entire sample.

Other changes, such as the introduction of digital learning tools (13.48%), changes in assessment methods (11.03%), and curriculum updates (12.25%), were also reported. These may reflect ongoing efforts to modernise the education system, some of which could be linked to the broader implementation of the LOF.

Professional development reforms (9.80%) were noted by fewer respondents, suggesting that this area may not be perceived as a major focus of system-wide changes. Similarly, parental involvement initiatives (6.13%) were among the least mentioned, indicating a possible lack of emphasis on or recognition of such initiatives within reform processes.

Question 12 aims to understand educators' emotional and behavioural responses to system-wide changes. By analysing these reactions in 12a 'get frustrated' (**Table 17**), 12b 'adapt easily' (**Table 18**) and 12c 'get motivated' (**Table 19**), I can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities that such changes present to school leaders and teachers.

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Somewhat	65	35.71	92	42.59	157	39.45
Depends	55	30.22	51	23.61	106	26.63
Not at all	51	28.02	35	16.20	86	21.61
Very	8	4.40	26	12.04	34	8.54
Completely	3	1.65	12	5.56	15	3.77
Total	182	100.00	216	100.00	398	100.00

Table 17 - Responses to "Get Frustrated".

The data highlights a moderate degree of frustration among educators when facing system-wide changes, with "somewhat" being the most frequently selected response (39.45%). This indicates that while frustration is common, it is generally experienced at a moderate level rather than being overwhelming.

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Leaders in the sample appear slightly less likely to report frustration compared to teachers, with fewer selecting "very" or "completely" frustrated as their response. This difference could reflect the varying roles and responsibilities of leaders, such as greater involvement in decision-making processes or access to more information. However, these differences may also stem from the distinct perspectives and expectations placed on these groups within schools.

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Somewhat	58	35.37	86	44.33	144	40.22
Very	45	27.44	42	21.65	87	24.30
Depends	32	19.51	33	17.01	65	18.16
Completely	27	16.46	24	12.37	51	14.25
Not at all	2	1.22	9	4.64	11	3.07
Total	164	100.00	194	100.00	358	100.00

Table 18 - Responses to "Adapt Easily".

The data indicates that many respondents feel capable of adapting to system-wide changes, with 40.22% selecting "somewhat" and 24.30% selecting "very." These responses suggest that adaptability is a notable strength among educators in the sample. Teachers were more likely than leaders to select "somewhat" (44.33%) or "very" (21.65%), potentially reflecting their direct involvement in classroom practices. The "depends" category (18.16%) highlights that adaptability is not a uniform experience and may vary based on factors such as the nature of the change, the level of institutional support, and individual attitudes toward reform.

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Completely	24	14.81	14	7.45	38	10.86
Depends	40	24.69	51	27.13	91	26.00
Not at all	9	5.56	27	14.36	36	10.29
Somewhat	44	27.16	58	30.85	102	29.14
Very	45	27.78	38	20.21	83	23.71
Total	162	100.00	188	100.00	350	100.00

Table 19 - Responses to "Get Motivated".

The data highlights variability in respondents' motivation levels when faced with system-wide changes. The largest proportion of respondents selected "somewhat" (29.14%) or "very" (23.71%), indicating that many educators 188 of the TC version but range of responses, with a noticeable proportion reporting "not at all" motivated (14.36%).

The analysis of Section 2 aligns with the study's aim to understand educators' experiences and perceptions of system-wide changes. By identifying the specific reforms that educators have experienced and their emotional and behavioural responses, this section provides insights into the factors that influence the success of educational reforms.

5.4 Primary schooling

The third section of the questionnaire aimed to explore the factors contributing to effective teaching and learning in primary schools within the Maltese educational system. This section seeks to capture the views and priorities of leaders and teachers regarding various elements that influence educational outcomes. By understanding these perspectives, I can gain insights into the critical aspects that educators believe are essential for enhancing the quality of primary schooling. The questions in this section were designed to assess the importance of different factors, preferred assessment methods, and the perceived benefits of various curricular approaches.

Question 14 asked respondents to rank various elements contributing to good primary school teaching. This question aimed to identify the priorities of educational leaders and teachers regarding the factors they believe are most essential for effective teaching and learning. By ranking these elements, I can better understand what educators consider to be the key drivers of educational quality in primary education.

To calculate the average rank for each element, the rankings provided by the respondents were aggregated, and the mean rank was computed (**Table 20**). This approach allowed me to determine the overall importance placed on each factor by the respondents.

Element	Average Rank (Leaders)	Average Rank (Teachers)	Combined Average Rank
The curriculum	1.80	2.10	1.95
Student engagement	2.20	2.00	2.10
Teacher experience	2.50	2.30	2.40
School leadership	3.00	3.20	3.10
Parental involvement	3.50	3.60	3.55
Pre-service training	4.00	3.80	3.90
Availability of resources	4.20	4.50	4.35
National exams	5.00	5.20	5.10
High salary	5.50	5.80	5.65

Table 20 - Ranking of elements contributing to good teaching.

The ranking of elements contributing to good teaching in primary schools reveals priorities among educational leaders and teachers. Both groups place the highest importance on the curriculum (combined average rank: 1.95) and student engagement (2.10), underscoring a shared belief that these are foundational elements for educational quality. The curriculum's role in shaping teaching practices ensures relevant content, while student engagement highlights the necessity of interactive and motivating teaching methods to foster conducive learning environments.

Teacher experience is also highly ranked (combined average rank: 2.40), reflecting the perceived importance of retaining seasoned educators who bring expertise and stability to classrooms. School leadership is ranked slightly lower, with leaders assigning it a rank of 3.00 and teachers 3.20 (combined: 3.10). This slight variation may reflect teachers' broader focus on systemic factors beyond leadership and leaders' emphasis on the role's strategic influence. The lower rankings of national exams (5.10) and high salary (5.65) indicate that while these factors are recognised, they are not viewed as primary drivers of teaching quality.

Question 15 asked respondents to identify the type of assessment they believe best supports student learning in primary schools. The response options (**Table 21**) included continuous assessment, summative assessment, a combination of both, and others.

Assessment Type	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Continuous assessment	70	38.46	90	42.86	160	40.20
Summative assessment	20	10.99	15	7.14	35	8.79
Combination of continuous and summative	75	41.21	95	45.24	170	43.37
Other	17	9.34	10	4.76	27	7.64
Total	182	100.00	210	100.00	392	100.00

Table 21 - Preferred types of assessment for student learning.

The data reveals that a combination of continuous and summative assessment is the most preferred method among respondents, with 43.37% indicating support for this approach. This preference reflects an understanding of the value of integrating ongoing formative assessments with periodic summative evaluation. Continuous assessment alone is also highly regarded, with 40.20% of respondents selecting this option. Its popularity suggests that educators appreciate its capacity to provide ongoing feedback and support student learning throughout the academic process. In contrast, summative assessment alone is the least favoured option, selected by only 8.79% of respondents. This indicates a shift away from traditional high-stakes testing in favour of more diverse and supportive assessment practices.

Question 16 asked respondents, in 3 parts, to rate the benefits of different types of curricula in the primary school context; 16a) Curriculum as a Syllabus to be Transferred (**Table 22**), 16b) Curriculum as a Product (**Table 23**), and 16c) Curriculum as a Process (**Table 24**).

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Not beneficial	22	12.09	25	11.37	47	11.68
Unsure	34	18.68	45	20.45	79	19.63
Beneficial	126	69.23	150	68.18	276	68.69
Total	182	100.00	220	100.00	402	100.00

Table 22 - Perceived benefits of curriculum as a syllabus to be transferred.

Most respondents (68.69%) consider the curriculum as a syllabus to be transferred as beneficial, indicating that many educators value structured content that can be systematically delivered and assessed. However, 19.63% are unsure about its benefits, and 11.68% find it not beneficial, possibly reflecting concerns about its limitations in promoting interactive or student-centred learning.

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Not beneficial	15	8.24	22	10.00	37	9.20
Unsure	29	15.93	38	17.27	67	16.67
Beneficial	138	75.83	160	72.73	298	74.13
Total	182	100.00	220	100.00	402	100.00

Table 23 - Perceived benefits of curriculum as a product.

A majority of respondents (74.13%) find the curriculum as a product beneficial, highlighting its alignment with OBE and accountability measures. This approach is valued for its focus on measurable learning outcomes. The relatively smaller proportions of respondents who are unsure (16.67%) or find it not beneficial (9.20%) suggest that while broadly accepted, some educators may prefer approaches that allow for greater flexibility or cater to diverse learning needs.

Response	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Not beneficial	12	6.59	18	8.18	30	7.46
Unsure	25	13.74	30	13.64	55	13.68
Beneficial	145	79.67	172	78.18	317	78.86
Total	182	100.00	220	100.00	402	100.00

Table 24 - Perceived benefits of curriculum as a process.

The curriculum as a process received the strongest support, with 78.86% of respondents considering it beneficial. This approach emphasises interaction and adaptability, fostering

dynamic and student-centred learning environments. However, 13.68% of respondents are unsure about its benefits, and 7.46% find it not beneficial.

The findings indicate a preference for more interactive and outcome-based curricular models, as seen in the strong support for curricula as a process and product. Nevertheless, the continued endorsement of the curriculum as a syllabus to be transferred highlights the perceived value of structured content delivery. This balance reflects educators' recognition of the need for both foundational content and responsive, student-centred teaching methods.

5.5 The Learning Outcomes Framework

The fourth section of the questionnaire examines the perceptions and experiences of leaders and teachers regarding the LOF in the Maltese educational system, which has been labelled as revolutionary and transformational. This section focuses on respondents' views on the LOF's implementation, effectiveness, and associated challenges. As the core of the questionnaire, this section directly addresses the central research focus, capturing educators' awareness, experiences, and attitudes toward the LOF. The findings provide a ground-level perspective on how this framework is understood and enacted in practice.

Question 17 aimed to gauge the perceptions of educators regarding the specific changes brought by the LOF. Understanding how the LOF has altered various aspects of teaching and learning is crucial for evaluating its effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. This question is divided into five parts (17a to 17e) to capture detailed insights on different facets of educational practice affected by the LOF (**Table 25**).

The LOF has changed the way:				
teachers prepare their teaching	Response	Leaders (%)	Teachers (%)	Combined (%)

	Not at all	6.59	6.82	6.72
	Slightly	9.89	11.36	10.70
	Somewhat	23.08	25.00	24.13
	Very	41.21	40.91	41.04
	Completely	19.23	15.91	17.41
	Unsure	0	0	0
teachers deliver the lesson	Response	Leaders (%)	Teachers (%)	Combined (%)
	Not at all	4.40	6.82	5.72
	Slightly	9.88	9.09	9.46
	Somewhat	24.73	27.27	26.12
	Very	39.56	38.64	39.05
	Completely	21.43	18.18	19.65
	Unsure	0	0	0
teachers assess their students	Response	Leaders (%)	Teachers (%)	Combined (%)
	Not at all	8.24	8.18	8.20
	Slightly	10.99	10.00	10.45
	Somewhat	26.37	27.27	26.87
	Very	41.21	38.64	39.80
	Completely	13.19	15.91	14.68
	Unsure	0	0	0
students learn in class	Response	Leaders (%)	Teachers (%)	Combined (%)
	Not at all	6.59	9.09	7.95
	Slightly	9.89	11.37	10.70
	Somewhat	24.73	25.00	24.88
	Very	39.56	36.36	37.81
	Completely	19.23	18.18	18.66
	Unsure	0	0	0
parents are involved in their children's education	Response	Leaders (%)	Teachers (%)	Combined (%)
	Not at all	13.74	13.64	13.68

	Slightly	19.23	18.18	18.66
	Somewhat	26.37	27.27	26.87
	Very	29.67	29.55	29.60
	Completely	10.99	11.36	11.19
	Unsure	0	0	0

Table 25 - Perceived changes brought by the Learning Outcomes Framework.

17a) *Teachers prepare their teaching* - The data suggests that the LOF has brought notable changes to how teachers prepare their lessons, with 60.44% of leaders and 56.82% of teachers selecting "very" or "completely." Both groups acknowledge the additional planning required under the framework. Leaders report slightly higher levels of change, which may reflect their perspective on the broader implementation process. However, the presence of lower responses indicates that not all educators perceive the same degree of impact in this area.

17b) *Teachers deliver the lesson* - Changes in lesson delivery were reported by 60.99% of leaders and 56.82% of teachers in the "very" or "completely" categories. These responses indicate a shift in teaching practices, likely towards more student-centred methods encouraged by the LOF. However, the data also shows variability, with some educators selecting lower categories, reflecting differing levels of impact depending on individual or contextual factors.

17c) *Teachers assess their students* - The LOF appears to have influenced assessment practices, with 54.40% of leaders and 54.55% of teachers selecting "very" or "completely." This aligns with the LOF's emphasis on formative assessments and ongoing feedback. At the same time, the data suggests a portion of educators perceive less change, highlighting a varied implementation experience across respondents.

17d) *Students learn in class* - Responses indicate changes in how students engage with learning, with 58.79% of leaders and 54.54% of teachers selecting "very" or "completely." This suggests that many educators observe shifts in classroom practices and student engagement under the LOF. However, the variability in responses, particularly in lower categories, points to differing levels of change or adaptation across schools.

17e) *Parents are involved in their children's education* - Parental involvement was the area with the lowest reported impact, with 40.66% of leaders and 40.91% of teachers selecting "very" or "completely." These results suggest that the LOF's influence on parent engagement has been limited, with many respondents perceiving little to no change. This highlights an area for potential improvement in future implementations, as stronger parental involvement could support the broader goals of the framework.

Question 18 is an open-ended question designed to capture additional changes experienced by educators with the introduction of the LOF. This question allowed respondents to express any further impacts or observations that may not have been covered in the previous questions. Responses have been grouped into thematic aspects to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impacts brought by the LOF. Each aspect is accompanied by direct quotes from respondents, highlighting their roles and the types of schools they represent. **Table 26** presents the positive aspects.

Positive Aspects	Direct Quotes
Changes in curriculum delivery	"The introduction of the LOF has made the curriculum more flexible and student-centred." (Teacher, State School)
	"Learning areas are more practical and in real-life context." (HoD, Church School)
	"The focus on learning rather than teaching is important." (aHoS, Independent School)
Professional development and learning	"There has been an increase in professional development opportunities related to the LOF." (Teacher, State School)
	"Continuous planning and adaptations and learning how to write reports." (Teacher, Church School)
Student engagement and learning	"Students are more engaged in their learning as the LOF promotes active participation." (Teacher, State School)
	"Students are being given the fora to truly show their full potential as assessments do not rely on just one final exam, but it promotes learning as a journey." (HoD, Independent School)

Parental involvement	"Parents are now more involved in their children's education as the LOF encourages regular updates." (aHoS, State School)
	"Parents are more informed about the progress of their children; teachers are held more accountable; teachers are more aware of the importance of the learning intention and the learning outcome of a lesson." (Teacher, Church School)

Table 26 - Additional positive aspects of the LOF.

Table 27 presents the challenging aspects.

Challenging Aspects	Direct Quotes
Assessment practices	"The amount of assessments is never-ending and stressful for all those involved." (Teacher, State School)
	"Too many ongoing marking which I feel has increased the emphasis on marks." (Teacher, Church School)
	"Assessing continuously to write down marks is a lot of work." (HoD, Independent School)
	"More assessments. Teachers and students are experiencing more pressure." (aHoS , State School)
	"The students are not getting anything out of the LOF. Teachers are being loaded with deadlines and lots of ticking which results in more stress." (Teacher, Church School)
	"There are many LOFs to tick *[by LOFs this teacher means LOs, ergo learning outcomes].* With LOFs everything seems to have the need to be assessed so the fun in learning has disappeared as teachers have become more concerned to see that most children in their class have reached most of the LOs." (Teacher, Church School)
	"Too many forced assessments, which leads to children feeling burnt out and frustrated." (HoS, Independent School)
	"More paperwork to be filled out. More stress and frustration on all the educators." (Teacher, State School)

Increased workload and stress	"The workload for the teacher has surely increased. Lots of pressure has been put on teachers." (HoD, Church School)
	"More work on the teacher. Amount of work...sometimes useless as neither parents nor students seem to care. Much more paperwork." (aHoS, Independent School)
	"Teachers spend more time assessing than teaching the concept." (aHoS, Independent School)
Impact on teaching and learning quality	"LOFs [again, LOs] have made teaching more complicated. They are NOT written from the children's point of view, they are not realistic, they do not reflect the needs of OUR students, they are not easy to understand (not even by qualified teachers), they are not easy to assess, they do not assess what is really important." (aHoSs, Independent School)
	"The focus on the paperwork has taken away the joy of teaching." (Teacher, State School)
	"There is a wide discrepancy between one year group and another." (HoD, Church School)
	"More planning and time dedicated to assessment and less time to enjoy teaching." (Teacher, State School)
Parental and student reactions	"Parents do not have enough information re LOFs [LOs] and lack commitment in their child's learning journey." (aHoS, State School)
	"Parents still want exams to understand where their children stand." (HoD, Independent School)
	"Certain LOs are too difficult for parents to understand." (Teacher, Independent School)

Table 27 - Additional challenging aspects of the LOF.

Question 19 aims to assess the relevance and effectiveness of various CPD opportunities related to the LOF. By understanding how educators rate these opportunities (**Table 28**), I can gauge the perceived value and impact of professional development on the implementation of the LOF.

CPD Opportunity	Irrelevant (%)	Slightly Irrelevant (%)	Somewhat Relevant (%)	Very Relevant (%)	Completely Relevant (%)	Haven't Experienced (%)
Attended conferences, seminars, or information sessions	5	10	20	40	15	10
Attended CoPE sessions	7	12	18	35	20	8
Discussed with a mentor	6	8	22	30	25	9
Curriculum Time meetings	5	10	25	30	20	10
Read material online	8	12	28	25	15	12
Read Letter Circulars issued by the Ministry for Education	9	15	30	20	10	16

Table 28 - Rating of CPD opportunities related to the LOF

The data in *Table 28* reveals varied perceptions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of different CPD opportunities related to the LOF.

19a) *Attended Conferences, Seminars, or Information Sessions* - A majority of respondents (55%) rated conferences, seminars, or information sessions as very or completely relevant.

This suggests that many educators find these events beneficial for gaining insights and updates about the LOF. However, the remaining responses indicate that not all participants perceive these opportunities as equally impactful.

19b) *Attended CoPE Sessions* – CoPE sessions were similarly rated as very or completely relevant by 55% of respondents. These planning sessions appear to be valued by many for their practical relevance in supporting the LOF's implementation, although a portion rated them as somewhat or less relevant, suggesting room for improvement.

19c) *Discussed with a Mentor* - Mentorship was rated as very or completely relevant by 55% of respondents. This highlights the perceived importance of personalised guidance in professional development. However, nearly half of the respondents did not rate mentorship as highly, pointing to differing experiences or expectations in this area.

19d) *Curriculum Time Meetings* - Curriculum Time meetings were rated as very or completely relevant by 50.00% of respondents. This suggests there are mixed views on the effectiveness of these meetings.

19e) *Read Material Online* - Online materials were rated as very or completely relevant by 40.00% of respondents. This indicates that online resources may not be as highly valued as in-person sessions.

19f) *Read Letter Circulars Issued by the Ministry for Education* - Letter circulars were found to be less relevant, with only 30.00% of respondents rating them as very or completely relevant. This suggests that official communications may not be as engaging or practical as other forms of CPD.

Question 20 aims to identify the most effective learning opportunities that have helped actors understand and implement the LOF. By ranking these opportunities (**Table 29**), I can determine which methods of professional development and learning are most valued.

Learning Opportunity	Leaders Average Rank	Teachers Average Rank	Combined Average Rank
Discussed with a mentor	2.70	2.60	2.65
Attended conferences, seminars, or information sessions	2.50	2.80	2.65
Attended CoPE sessions	3.20	3.00	3.10
Curriculum Time meetings	3.10	3.40	3.25
Read material online	3.40	3.50	3.45
Read letter circulars issued by the Ministry for Education	3.70	3.80	3.75

Table 29 - Ranking of learning opportunities related to the LOF.

The learning opportunities are presented in descending order from most to least helpful based on the combined average rank.

Discussed with a mentor - Discussions with mentors received an average rank of 2.70 from leaders and 2.60 from teachers, indicating high effectiveness across both groups. The close rankings suggest that both leaders and teachers highly value personalised support and guidance.

Attended conferences, seminars, or information sessions - Conferences, seminars, or information sessions received an average rank of 2.5 from leaders and 2.8 from teachers, making them one of the most effective learning opportunities for understanding the LOF. It seems that both groups highly value these formal professional development events.

Attended CoPE sessions - CoPE sessions were ranked moderately, with an average of 3.20 from leaders and 3.00 from teachers. Teachers may find these sessions slightly more

beneficial due to their direct application to classroom practices, while leaders may view them as supplementary to other learning opportunities.

Curriculum time meetings **-** Curriculum Time meetings received average ranks of 3.10 from leaders and 3.40 from teachers, suggesting mixed perceptions of their effectiveness. While these meetings support collaborative planning and alignment with LOF objectives, their perceived impact appears to vary, particularly among teachers.

Read material online - Online materials were ranked at 3.40 by leaders and 3.50 by teachers, indicating that while these resources are used, they are not seen as the most effective learning tool.

Read letter circulars issued by the Ministry for Education - Letter circulars were ranked the lowest, with an average of 3.70 from leaders and 3.80 from teachers. Both groups appear to find these offical communications less relevant or practical.

Question 21 seeks to understand the extent of CPD received by educators regarding the LOF. This question aims to quantify the CPD exposure of educators (**Table 30**).

Training Hours	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combine d Count	Combine d (%)
Less than 10 hours	30	16.22	45	20.18	75	18.38
Between 10 and 20	80	43.24	100	44.84	180	44.12
More than 20 hours	60	32.43	70	31.36	130	31.86
No training received	15	8.11	8	3.60	23	5.64
Total	185	100.00	223	99.98	408	100.00

Table 30 - Hours of CPD received regarding the LOF.

A majority of respondents (44.12%) reported receiving between 10 and 20 hours of professional learning, suggesting that many educators have been exposed to a moderate level of professional development. While this indicates a concerted effort to provide training, it also raises questions about whether this amount is sufficient to fully support the comprehensive integration of the LOF into teaching practices.

Approximately one-third of respondents (31.86%) reported receiving more than 20 hours of CPD. This group likely represents those with greater familiarity and preparation for implementing the LOF. However, the fact that this is not the majority highlights potential inconsistencies in training access or delivery.

On the other hand, 18.38% of respondents reported receiving less than 10 hours of CPD. This limited exposure could present challenges in applying the principles and methodologies of the LOF. Furthermore, 5.64% of respondents indicated they had not received any training, which underscores a gap that could impede effective implementation.

The disparity in CPD hours also reflects differences between leaders and teachers. A higher proportion of teachers (20.18%) than leaders (16.22%) reported receiving less than 10 hours of training, while leaders and teachers reported similar proportions for the 10 to 20 hours range. These differences may reflect variations in the prioritisation of CPD for different roles.

While analysing the overall professional learning hours received by educators regarding the LOF, I became curious about whether there were any notable differences based on the type of school sector. To gain deeper insights, I delved into the data to examine the training allocation across state, church, and independent schools (**Table 31**).

CPD Hours	State Count	State (%)	Church Count	Church (%)	Independent Count	Independent (%)
Less than 10 hours	45	17.24	20	18.52	10	25.64
Between 10 and 20	115	44.16	45	41.67	20	51.28
More than 20 hours	85	32.64	35	32.41	10	25.64
No CPD received	15	5.75	8	7.41	0	0

Table 31 - Hours of CPD received regarding the LOF by sector.

In state schools, 44.16% of respondents received 10 to 20 hours of CPD, and 32.64% received more than 20 hours, though 5.75% reported no training, indicating gaps. Church schools show a similar pattern, with 41.67% receiving 10 to 20 hours and 32.41% receiving more than 20 hours. However, the slightly higher percentage (7.41%) of respondents with no training suggests inconsistencies. Independent schools exhibit greater variability, with 51.28% receiving 10 to 20 hours but only 25.64% receiving more than 20 hours. Additionally, 25.64% reported less than 10 hours of CPD. These disparities highlight the need for more equitable professional learning distribution across sectors to support effective LOF implementation.

Question 22 seeks to determine the timing of the specific training received by educators regarding the LOF (**Table 32**).

Timing of CPD	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
During school hours	110	59.46	120	53.81	230	56.37
After school hours	75	40.54	103	46.19	178	43.63
Total	185	100	223	100	408	100

Table 32 - Timing of CPD received regarding the LOF.

56.37% of respondents received CPD during school hours, while 43.63% attended after-school sessions. Daytime training appears to be more common, likely due to its convenience for educators. However, the notable percentage of after-school CPD highlights the need for flexible schedules to accommodate varying commitments.

Among leaders, 59.46% received CPD during school hours, slightly more than teachers (53.81%). This difference may reflect the structured nature of leaders' schedules, allowing easier access to daytime sessions. Conversely, 46.19% of teachers attended CPD after school hours, suggesting a greater reliance on evening or weekend options to fit around classroom responsibilities.

Question 23 provides insights into the nature of the CPD sessions (**Table 33**) and can help understand the levels of participation and engagement among educators.

Nature of CPD	Leaders Count	Leaders (%)	Teachers Count	Teachers (%)	Combined Count	Combined (%)
Mandatory	130	70.27	145	65.02	275	67.40
Voluntary	55	29.73	78	34.98	133	32.60

Table 33 - Nature of CPD received regarding the LOF.

67.40% of respondents reported attending mandatory CPD sessions, reflecting a rather strong directive to equip educators with the knowledge and skills needed to implement the LOF. Voluntary CPD was reported by 32.60%, suggesting additional opportunities for educators to seek professional development beyond required sessions. Among leaders, 70.27% indicated their CPD was mandatory, underscoring the institutional focus on preparing leaders for the LOF's implementation.

The remaining 29.73% of leaders attended voluntary sessions, demonstrating interest in supplementary learning opportunities. For teachers, 65.02% reported mandatory CPD, slightly lower than the proportion among leaders. Additionally, 34.98% of teachers participated in voluntary sessions, indicating a proactive approach among a good number of teachers to deepen their understanding of the LOF.

Question 24 of the questionnaire aimed to understand the strengths of the specific CPD received regarding the LOF (**Table 34**). This open-ended question yielded 245 responses, which have been thematically analysed to identify common aspects. Direct quotes from respondents are included to illustrate each aspect, with their roles and sectors indicated in brackets.

Aspect	Direct Quotes
Comprehensive content	"Detailed sessions." (Teacher, Church School) "Very detailed info." (Teacher, Independent School)
Practical application	"The practicality of it, being given by experienced educators." (Teacher, State School) "Very hands-on with several examples." (Teacher, State School) "They showed examples that it really works." (Teacher, Church School)
Interactive and engaging methods	"Discussion with other teachers." (Teacher, State School) "Group discussions." (Teacher, Independent School) "Teachers were given time to voice their concerns. Experiences of actual teachers in classrooms were provided." (Teacher, Church School)
Expert facilitators	"Hearing accurate information from the expert in the field, the EO." (Teacher, Church School) "I was lucky enough to follow the initial training, which culminated in a visit abroad. It was very intense, demanding, and challenging, and it was led by very knowledgeable people. We also learned a lot together as a group of educators." (Teacher, State School) "To get knowledgeable about the LOF." (Teacher, Independent School)
Collaborative learning environment	"We each have subjects that we coordinate so I specifically focused on Maths and Science. But then we, all teachers from the year group, had sessions where we explained to one another the meetings and the new way of doing things. We also then had some EOs visiting the school during the first year." (Teacher, Church School) "Small group workshops." (Teacher, Independent School) "Sharing of good practice with other educators." (Teacher, State School)
Clear objectives and outcomes	"Clear explanations." (Teacher, Church School) "Explained clearly what is expected of us." (Teacher, State School) "The LOF was clearly explained, for most primary school subjects." (Teacher, Independent School)

Resource availability	"They guided us on how to implement the LOFs in the classroom, even some of them they've shared resources." (Teacher, State School)
	"It provided a reasonable overview." (Teacher, Independent School)
Support and follow-up	"Some EOs shared some ideas for assessment. We also had the opportunity to ask questions." (Teacher, Church School)
	"Asking questions." (Teacher, State School)

Table 34 - Strengths of the LOF CPD.

Question 25 of the questionnaire aimed to identify the weaknesses of the specific CPD received regarding the LOF (**Table 35**). This open-ended question yielded numerous responses, which have been thematically analysed to identify common weaknesses and insights. Direct quotes from respondents are included to illustrate each aspect, with their roles and sectors indicated in brackets.

Aspect	Direct Quotes
Insufficient depth	"It should be more well planned and explanation should not be general but more in-depth." (Teacher, State School)
Lack of practical examples	"Lacking material had to ask for support more than once." (Teacher, State School)
	"Not practical." (Teacher, Church School)
	"Some speakers lacked practical examples." (Teacher, Independent School)
Limited resources	"2 hrs training only and you have to travel for 30 mins each way... need more time to be hands-on and collaborate together to share ideas and resources." (Teacher, Church School)
	"We were the first ones who were trained, so for the trainees, this was all too new too. They were uncertain about lots of things which we asked about. The biggest weakness was that we had no resources and we had to create all these and that took lots of time - time to plan and discuss with the other teachers in my group and to reach a consensus. But finally I can say that we managed to create lots of good things and were happy with the result. What we did not like is the fact that every year, some things change and we have to go through everything once again." (Teacher, State School)

Time constraints	"Too short." (Teacher, State School)
	"Time for CPD was quite short. More time should be dedicated to teacher training when system-wide changes in the education sector are being adopted." (Teacher, Church School)
	"Too much information in a short period of time." (Teacher, Independent School)
General discontent	"Our frustration regarding the workload was ignored. As always. There is too little time between finishing up records of the LOs and assessments and actually working with the children. Our job requires another person in class doing this." (Teacher, State School)
	"Speakers were geared to minimise any negative comments as if they were being paid to show how much this system works. As if they were paid to do some kind of publicity and focused only on the traditionally referred to as important subjects i.e. Languages and Mathematics." (Teacher, Church School)

Table 35 - Weaknesses of the LOF CPD.

Several key weaknesses of the LOF CPD are being reported, highlighting areas that require improvement to enhance the effectiveness of future professional learning sessions. Moreover, some respondents seem to be questioning the commitment and competencies of those in charge.

Question 26 of the questionnaire aimed to gather suggestions for improving the specific CPD received regarding the LOF (**Table 36**). This open-ended question yielded numerous responses, which have been thematically analysed to identify common suggestions for improvement. Direct quotes from respondents are included to illustrate each aspect, with their roles and sectors indicated in brackets.

Aspect	Direct Quotes
More practical examples	"More practical examples." (Teacher, State School)
	"Give practical examples of what can be done in class. How to reach all abilities. How not to discourage students who are not reaching the goals." (Teacher, Church School)
	"More hands-on activities and more variations of continuous assessment." (Teacher, State School)

Better organisation	"Provide information-organised packs for each subject." (Teacher, Independent School)
Increased follow-up support	"Ongoing support-whole school approach." (Teacher, Church School) "More training for teachers...training has to be continuous, not sporadic." (Teacher, Independent School)
More resources	"More engagement on devising specific resources to address issues of levelled teaching." (Teacher, State School) "Nowadays trainees are much more experienced like we all are. We know which things worked and which did not work. We changed or adjusted the things which we could change. However, there are still things that do not work in the LOF, and nobody wants to hear the teachers. If I were to give the CPD I would give the teachers lots of resources and schemes of work. I am sure that the majority of teachers will adopt and adapt. It will make the change much more smooth and less frustrating. For us, it was a race against time. We had to have everything prepared by September because we are all working mothers and the bulk of our work is done during summer." (Teacher, Church School)
Extended CPD duration	"More sessions and more time to prepare prior to implementation." (Teacher, State School) "Dedicate more time to CPD. Train teachers more on how to plan for this." (Teacher, Church School) "The training was too fast, and we had no time to understand in detail and ask enough questions. For Maths, for instance, it was really made easy even the colour coding but when it came to Malti we needed much more time. In the case of English, we had started school before we had the COPE session so you can imagine how lost one would feel. It was held in October and that same evening I had parent's evening trying to explain to the parents what is going to happen and what these LOFs [*i.e. LOs*] are." (Teacher, Independent School)
Addressing educator concerns	"Listen to teachers' concerns." (Teacher, State School) "Start by simply asking for questions, input, difficulties, and feedback from teachers. Read/listen to what they have to say, and base the LOs on what they say. Then once these have been established, provide concrete training and support." (Teacher, Church School) "If changes were made, give me suggestions on how I can address the LO rather than dictating what needs to be done with no help. Different EOs should have

	been given CPD on what the LOs were about as it was very confusing when you are given contradicting information." (Teacher, Independent School)
Flexible scheduling	"Provide adequate time for CPD. Ongoing rather than one-off. Better timing e.g., during the second term of the scholastic year in preparation for implementation of LOs in the following scholastic year." (Teacher, State School)

Table 36 - Suggestions for improving LOF CPD.

The analysis of responses to Question 26 reveals several key suggestions for improving the LOF CPD, highlighting areas that need attention to enhance the effectiveness of future professional learning sessions.

More practical examples - A common suggestion was the inclusion of more practical examples. Respondents felt that real-life scenarios and hands-on activities would help them better understand how to implement the LOF in their classrooms. For instance, one respondent stated, "Give practical examples of what can be done in class. How to reach all abilities. How not to discourage students who are not reaching the goals." (Teacher, Church School).

Better organisation - Improving the organisation of the training was another suggestion. Respondents wanted the CPD materials to be better structured and organised for easier comprehension. As one respondent mentioned, "Provide information-organised packs for each subject." (Teacher, Independent School).

Increased follow-up support - There was a strong demand for ongoing support and follow-up sessions. Respondents emphasised the need for continuous professional learning and support rather than sporadic sessions. One respondent highlighted the need for "Ongoing support-whole school approach." (Teacher, Church School).

More Resources - Respondents also called for more resources and materials to be provided during the CPD. They felt that having access to ample resources would make the implementation process smoother and less frustrating. One respondent noted, "We know which things worked and which did not work. If I were to give the training, I would give the teachers lots of resources and schemes of work." (Teacher, Church School).

Extended CPD duration - The need for longer and more comprehensive CPD sessions was a recurring aspect. Respondents felt that the current training sessions were too short and rushed, leaving them with insufficient time to grasp the material fully. One respondent explained, "The training was too fast, we had no time to understand in detail and ask enough questions." (Teacher, Independent School).

Addressing educator concerns - Respondents emphasised the importance of addressing their concerns and incorporating their feedback into the CPD. They felt that their input was often overlooked, leading to a disconnect between the CPD content and their practical needs. One respondent suggested, "Start by simply asking for questions, input, difficulties, and feedback from teachers." (Teacher, Church School).

Flexible scheduling - There was a call for more flexible scheduling of training sessions to accommodate educators' busy schedules. Respondents suggested that CPD should be ongoing rather than one-off events and should be scheduled at convenient times. One respondent recommended, "Provide adequate time for CPD. Ongoing rather than one-off. Better timing e.g., during the second term of the scholastic year." (Teacher, State School).

The findings related to professional development, as reflected in Tables 30, 32, 35 and 36, suggest a complex reality where both mandatory and voluntary learning opportunities exist. However, the reliance on the term 'training' risks reducing professional growth to a purely instrumental exercise. Literature on CPD and CPL (Avalos, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) emphasises that transformative professional development must be job-embedded, relational, and contextually meaningful. The responses illustrate that when professional learning is rooted within the everyday realities of schools, rather than confined to withdrawal-type courses, educators are better able to internalise reforms and adapt them to their specific school contexts. The data from Table 36, in particular, points toward a latent desire for schools to become learning communities, where professional growth is collaborative and sustained, rather than episodic.

In addressing Question 23 (Table 33), it is important to recognise that respondents could (and indeed often did), engage in both mandatory and voluntary professional learning activities.

This overlap reflects a dual dynamic: while compliance-based training remains prevalent, there is also evidence of growing teacher agency and voluntary engagement in learning initiatives. A critical challenge for reform, therefore, lies in shifting from compliance-driven models toward more autonomous, teacher-led professional learning cultures.

Question 27 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF assists teachers in their day-to-day teaching. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 11**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Figure 11 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF assists teachers in their day-to-day teaching.

Among teachers, 18 respondents (10.2%) strongly disagreed, and 25 respondents (14.2%) disagreed, with a combined 24.4% expressing dissatisfaction with the LOF's effectiveness in their daily teaching activities. Similarly, 4 leaders (2.4%) strongly disagreed, and 13 leaders (7.9%) disagreed, making up 10.3% of leaders who shared similar reservations. While these figures indicate that dissatisfaction is present among both groups, it is more pronounced among teachers, who may feel the direct challenges of implementing the framework.

A proportion of respondents selected "neutral," with 70 teachers (39.8%) and 70 leaders (42.4%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This high prevalence of neutrality suggests that many respondents are unsure about the LOF's practical impact, possibly reflecting a lack of

clarity or mixed experiences with its application. For teachers, this could highlight variability in how the LOF aligns with their classroom contexts, while for leaders, it may reflect uncertainties about its effectiveness in achieving system-wide goals.

Agreement was reported by 50 teachers (28.4%) and 55 leaders (33.3%), indicating that a proportion of respondents found the LOF helpful in supporting their teaching activities. Strong agreement was less common, with 13 teachers (7.4%) and 23 leaders (13.9%) strongly agreeing that the LOF assists in day-to-day teaching. Combined agreement levels (agree and strongly agree) were higher among leaders (47.2%) than teachers (35.8%), reflecting a more positive perception among those in leadership roles. However, these figures should not be over-interpreted as strong endorsement, particularly given the proportion of neutral and dissenting responses.

Question 28 aimed to gauge respondents perceptions of how the LOF assists them in their assessments. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 12**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Figure 12 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF assists teachers in their assessments.

Among teachers, 7 respondents (4.0%) strongly disagreed and 18 respondents (10.2%) disagreed, totalling 15.2% who expressed dissatisfaction with the LOF's role in assessments. Similarly, among leaders, 2 respondents (1.1%) strongly disagreed and 12 respondents (6.7%) disagreed, making up 7.8% of leaders who were dissatisfied. These figures indicate a higher level of dissatisfaction among teachers compared to leaders, possibly reflecting different levels of engagement or challenges encountered in assessment implementation.

The "neutral" category was selected by a considerable portion of respondents, with 58 teachers (33.0%) and 40 leaders (22.2%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This substantial neutrality might suggest that while respondents acknowledge some relevance of the LOF to assessment practices, its impact is either not fully evident or perceived as inconsistent across different contexts.

A portion of respondents expressed agreement with the LOF's contribution to assessments. Among teachers, 62 respondents (35.2%) agreed, and 31 respondents (17.6%) strongly agreed, combining to 52.8%. Leaders showed a higher combined agreement level, with 80 respondents (44.4%) agreeing and 46 respondents (25.6%) strongly agreeing, totalling 70.0%. This stronger endorsement among leaders could be attributed to their broader perspective on the strategic implementation of assessments or greater involvement in shaping assessment processes aligned with the LOF.

The overall findings reveal a divergence in perceptions between teachers and leaders, with leaders demonstrating a more positive outlook. However, the notable neutrality and disagreement highlight areas where the LOF might not fully meet educators' needs in supporting assessment practices.

Question 29 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps school leaders understand the day-to-day teaching happening in their schools. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 13**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The LOF helps school leaders to understand the day-to-day teaching happening in their school

Figure 13 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps school leaders to understand the day-to-day teaching happening in their school.

Among teachers, 15 respondents (8.5%) strongly disagreed, and 30 respondents (17.0%) disagreed, indicating that 25.5% of teachers view the LOF as not effectively supporting leaders in this area. Similarly, among leaders, 5 respondents (2.9%) strongly disagreed, and 18 respondents (10.4%) disagreed, resulting in a total of 13.3% expressing dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that teachers are more critical than leaders in their evaluation of the LOF's role in this regard. A notable proportion of respondents from both groups provided neutral responses, with 65 teachers (36.9%) and 50 leaders (28.9%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This neutrality may point to mixed experiences or ambiguity about the LOF's influence in bridging leadership with classroom practices. Agreement with the statement is more prominent among leaders than teachers. Among leaders, 70 respondents (40.5%) agreed, and 30 respondents (17.3%) strongly agreed, totalling 57.8% who perceive the LOF as effective in helping them understand day-to-day teaching. Teachers, on the other hand, had 50 respondents (28.4%) agreeing and 16 respondents (9.1%) strongly agreeing, totalling 37.5% who endorsed this view. The differences between leaders and teachers may reflect distinct roles and levels of engagement with the LOF. Leaders, who are more involved in systemic oversight, may experience the framework as a useful tool for aligning school-wide objectives with teaching practices. Conversely, teachers, who are directly engaged in the classroom,

may not perceive the LOF as offering the same level of practical support for leadership insight.

Question 30 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps school leaders understand the assessment happening in their schools. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 14**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Figure 14 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps school leaders to understand the assessment happening in their school.

Among teachers, 10 respondents (5.7%) strongly disagreed, and 25 respondents (14.2%) disagreed, resulting in 19.9% expressing a negative perception. Among leaders, 5 respondents (2.7%) strongly disagreed, and 20 respondents (10.8%) disagreed, totalling 13.5% of leaders who held a similar negative view. This disparity suggests that teachers are slightly more critical than leaders regarding the LOF's ability to facilitate understanding of assessments.

Neutral responses were common among both groups, with 70 teachers (39.8%) and 50 leaders (27.0%) choosing this option. This neutrality indicates that a proportion of educators may be uncertain about the LOF's effectiveness in this domain or perceive its impact as moderate without being strongly positive or negative.

Positive perceptions were more prevalent among leaders, with 75 respondents (40.5%) agreeing and 35 respondents (18.9%) strongly agreeing, amounting to 59.4% of leaders who viewed the LOF as beneficial in enhancing their understanding of assessments. Among teachers, 55 respondents (31.3%) agreed, and 16 respondents (9.1%) strongly agreed, totalling 40.4% who expressed a positive view. This notable difference in positive responses between the two groups highlights a divergence in how the LOF's impact on assessment practices is experienced or perceived.

These findings suggest that while the LOF is regarded as supportive in improving assessment practices by a majority of leaders, its reception among teachers is more divided. The higher proportion of neutral and critical responses from teachers indicates potential challenges in how the LOF is implemented or communicated in relation to assessments.

Question 31 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps students understand what they are learning. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 15**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
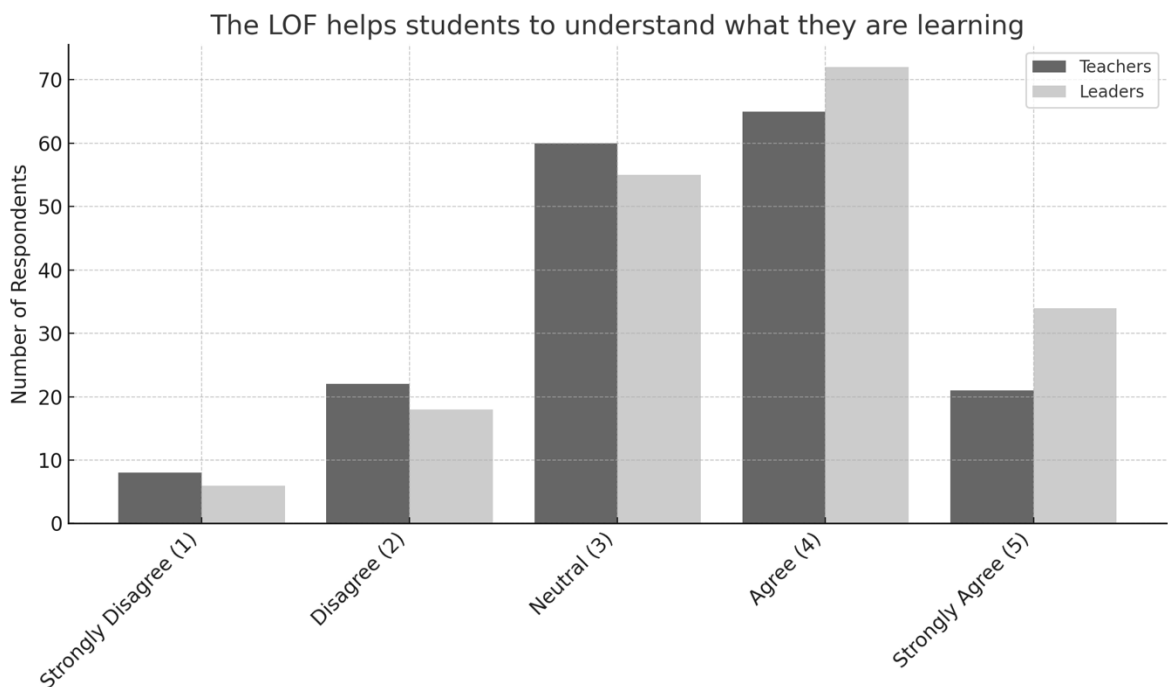
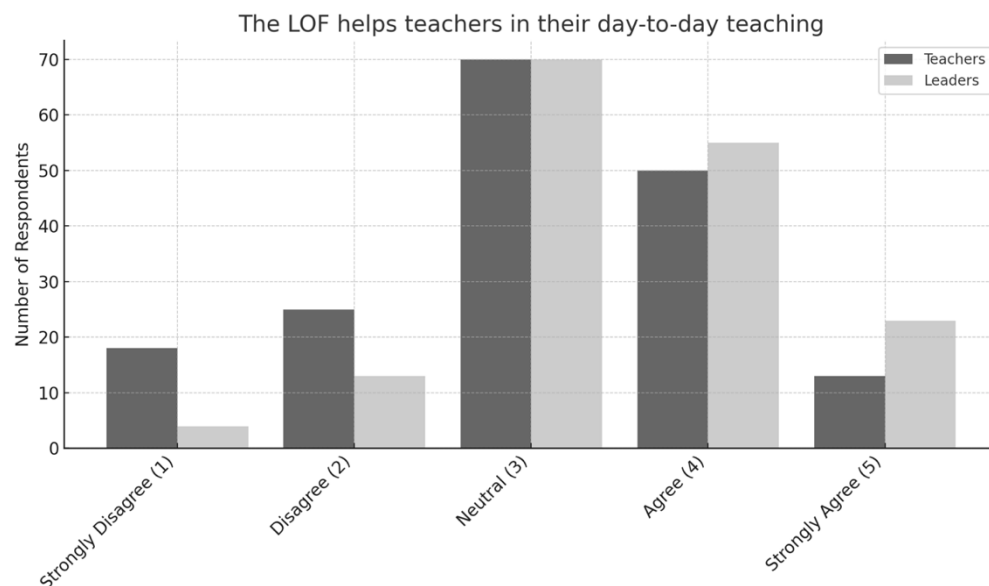*Figure 15 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps students to understand what they are learning.*

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Among teachers, 8 respondents (4.5%) strongly disagreed, and 22 respondents (12.5%) disagreed, resulting in 17% expressing negative perceptions. For leaders, 6 respondents (3.2%) strongly disagreed, and 18 respondents (9.7%) disagreed, totaling 12.9% with negative views. The slightly higher proportion of disagreement among teachers could reflect challenges they encounter in translating the LOF into clear student outcomes.

Neutral responses were relatively common, with 60 teachers (34.1%) and 55 leaders (29.7%) selecting this option. This suggests that a portion of respondents may perceive the LOF's impact on students' understanding as moderate or context-dependent.

Positive responses, encompassing "agree" and "strongly agree," were dominant among both groups but more pronounced among leaders. For teachers, 65 respondents (36.9%) agreed, and 21 respondents (11.9%) strongly agreed, making up 48.8% with positive views. Among leaders, 72 respondents (38.9%) agreed, and 34 respondents (18.4%) strongly agreed, resulting in 57.3% with positive perceptions. The higher level of agreement among leaders may reflect their strategic perspective on how the LOF aligns with broader educational goals.

These findings highlight a divergence in how teachers and leaders experience the LOF's utility in helping students understand their learning. While leaders generally view the LOF more positively, teachers' higher neutral and negative responses suggest that challenges persist in its practical application.

Question 32 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps students understand how they are learning. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 16**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
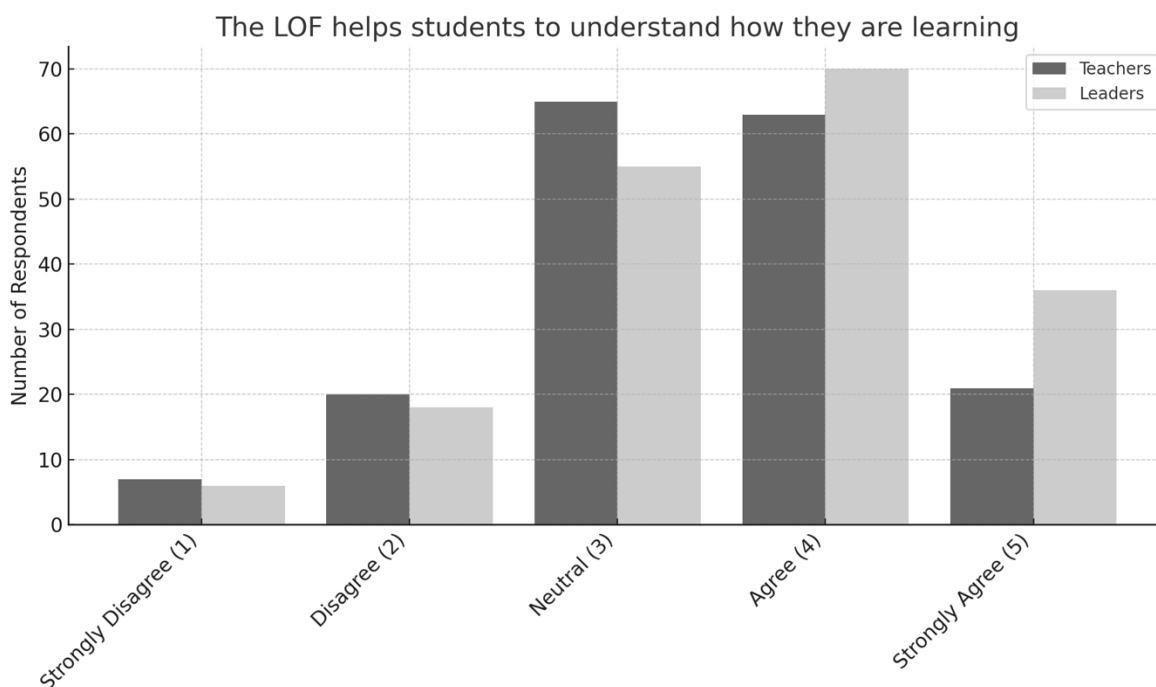
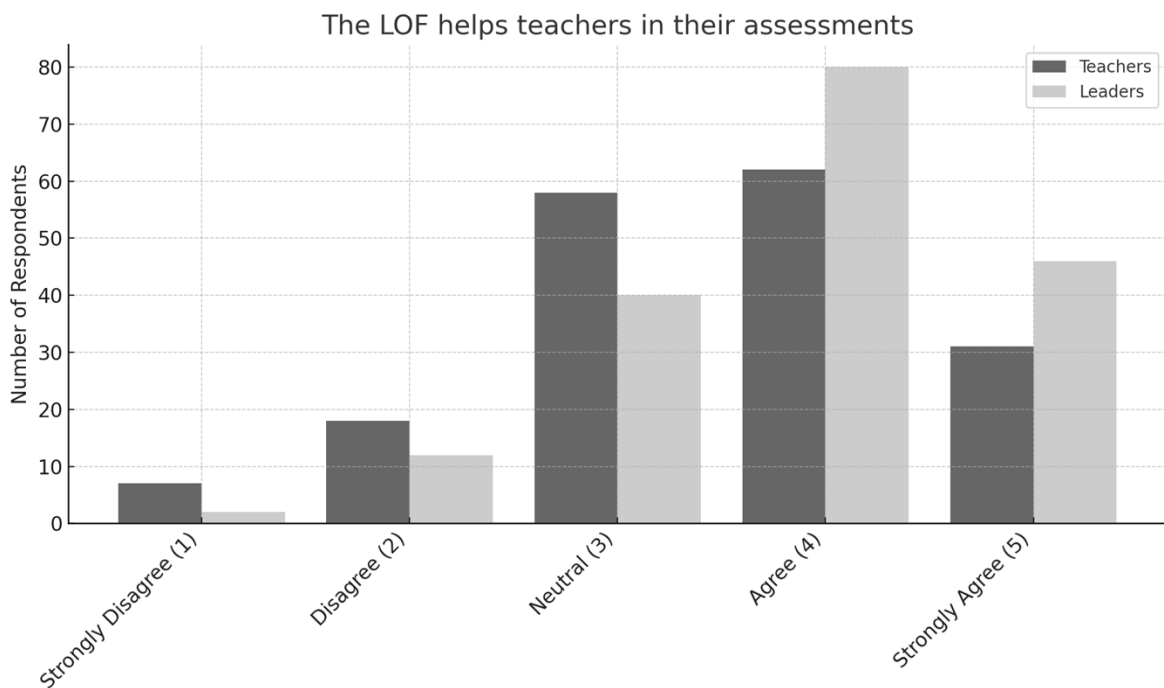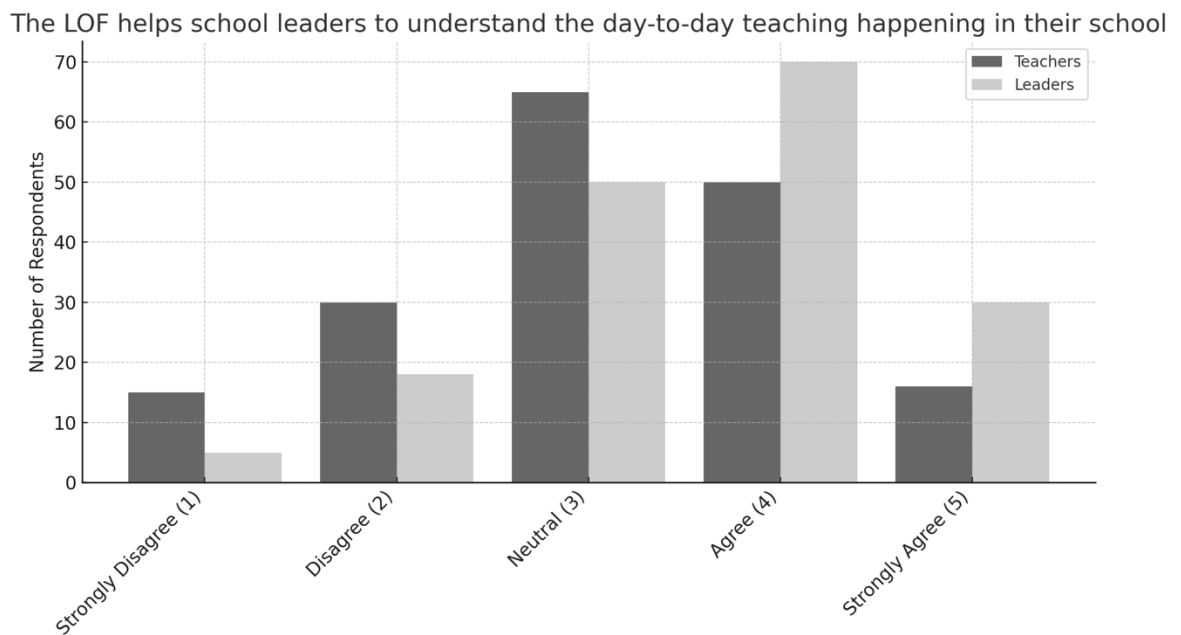*Figure 16 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps students to understand how they are learning.*

Among teachers, 7 respondents (4%) strongly disagreed, and 20 respondents (11.4%) disagreed, resulting in a total of 15.4% expressing disagreement. For leaders, 6 respondents (3.2%) strongly disagreed, and 18 respondents (9.7%) disagreed, totalling 12.9% negative responses. The slightly higher proportion of disagreement among teachers may highlight difficulties in conveying learning processes effectively to students. Neutral responses were relatively high in both groups, with 65 teachers (36.9%) and 55 leaders (29.7%) selecting this option. This suggests that a number of respondents perceive the LOF's impact on helping students understand their learning as moderate or conditional, potentially influenced by contextual factors such as resource availability or CPD.

Positive responses, comprising "agree" and "strongly agree," accounted for 84 teachers (47.7%) and 106 leaders (57.3%). Specifically, 63 teachers (35.8%) and 70 leaders (37.8%) agreed, while 21 teachers (11.9%) and 36 leaders (19.5%) strongly agreed. The higher levels of agreement among leaders may reflect their strategic understanding of the LOF's goals and their role in overseeing its implementation, compared to the teachers' direct, day-to-day interactions with students. Overall, while leaders are more optimistic about the LOF's ability to help students understand their learning processes, the mixed responses from teachers indicate potential barriers or areas for improvement.

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Question 33 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps parents understand what their children are learning. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 17**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

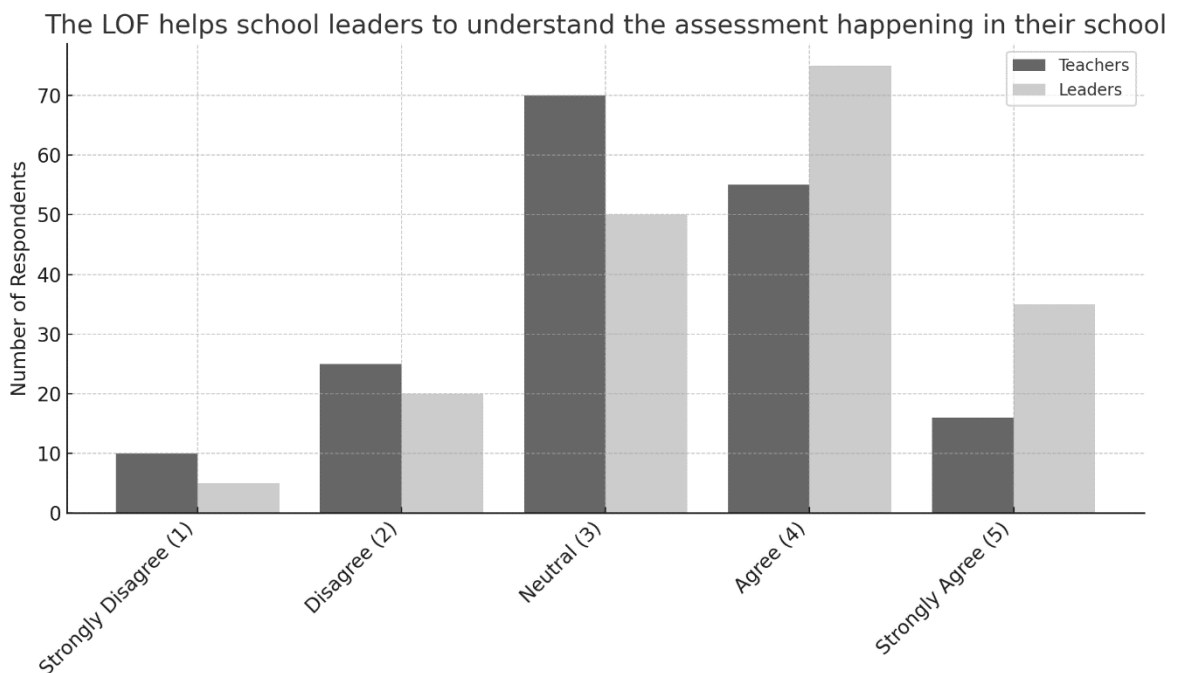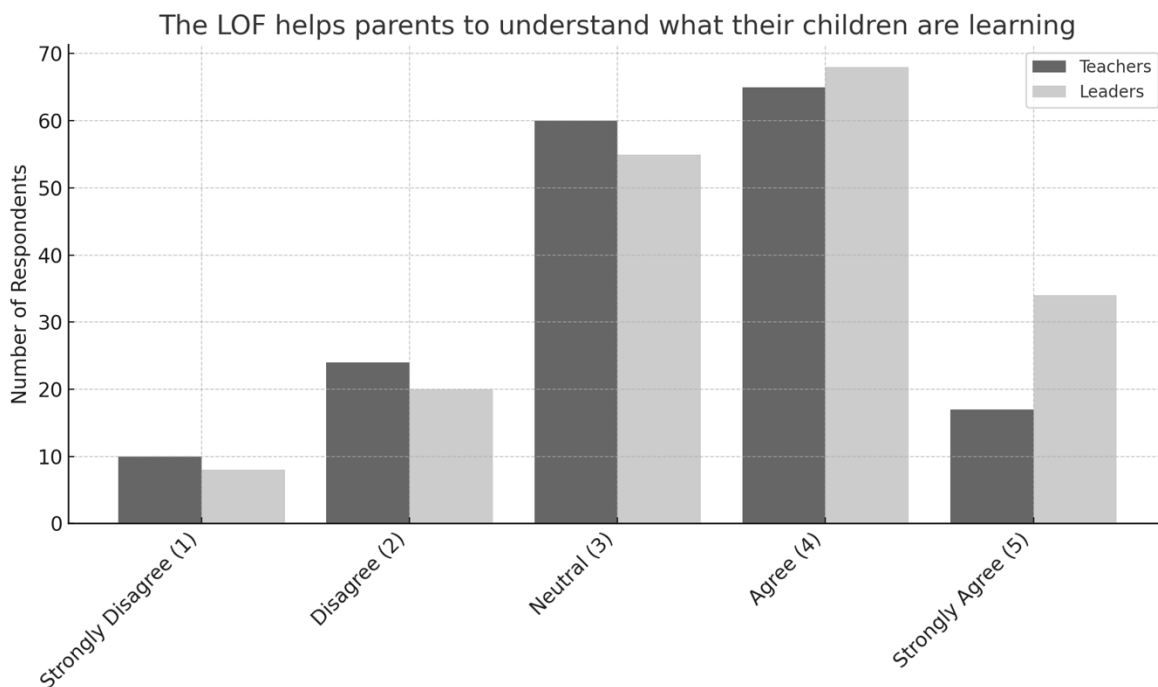*Figure 17 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps parents to understand what their children are learning.*

Among teachers, 10 respondents (5.7%) strongly disagreed, and 24 respondents (13.6%) disagreed, resulting in a total of 19.3% expressing disagreement. Among leaders, 8 respondents (4.3%) strongly disagreed, and 20 respondents (10.8%) disagreed, totalling 15.1% negative responses. These figures suggest that a notable minority of respondents believe that the LOF has limited success in helping parents understand their children's learning.

Neutral responses were relatively consistent across groups, with 60 teachers (34.1%) and 55 leaders (29.7%) selecting this option. This indicates that a proportion of respondents are uncertain about the LOF's effectiveness in engaging parents, potentially due to variability in parental involvement or communication practices between schools.

Positive responses, comprising "agree" and "strongly agree," accounted for 82 teachers (46.6%) and 102 leaders (55.1%). Specifically, 65 teachers (36.9%) and 68 leaders (36.8%) agreed, while 17 teachers (9.7%) and 34 leaders (18.4%) strongly agreed. Leaders displayed

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a higher level of agreement, which may stem from their broader perspective on school-wide communication strategies compared to teachers' direct classroom experiences. Overall, these findings suggest that while a majority of respondents perceive the LOF as having some positive impact on parental understanding, there remain gaps in its perceived effectiveness.

Question 34 aimed to gauge respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps parents interpret their children's assessment better. Respondents rated their agreement (**Figure 18**) on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
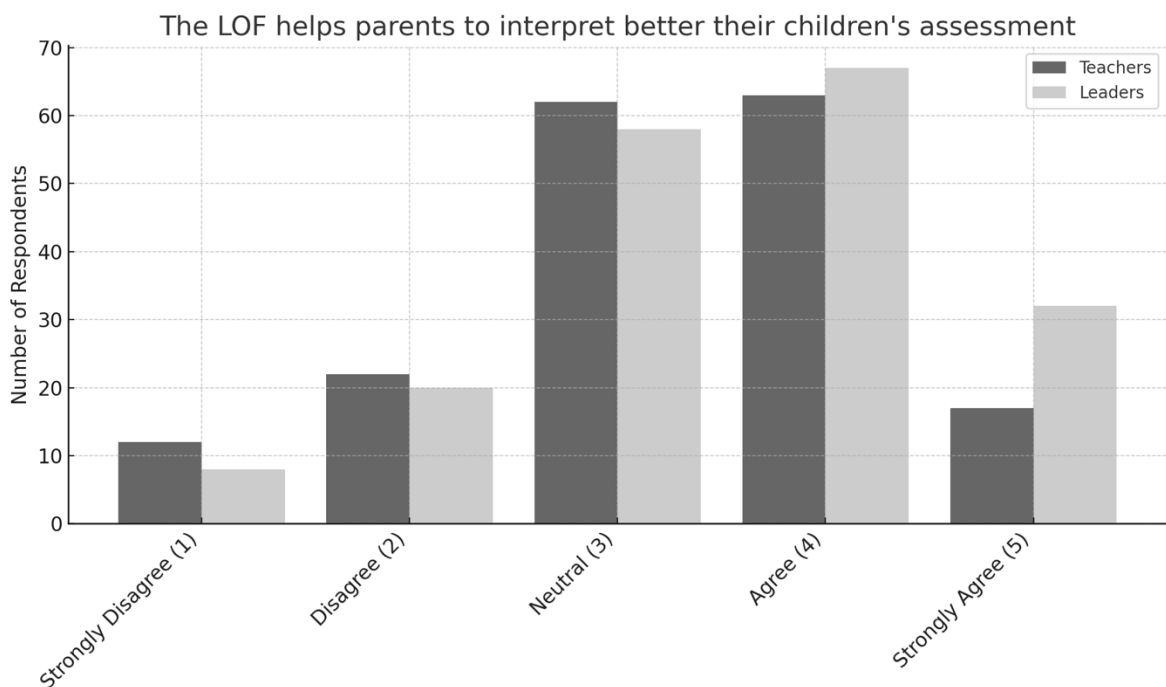
Figure 18 - Respondents' perceptions of how the LOF helps parents to interpret better their children's assessment.

Among teachers, 12 respondents (6.8%) strongly disagreed, and 22 respondents (12.5%) disagreed, resulting in 19.3% expressing negative views. Similarly, among leaders, 8 respondents (4.3%) strongly disagreed, and 20 respondents (10.8%) disagreed, leading to a slightly lower combined percentage of 15.1% disagreement. These figures suggest a minority of respondents from both groups perceive that the LOF has limited effectiveness in helping parents understand assessments.

Neutral responses accounted for 62 teachers (35.2%) and 58 leaders (31.4%), suggesting that a proportion of respondents are uncertain about the LOF's impact in this area. This neutrality

could reflect a lack of clarity or variability in how assessment results are communicated to parents across different schools.

Positive responses, combining "agree" and "strongly agree," were reported by 80 teachers (45.5%) and 99 leaders (53.5%). Specifically, 63 teachers (35.8%) and 67 leaders (36.2%) agreed, while 17 teachers (9.7%) and 32 leaders (17.3%) strongly agreed. Leaders demonstrated a slightly stronger endorsement of the LOF's role in facilitating parents' understanding of assessments compared to teachers.

While there is a reasonable level of agreement on the LOF's potential to enhance parental understanding of assessments, the notable proportion of neutral and negative responses highlights areas for improvement.

Question 35 is a pivotal component of the questionnaire, designed to capture the overall perceptions of educators regarding the impact and success of the LOF across various dimensions. This question is divided into four parts, each addressing a specific aspect of the LOF's influence:

- 35a. The LOF has made a positive difference to primary schools in Malta.
- 35b. The LOF has made a positive difference to the school where the respondent works.
- 35c. The LOF is a successfully implemented system-wide curriculum change in primary schools in Malta.
- 35d. The LOF is a successful system-wide curriculum change in all schools in Malta.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from "Not at all" to "Completely." The responses from both teachers and leaders were analysed to provide an understanding of the perceived effectiveness and implementation success of the LOF. The following sections present an analysis of the responses to each part of question 35 (**Figures 19 to 22**), comparing perspectives between teachers and leaders to draw insights.
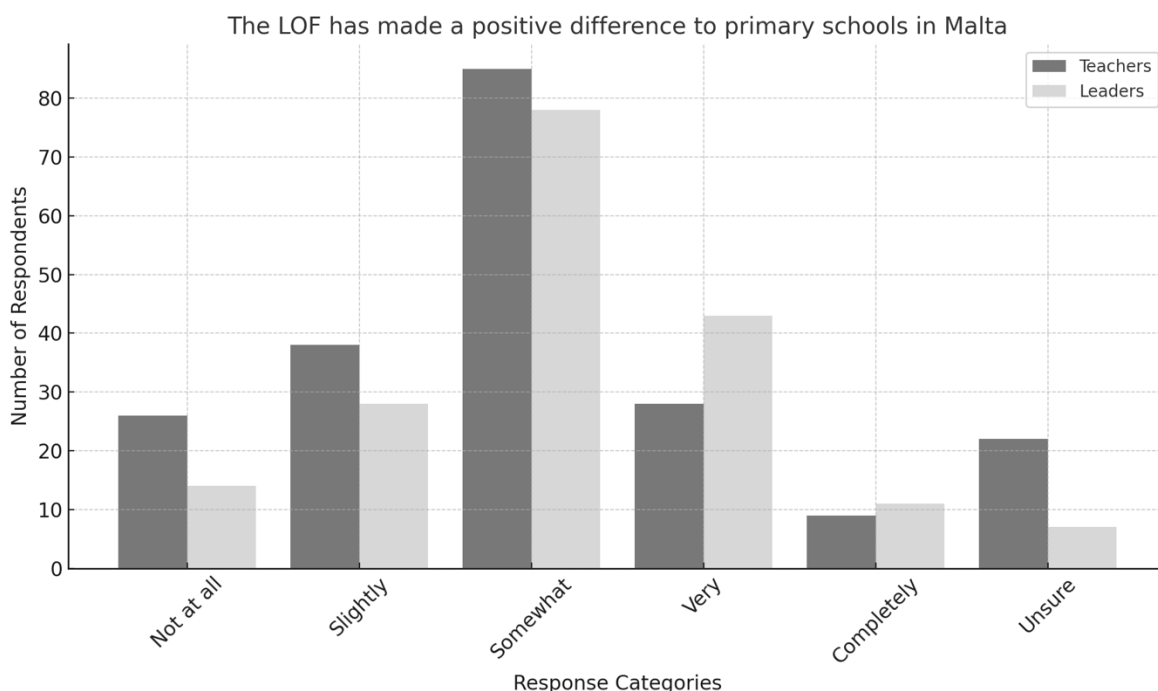
Figure 19 - Respondents' perceptions if the LOF has made a positive difference in primary schools in Malta.

Among teachers, the most frequent response was "Somewhat," with 85 out of 208 respondents (40.9%) selecting this option. This indicates a moderate endorsement of the LOF's positive influence. However, a proportion expressed lower levels of agreement: 26 respondents (12.5%) selected "Not at all," and 38 respondents (18.3%) selected "Slightly." Together, these responses reflect a degree of skepticism or limited perceived impact among nearly one-third (30.8%) of teachers. Positive perceptions were further indicated by 28 teachers (13.5%) who selected "Very" and only 9 teachers (4.3%) who selected "Completely," indicating a smaller subset of strong advocates for the LOF. The remaining 22 teachers (10.6%) were "Unsure," reflecting potential uncertainty or lack of clear outcomes linked to the LOF.

For leaders, the distribution follows a similar trend, with "Somewhat" being the most common response, selected by 78 out of 181 respondents (43.1%). Leaders were slightly more inclined toward positive evaluations compared to teachers, with 43 leaders (23.8%) selecting "Very" and 11 leaders (6.1%) selecting "Completely." Combined, these positive responses indicate that just under one-third of leaders (29.9%) perceive the LOF as having a strong positive impact. Conversely, 14 leaders (7.7%) selected "Not at all," and 28 leaders (15.5%) selected "Slightly," highlighting some reservations. The "Unsure" category was

selected by 7 leaders (3.9%), a much smaller percentage than among teachers, suggesting that leaders may feel more decisive about the LOF's influence.

Overall, the data reveals that while a plurality of respondents across both groups acknowledge the LOF's contributions at least "Somewhat," a proportion of both teachers (30.8%) and leaders (23.2%) hold reservations about its impact, with notable differences in the degree of positivity expressed. Leaders appear slightly more positive overall compared to teachers, possibly reflecting their closer involvement in policy implementation. However, the relatively low number of "Completely" responses in both groups (4.3% of teachers and 6.1% of leaders) suggests that the LOF's perceived success is tempered by ongoing challenges or unmet expectations.
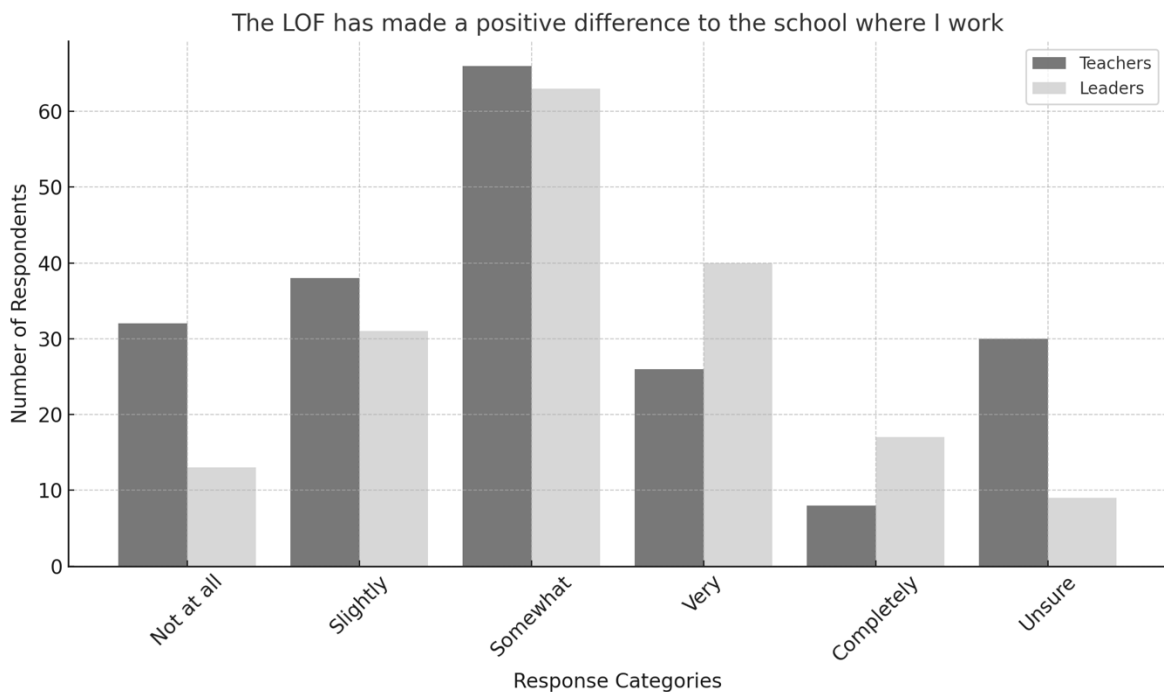
Figure 20 - Respondents' perceptions if the LOF has made a positive difference to the school where they work.

For teachers, the most frequently chosen response was "Somewhat," with 66 out of 200 respondents (33%) indicating this level of agreement. This suggests that while many teachers perceive the LOF as contributing positively to their schools, the impact is not uniformly strong. A notable 32 teachers (16%) selected "Not at all," while 38 (19%) chose "Slightly," reflecting a considerable proportion of respondents with more reserved or critical views of the LOF's impact. Positive endorsements were expressed by 26 teachers (13%) who selected "Very" and 8 (4%) who selected "Completely," collectively accounting for only 17% of

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respondents. The remaining 30 teachers (15%) were "Unsure," indicating that uncertainty about the LOF's contributions persists among a notable subset of educators.

Leaders expressed somewhat higher levels of positivity compared to teachers. Similar to teachers, the most common response was "Somewhat," selected by 63 out of 173 leaders (36%). A further 40 leaders (23%) indicated a stronger level of agreement by selecting "Very," and 17 (10%) expressed the highest level of agreement by choosing "Completely." Combined, 33% of leaders viewed the LOF as having a strong positive impact. However, skepticism was not absent: 13 leaders (8%) selected "Not at all," and 31 (18%) selected "Slightly," collectively accounting for 26% of responses. A smaller percentage of leaders (5%) were "Unsure," suggesting that leaders may feel more decisive about the LOF's role in their schools.

Overall, the findings suggest a generally moderate perception of the LOF's positive impact on schools, with "Somewhat" being the most common response across both groups. However, the relatively low proportion of "Completely" responses - 4% among teachers and 10% among leaders - indicates that strong endorsements of the LOF's effectiveness are limited. The higher levels of positivity among leaders could reflect their broader view of school-wide changes or a closer alignment with the framework's implementation. Conversely, the higher levels of skepticism and uncertainty among teachers may stem from their day-to-day experiences with the LOF, which might not consistently align with its intended goals.
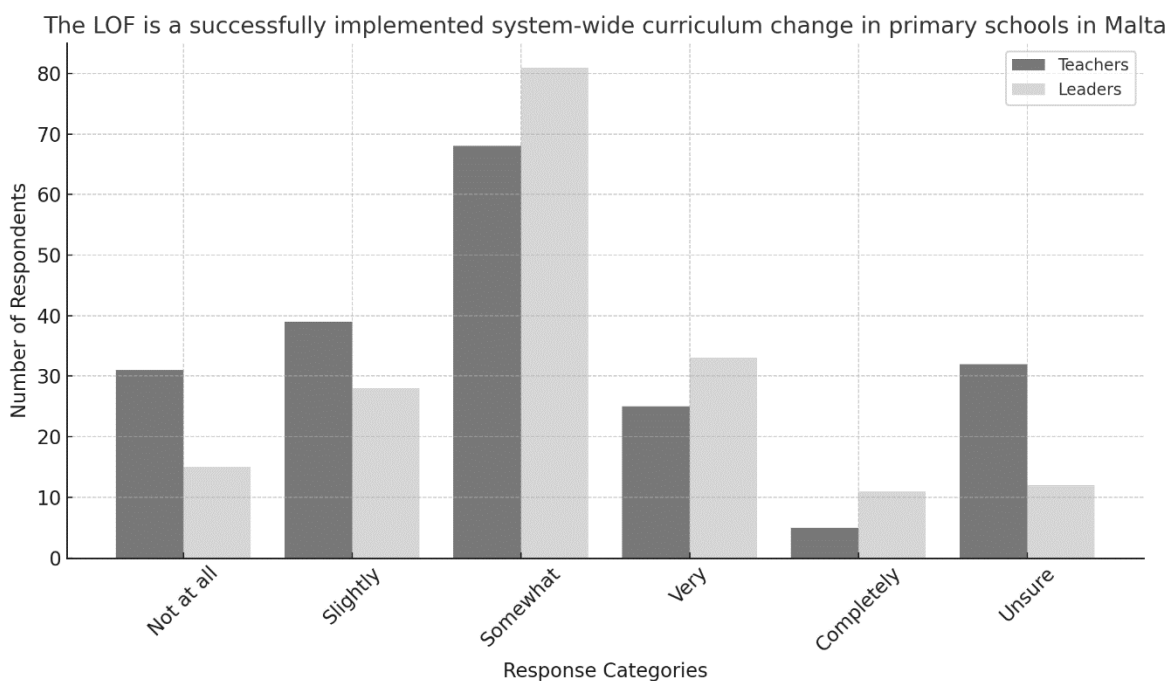
Figure 21 - Respondents' perceptions if the LOF is a successfully implemented system-wide curriculum change in primary schools in Malta.

Among teachers, the most frequent response was "Somewhat," selected by 68 out of 200 respondents (34%), indicating a moderate level of perceived success. This suggests that while many teachers acknowledge some positive aspects of the LOF's implementation, they may also perceive shortcomings or challenges that prevent them from endorsing it more strongly. Another notable category is "Unsure," chosen by 32 respondents (16%), reflecting uncertainty regarding the LOF's overall success. Combined, the "Slightly" (39 respondents, 19%) and "Not at all" (31 respondents, 15.5%) categories highlight that over a third of teachers view the LOF as only marginally successful or unsuccessful. Strong endorsements were less frequent, with 25 teachers (12.5%) selecting "Very" and just 5 (2.5%) selecting "Completely."

Leaders displayed a somewhat more positive perspective, with "Somewhat" also being the most common response at 81 out of 180 respondents (45%). This higher proportion compared to teachers may reflect leaders' closer involvement in the implementation process and their broader strategic perspective. Positive evaluations were more frequent among leaders, with 33 respondents (18.3%) selecting "Very" and 11 (6.1%) selecting "Completely," resulting in a combined 24.4% of leaders offering strong endorsements. However, scepticism was not absent: 15 leaders (8.3%) selected "Not at all," and 28 (15.6%) selected "Slightly." The

"Unsure" category was chosen by 12 leaders (6.7%), lower than among teachers, suggesting leaders might feel more confident in their evaluations.

These results underscore the complexity of perceptions surrounding the LOF's implementation. While the majority of both teachers and leaders lean towards moderate agreement with its success ("Somewhat"), the substantial proportions expressing scepticism or uncertainty highlight persistent challenges. Teachers' more critical stance may stem from their direct, day-to-day experiences with implementing the LOF in classrooms, which might expose practical difficulties or mismatches between the framework's goals and its applicability. Conversely, leaders' comparatively positive responses might reflect their broader oversight roles, which could align more closely with the strategic intentions behind the LOF.
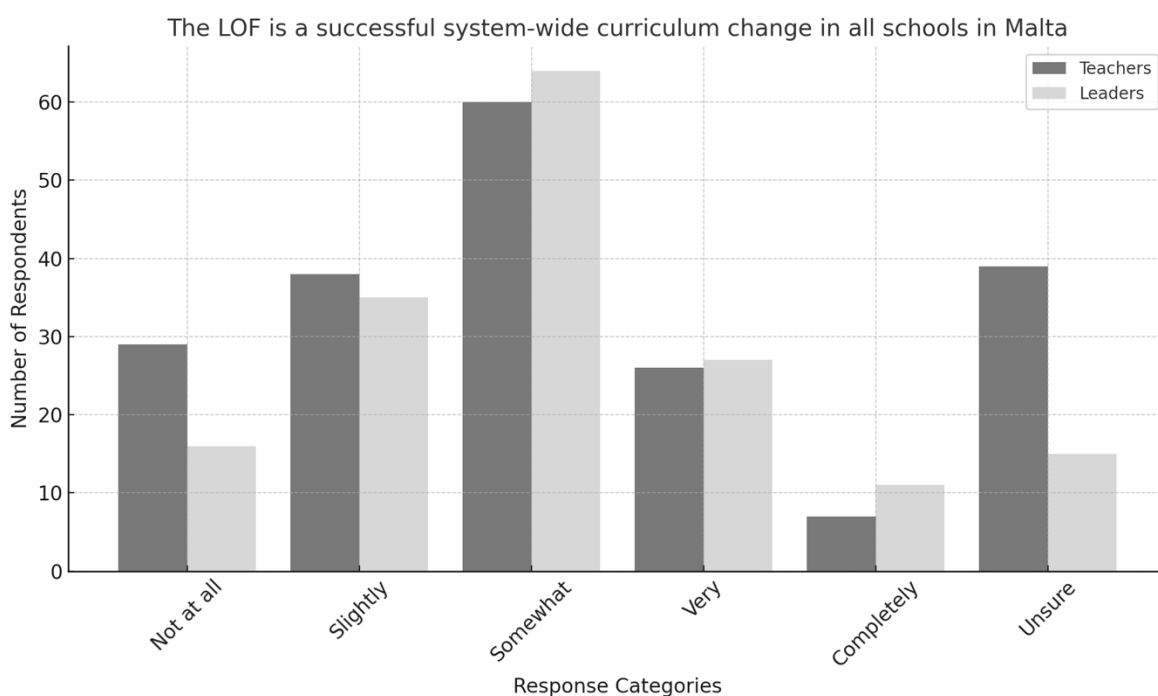
Figure 22 - Respondents' perceptions if the LOF is a successful system-wide curriculum change in all schools in Malta.

Among teachers, the largest group, 60 respondents (30.2%), selected "Somewhat," indicating a moderate level of agreement with the statement. This suggests that while a portion of teachers recognises some positive outcomes of the LOF, reservations persist. This cautious stance is further supported by the 39 teachers (19.6%) who selected "Unsure," reflecting uncertainty regarding the LOF's overall effectiveness. A notable number of teachers

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expressed scepticism, with 38 respondents (19.1%) selecting "Slightly" and 29 (14.6%) selecting "Not at all," accounting for nearly a third of the sample perceiving limited or no success in the LOF's implementation. Conversely, strong endorsements were relatively rare, with 26 teachers (13.1%) selecting "Very" and only 7 (3.5%) selecting "Completely." Leaders showed a slightly more optimistic perspective but still highlighted reservations. The most frequent response among leaders was also "Somewhat," chosen by 64 respondents (38.1%), reflecting a balanced view of the LOF's implementation. A smaller proportion expressed uncertainty, with 15 leaders (8.9%) selecting "Unsure." Positive responses were slightly higher among leaders compared to teachers, with 27 leaders (16.1%) selecting "Very" and 11 (6.5%) selecting "Completely." However, scepticism remains evident, with 35 leaders (20.8%) selecting "Slightly" and 16 (9.5%) selecting "Not at all."

Overall, these responses reveal a critical tension in perceptions of the LOF. While a moderate level of support exists among both teachers and leaders, reflected in the prevalence of "Somewhat" responses, substantial portions of both groups remain either unsure or sceptical of the LOF's success. Teachers are notably more likely to express uncertainty or scepticism, which may reflect their day-to-day challenges with the framework's practical implementation. Leaders, on the other hand, while slightly more positive, also display reservations.

5.6 Way forward for Malta

The fifth and final section of the questionnaire aimed to gather open-ended responses from educators regarding their views on the future of the curriculum, suggestions for system-wide changes, and any additional comments they may have. This section is designed to capture the diverse perspectives and innovative ideas of teachers and leaders, providing a platform for them to voice their opinions on how to best prepare primary students in Malta for future challenges.

Question 36 of the questionnaire aimed to understand educators' perspectives on the ideal curriculum that addresses future challenges and prepares students effectively.This open-ended question yielded numerous responses, which have been thematically analysed to

identify common suggestions for improvement (**Table 37**). Direct quotes from respondents are included to illustrate each aspect, with their roles and sectors indicated in brackets.

Suggestion
Practical and skills-based
Technology integration
Holistic development
Child-centred learning
Reduced overload
Integration of interdisciplinary learning
Environmental education
Global citizenship
Additional insights: creativity, physical education, and multilingual education

Table 37 - Common suggestions for the ideal curriculum.

Practical and skills-based - A recurring aspect among the responses was the need for a curriculum that emphasises practical skills and hands-on learning, which are directly applicable to real-world settings. Many educators highlighted the importance of equipping students with critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

"A curriculum that includes more hands-on activities and real-life problem solving." (Teacher, State School)

"Focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration." (HoS, Church School)

"Skill-based curriculum." (Teacher, Independent School)

"A curriculum that allows more time to focus on the 21st century skills."

(Teacher, Church School)

"A practical curriculum that prepares students for real-life challenges."

(Teacher, State School)

"Emphasise skills that are transferable to the workplace."

(HoD, State School)

Technology integration - The integration of technology into the curriculum was another prominent aspect. Educators stressed the importance of incorporating digital literacy and modern technological tools into the learning process.

"Incorporate more technology and digital learning tools."

(Teacher, Independent School)

"Preparing students for a digital future with strong tech skills."

(HoD, State School)

"Digital literacy and all its dangers and prospects need to be better included

and discussed." (Teacher, Church School)

"Better consideration of STEM subjects should be taken into account."

(Teacher, State School)

"Integrate coding and computational thinking into the curriculum."

(Teacher, Independent School)

The call for increased investment in educational technology directly addresses the identified lack of resources that was a major source of frustration for educators. In earlier sections (i.e. data in Tables 15 and 1s), teachers highlighted the need for more digital tools and resources to effectively implement the LOF. By investing in educational technology, schools can provide the necessary tools to support digital learning, thereby reducing frustration and enhancing the effectiveness of teaching practices.

Holistic development - Many respondents advocated for a curriculum that balances academic knowledge with personal and social development. This holistic approach aims to foster emotional and social skills alongside traditional academic learning.

"A holistic approach that fosters emotional and social skills alongside academics." (Teacher, Church School)

"Curriculum that supports the all-round development of the child."
(HoS, Independent School)

"A balance between the emergent (curriculum) and LOF in which room for some flexibility is allowed." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Student-centred curriculum that emphasises ongoing progress."
(Teacher, State School)

"Focus on developing well-rounded individuals, not just academically strong students." (Teacher, Church School)

Child-centred learning - A number of educators called for a more child-centred approach to learning, which focuses on personalised and student-centred education. This approach respects the individual needs and interests of students, giving them a voice and choice in their learning journey.

"… a curriculum that respects the child giving them voice and choice and recognition." (HoS, Independent School)

"Child-centred curriculums which make the best use of resources available." (Teacher, Church School)

"An approach that incorporates all students." (Teacher, State School)

"Giving the teacher space to explore her students' interests." (Teacher, State School)

"Personalised learning plans tailored to individual student needs." (Teacher, Independent School)

Reduced overload - A common concern among educators was the need to avoid overly packed curricula, which can lead to stress and diminish the quality of learning.

"One which is not overloaded. The students have too much to learn and to study." (Teacher, Church School)

"A curriculum that is linked to the real world thus making this new knowledge practical." (HoS, Independent School)

"Everything in Malta needs always to be prescribed, preplanned however from the interest of students' own quests." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Reduce the content load to allow for deeper understanding." (Teacher, State School)

Integration of interdisciplinary learning - Several educators mentioned the need for a curriculum that promotes interdisciplinary learning, where subjects are not taught in isolation but integrated to provide a more cohesive understanding of concepts.

"Promote interdisciplinary learning where subjects are interconnected."

(Teacher, State School)

"A curriculum that integrates different subjects to reflect real-world problems." (HoS, Independent School)

"Encourage project-based learning that spans multiple disciplines." (Teacher, Church School)

Environmental education - A number of respondents highlighted the importance of including environmental education to prepare students for the future challenges related to sustainability and climate change.

"Include environmental education to foster awareness about sustainability."

(Teacher, State School)

"A curriculum that educates students about climate change and environmental stewardship." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Focus on sustainability and environmental issues to prepare students for future challenges." (HoD, Church School)

Global citizenship - There was also a call for the curriculum to prepare students to be global citizens, with an understanding of global issues and cultural competence.

"Educate students to be global citizens with an understanding of international issues." (Teacher, Independent School)

"A curriculum that promotes cultural awareness and global thinking." (HoS, State School)

"Prepare students to engage with and understand different cultures and perspectives." (Teacher, Church School)

Beyond the major aspects already identified, several additional insights can be drawn from the responses.

Emphasis on creativity and innovation - Educators highlighted the importance of fostering creativity and innovation within the curriculum.

"A curriculum that encourages creativity and innovation." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Incorporate creative thinking and problem-solving activities."

(HoD, State School)

Emphasis on physical education and health - Some educators stressed the need for a curriculum that prioritises physical education and health.

"More emphasis on physical education and healthy living."

(Teacher, Independent School)

"Ensure that health and physical well-being are integral parts of the curriculum." (HoS, State School)

Multilingual education - There was a call for incorporating multilingual education to prepare students for a globalised world.

"Incorporate multilingual education to enhance global competencies."

(Teacher, Church School)

"Ensure students are proficient in multiple languages." (Teacher, State School)

The analysis of responses reveals a strong preference among educators for a curriculum that is practical, skills-based, and incorporates technology. There is a clear emphasis on holistic development, balancing academic knowledge with personal and social skills. Educators also advocate for a child-centred approach, allowing for personalised and student-focused education. Additionally, there is a call to reduce curriculum overload to improve the quality of learning.

Question 37 of the questionnaire aimed to gather innovative ideas and suggestions from educators for improving the educational system on a broader scale. This open-ended question yielded numerous responses, which have been thematically analysed to identify common suggestions for improvement (**Table 38**). Direct quotes from respondents are included to illustrate each aspect, with their roles and sectors indicated in brackets.

Suggestion
Professional development
Curriculum flexibility
Assessment methods
Support and resources
Student well-being
Parental involvement
Additional suggestions

Table 38 - Common suggestions for improving the educational system.

Professional development - A number of responses emphasised the need for continuous professional development and learning opportunities for teachers, as outlined earlier. Educators highlighted the importance of keeping up with educational advancements and ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to handle new challenges.

"Invest in regular and comprehensive professional development for teachers."

(Teacher, State School)

"Ongoing training to keep up with educational advancements."

(HoD, Church School)

"There have already been too many changes, the only change is that of allowing teachers space to develop and take care of their well-being."

(Teacher, State School)

Curriculum flexibility - Another prominent aspect was the call for greater flexibility within the curriculum to cater to diverse student needs and learning styles. Many educators advocated for a more adaptable curriculum that allows for personalised learning experiences.

"Allow for more flexibility in the curriculum to address different learning styles." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Adapt the curriculum to be more inclusive and flexible."
(HoS, State School)

"A curriculum that is adaptable to the ever-changing needs of society and the job market." (Teacher, Church School)

Assessment methods - The need to revise assessment strategies was another key aspect. Educators suggested moving away from traditional exam-centric approaches towards more formative and continuous assessment methods.

"Move towards more continuous assessment methods." (Teacher, Church School)

"Focus on formative assessments that support learning rather than just exams." (EO, State School)

"Assessments should be less about memorization and more about understanding and application." (Teacher, Independent School)

Support and resources - Many respondents highlighted the need for better support and resources for both teachers and students. This includes providing adequate materials, tools, and infrastructural support to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

> "Provide more resources and support for teachers in the classroom."
>
> (Teacher, State School)

> "Ensure that students have access to all necessary learning materials."
>
> (HoD, Church School)

> "Adequate resources and smaller class sizes to provide individual attention."
>
> (Teacher, Independent School)

Student well-being - The importance of focusing on student well-being and mental health was a recurring aspect in the responses. Educators stressed the need for programs and initiatives that support the emotional and psychological well-being of students.

> "Focus on the mental health and well-being of students."
>
> (Teacher, Independent School)

> "Implement programs that support student well-being and resilience."
>
> (HoS, State School)

> "Prioritise the holistic development of students, including their emotional and
>
> social well-being." (Teacher, Church School)

Parental involvement - Encouraging greater involvement of parents in the educational process was another key suggestion. Educators highlighted the benefits of engaging parents more actively in their children's education.

"Engage parents more in the educational journey of their children."

(Teacher, Church School)

"Increase parental involvement to support student success."

(HoD, Independent School)

"Parents should be partners in the education process, not just observers."

(Teacher, State School)

Focus on reducing bureaucracy - Educators expressed concerns about excessive bureaucracy and called for streamlined administrative processes.

"Reduce bureaucracy and allow teachers to focus more on teaching."

 (Teacher, State School)

"Cut down on red tape to enable more effective teaching."

(HoD, Church School)

Enhancing teacher autonomy - There were calls for granting teachers more autonomy in their teaching methods and classroom management.

"Give teachers more autonomy to tailor their teaching to their students'

needs." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Allow teachers the freedom to innovate in their classrooms."

(HoS, State School)

Improving infrastructure - Respondents emphasised the need for better infrastructure and modern facilities in schools.

"Invest in modern infrastructure and facilities to support learning."

(Teacher, Church School)

"Upgrade school infrastructure to create a better learning environment."

(Teacher, State School)

Strengthening community involvement - Some educators suggested enhancing community involvement in the educational process.

"Foster stronger ties between schools and the local community."

(Teacher, Independent School)

"Encourage community-based learning projects."

(HoD, State School)

Focus on equity and inclusion - There was a strong call for ensuring equity and inclusion within the educational system.

"Ensure that the curriculum and resources are inclusive of all students."

(Teacher, Church School)

"Promote equity in education to provide equal opportunities for all students."

(Teacher, State School)

The analysis of responses to question 37 illustrates a strong preference for continuous professional development, curriculum flexibility, revised assessment methods, and better support and resources. Additionally, there is a notable emphasis on student well-being and increased parental involvement.

Question 38 of the questionnaire aimed to gather any additional insights or suggestions that educators might have regarding the educational system in Malta. This open-ended question provided a platform for respondents to express any concerns, challenges, or recommendations that were not covered by the previous questions. To provide a thorough analysis, the responses were categorised into several recurring aspects.

Concerns and challenges - Numerous respondents highlighted ongoing concerns and challenges they face in their roles. These concerns frequently revolve around excessive workloads, insufficient resources, and bureaucratic obstacles that detract from teaching time and quality.

"There are too many administrative tasks that take away from actual teaching time." (Teacher, Independent School)

"We need more resources and support staff to effectively implement the new curriculum." (Teacher, State School)

"There have already been too many changes, the only change is that of allowing teachers space to develop and take care of their well-being." (Teacher, State School)

"Leadership needs to be more supportive and less bureaucratic."

(HoS, State School)

Suggestions for improvement - In addition to their concerns, educators provided constructive suggestions for systemic improvements. These suggestions span policy changes, classroom practices, and overarching reforms, reflecting a desire for a more supportive and effective educational framework.

"Increase investment in educational technology to support digital learning."

(HoS, State School)

"Consider reducing class sizes to allow for more individualised attention."

(Teacher, Church School)

"Ensure that professional development is continuous and relevant to the current educational context." (Teacher, State School)

"Foster collaboration between teachers and leadership to create a more cohesive approach to education." (HoD, Independent School)

Reducing class sizes is a suggestion that aims to address the challenges related to classroom management and personalised learning. Earlier findings (e.g. Question 37) indicated that large class sizes made it difficult for teachers to implement the LOF effectively and provide individual support to students. Smaller class sizes would enable teachers to better manage their classrooms, offer personalised attention, and adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of each student.

Moreover, continuous and relevant professional development is crucial for equipping educators with the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to the LOF and other reforms. Earlier sections (i.e. Table 30) revealed that inadequate professional development was a barrier to effective implementation. Similarly, fostering collaboration between teachers and school leadership addresses the disconnect and communication gaps identified in the earlier analysis. Educators expressed the need for a supportive and collaborative environment where their voices are heard, and their insights are valued.

Emphasis on teacher well-being - The well-being and professional satisfaction of teachers emerged as a critical aspect. Respondents stressed the necessity of creating a supportive work environment that acknowledges and addresses the pressures faced by educators.

"Teacher well-being should be a priority. Happy teachers lead to better teaching and learning outcomes." (Teacher, Independent School)

"Ensure that teachers are not overburdened and have a healthy work-life balance." (HoD, State School)

"Encourage a culture of respect and recognition for teachers' efforts." (HoS, Church School)

"Provide more mental health support for teachers." (Teacher, Church School)

In fact, prioritising teacher well-being is essential for maintaining high levels of motivation and effectiveness. Earlier sections (e.g. Table 41) highlighted the emotional and physical toll that the LOF implementation has taken on educators. Addressing issues such as workload, mental health support, and recognition of efforts can improve teachers' well-being.

Focus on student-centred learning - A number of responses underscored the necessity of maintaining a focus on student-centred learning approaches. Educators emphasised that educational reforms should prioritise the needs and interests of students, fostering an environment where students feel valued and engaged.

"Always keep the students' needs and interests at the centre of any educational reform." (Teacher, Church School)

"Foster an environment where students feel valued and their voices are heard." (Teacher, State School)

"Develop curricula that are flexible and adaptable to individual student needs." (HoD, State School)

"Encourage more student-led projects and experiential learning opportunities." (Teacher, Independent School)

By considering these insights, policymakers and educational leaders can better understand the complex needs of educators and students, leading to more effective and holistic educational reforms in Malta.

5.7 Summary of the main findings

Drawing on data from 408 respondents, the analysis reveals insights into the implementation, impact, and challenges of the LOF and broader educational reforms. The results highlight systemic tensions between policy intentions and practical realities, providing a critical lens through which to evaluate the "revolution" or "transformation" which is implied to be happening in Malta.

5.7.1 Educators' experiences with system-wide changes

A substantial majority of respondents (approximately 75-79%) reported experiencing system-wide changes, regardless of tenure or role. This pervasive awareness suggests that reforms have permeated all levels of the primary education system. However, the extent to which these changes are internalised or embraced remains contentious. Emotional responses to reforms varied, reflecting both adaptability and frustration. Approximately 40% of respondents indicated they "somewhat" adapt to changes, while a notable proportion (39%) reported moderate levels of frustration. This ambivalence underscores the difficulty of implementing reforms in ways that feel both meaningful and manageable to educators. The qualitative data further point to specific grievances, including increased administrative demands, insufficient resources, and perceived misalignments between policy goals and classroom realities.

5.7.2 Key drivers of effective teaching

Respondents ranked the curriculum, student engagement, and teacher experience as the most critical factors influencing effective teaching and learning. This prioritisation underscores a shared recognition of the importance of well-structured curricula and the active participation of students in their learning journey. However, the lower rankings assigned to factors like high salaries and national exams suggest a prevailing belief that intrinsic elements of education outweigh extrinsic motivators in shaping teaching quality. The emphasis on teacher experience highlights an enduring tension in policy discourses around education reform. While experienced educators bring practical insights and resilience to reforms, they may also be more resistant to change due to entrenched practices. This tension is particularly relevant in Malta, where rapid curricular shifts like the LOF require professional adaptation.

5.7.3 Assessment practices

The majority of respondents favoured a combination of continuous and summative assessment, with 43% advocating for this balanced approach. Continuous assessment alone was also widely endorsed (40%), reflecting educators' appreciation for formative feedback

mechanisms that align with the LOF's emphasis on learning outcomes. However, only a minority (8.79%) supported summative assessment as a standalone practice, indicating a broader shift away from traditional high-stakes testing. Despite this apparent alignment with contemporary pedagogical trends, qualitative feedback suggests underlying concerns about the operationalisation of these practices. Many respondents cited inadequate time, CPD, and resources as barriers to effectively implementing assessment strategies in line with the LOF. This discrepancy between pedagogical ideals and practical implementation reveals a critical gap that must be addressed to achieve meaningful reform.

5.7.4 Perceptions of the Learning Outcomes Framework

The LOF emerged as both a central focus of this chapter and a divisive element among respondents. While a majority recognised its influence on teaching preparation (58%) and assessment practices (54%), fewer were convinced of its broader effectiveness. For example, only 7% of respondents considered the LOF a "completely successful" reform, and 32% remained unsure about its overall success. This uncertainty highlights a need for clearer communication, targeted professional development, and ongoing support to bridge the gap between policy design and classroom execution. One of the most persistent criticisms centred on the perceived disconnect between the LOF's goals and the realities of teaching. Respondents frequently mentioned increased administrative burdens, which they felt detracted from their ability to focus on pedagogy. Similarly, the LOF's limited impact on parental involvement - cited by only 40% of educators - was seen as a missed opportunity to engage families in supporting student learning. These findings suggest that the LOF, while ambitious in scope, has struggled to gain full traction at the grassroots level.

5.7.5 Professional development and learning

The analysis highlights variability in the quality, timing, and accessibility of LOF-related professional development. While most educators received 10-20 hours of CPD, many expressed concerns about its relevance and depth. Mentorship and conferences were ranked as the most effective forms of support, reflecting a preference for interactive and context-specific learning opportunities. However, the reliance on letter circulars and online materials,

perceived as less effective, suggests a need to diversify and personalise professional development strategies.

5.7.6 Broader reflections on reform implementation

The survey data revealed patterns suggestive of both collaborative aspirations and latent resistance within the teaching profession. Respondents frequently identified tensions between externally imposed reforms and their capacity for school-based, collegial decision-making, echoing broader debates around community-building and teacher agency in reform contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The findings paint a complex picture of educational reform in Malta, characterised by ambitious policy goals but uneven implementation. While the LOF represents a step towards aligning curricula with contemporary pedagogical standards, its success has been tempered by systemic challenges, including resource constraints, inconsistent training, and resistance to change. These challenges are not unique to Malta; rather, they reflect broader issues inherent in large-scale curricular reform. Policies that fail to account for the lived realities of teachers and leaders risk fostering compliance rather than genuine "transformation".

5.8 Looking back and ahead

This chapter has provided a comprehensive analysis of the questionnaire responses gathered, approached through a pragmatic lens to ensure practical applicability and relevance to real-world educational contexts. In the next chapter, the focus will shift to the analysis of interviews. These interviews will provide qualitative insights into the experiences and perceptions of the actors directly involved in the implementation of the LOF.

Chapter 6 – Analysis of Interviews

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative data gathered through 14 interviews with three Ministry officials (a director, an HCN and an EO), six school leaders (three HoSs and three aHoSs) and five teachers across different school types in Malta. These interviews, based on a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 9), explored the participants' experiences and perceptions of the LOF reform. The analysis follows a thematic approach, focusing on identifying patterns in the data that reflect the reform's perceptions and implementation.

The findings from qualitative data presented in this chapter emerged from a thematic analysis conducted in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) methodological guidelines. Themes were developed through a systematic process of coding, categorisation, and critical review, ensuring that both data-driven patterns and conceptually informed insights were captured. These themes and their respective sub-themes were then grouped into three sections that form the structure of this chapter.

Section 1 - Perceptions of the LOF

This section explores how participants understood the LOF reform as a policy initiative, their initial expectations, and the intentions they attributed to it. It also examines participants' perceptions of the reform's depth, whether it was seen as a substantive change or a superficial exercise in compliance. Finally, it considers the role of the union in shaping and responding to the reform.

Section 2 – Implementation of the LOF

This section examines the actual processes of implementing the LOF reform, including the challenges faced and the strategies adopted to manage change. It investigates how leadership adapted to the reform, the impact on teaching practices, and the responses of various actors.

Section 3 - Future directions and recommendations

The final section highlights participants' insights into the future of educational reform in Malta, providing recommendations for support structures, speed of implementation, and strategies to ensure meaningful, sustainable change.

The thematic analysis used a systematic coding process to identify recurring themes in the interviews. These themes are presented systematically within each section, grouped by actor categories (Ministry officials, school leaders, teachers) to highlight varying perspectives. Direct quotes are used throughout the chapter to illustrate key points and provide the participants' views and experiences. Each theme concludes with an analysis comparing these perspectives, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the LOF reform by bridging participants' perceptions of the reform's intentions with their experiences of its practical implementation.

Table 39 provides an overview of the participants interviewed for this study, including their assigned codes, roles, and the educational sectors they represent. This reference aims to help the reader identify the context of each participant's perspective throughout the chapter.

Participant Code	Participant Role	Sector
MO1	Director	
MO2	Head of College Network	
MO3	Education Officer	
HOS1	Head of School	State
HOS2	Head of School	Church
HOS3	Head of School	Independent
aHOS1	Assistant Head of School	State
aHOS2	Assistant Head of School	Church
aHOS3	Assistant Head of School	Independent
T1	Teacher	State
T2	Teacher	Church
T3	Teacher	Independent
T4	Teacher	State
T5	Teacher	Church

Table 39 - Participants' codes, participants' role and sectors.

Table 40 explains how each of the three section is organised around several themes, with sub-themes that detail specific aspects of the participants' responses.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Section 1: Perceptions of the LOF reform	
Theme 1: Understanding the LOF as a reform initiative	- Policy understanding and interpretation - Initial reactions and expectations
Theme 2: Perceived cosmetic vs. substantive change	- Cosmetic change (surface-level compliance) - Substantive change (pedagogical shifts) - Divergent views on long-term impact
Theme 3: Role of the union in the reform process	- Union's influence on the reform - Union-teacher relationships - Divergent perceptions of the union's role
Theme 4: Perceptions of stakeholder roles	- Teachers' perceptions of policy-makers - Leaders' perceptions of teachers - Cross-stakeholder views on collaboration - Conflicting guidance among education officers
Section 2: Implementation of the LOF	
Theme 5: Challenges in implementing the reform	- Resource allocation and support - Professional development and learning - Time constraints and assessment challenges
Theme 6: Leadership and school-wide adaptations	- Strategy leader and vision - Distributed leadership and teacher collaboration - Addressing resistance to change
Theme 7: Impact on teaching and learning practices	- Curriculum and lesson planning adjustments - Teaching methods and pedagogical shifts - Student engagement and learning outcomes - Increased testing and continuous assessment practices
Theme 8: Parental and students' reactions to the reform	- Parental engagement with the reform - Student responses to the LOF - Broader community engagement
Section 3: Future directions and recommendations	
Theme 9: Future directions and recommendations	- Desired support structures - The pace of implementation - Lessons for future reforms

Table 40 – The three sections of the thematic analysis.

Section 1 - Perceptions of the LOF

This section examines how the LOF was perceived by various actors at the Ministry, school, and classroom levels. It focuses on their understanding of the reform's intentions, their expectations, and their initial reactions to its introduction. The section also explores how they evaluated the reform's depth and effectiveness, the role of external influences like unions, and the perceptions of other participants within the system.

The themes in this section include understanding the LOF as a reform initiative, which explores how the reform's purpose and goals were interpreted; perceived cosmetic versus substantive change, which examines differing views on whether the reform was transformative or superficial; the role of the union, which analyses how union actions and rhetoric influenced stakeholder perceptions; and perceptions of others, which considers how participants viewed the roles of other actors in the reform process. These themes provide a view of how the LOF was received during its initial stages, revealing the complexities of stakeholder attitudes and the broader socio-political dynamics at play.

6.1 Theme 1 - Understanding the LOF as a reform initiative

The LOF was introduced as a revolutionary educational policy aimed at shifting Malta's education system towards skill-based, learner-centred practices. However, the reform elicited varying interpretations and expectations across participants. This theme examines participants' understanding of the LOF under two sub-themes: *policy understanding and interpretation* and *initial reactions and expectations*.

6.1.1 Policy understanding and interpretation

Ministry officials

Ministry officials viewed the LOF as a foundation for modernising education, though they recognised inconsistencies in its interpretation. MO1 (Director), with extensive experience overseeing reforms, described the LOF's intended paradigm shift: "The LOF was about moving beyond content-heavy curriculums. It was designed to foster critical thinking,

collaboration, and lifelong learning - skills that go beyond passing exams. This is what we wanted schools to focus on." MO2 (HCN) highlighted the policy's alignment with European educational priorities: "We crafted the LOF to align Malta with international benchmarks. It wasn't just a local reform but part of a broader strategy to position our education system as forward-looking and competitive." However, MO3 (EO) admitted gaps in communicating these ambitions:

> We assumed the framework's principles were self-explanatory, but they weren't. We realised later that the messaging didn't fully translate to teachers and leaders on the ground. It's a challenge we should have anticipated, given the scale and scope of the reform.

School leaders

School leaders often found themselves struggling to decipher the LOF's abstract principles. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) recalled:

> We had to explain the LOF to our teachers, but even we were uncertain about its specifics. It felt like we were interpreting a vision rather than following a plan. This created a lot of uncertainty and, at times, resistance, because no one likes implementing something they don't fully understand.

aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent), with over 15 years in leadership roles, reflected on the inconsistency of policy language:

> The LOF left too much room for interpretation. Some of us tried to align with its principles, but others were overwhelmed by the lack of structure. It created more confusion than clarity, and this lack of consistency affected how the reform was implemented.

Teachers

Teachers expressed confusion, frequently criticising the LOF's lack of actionable guidance. T1 (Teacher, State) remarked: "We were handed these documents that sounded impressive but weren't practical. There was no roadmap - just a lot of jargon about outcomes and skills." T2 (Teacher, Church) shared a similar view, questioning the reform's classroom relevance:

> The LOF might work in theory, but in reality, we were left guessing. How do
>
> we focus on critical thinking when we're juggling large classes and limited
>
> time? It felt like the expectations were unrealistic for the resources and
>
> conditions we had to work with.

T3 (Teacher, Independent), a younger educator, found some inspiration in the LOF but acknowledged its challenges: "The ideas were exciting, but for many teachers, they felt unattainable. Without clear examples or support, the LOF was more of a concept than a practical tool."

6.1.2 Initial reactions and expectations

Ministry officials

Ministry officials expressed optimism about the LOF's transformative potential. MO2 (HCN), with over 15 years of experience, reflected on the reform's early promise:

> The LOF was an opportunity to rethink education in Malta. There was a lot
>
> of excitement about what it could achieve - more engaged learners, more
>
> innovative teaching. It felt like the right time for such a change, and we
>
> thought this energy would carry through to schools.

However, MO3 (EO) who has more than 13 years of experience in education, admitted that this enthusiasm wasn't always matched by the system's readiness:

We had high hopes, but not everyone shared our enthusiasm. Some stakeholders didn't see the bigger picture, which created resistance from the start. It taught us that excitement at the policy level doesn't always translate to the people who need to implement it.

School leaders

Reactions among school leaders were mixed, often reflecting the tension between policy aspirations and practical realities. HOS1 (Head of School, State), who has been serving as head for more than 8 years, remarked:

At first, I was excited about the possibilities. But the more we delved into the LOF, the more questions arose. We weren't given enough preparation to make the reform feel feasible. Without a clear plan or consistent support, the initial enthusiasm began to wane.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) described a divide among their staff: "Some teachers were enthusiastic, particularly younger ones who saw the LOF as a chance to innovate. But for many, it felt like another top-down directive they didn't fully understand."

Teachers

Teachers frequently expressed scepticism, particularly about the LOF's feasibility. T4 (Teacher, State) offered a stark critique:

We've seen reforms like this before. They come with big promises but end up adding more paperwork to our already heavy workloads. The LOF didn't feel different, it felt like more of the same. We wanted practical solutions, not just theoretical changes.

T3 (Teacher, Independent) provided a more nuanced view:

> For me, the LOF offered an exciting vision, but I understood why others
>
> found it daunting. It felt like it was asking us to completely change our
>
> approach without giving us the tools to do so. Without proper support, it's
>
> hard to sustain the excitement it initially brought.

The perceptions of the LOF reveal systemic issues in policy design and communication, particularly in how its goals were understood across different levels of the educational hierarchy. Ministry officials portrayed the LOF as a revolutionary policy aimed at aligning Malta with international educational standards. However, their reflections suggest a lack of awareness of the challenges faced by those tasked with implementing the reform. School leaders, caught between policy-makers and teachers, struggled to balance the LOF's lofty ambitions with the realities of school operations. Many expressed frustration with the reform's lack of clear guidelines, which left them interpreting abstract principles while managing resistance from teachers. Teachers, as the primary implementers, often viewed the LOF as disconnected from their daily realities.

These findings highlight the importance of a cohesive reform strategy that prioritises clarity, actors' engagement, and systemic readiness. The LOF's ambitious vision was undermined by inconsistent communication and inadequate preparation, resulting in a fragmented understanding of its purpose and potential. For large-scale reforms to succeed, all actors must share a clear, practical vision, supported by robust CPD, resources, and a framework that bridges policy ideals with implementation realities.

6.2 Theme 2 - Perceived cosmetic vs. substantive change

The LOF was introduced as a transformative initiative, with ambitions to shift educational practices in Malta towards skill-based, learner-centred approaches. However, perceptions of the reform's depth varied across participants. While some saw it as a substantive opportunity to drive meaningful pedagogical change, others viewed it as superficial or cosmetic in nature. This theme explores these perceptions through three sub-themes: *cosmetic change (surface-*

level compliance), *substantive change (perceived potential for pedagogical shifts)*, and *divergent views on long-term impact*.

6.2.1 Cosmetic change – surface-level compliance

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that many stakeholders perceived the LOF as superficial. MO3 (EO) reflected on this challenge: "Some participants misunderstood the LOF as just another box-ticking exercise. This perception undermined its purpose. While we intended for a transformative shift, it was often reduced to compliance with formalities, which was disappointing to witness." MO2 (HCN) noted how the reform's introduction may have contributed to these perceptions: "We tried to communicate its depth, but the emphasis on documentation during rollout led many to believe the reform was purely procedural. It was never meant to be just about meeting requirements, but that's how it was received by some."

School leaders

School leaders echoed these concerns, noting that perceptions of the LOF often did not extend beyond its formal aspects. HOS1 (Head of School, State) observed: "Teachers saw it as another mandate - more paperwork, more jargon. The perception was that it added to their workload without actually changing what they were doing in the classroom. This superficial view was hard to shift." aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent), who has been in leadership for over 15 years, explained: "The LOF's focus on outcomes led to the impression that it was about accountability rather than improvement. For many, it became about ticking boxes instead of exploring the deeper changes it aimed to inspire."

Teachers

Teachers frequently voiced scepticism, perceiving the LOF as a procedural exercise rather than a substantive reform. T2 (Teacher, Church) commented: "It seemed like we were being asked to change on paper, not in practice. The reform looked good in reports, but it didn't feel like it was meant to change how we teach." T1 (Teacher, State), with over two decades

of experience, critiqued the reform's perceived superficiality: "We've seen policies like this before - big promises that don't make it into the classroom. The LOF felt like a rebranding exercise, with new terminology but the same old practices. It didn't feel transformative at all."

6.2.2 Substantive change – perceived potential for pedagogical shifts

Ministry officials

Despite scepticism, Ministry officials perceived the LOF as an ambitious framework capable of substantive change if fully understood and embraced. MO1 (Director) highlighted its transformative potential:

> The LOF was meant to go beyond superficial adjustments. It was about rethinking how students learn and what we prioritise in education. We wanted a shift from knowledge recall to critical thinking and skills, but perceptions didn't always reflect this.

MO2 (HCN) added: "Those who understood its depth saw the LOF as an opportunity for innovation. It was designed to encourage creativity in teaching and learning, not just compliance. Unfortunately, this wasn't always how it was perceived."

School leaders

School leaders noted varying perceptions of the LOF's potential among their staff. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) described some positive initial reactions: "There were teachers who saw the LOF as a chance to innovate. They perceived it as a framework that encouraged more interactive, student-centred methods. For them, it was inspiring." However, aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church), who expressed that is not interested in the role of head of school, highlighted the scepticism of others: "For some, it seemed too abstract. The perception was that the LOF's goals were too ambitious for the realities of our schools. While some were excited by the possibilities, others questioned whether it was practical."

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Teachers

Teachers were divided in their perceptions of the LOF's potential for meaningful change. T3 (Teacher, Independent) shared an optimistic view: "I saw the LOF as a way to rethink my teaching. It encouraged me to be more creative and focus on skills, which was exciting. But I know not everyone saw it the same way." However, T2 (Teacher, Church) with more than 10 years of teaching experience, expressed doubts: "The LOF sounded good in theory, but in practice, it felt like a lot of big ideas without a clear plan. It's hard to believe in change when you don't see how it will work."

6.2.3 Divergent views on long-term impact

Ministry officials

Ministry officials expressed hope for the LOF's future but acknowledged perceptions of uncertainty among stakeholders. MO3 (EO) reflected: "Many saw the LOF as ambitious but wondered if it could sustain momentum. The perception was that reforms like this often lose steam after the initial push, which made some sceptical about its long-term viability." MO2 (HCN) added: "There were doubts about whether the system could support the LOF in the long term. Some stakeholders felt it was too much too soon, which affected their confidence in its sustainability."

School leaders

School leaders were similarly divided in their perceptions of the LOF's potential for lasting change. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent), who has been serving as head for less than 5 years, expressed cautious optimism: "I believe the LOF could have a long-term impact if we commit to it. But the perception among many was that it might be another short-lived initiative. It's a concern I understand." aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State), who has been serving in the role for less than 5 years and was a primary school teacher beforehand, noted the influence of past experiences: "For many, the perception was shaped by previous reforms that didn't last. There was a sense of 'here we go again,' which made it hard to build trust in the LOF's longevity."

Teachers

Teachers doubted the LOF's long-term impact. T1 (Teacher, State) remarked: "There's always a lot of energy at the start, but then things fade away. The perception was that the LOF wouldn't last long enough to make a real difference. We've seen this pattern before." T3 (Teacher, Independent), however, shared a more hopeful view: "I think the LOF could bring about real change if we stick with it. The perception among newer teachers like me is more positive, but I know others have their doubts."

The perceptions of cosmetic versus substantive change reveal how actors' positionality influenced their views of the LOF. Ministry officials framed the reform as transformative, but their slight acknowledgment of scepticism reflects an initial understanding of the disconnect between policy intentions and stakeholder beliefs. School leaders were often caught between optimism for the LOF's potential and the scepticism of their staff, highlighting the role of intermediaries in shaping perceptions. Teachers, as the final implementers, frequently viewed the LOF through a pragmatic lens, with their perceptions coloured by past reform experiences and systemic challenges. These perspectives illustrate that perceptions of reform are shaped as much by systemic history and communication strategies as by the reform's actual design. The diversity of views underscores the importance of alignment and clarity in fostering shared understanding and belief in the reform's purpose.

6.3 Theme 3 - Role of the union in the reform process

The role of the union in the implementation of the LOF emerged as a substantial factor shaping participants' perceptions of the reform. Participants expressed a range of views on how the union influenced the reform's reception, support, and overall success. This theme explores these perceptions through three sub-themes: *union's influence on the reform*, *union-teacher relationships*, and *divergent perceptions of the union's role*.

6.3.1 Union's influence on the reform

Ministry officials

Ministry officials perceived the union as both a supporter and a barrier to the LOF's progress. MO1 (Director) acknowledged the union's dual role: "The union's involvement was essential in advocating for teachers' needs, but at times, it felt like their pushback slowed down the reform process. They had their priorities, which didn't always align with the policy goals." MO3 (EO) elaborated:

> The union was influential in shaping how the LOF was introduced to schools. While they provided valuable input on teacher concerns, their emphasis on workload and conditions often overshadowed the reform's broader aims, creating mixed perceptions among stakeholders.

School leaders

School leaders frequently noted the union's strong presence in the reform process, shaping how it was perceived at the school level. HOS2 (Head of School, Church), who has been working in school leadership for more than 10 years, observed:

> The union played a key role in setting the tone for how the LOF was received by the teachers and others at school. Their emails and circulars about protecting teachers' interests often framed the reform as an additional burden rather than an opportunity for growth.

aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) reflected on the impact of union communications:

> Many teachers took their cues from the union's stance. If the union was critical of the LOF, that influenced how teachers approached it in practice. It wasn't necessarily a negative influence, but it shaped perceptions significantly. I see that they [teachers] are easily influenced.

Teachers

Teachers often viewed the union as a vital advocate for their concerns during the LOF's introduction. T5 (Teacher, Church) commented: "The union gave us a voice in the reform process. They raised issues that we were too overwhelmed to articulate ourselves, like how the LOF added to our workload without providing the necessary support." T4 (Teacher, State), who is interested in taking up leadership roles in the future, felt the union's focus on resistance created unnecessary tension: "While the union meant well, their opposition to some aspects of the LOF made it harder for us to engage with the reform positively. It sometimes felt like we were being told to resist rather than adapt. Even when they [the Ministry] invited us an information session, we were unsure how to behave or what to accept."

6.3.2 Union-teacher relationships

Ministry officials

Ministry officials observed that the union's close relationship with teachers strongly influenced their perceptions of the LOF. MO2 (HCN) remarked:

> Teachers trusted the union to represent their interests, which gave the union significant sway over how the LOF was perceived. This trust was both a strength and a challenge - it empowered teachers but also created a dependency on union narratives. For example, when they [teachers] come to talk to me, they often mention what they can and cannot do.

MO1 (Director) noted:

> The union's relationship with teachers was key in shaping their attitudes towards the reform. If the union was supportive, teachers were more likely to engage positively. If not, it created resistance, even when our intentions were

clear. I feel that in Malta the union thinks that it can lead the schools – but that is our job, not the union's.

School leaders

School leaders recognised the union's influence on teacher perceptions as both supportive and obstructive. HOS1 (Head of School, State) reflected:

The union was a lifeline for teachers during a time of major change. But sometimes, their advocacy for teacher concerns came across as resistance to the LOF itself, which made it harder for us to create a positive narrative around the reform. This is the same like in-class observations – as a Head of School, I cannot go into a classroom and observe a teacher, because of the union directives. This is ridiculous.

aHOS3 (Assistant Head, State) added:

The union's focus on protecting teachers' rights was important, but it sometimes overshadowed the benefits the LOF could bring. Teachers were caught between their loyalty to the union and their willingness to try something new. Moreover, in Malta, we are seeing the growth of a second union, and this is creating further tension. We already had challenges with one union, and now a second one has been formed, so the challenges have doubled.

Teachers

Teachers consistently praised the union's efforts to prioritise their well-being during the LOF's rollout. T5 (Teacher, Church) explained: "The union was our voice. They made sure our concerns about workload and expectations were heard. Without them, the LOF would

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have felt like an impossible challenge." However, T1 (Teacher, State) noted that this dynamic also had its drawbacks:

> The union's support was invaluable, but it sometimes felt like they were too focused on saying no to the reform. That made it harder for those of us who wanted to engage with the LOF to feel supported. Sometimes I felt bad for the EOs and the people working in the curriculum [department], they were constantly being told that their work will not be accepted. It must have been hard.

6.3.3 Divergent perceptions of the union's role

Ministry officials

Ministry officials expressed contrasting views on the union's overall contribution to the LOF. MO3 (EO) acknowledged their advocacy but noted its limits:

> The union played an important role in highlighting teacher concerns, but there were times when their focus on protecting their members overshadowed the bigger picture. This created challenges in maintaining a balanced dialogue. Even the teachers, they were constantly thinking which subjects to attack – it felt like the teachers were trying to 'divide and rule' our work as education officers.

MO1 (Director) remarked:

> While the union's input was valuable, there were moments when their focus seemed to undermine the reform's objectives. It wasn't intentional, or so I think. But it created friction that made progress slower than anticipated. For

example, we were dealing with a pandemic, and the union was stopping us

from continuing the rollout of the LOF. It was a very stressful time.

School leaders

School leaders were similarly divided in their perceptions of the union's role. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) expressed appreciation for their advocacy: "The union ensured that teachers felt heard during a time of upheaval. Their presence was reassuring, even if it sometimes created obstacles for us as leaders trying to implement the LOF." In contrast, aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) questioned the union's approach:

> While their advocacy was important, the union often seemed more focused
>
> on resisting change than facilitating dialogue. This sometimes put teachers
>
> and leaders at odds, which wasn't helpful. My teachers also used to quote
>
> what is happening in other sections, that, for example, in state schools,
>
> something was not being done or accepted, and it created a lot of internal
>
> struggles within our school.

Teachers

Teachers also expressed mixed views. T2 (Teacher, Church) praised the union's efforts:
> They stood up for us when we felt overwhelmed and when they [Ministry]
>
> were telling us that we needed to start ticking the children's learning
>
> [continuous assessment] and adding more paperwork to our load. Their role
>
> in pushing back against unrealistic expectations was crucial for our morale.

T1 (Teacher, State), however, felt the union could have done more to bridge the gap between policy and practice:

The union was good at saying what wouldn't work but less effective at helping us figure out what could. I wish they had focused more on solutions. Sometimes, I sent them [union] emails, and they did not reply. Other colleagues from other schools also told me the same. This is not fair as we pay our memberships.

Perceptions of the union's role in the LOF reform process highlight its complex influence. Ministry officials recognised the union as a critical stakeholder but often viewed their advocacy as a source of friction, particularly when it conflicted with policy goals. School leaders, in between policy-makers and teachers, frequently saw the union as both a support system and an impediment to fostering engagement with the reform. Teachers largely appreciated the union's efforts to prioritise their concerns, but some questioned whether their focus on resistance undermined opportunities for constructive dialogue. These perspectives underscore the union's dual role as both an advocate for teachers and a powerful shaper of perceptions. While their support was crucial in addressing teacher concerns, their emphasis on resistance to aspects of the reform often framed the LOF as adversarial, affecting how it was perceived across the system.

6.4 Theme 4 - Perceptions of stakeholder roles

The implementation of the LOF brought to light varying perceptions among stakeholders about the roles played by others in the reform process. Teachers, school leaders, and Ministry officials offered distinct perspectives on how their counterparts contributed to or hindered the LOF's objectives. Additionally, conflicting guidance from EOs across different subjects created further challenges in the reform's implementation. This theme explores these perceptions through four sub-themes: *teachers' perceptions of policy-makers*, *leaders' perceptions of teachers*, *cross-stakeholder views on collaboration*, and *conflicting guidance among EOs*.

6.4.1 Teachers' perceptions of policy-makers

Ministry officials

While this sub-theme focuses on teachers' perceptions, Ministry officials acknowledged that teachers often viewed policy-makers as distant from classroom realities. MO3 (EO) noted:

> Teachers sometimes see us as out of touch with what happens in schools. It's a perception we've tried to address along the years, but it's a challenge when reforms come from the top down. We really try to be present in schools and attend curriculum time meetings or organise CoPE sessions. But for example, in this LOF change, we were not given a direction from above. We were just told to help teachers as much as possible without guidelines on how to do so.

MO1 (Director) added:

> The distance between policy design and implementation creates a perception that we don't understand their [teachers] struggles. We have many people working in schools who are trying to narrow the gap, but I am aware that we are not fully managing. The Ministry is definitely closer to schools but we need to work harder. This is something we must work on bridging.

Teachers

Teachers often expressed frustration with what they perceived as a disconnect between policy-makers and classroom realities. T4 (Teacher, State) remarked:

> The people making these decisions don't understand what it's like to teach 25 children in a packed classroom. They talk about outcomes and critical thinking, but they have no idea how hard it is to achieve that with the resources we have.

T2 (Teacher, Church) shared a similar sentiment: "It felt like the policies were made in a vacuum. We were handed a framework and told to follow it without anyone asking us what we needed to make it work." T3 (Teacher, Independent), however, offered a more empathetic perspective: "I think the policy-makers mean well, but their ideas don't always translate into practical steps for us. They should spend more time in schools to see how things really work."

6.4.2 Leaders' perceptions of teachers

School leaders

School leaders had mixed perceptions of how teachers engaged with the LOF. HOS1 (Head of School, State) observed:

> There were few teachers who fully embraced the reform, seeing it as an opportunity to improve their practice. But many others resisted, seeing it as just more work without tangible benefits. This divide made it difficult to create a cohesive school culture around the LOF. This is what other heads of schools, my friends, tell me that happened in their schools, too.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) noted generational differences in teachers' responses: "Younger teachers seemed more willing to adapt, while older staff were often sceptical. This perception wasn't about capability but about the willingness to embrace change."

Ministry officials

Ministry officials also commented on the varied perceptions leaders held of teachers. MO2 (HCN) remarked:

> School leaders are often caught between wanting to support their staff and feeling frustrated by resistance to change. Their perceptions of teachers' engagement shape how they approach implementation. For example the

heads in my college have often come to talk to me about this reform. They

feel they were not prepared themselves so they feel they cannot help their

teachers accordingly. And somehow, I don't blame them. As head of the

college network, I also had to create my own, let's say, guidelines on how to

approach the reform. Decentralisation is good, but feeling on your own has

its challenges, too.

6.4.3 Cross-stakeholder views on collaboration

Ministry officials

Ministry officials highlighted the importance of collaboration in the reform process, though they acknowledged it was perceived differently by various stakeholders. MO1 (Director) stated:

Collaboration was at the heart of the LOF's design, but perceptions of what

that meant varied. For some, it was about co-creating solutions; for others, it

was simply about communicating decisions. We tried to train our people but

somehow everyone has a different character. We are trying to bring everyone

on board, but it is not easy. When I mention something to one of our EOs,

they sometimes do not understand that the subject they coordinator is part of

a bigger web of things.

MO3 (EO) elaborated: "The perception gap between teachers, leaders, and policy-makers often comes down to communication. Each group felt like the others weren't fully listening, which created tension instead of collaboration."

School leaders

School leaders frequently noted the challenges of fostering collaboration across different levels of the education system. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) reflected:

> Collaboration sounded great in theory, but in practice, it was hard to achieve. Teachers often felt like they weren't part of the decision-making process, while we felt stuck between them and the Ministry. It could also be because we are an independent school and sometimes, we are the last to get to know of the changes which are happening. Sometimes, we do not even receive important circulars or invites to official events and CPD sessions. They forget us, and this is strange because there are 8 or 9 schools like us in Malta.

aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) described the difficulty of balancing expectations:

> We tried to be mediators, but it wasn't always easy. Teachers wanted more support, and the Ministry wanted faster results. This tension made genuine collaboration feel out of reach at times. We really wished to include the teachers in the processes, but sometimes we had to give answers without having time to consult.

Teachers

Teachers often felt excluded from meaningful collaboration, perceiving their role as reactive rather than participatory. T5 (Teacher, Church) commented: "We weren't asked what we thought or needed until the LOF was already in place. Collaboration felt like an afterthought rather than a core part of the process." T3 (Teacher, Independent), with less than 4 years in teaching, however, described pockets of successful collaboration:

In my school, we had regular meetings as a year group to discuss how to implement the LOF. It wasn't perfect, but at least we felt like we had a voice. That made a big difference in how we approached the reform. We also came up with our plan, and we decided to stick to it, irrespective of whether the Ministry liked it or not. I don't know if other teachers in other schools can do that, but as since we are a private school, then I think we can.

6.4.4 Conflicting guidance among education officers

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that inconsistent messaging among EOs across subjects contributed to confusion at the school level. MO3 (EO) admitted:

We didn't always coordinate effectively between subject areas. What one EO emphasised for their subject didn't always align with what another EO was saying, and this led to mixed messages reaching schools. There are more than 50 EOs or maybe about 60 or 65, imagine having all of them agree on how to assess a subject and how to implement such a reform. They [the Ministry] should have included us from the start and not sending us to schools to inform teachrs about the change without being properly equipped andaligned amongst us.

MO2 (HCN) reflected on the broader implications of these inconsistencies: "When EOs don't align their guidance, it undermines the whole system. Teachers start to question the validity of the framework itself because they're getting contradictory advice about how to apply it."

School leaders

School leaders frequently highlighted the challenges posed by conflicting instructions from EOs. HOS1 (Head of School, State) described a common issue:

> The EO for one subject was insisting that we prioritise specific outcomes for assessment, while the EO for another subject had a completely different approach. This lack of consistency left us scrambling to figure out what the LOF really required. We sometimes used to meet with teachers and the teachers used to grumble – and we were caught in the middle. We do not want to shed bad light on the Ministry, but the teachers were right, more alignment was needed.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) remarked on the difficulty of managing these contradictions: "It's hard to support teachers when they're getting conflicting advice. We ended up having to interpret the LOF ourselves, which only added to the confusion and frustration."

Teachers

Teachers often felt caught in the crossfire of inconsistent guidance from different EOs. T2 (Teacher, Church) shared their experience:

> One EO told us to focus on continuous assessment without informing the children so that it is a natural process, while another said we needed to emphasise summative approaches to assessment and children needed to know they are being tested. It was impossible to know which direction to follow, and it left us feeling lost.

T1 (Teacher, State) expressed frustration with the lack of coordination:

The EOs weren't on the same page. We were trying to implement the LOF, but when the people guiding us couldn't agree, it felt like we were set up to fail. Even on the websites of the different subjects, there was conflicting information and we did not know whom to ask.

T3 (Teacher, Independent), however, pointed out that some schools tried to manage these inconsistencies internally: "Our SLT worked hard to synthesise the EOs' guidance into a coherent plan for us. It wasn't perfect, but it helped us avoid some of the confusion other schools were facing."

Perceptions of stakeholder roles reveal expectations, frustrations, and opportunities for improvement. Teachers frequently viewed policy-makers as detached from their realities, while policy-makers acknowledged this perception and its implications for reform acceptance. School leaders, caught between advocating for their staff and meeting Ministry expectations, often found their own perceptions shaped by these dual pressures. Collaborative efforts, while emphasised in the reform's design, were often perceived as insufficient or uneven, highlighting gaps in communication and shared understanding. The lack of alignment impacted stakeholders' perceptions of the LOF. Ministry officials acknowledged the challenges posed by inconsistent messaging, recognising that it eroded trust in the framework. School leaders, caught between conflicting instructions, often had to develop their own interpretations, adding to their workload and contributing to a sense of uncertainty. Teachers, as the primary implementers, experienced frustration and disillusionment when faced with contradictory guidance, further complicating their engagement with the reform.

Section 2 - Implementation of the LOF

While the previous section focused on stakeholders' perceptions of the LOF as a reform initiative, this section delves into the realities of its implementation. Moving beyond perceptions of intent and expectations, it explores how the LOF was enacted within schools, examining the practical challenges, adaptations, and impacts experienced by different actors. This section considers the ways in which Ministry officials, school leaders, and teachers

translated the reform's ambitions into change, highlighting both systemic barriers and areas of progress.

6.5 Theme 5 - Challenges in implementing the reform

The implementation of the LOF brought to light numerous practical challenges that shaped participants' experiences. This theme explores these realities across three sub-themes: *resource allocation and support*, *professional development and learning*, and *time constraints and assessment challenges*.

6.5.1 Resource allocation and support

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged the systemic resource limitations that impacted the LOF's implementation. MO2 (HCN) reflected: "The LOF required a significant shift in practices, but schools often didn't have the resources to make that shift. Whether it was funding, materials, or time, the gaps were evident and created barriers to successful implementation." MO3 (EO) emphasised the disconnect between policy ambitions and systemic realities:

> We had the vision, but the resources to support that vision were not always there. For example, we used to send documents to the LOF project office for feedback and they took quite some time to be reviewed. This lack of alignment left schools struggling to meet expectations, which hindered the reform's progress.

School leaders

School leaders frequently described the effect of inadequate resources on their ability to support teachers and students. HOS1 (Head of School, State) remarked:

We were asked to do more with the same resources - or in some cases, fewer

resources. This created a lot of frustration among teachers, who felt

unsupported in making the changes the LOF required. For example, during

the pandemic, the classes were split into smaller numbers, and a number of

support teachers were sent back to the classroom to teach a class, and this

meant that there were fewer people going around the schools to support our

teachers.

aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent) shared a similar concern: "We tried to allocate what we had as best we could, but it was never enough. Teachers needed more materials, training, and time, and without those, it was hard to make the LOF work in practice."

Teachers

Teachers expressed frustration at the lack of resources provided to support the LOF's implementation. T2 (Teacher, Church) described the situation:

The reform was ambitious, but it felt like no one thought about how we would

actually do it. We didn't have the tools, and even when we asked for them, it

seemed like there was no plan to provide them. For example, we asked for

some examples of how to implement the learning outcomes, and it took them

[the Ministry] quite a long time to give us proper guidelines. We somehow

had to come up with our own ways.

T1 (Teacher, State) commented on how these resource gaps affected morale:

It's hard to stay motivated when you're asked to do the impossible. The LOF

demanded a lot, but the resources just weren't there to meet those demands.

It felt like we were being set up to fail. Everyone was asking us to change the

schemes of work after a whole summer of planning, and to be fair, I was quite

irritated by this. If I knew before I would not waste a whole summer planning.

6.5.2 Professional development and learning

Ministry officials

Ministry officials recognised that professional development efforts were insufficiently targeted to address the practical needs of educators. MO1 (Director) admitted:

The training we offered was well-intentioned, but it didn't always align with

what teachers needed to implement the LOF in their classrooms. The

feedback we received was clear - more practical, hands-on guidance was

required. In fact, the training sessions which were done later on were more

hands-on, and we could also show examples of good practice from schools.

MO2 (HCN) emphasised the importance of ongoing support: "One-off training sessions weren't enough. Teachers needed continuous support to build their confidence and skills, but the system wasn't set up to provide that."

School leaders

School leaders frequently described the gaps in CPD as a substantial barrier to implementation. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) observed:

Teachers came back from the workshops feeling more confused than

confident. The training didn't address the specific challenges they faced,

which made it harder for them to engage with the reform. It is one thing

placing teachers in a hall and telling them what to do, and it is another thing

showing them how it has to be done and giving them examples. Teachers

need examples especially about something so complex as the LOF.

aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) expressed concern about the lack of follow-up: "We needed ongoing training that built on what teachers learned initially, but instead, we were left to figure things out on our own. This lack of continuity created a lot of frustration."

Teachers

Teachers often felt that the CPD they received was disconnected from their everyday challenges. T3 (Teacher, Independent) explained:

The workshops were heavy on theory but light on practical strategies. We

needed concrete examples of how to apply the LOF in our classrooms, but

instead, we got general advice that didn't always make sense. For example,

when we asked for the continuous assessment planning sheets which we were

promised to receive, they told us that they were still working on them.

T5 (Teacher, Church), who previously used to work in an independent school, shared similar frustrations:

We asked for follow-up sessions, but they never happened. It felt like we were

given a brief introduction and then left on our own to figure out the rest. We

also asked the Secretariat [for Catholic Education] to give us such follow-up

sessions, and they promised us that they would.

6.5.3 Time constraints and assessment challenges

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that the rapid timeline for the LOF's implementation created challenges. MO3 (EO) noted: "The timeline was ambitious, and we didn't fully account for

how much time teachers would need to adapt. This created a lot of stress and made it harder for them to engage with the reform." MO2 (HCN) reflected on the tension between urgency and feasibility:

> We wanted to see results quickly, but the reality is that meaningful change takes time. The perception that we were rushing the process added to the resistance. I always told my heads [of school] to take it slow, to support the teachers and to go through the change day by day. But I am also aware that schools try to compete to look the best, so that does not help.

School leaders

School leaders frequently described the impact of time constraints on their ability to support staff effectively. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) explained: "Teachers were already overwhelmed by their regular responsibilities, and the LOF added another layer of pressure. They didn't have enough time to plan, learn, and adjust, which made the reform feel unmanageable." aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) added: "We tried to build in time for training and collaboration, but the day-to-day demands of running a school made it almost impossible. Teachers felt like they were being pulled in too many directions."

Teachers

Teachers consistently cited time constraints as one of the most noteworthy barriers to implementing the LOF effectively. T4 (Teacher, State) commented:

> We barely had time to read through the framework, let alone figure out how to use it. The deadlines were unrealistic, and it felt like no one considered how much work we were already doing. These things take time we cannot just wake up in the morning and start teaching in the LOF way. You cannot give us endless lists of learning outcomes, and we have to start teaching them

without getting used to them; it just does not make sense. I also do not understand what was so wrong with the old syllabus.

T2 (Teacher, Church) shared similar concerns: "We needed time to adapt and learn, but instead, we were expected to implement everything immediately. It created a lot of stress and made it hard to see the LOF as anything other than a burden."

The challenges faced during the LOF's implementation highlight misalignments between the reform's ambitions and the realities of the education system. Ministry officials acknowledged the gaps in resources, CPD, and time, recognising their impact on stakeholder engagement. School leaders, tasked with managing these gaps, often found themselves struggling to provide adequate support to their staff. Teachers, as the primary implementers, experienced these challenges most acutely, leading to widespread frustration and scepticism about the reform's feasibility. Without these foundational elements, even the most well-intentioned reforms risk being perceived as unrealistic.

6.6 Theme 6 - Leadership and school-wide adaptations

As the LOF was implemented, leadership at the school level emerged as an important factor in shaping how the reform was enacted. School leaders were tasked with interpreting the framework, mediating between policy-makers and teachers, and fostering an environment conducive to change. This theme explores the practical realities of leadership during the LOF's implementation through three sub-themes: *strategic leadership and vision*, *distributed leadership and teacher collaboration*, and *addressing resistance to change*.

6.6.1 Strategic leadership and vision

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged the critical role of school leaders in guiding the LOF's implementation. MO2 (HCN) reflected:

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Leadership at the school level was the linchpin of this reform. Schools in my

college with strong, proactive leaders managed to interpret and adapt the LOF

more effectively, even with the challenges they faced. It is in their nature,

they like to take on a challenge because they already would have established

a vision with their team

MO1 (Director) emphasised the need for alignment between policy directives and school leadership practices:

The leaders who succeeded were those who could align their vision with the

framework. This required not just administrative skills but a deep

understanding of the LOF's principles. Schools with strong leaders had

already a shared vision and the LOF was the natural way forward for student-

centred learning

School leaders

School leaders described the importance of setting a clear direction for their staff. HOS1 (Head of School, State), with more than 8 years of experience in headship, shared their approach:

I knew we had to frame the LOF as an opportunity rather than a burden. My

role was to show teachers how this reform could improve our practices, even

if it wasn't easy at first. If I show them that I am afraid of this change, then

automatically, they would be afraid to. I had to lead by example.

aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent), with 15 years of leadership experience, highlighted the challenge of balancing strategic planning with day-to-day demands:

It's one thing to have a vision; it's another to implement it. The LOF required us to constantly juggle long-term goals with the immediate realities of running a school. This is not easy when the LOF is just one, and yet, I dare say, minor, thing which is happening within our schools. There is so much more one has to take care of.

Teachers

Teachers frequently noted the importance of school leaders in shaping their engagement with the LOF. T3 (Teacher, Independent) remarked: "Our Head of School was instrumental in helping us understand the LOF. She held regular meetings to explain its goals and how it connected to our work. Without that, I think many of us would have been lost." T5 (Teacher, Church), however, described a less supportive experience:

In our school, there wasn't much direction from leadership. We were left to figure things out on our own, which made the reform feel even more overwhelming. It might be that they themselves did not have enough guidance from the people above, I don't know.

6.6.2 Distributed leadership and teacher collaboration

Ministry officials

Ministry officials highlighted the importance of fostering collaborative leadership models during the LOF's implementation. MO3 (EO) noted:

Distributed leadership was critical in schools where the reform made the most progress. Leaders who empowered their staff created a sense of collective ownership over the LOF, which was essential for its success. Sometimes, teachers used to call us to ask us questions when they are stuck with

something, so this means that they would have already started working on something. This empowerment in staff is important. It was not the Head of School who was calling us, but the teacher. This means something.

MO2 (HCN) added: "The schools that thrived were those where leadership wasn't concentrated at the top. When teachers felt involved in decision-making, they were more likely to engage with the LOF. Most of the schools in my college are like this."

School leaders

School leaders who adopted distributed leadership approaches often described positive outcomes. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) shared their strategy:

We created working groups where teachers could contribute to how we implemented the LOF. This not only lightened the load on leadership but also gave teachers a voice, which increased their buy-in. We split them by subject and we were surprised that over summer, they continued to meet and work on the changes. This was impressive as it did not even happen in the past when we changed the textbooks.

aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) explained how collaboration improved morale: "When teachers at school felt they had a stake in the reform, they were more willing to embrace it. It wasn't just about delegation - it was about building trust and fostering a sense of teamwork."

Teachers

Teachers who participated in collaborative efforts often reported higher levels of engagement with the LOF. T3 (Teacher, Independent) described their experience: "Our SLT really listened to us. We had regular opportunities to share our concerns and ideas, which made the whole process feel more manageable." T1 (Teacher, State), however, noted the absence of such collaboration in their school:

In our school, it felt like decisions were made for us, not with us. This created resentment and made it harder to see the LOF as something we could all work towards. It is one thing that people from outside school come and tell you what to do, but when it happens from someone within the school, then it hurts. Involve us, as we are the ones in the classroom day in and day out.

6.6.3 Addressing resistance to change

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged the challenges school leaders faced in managing resistance to the LOF. MO1 (Director) reflected:

Resistance was inevitable, especially given the scale of the change. The leaders who succeeded were those who approached resistance not as an obstacle but as an opportunity to understand and address concerns. In all schools, there was a degree of resistance, and there will always be. But then, we need to also focus on those who embrace change. I strongly believe some teachers needed the LOF to happen as it aligns with their teaching preferences.

MO3 (EO) added:

Supporting leaders in managing resistance was a priority, but it was clear that not all schools had the capacity or training to tackle this effectively. Moreover, some heads did not want our help, they wanted to manage the school on their own – this was sometimes problematic as we, as subject coordinators, could have helped the Head of School from the little that we knew.

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School leaders

School leaders frequently described resistance from staff as a major hurdle. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) recounted their experience:

> There were teachers who outright refused to engage with the LOF at first. It took time, patience, and a lot of one-on-one conversations to bring them on board. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. What motivated them was when I told them that I was feeling the same way as them and that I also felt scared or lost. But I constantly reminded everyone that this was being done for the children's benefit, as that is what we were constantly told.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) explained how resistance often stemmed from fear: "For many teachers, the LOF represented uncertainty. Addressing their resistance meant acknowledging their fears and showing them that we were in this together."

Teachers

Teachers often expressed resistance as a response to feeling overwhelmed or unsupported. T1 (Teacher, State) admitted:

> At first, I was completely against the LOF. It just seemed like more work without any benefit. Over time, I started to see its value, but only because our leadership didn't give up on helping us understand it. The lessons are sometimes more student-centred now, and this is helping me to plan my lessons better, especially with the "I can" statements. However, the amount of paperwork there is, is way too much!

T2 (Teacher, Church) described the challenges of overcoming initial scepticism: "It wasn't that we didn't want to change - it was that we didn't feel prepared to. Resistance was more about self-preservation than defiance. Things were and are still unclear!"

Leadership played a pivotal role in shaping the implementation of the LOF, with strategic vision, distributed approaches, and the management of resistance emerging as critical factors. Ministry officials emphasised the importance of proactive and collaborative leadership, noting its effect on stakeholder engagement. School leaders, as intermediaries, translate policy into practice, often relying on distributed leadership approaches to foster teacher buy-in. Teachers, in turn, highlighted the importance of strong, supportive leadership in overcoming resistance and building trust in the reform. These findings underscore the need for leadership professional learning that equips school leaders to balance strategic planning with day-to-day realities, foster collaborative environments, and address resistance constructively. Without these elements, the LOF's implementation risks being uneven and unsustainable.

6.7 Theme 7 - Impact on teaching and learning practices

The implementation of the LOF introduced changes to teaching and learning practices. Participants' experiences reveal a spectrum of adjustments, ranging from curriculum mapping to lesson planning and classroom engagement strategies. This theme examines the practical impacts of the LOF through four sub-themes: *curriculum and lesson planning adjustments*, *teaching methods and pedagogical shifts*, *student engagement and learning outcomes* and *increased testing*.

6.7.1 Curriculum and lesson planning adjustments

Ministry officials

Ministry officials recognised that the LOF required extensive adjustments to curriculum and lesson planning. MO1 (Director) with over 20 years of experience, explained: "The LOF wasn't just about changing what was taught; it was about changing how it was planned.

Teachers had to rethink their lessons to align with outcomes, which was a big shift from traditional approaches." MO3 (EO) highlighted the challenges this created: "The new approach demanded a level of detail in planning that many teachers found overwhelming. While some adapted quickly, others struggled to transition from a content-driven mindset to an outcomes-based one."

School leaders

School leaders described how they supported staff in adapting their curriculum and lesson plans. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) noted:

We had to provide additional workshops to help teachers align their plans with the LOF. It wasn't easy, especially for those who had been teaching the same way for years, but eventually, I think most will manage to adjust. We also try to pair teachers so that they help each other – maybe someone who is more traditional with someone who is more proactive to change.

aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent), with 15 years of leadership experience, explained how collaboration played a role in this process:

We encouraged teachers to work together on their plans, sharing ideas and strategies and schemes of work. This helped reduce the workload and created a sense of collective progress. In fact, some teachers decided to work their schemes together and some are also sharing lesson plans and adaptations. This is very good! However, the initial adjustment period was difficult for everyone involved, as the expectations were so different from previous norms.

Teachers

Teachers frequently described the challenges of aligning their lesson plans with the LOF. T1 (Teacher, State), with over two decades of classroom experience, remarked:

> The planning took so much more time than before. Every lesson had to connect to specific outcomes, and it wasn't always clear how to do that. It felt like we were constantly reinventing the wheel. There are lessons in the classroom which do not necessarily align to a learning outcome, maybe something happened and I want to teach about it. Can't I do that? Where is my autonomy? We are reducing learning to a checklist!

T3 (Teacher Independent), early in their career, shared a more positive experience:

> Once I got the hang of it, the planning became more intuitive. The outcomes gave me a clearer sense of purpose for each lesson, which actually made my teaching more focused. It wasn't an easy process, but the clarity eventually came with practice and collaboration. Moreover, when I discussed my planning with other teachers in my same year group, I was relieved that they were also finding my same difficulties. When I am planning at home, I start overthinking that I am not understanding or that I am doing something wrong.

6.7.2 Teaching methods and pedagogical shifts

Ministry officials

Ministry officials highlighted the LOF's emphasis on innovative teaching methods. MO2 (HCN), with a background in teacher training, noted:

> The LOF encouraged teachers to move away from rote learning and towards more interactive, student-centred approaches. This was a significant shift, and

while some embraced it, others found it difficult to let go of traditional

methods. And I understand where this is coming from, but this has to change.

In my college, it has to change. Traditional teaching is easier to assess through

summative approaches while the new kinds of teaching require a continuous

assessment mindset, which some teachers lack, unfortunately.

MO1 (Director) reflected on the uneven uptake of these pedagogical shifts: "We saw some truly inspiring examples of teaching innovation, but these were exceptions rather than the rule. Many teachers found it hard to change their practices without additional support."

School leaders

School leaders observed varying degrees of pedagogical change among their staff. HOS1 (Head of School, State) described a success story:

One teacher completely transformed her classroom with collaborative

learning projects. The students were more engaged, and their learning

outcomes improved significantly. It showed what was possible with this new

way of teaching – which maybe is not only thanks to the LOF but to other

initiatives too. I also noticed that the children are now more aware of what

they are learning.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church), who expressed that is not interested in the role of head of school, noted the challenges faced by others:

Some teachers struggled to adopt new methods, especially those who were

used to a more didactic approach. It wasn't resistance - it was just a matter of

confidence and experience. Without hands-on support, their ability to

experiment with these methods remained limited. And although it is our

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responsibility to support them, it has to come from them, it has to be intrinsic. They need to be the ones to want to embrace change.

Teachers

Teachers offered mixed perspectives on the pedagogical shifts encouraged by the LOF. T2 (Teacher, Church), who has over a decade of experience, described their initial resistance:

At first, I didn't see the point of changing my methods. But once I started experimenting with group work and problem-solving tasks, I noticed a difference in how my students responded. However, this is not because the LOF is saying this, but it somehow made me think about new student-centred approaches to learning and I think I made some very good changes these last years.

T4 (Teacher, State) expressed frustration with the lack of guidance:

We were told to be more creative, but no one showed us how. It felt like we were being asked to innovate without the tools or examples to support us. The pressure to do something new was constant, but the support to make it work was inconsistent. All we asked for are examples, ways of doing things, good practice of documentation etc. They left us in the dark.

6.7.3 Student engagement and learning outcomes

Ministry officials

Ministry officials frequently cited improved student engagement as a key goal of the LOF. MO3 (EO), with extensive experience in classroom observation, observed:

The LOF was designed to make learning more engaging for students, and where it was implemented effectively, we saw some positive results. Students were somehow active participants in their education, which was encouraging. Unfortunately now we are not allowed to conduct classroom visits due to union directives, so I would not know about this.

MO2 (HCN) highlighted the variability in outcomes: "In some schools, heads tell me that the reform led to noticeable improvements in student engagement and critical thinking skills. In others, the impact was less clear, probably because the implementation wasn't consistent."

School leaders

School leaders described how student engagement varied depending on how well teachers adapted to the LOF. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) explained:

Where teachers embraced the LOF, students were more engaged and took more ownership of their learning. But in classrooms where the changes weren't fully implemented, the impact on students was minimal. And somehow, you cannot force a teacher to do something, it has to come from within. When they close their classroom doors, we would not know exactly how they are teaching, although we would have an idea.

aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) noted the role of classroom dynamics:

Students responded well to interactive methods, but not every teacher was comfortable using them. This inconsistency affected how the LOF was perceived by parents and students alike. Sustaining engagement requires consistency, and that was often missing. It could also be because teachers

were constantly thinking about how to assess children rather than what children were learning or how they, as teachers, were teaching.

Teachers

Teachers often cited mixed experiences with student engagement. T3 (Teacher, Independent) shared a positive example:

> My students were much more involved when I used project-based learning. They asked more questions and worked together in ways I hadn't seen before. It was challenging to set up, but the results were worth it. I like that some learning outcomes from the LOF urge you to try project-based learning or to find links between things that the children learn. Sadly, the list of learning outcomes in never-ending!

T2 (Teacher, Church), however, described a different experience:

> For some students, the LOF's focus on collaboration and problem-solving was difficult. They were used to traditional methods, and it took time for them to adjust. Not all of them thrived under the new system, and some even struggled with the shift in expectations. It could be that in church schools, we have a certain way of teaching and a certain way the children learn, and this is being challenged. I am unsure if this is good or bad, but certainly, it's different.

6.7.4 Increased testing and continuous assessment practices

The LOF introduced changes to assessment practices, requiring a shift towards continuous assessment as a key component of evaluating student progress. While this approach aimed to align assessments with learning outcomes and encourage diverse methods of gauging student

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achievement, the implementation often resulted in an increase in formal testing. Participants highlighted how this focus on continuous assessment led to challenges, including undue pressure on both teachers and students, a lack of alignment with authentic learning experiences, and inconsistencies in its application.

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that the emphasis on continuous assessment was intended to encourage innovative and holistic evaluation methods. MO3 (EO) reflected:

> Continuous assessment was designed to be flexible, allowing teachers to assess students through diverse methods like projects, presentations, and real-world tasks. Unfortunately, the perception was that assessment meant more tests, which wasn't the intent of the reform. On the other hand, we wanted to move away from continuous testing and wanted to focus on the learning experience.

MO1 (Director) explained how this misinterpretation affected the implementation:

> We envisioned continuous assessment as a way to integrate learning and evaluation, but many teachers defaulted to frequent formal tests. This created a perception that the LOF increased the workload for both teachers and students. We gave teachers so many examples of what they can do to assess learning, like show-and-tell sessions, quizzes and other means … but somehow, teachers still wanted to engage in summative assessment through tests. I do not understand this.

School leaders

School leaders described how the increase in testing undermined the LOF's goals of fostering meaningful learning experiences. HOS1 (Head of School, State) explained:

> Instead of using creative methods like debates or collaborative projects, some teachers resorted to constant tests. This put unnecessary pressure on students and took away from the kind of learning the LOF was meant to encourage. I have a feeling that this is done because of competition with other colleagues and because they want the parents to see that their children are learning something and a mark is given. We tried to tell them not to do this, but somehow, teachers are stubborn.

aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) highlighted the challenges of managing these practices:

> Teachers felt they had to produce frequent assessments to show progress, but this led to a testing culture that contradicted the LOF's principles. It became more about compliance than creativity. This is why on social media parents are grumbling, because every day has become like a test day!

Teachers

Teachers frequently expressed frustration with the expectations around continuous assessment, noting how it often translated into excessive testing. T1 (Teacher, State), with over two decades of experience, remarked:

> We were told to assess students continuously, but there wasn't much guidance on how to do this creatively. Many of us defaulted to regular tests because it was the easiest way to meet the requirements. It wasn't ideal, but we felt like we didn't have a choice. Some told us to use tools like maths trails to assess,

but really and truly, can you assess children through a maths trail outside? It

will not work.

T5 (Teacher, Church) described the influence on students:

In other year groups, I could see that children were constantly being tested,

sometimes on a weekly basis. It wasn't just stressful for them - it also took

away from their enthusiasm for learning. There wasn't enough focus on

hands-on activities or critical thinking. I am unsure why the head did not tell

them anything.

T3 (Teacher, Independent) shared a contrasting perspective, describing how their school tried
to implement more innovative approaches:

We used debates, experiments, and group projects as part of our continuous

assessment. It took more planning, but the students were more engaged and

it felt more aligned with what the reform was trying to achieve. Not every

school was able to do this, though – maybe because of lack of money or lack

of initiative.

The impact of the LOF on teaching and learning practices varied widely, reflecting
differences in actor readiness, support, and engagement. Ministry officials highlighted the
framework's potential to foster innovative practices, but acknowledged that its effectiveness
depended on how well it was understood and implemented at the school level. School leaders
played a critical role in facilitating these changes, though their success was often limited by
resource constraints and teacher readiness. Teachers' experiences underscored the practical
challenges of aligning lesson planning, pedagogy, and student engagement with the LOF's
principles. The shift towards continuous assessment under the LOF revealed gaps between
the reform's intentions and its practical implementation. Ministry officials emphasised the
flexibility and creativity intended by the framework, but many teachers and school leaders
interpreted continuous assessment as an increase in formal testing. This misalignment not
only created additional stress for students and teachers but also undermined the LOF's goals

of promoting authentic and meaningful learning experiences. These findings emphasise the importance of sustained support and professional development to enable meaningful pedagogical change. While the LOF offered a vision for enhancing teaching and learning, its implementation revealed gaps in capacity and consistency that must be addressed to realise its full potential. The findings also underscore the need for clearer guidance and CPD on implementing continuous assessment in ways that reflect the LOF's principles. Supporting teachers in adopting diverse, real-world assessment methods could help align assessment practices with the reform's vision and reduce the reliance on frequent formal testing.

6.8 Theme 8 - Parental and students' reactions to the reform

The implementation of the LOF evoked varied reactions from other stakeholders, including parents, students, and the broader school community. This theme explores the participants' reflections on these stakeholder reactions through three sub-themes: *parental engagement with the reform*, *student responses to the LOF*, and *broader community engagement*.

6.8.1 Parental engagement with the reform

Ministry officials

Ministry officials highlighted the importance of parental buy-in for the reform's success. MO1 (Director) observed: "Parents were one of the most vocal groups about the LOF. Many appreciated the focus on skills and outcomes, but others expressed concerns about how it was being implemented, particularly around assessment and the increased demands on their children." MO3 (EO) described the challenge of managing parental expectations: "We tried to communicate the benefits of the LOF to parents, but the feedback we received suggested that many felt left out of the process. This made it harder for schools to implement the reform smoothly."

School leaders

School leaders often found themselves mediating between parental concerns and the demands of the LOF. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) explained: "Parents were confused about what the LOF meant for their children's education. Some thought it was too focused on outcomes and not enough on traditional subjects, while others worried about the increased testing." aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) noted the impact of these concerns on school dynamics: "We spent a lot of time addressing parental questions, which sometimes took away from our ability to focus on supporting teachers. The lack of clear communication from the Ministry made this even more challenging."

Teachers

Teachers frequently described the pressure of addressing parental concerns about the LOF. T2 (Teacher, Church) remarked: "Parents often came to us with questions we didn't have answers to. They wanted to know why their children were being assessed differently or why there seemed to be so much focus on skills instead of traditional subjects." T4 (Teacher, State), who is interested in taking up leadership roles in the future, described the difficulty of balancing parental demands with the expectations of the LOF:

> We tried to reassure parents that the LOF was beneficial, but it was hard when
> we ourselves were struggling to understand it and to implement it. Their
> frustration added to our own. It is not easy to bring someone on board if you
> do not understand it yourself.

6.8.2 Student responses to the LOF

Ministry officials

Ministry officials emphasised the importance of student engagement in the success of the LOF. MO2 (HCN), with over 15 years of experience, noted:

Students were at the heart of the LOF, and where it was implemented well, they responded positively. They enjoyed the focus on interactive and skills-based learning, but in schools where the implementation was uneven, they found it confusing and stressful.

MO1 (Director) reflected on the varied student experiences: "For some students, the LOF was a welcome change, making learning more engaging. For others, especially in schools where support was lacking, it felt like an additional pressure without clear benefits."

School leaders

School leaders frequently observed mixed reactions from students. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent) explained: "Some students thrived under the LOF, particularly those who enjoyed learning about what they are learning. Others struggled with the changes, especially those who were used to traditional methods of teaching and assessment." aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) noted the effect of inconsistent implementation:

The inconsistency in how the LOF was applied across subjects created confusion for students. They didn't always understand why certain lessons felt different or why assessments had changed. And I do not blame them. Some subjects were very clear while others were ambiguous, so all this confused the children.

Teachers

Teachers shared diverse perspectives on how students responded to the LOF. T3 (Teacher, Independent) described positive outcomes:

My students were more engaged when we used LOF-aligned methods like

when they showed what they learnt and how they learnt it, or when they

documented their learning on a journal or used an exit note to write the

learning outcome and how they feel about it. They seemed to enjoy learning

more when it was interactive.

T4 (Teacher, State) expressed concern about the impact on struggling students:

Some students found the learning outcomes. They weren't used to the

emphasis on skills and outcomes, and without enough support, they felt lost.

Most were trained to produce knowledge and information, not show how they

have learnt something.

6.8.3 Broader community engagement

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that the broader school community, including local
stakeholders and external organisations, played a role in shaping the LOF's implementation.
MO3 (EO) commented: "The community's understanding of the LOF was often shaped by
the social media discourse. This sometimes amplified concerns and misconceptions, making
it harder to implement the reform effectively." MO2 (HCN) highlighted the importance of
community involvement:

Engaging the wider community was crucial but often overlooked. Schools

that involved parents and other stakeholders in discussions about the learning

outcomes, saw more positive reactions. There were also some schools who

organised workshops for parents or human library days related to certain

learning outcomes, this was very inspiring.

School leaders

School leaders frequently noted the influence of the broader community on their ability to implement the LOF. HOS1 (Head of School, State) explained: "The community's role in the LOF varied widely. In some cases, local educational agencies were supportive, but in others, they questioned whether the reform was necessary." aHOS3 (Assistant Head, Independent) described efforts to engage the community: "We organised sessions to explain the LOF to parents and educational entities in our community. These were helpful, but they also revealed how much confusion there was about the reform. Everyone had mixed ideas of what the LOF is."

Teachers

Teachers often felt the ripple effects of community attitudes on their work. T5 (Teacher, Church) remarked:

> When parents or community members didn't support the LOF, it added pressure on us as teachers. We were caught between trying to implement the reform and addressing their concerns. For example when they come to talk to us about the continuous assessment ticking or to explain how a certain comment has been given, we understand that some parents did not understand this whole reform.

T3 (Teacher, Independent) described a more positive experience: "In my school, we involved the community in educational projects which were linked to the learning outcomes. This helped build support and made the reform feel more relevant to everyone involved." Participants' responses to the LOF reveal the complexities of implementing large-scale educational reforms. Parental concerns often seem to have centred on the perceived departure from traditional teaching methods and the increased demands on students, reflecting gaps in communication and understanding. Students seem to have experienced both opportunities and challenges, with their responses shaped by the quality and consistency of the reform's implementation. The broader community's involvement further influenced the LOF's

outcomes, underscoring the importance of engagement and clear messaging. These findings highlight the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between schools, parents, students, and the wider community to ensure reforms like the LOF are understood and supported. Addressing misconceptions and fostering alignment across stakeholders is essential for the reform's long-term success.

Section 3 - Future directions and recommendations

The final section of this chapter focuses on the insights and lessons learned from the implementation of the LOF as shared by participants. Moving beyond the perceptions and practical challenges discussed in earlier sections, this section explores participants' views on how future educational reforms can be more effective and sustainable. The emphasis is on identifying actionable recommendations and fostering a collaborative, inclusive approach to reform. Through themes such as desired support structures, the pace of implementation, and lessons for future reforms, this section provides a roadmap for improving future policy design and execution. These reflections underline the importance of balancing ambition with practicality and ensuring that reforms are designed with input from all involved.

6.9 Theme 9 - Future directions and recommendations for reform

The experiences and insights shared by participants during the implementation of the LOF highlight key areas for improvement and offer valuable lessons for future educational reforms. This theme synthesises participants' recommendations into three sub-themes: *desired support structures*, *the pace of implementation*, and *lessons for future reforms*. These sub-themes explore how actors envision more effective reform processes and sustainable outcomes.

6.9.1 Desired support structures

Ministry officials

Ministry officials emphasised the importance of robust support systems to ensure the success of future reforms. MO2 (HCN) noted: "One of the main lessons from the LOF is that reforms need to be backed by continuous support. This includes not just training but also ongoing mentorship, clear guidelines, and regular communication to address challenges as they arise." MO3 (EO) highlighted the role of technology in enhancing support: "Future reforms should use digital tools to provide teachers with resources and training on demand. This would allow for more personalised support and greater accessibility, especially for those in remote areas."

School leaders

School leaders underscored the need for targeted support tailored to the realities of school contexts. HOS2 (Head of School, Church), with 10 years of experience in leadership, explained: "Support structures need to account for the diversity of schools. What works for one may not work for another, so we need flexible systems that allow for local adaptation while maintaining consistency in outcomes." aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State), who has been in the role for less than 5 years, shared a similar perspective: "We also need more support for middle leaders, who often bear the brunt of reform implementation. They're the ones connecting policy to practice, and they need better training and resources to do that effectively."

Teachers

Teachers frequently called for more practical and sustained support. T2 (Teacher, Church) remarked: "The workshops we had were a good start, but what we really needed was someone to walk us through the process step by step. Having a mentor or a point of contact for questions would have made a big difference." T3 (Teacher, Independent), with less than 4 years in teaching, suggested a more collaborative approach: "If we had regular opportunities to meet with other teachers, share best practices, and learn from each other, it would have been much easier to navigate the changes. Reforms need to foster collaboration, not isolation."

6.9.2 The pace of implementation

Ministry officials

Ministry officials acknowledged that the timeline for the LOF's rollout was a point of contention. MO1 (Director) reflected: "The pace was too fast for many stakeholders. While we wanted to see results quickly, we underestimated the time it would take for schools to adapt. Future reforms need to strike a better balance between urgency and feasibility." MO2 (HCN) stressed the importance of phased implementation: "Introducing reforms gradually allows for feedback loops, adjustments, and a more measured approach to change. It's better to get it right slowly than to rush and face resistance."

School leaders

School leaders often cited the speed of implementation as a barrier to success. HOS3 (Head of School, Independent), who has been a head for less than 5 years, explained: "We needed more time to plan, train, and prepare our staff. The pace felt overwhelming, and that stress trickled down to everyone involved, including the students." aHOS2 (Assistant Head, Church) highlighted the role of timing in fostering buy-in: "When reforms are rushed, people feel like they're being forced into something they don't understand. Slowing down allows for better communication and more meaningful engagement."

Teachers

Teachers consistently emphasised the need for a more realistic timeline. T1 (Teacher, State) remarked: "We were expected to change everything overnight. It wasn't just about learning new methods - it was about unlearning old habits, and that takes time. Future reforms need to respect that process." T5 (Teacher, Church), who previously used to work in an independent school, added: "If we had more time to adjust, the reform wouldn't have felt so overwhelming. A slower rollout would have allowed us to focus on quality rather than just ticking boxes."

6.9.3 Lessons for future reforms

Ministry officials

Ministry officials reflected on the broader implications of the LOF experience. MO3 (EO), with 13 years of experience in education, emphasised the importance of co-creation: "Reforms work best when they're developed collaboratively, with input from all stakeholders from the start. Teachers, school leaders, parents, and students all need to feel like they have a voice in shaping the changes." MO1 (Director) highlighted the role of evidence-based decision-making: "Future reforms need to be grounded in robust data and piloted extensively before full implementation. This not only builds credibility but also helps identify potential challenges early on."

School leaders

School leaders offered practical suggestions for improving future reforms. HOS2 (Head of School, Church) suggested building a stronger feedback culture: "We need systems that allow for ongoing feedback from schools to the Ministry. This way, reforms can be adjusted in real-time based on what's working and what isn't." aHOS1 (Assistant Head, State) stressed the importance of capacity building: "Investing in the professional development of all staff - not just teachers but also leaders and administrators - is crucial. Reforms are only as strong as the people implementing them."

Teachers

Teachers frequently called for a focus on sustainability and practicality. T3 (Teacher, Independent) remarked: "Reforms need to be realistic and sustainable. Grand ideas are great, but if they don't work in the classroom, they're just another burden on teachers." T1 (Teacher, State) added: "We need reforms that empower us, not overwhelm us. That means listening to what we need and designing changes that fit into the reality of teaching, not some idealised version of it."

Several themes underscored the salience of collaboration, community, and resistance as critical dimensions of reform enactment. Participants' narratives highlighted the importance of relational trust and collective professional identity in sustaining change, while also foregrounding the subtle and overt forms of resistance that emerge when reforms are perceived as misaligned with local contexts and professional values (Ball, 2012; Priestley et al., 2015). Participants' reflections on the LOF underscore the need for a more collaborative, flexible, and measured approach to educational reform. Ministry officials, school leaders, and teachers alike highlighted the importance of robust support structures, realistic timelines, and ongoing dialogue to ensure the success of future initiatives. These lessons emphasise the value of co-creation, phased implementation, and continuous feedback in building reforms that are both impactful and sustainable. Future reforms must prioritise inclusivity and adaptability, recognising the diverse contexts in which they will be applied. By addressing the gaps and challenges revealed through the LOF experience, policy-makers can create a more supportive environment for transformative change in education.

The reflections collated under Theme 9 surface a fundamental tension at the heart of educational reform efforts in Malta: a tension between aspirational discourses of inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment, and the entrenched systemic structures that continue to reinforce top-down control, performativity, and compliance. Participants' calls for more authentic professional engagement, school-based development, and contextual responsiveness reveal an acute awareness that meaningful reform cannot be imposed externally; it must be co-constructed internally through relational trust, distributed leadership, and a genuine valuing of practitioner agency. However, the data also reflect a degree of scepticism which is an underlying recognition that rhetorical commitments to decentralisation and innovation are often undermined by persistent hierarchical mindsets, fragmented accountability frameworks and uneven support across sectors.

Critically, the participants' perspectives align with broader theoretical insights (Ball, 2012; Priestley et al., 2015; Fullan, 2016) that view reform not as a linear implementation of best practice models, but as a messy, negotiated, and deeply political process shaped by power relations, professional cultures and institutional inertia. The very desire for schools to evolve into learning communities points to a deeper yearning for systemic recalibration, moving away from transactional governance structures towards relational, context-sensitive, and

participatory models of educational change. Yet, achieving such transformation demands more than policy prescriptions as it requires cultural shifts, capacity-building at every level, and the reconstitution of professional identities around notions of trust, agency and ethical responsibility.

What emerges, therefore, is not simply a set of pragmatic recommendations, but a challenge to the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin current reform strategies. If Malta is to engage in system-wide educational transformation, future efforts must embrace complexity rather than resist it, building iterative, dialogic, and adaptive reform cultures that are resilient to political fluctuations yet responsive to local needs. This vision, while difficult, offers a credible pathway toward educational change that is both sustainable and emancipatory.

6.10 Looking back and ahead

Chapter 6 presented a thematic analysis of 14 interviews with Ministry officials, an HCN, an EO, school leaders, and teachers across different school types in Malta. The chapter examined their perceptions, challenges, and experiences of stakeholders as they tackled the LOF reform, capturing both its potential and its limitations.

The chapter was organised into three sections. Section 1 explored how the LOF was perceived, focusing on participants' understanding of its goals and the challenges of aligning policy intentions with school-level realities. Section 2 examined the practical implementation of the reform, highlighting challenges such as limited resources, inconsistent leadership strategies, and the rapid pace of change. Section 3 synthesised participants' reflections to offer actionable recommendations for future reforms, emphasising the need for robust support, realistic timelines, and greater collaboration. A key theme throughout the chapter was the tension between surface-level compliance and deeper pedagogical change, reflecting the complexities of implementing system-wide reform in Malta. These findings, combined with the data from Chapter 5, set the stage for Chapter 7, which will synthesise the results, engage with the literature, and address the study's research questions.

Chapter 7 – Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the key findings of the study, integrating insights from the quantitative and qualitative data to provide an understanding of the implementation and impact of the LOF within the Maltese education system. Building upon the empirical evidence, the chapter engages deeply with broader conceptual debates around community, collaboration, resistance, teacher agency and system-wide reform dynamics. It revisits each research question individually, articulating how the findings contribute to a relational and critically informed analysis of reform enactment.

Particular attention is given to how the two data sets complement one another in revealing the complexities, contradictions and tensions inherent in large-scale curricular reform. This discussion draws upon the conceptual framework (i.e. systems thinking, policy enactment theory, curriculum theory, and reform theory) to interrogate how policy, power, and agency interact in the enactment of the LOF. The Maltese context, with its small-island governance realities and postcolonial undercurrents, is foregrounded as a critical mediating environment. The dual themes of revolution and transformation, which underpin both the LOF's ambitions and the analytical framing of this thesis, continue to guide the reflections in this chapter. While the LOF was intended to revolutionise education in Malta, the findings reveal the systemic and cultural challenges that constrain the translation of visionary reforms into transformative, sustainable practices.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: Sections 7.2 to 7.5 address each research question individually, critically linking the findings to the theoretical framework and relevant international and local literature. Section 7.6 offers a reflection on the theoretical framework's role and evolution in light of the study's findings, setting the stage for the final reflections to be presented in Chapter 8.

7.2 Factors affecting the enactment of educational reform in Malta

The first research sub-question asks: *What are the main factors affecting the enactment of system-wide educational reforms in Malta?* Addressing this question requires an understanding of the complexities of educational reform and a detailed examination of the factors that influence its enactment.

7.2.1 Centralisation and systemic constraints

Centralisation emerged as a critical factor influencing the enactment of the LOF. Shaped by its colonial legacy, Malta's education system retains a hierarchical and centralised governance structure in which the Ministry of Education has authority over policy design and implementation. While this centralisation enables uniform policy dissemination, it simultaneously constrains the flexibility needed for schools to adapt reforms to their specific contexts. This duality reflects what Senge (1990) describes as systemic bottlenecks, where rigid structures hinder the flow of feedback and adaptation, disrupting the potential for organisational learning. Bezzina (2006) highlights the tension between Malta's centralised governance model and the need for distributed decision-making in education. He argues that while centralisation ensures policy coherence, it often constrains the flexibility required for grassroots adaptation, particularly in small states. This perspective underscores the findings of this study, where participants described the LOF's top-down implementation as limiting their professional agency and ability to localise reform initiatives. Participants frequently noted that the LOF was conceived and implemented as a top-down initiative, with limited involvement from teachers or school leaders in its design. This disconnect aligns with Ball's (2012) policy enactment theory, which highlights how policies are interpreted and reshaped during their enactment. In Malta, systemic inertia often diluted the LOF's transformative intent as teachers and leaders struggled to reconcile prescriptive directives with the realities of their classrooms. The tension between centralisation and local agency underscores the importance of balancing systemic coherence with professional autonomy. Stenhouse's (1975) vision of curriculum as a process offers a valuable lens here, advocating for teacher-led inquiry and adaptation rather than rigid implementation. The LOF's outcome-based framework, emphasising measurable results, often conflicted with this principle, reducing opportunities for educators to engage in reflective and adaptive practices.

7.2.2 Resource constraints and capacity-building

Resource constraints further compounded the challenges of implementing the LOF. Both data sets revealed gaps in providing CPD, materials, and administrative support. Teachers consistently expressed frustration at the lack of practical tools to integrate the LOF into their teaching. As one participant noted, "The LOF told us what we needed to achieve but gave us no means to get there." School leaders echoed these sentiments, describing the dual pressures of managing reform implementation and addressing operational demands. These findings align with Fullan's (2007) emphasis on capacity-building as the foundation of successful reform. Without adequate CPD and resources, educators are left ill-equipped to tackle the complexities of new frameworks. The data revealed that professional development sessions often focused on theoretical principles rather than practical strategies, exacerbating the disconnect between policy goals and classroom realities. Senge (1990) notes that sustainable reform depends on iterative learning processes that empower individuals to co-construct solutions. In Malta, the absence of such processes undermined the LOF's enactment, reinforcing perceptions of the reform as overly ambitious and disconnected from everyday practice.

The limited administrative capacity of Malta's education system, characterised by small workforces and overlapping responsibilities, also influenced the reform's implementation. Participants described frequent delays in receiving guidance and materials, which hindered their ability to engage meaningfully with the LOF. This reflects Senge's (1990) concept of fragmented systems, where inefficiencies in resource allocation disrupt the alignment needed for successful change.

7.2.3 Post-colonial dynamics and policy design

Malta's colonial history continues to shape its education system, particularly by relying on externally developed policies. Participants frequently described the LOF as an imported framework that failed to resonate with the local context. This perception aligns with Ball's (2012) argument that policies are not static texts but dynamic processes influenced by cultural and relational contexts. In Malta, the LOF's emphasis on learner-centred practices often clashed with the rigid bureaucratic structures inherited from its colonial past. This tension

between global aspirations and local realities reflects a broader critique of post-colonial governance, as highlighted by Sultana (1998). For many participants, the LOF's outcome-driven model reinforced the perception of reform as a compliance exercise, where the focus on documentation and accountability overshadowed its transformative potential. Stenhouse's (1975) critique of rigid curriculum frameworks provides a counterpoint to this approach, advocating for reforms that prioritise professional inquiry and contextual adaptation. Addressing these dynamics requires a shift toward more inclusive and locally driven policy-making processes. Fullan (2007) emphasises the importance of relational trust in fostering stakeholder engagement, noting that sustainable reform depends on collaborative relationships between policy-makers and practitioners. In Malta, bridging the gap between national policy goals and localised practices is essential for enabling teachers and school leaders to take ownership of reforms.

7.2.4 Relational dynamics in small-island states

The socio-cultural context of Malta further shaped the enactment of the LOF. As discussed in Chapter 2, small-island states are characterised by close-knit communities where professional and personal relationships often overlap. This interconnectedness creates both opportunities and challenges for reform. While relational proximity fosters collaboration and trust, it can also amplify resistance to change, particularly when reforms are perceived as externally imposed. In the Maltese educational context, Debono (2019) highlights that despite extensive policy initiatives, leadership effectiveness is often hampered when relational dynamics within schools are neglected. Participants highlighted the duality of relational dynamics, where informal networks facilitated knowledge-sharing and also reinforced collective scepticism about the LOF. These findings align with Senge's (1990) systems thinking framework, which emphasises the importance of aligning formal structures with informal practices to foster coherence. However, the data revealed that these networks often operated independently of formal policy channels, leading to inconsistencies in how the LOF was interpreted and enacted. Union involvement further complicated these dynamics. While unions provided teachers with a sense of collective agency, their resistance to certain aspects of the LOF often created tensions between policy-makers and educators. This reflects Ball's (2012) observation that policy enactment's relational and political dimensions are as influential as the policy itself.

7.3 Leaders and teachers' experiences and responses to educational reform

The second research sub-question asks: *How do school leaders, curricular leaders and teachers in primary education in Malta experience and respond to system-wide educational reforms?* The enactment of the LOF revealed diverse responses among teachers, school leaders, and curricular leaders, shaped by their professional roles, systemic constraints, and cultural contexts.

7.3.1 Professional autonomy in a centralised system

Teacher autonomy emerged as a central theme in participants' responses. While the LOF was framed as offering flexibility and professional freedom, participants overwhelmingly reported feeling constrained by systemic inefficiencies and rigid accountability mechanisms. Teachers described their autonomy as "limited to what the framework dictates," with the LOF's prescriptive documentation requirements overshadowing opportunities for innovation. This reflects Stenhouse's (1975) critique of rigid curriculum models, which risk reducing teachers to implementers rather than developers of educational practice. It also aligns with Bezzina's (2013) assertion that school leaders in Malta often operate within tight systemic constraints, balancing the demands of central authorities with the need to foster teacher autonomy. Bezzina argues that this balancing act is critical in ensuring reforms like the LOF do not erode the professional identity and creativity of educators.

Participants frequently highlighted the gap between the rhetoric of autonomy and the realities of implementation. One teacher described the reform as "autonomy on paper, not in practice," reflecting the tension between the LOF's aspirational goals and the systemic conditions that shape its enactment. Ball's (2012) policy enactment theory underscores how policies are not static but are interpreted and reinterpreted by those tasked with implementing them. In the case of the LOF, teachers' experiences revealed a disconnect between the policy's intended outcomes and its operational realities, leading to a perception of autonomy as more symbolic than substantive.

This tension was further exacerbated by the centralised nature of Malta's education system, which limited schools' ability to adapt the LOF to their unique contexts. Senge's (1990)

systems thinking framework highlights the importance of enabling localised decision-making within larger systemic structures. However, the data suggest that the hierarchical nature of Malta's governance model hindered this flexibility, reinforcing a compliance-driven approach to reform. Addressing these dynamics requires reimagining autonomy as relational, rooted in trust, collaboration, and professional inquiry, an approach championed by Stenhouse (1975).

7.3.2 The emotional labour of reform

The emotional toll of the LOF's implementation was a recurring theme in participants' accounts, revealing the hidden costs of systemic change. Teachers frequently described feelings of frustration, disillusionment, and exhaustion, particularly when faced with conflicting expectations and insufficient resources. For many, the reform's ambitious goals were experienced as burdensome rather than empowering, echoing Ball's (2003) critique of managerialist reforms that prioritise accountability at the expense of professional creativity. Reform fatigue emerged as a factor in shaping actors' responses. Participants described the LOF as one of many initiatives introduced without sufficient consultation or iterative feedback, creating a "reform treadmill" that undermined their capacity for meaningful engagement. Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change highlights the importance of addressing the emotional dimensions of reform, noting that successful implementation depends on fostering relational trust and resilience among stakeholders. In Malta, however, the lack of consistent communication and support amplified feelings of disengagement and resistance.

School leaders also experienced emotional pressures, often describing their roles as isolating and fraught with competing demands. Many leaders expressed frustration at the lack of clear guidance from the Ministry, which left them to interpret and operationalise the LOF independently. This aligns with Leithwood et al.'s (2008) findings on the relational dimensions of leadership, emphasising the need for collaborative structures that mitigate the emotional toll of reform.

7.3.3 Variability in leadership responses

Leadership emerged as an important factor in shaping how the LOF was experienced and enacted. The data revealed variability in how school leaders approached reform implementation, reflecting differences in leadership styles, capacities, and contextual challenges. Some leaders adopted distributed leadership approaches, fostering collaboration and shared ownership among staff. As one head of school explained, "We brought everyone together, teachers, parents, even students, to figure out how to make this work." These leaders often reported higher levels of teacher engagement and adaptation, aligning with Fullan's (2007) emphasis on capacity-building as a driver of systemic change. Conversely, leaders who relied on hierarchical or directive approaches frequently encountered greater resistance. This resistance was compounded by leaders' own uncertainties about the LOF, which sometimes undermined their ability to project confidence and provide clear guidance. Ball's (2012) policy enactment theory provides a lens for understanding these dynamics, highlighting how relational and contextual factors shape policy interpretation and implementation.

The questionnaire data also revealed a perception gap between school leaders and teachers, with leaders expressing relatively higher confidence in the LOF's potential. This discrepancy suggests that leaders may underestimate the practical challenges teachers face or that their uncertainties are masked by the need for project authority. These findings align with Senge's (1990) systems thinking framework, which underscores the importance of feedback loops in aligning leadership practices with on-the-ground realities. Leadership capacity-building emerged as a critical area for improvement. Many participants highlighted the lack of targeted CPD for school leaders, leaving them ill-prepared to tackle the complexities of reform. Stenhouse's (1975) emphasis on inquiry and reflection is particularly relevant here, suggesting that professional learning for leaders should focus on fostering adaptive and collaborative strategies.

7.3.4 The role of professional identity in shaping responses to reform

A critical factor in how leaders and teachers responded to the LOF was their sense of professional identity. The findings revealed that participants' self-perceptions as teachers and

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leaders influenced their engagement with the reform. For many, the LOF was not merely a policy directive but a challenge to their established practices, values, and beliefs about education.

Teachers frequently described feeling that the LOF's prescriptive documentation requirements and outcomes-based approach conflicted with their identity as creative, autonomous professionals. This tension was particularly pronounced among experienced educators, who often viewed the reform as undervaluing their expertise and judgment. These insights align with Day and Gu's (2010) assertion that professional identity is deeply tied to teachers' sense of purpose and agency, and disruptions to this identity can provoke resistance or disengagement.

School leaders also struggled with the implications of the LOF for their professional identities. While some embraced the reform as an opportunity to reimagine their leadership roles, others struggled to reconcile the demands of the LOF with their existing practices and priorities. The findings suggest that leaders who viewed themselves as facilitators of teacher development were more likely to adopt collaborative approaches to implementing the LOF, fostering a sense of shared purpose among staff. This reflects Spillane et al.'s (2004) emphasis on the relational dimensions of distributed leadership, where professional identity is shaped by interactions and shared goals.

Conversely, professional identity also emerged as a source of resilience and innovation. Teachers who identified strongly as lifelong learners were more likely to engage with the LOF as an opportunity for professional growth. These teachers reframed the reform as a means of enhancing their practice, even in the face of systemic constraints. This adaptive response highlights the potential of reforms to serve as catalysts for identity renewal when coupled with adequate support and professional development opportunities (Kelchtermans, 2005). The relationship between policy and professional identity underscores the need for reforms to acknowledge and support educators' sense of purpose and agency. Policy-makers should consider how reforms align with the values and identities of those tasked with implementation, fostering alignment rather than conflict. CPD initiatives could explicitly address these dimensions, providing spaces for educators to reflect on how reforms intersect with their professional identities and aspirations.

7.3.5 Teachers and leaders as transformative actors

This study framed teachers and school leaders as actors, a conceptual choice inspired by Touraine's (2000) perspective on social actors as agents of change within their environments. Touraine's actor-oriented sociology challenges system-oriented models, arguing that social change emerges from the interaction between individual agency and structural constraints. The findings revealed that teachers and school leaders in Malta acted not as passive recipients of policy but as active agents approaching and reshaping the LOF's implementation. For instance, teachers' adaptations of prescriptive policies into context-sensitive practices reflect what Touraine identifies as the "ambivalence" of actors - both engaging with and resisting imposed norms. Similarly, school leaders who fostered distributed leadership demonstrated the creative agency that Touraine attributes to actors who redefine their horizons and capacities for action.

Touraine's concept of "actors' projects," which combines individual agency with a defense of collective identity, resonates strongly with the experiences of participants in this study. Teachers' shared frustrations with the LOF were often framed in terms of their professional identity and autonomy, illustrating how collective concerns can drive individual adaptations and innovations. This perspective underscores the need for policy-makers to view educators not as instruments of reform but as co-creators of systemic change. Recognising teachers and leaders as transformative actors requires reforms that empower agency, foster collaboration, and acknowledge the relationship between policy and practice. The interview findings of this study align with Bezzina and Cutajar's (2012) observations that leadership in Malta continues to be constrained by governance structures that favour compliance over strategic, long-term visioning. Their work highlights the persistent tension between centralised control and the aspiration for distributed leadership, revealing how educational leaders often operate within tightly prescribed parameters that limit innovation and agency (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2012). These systemic constraints, repeatedly referenced by school leaders and curricular leaders in this study, underscore the difficulty of achieving meaningful reform without parallel cultural and structural shifts.

7.4 Insights into policy change strategies for education

The third sub-question asks: *How can understanding the enactment of the LOF reform inform future policy change strategies in education?* This section explores the lessons learned from the LOF's enactment, focusing on the links between policy aspirations and implementation realities.

7.4.1 Bridging the gap between vision and practice

The LOF was conceived as a "revolutionary" reform to transform Malta's education system into a learner-centred, outcomes-based model aligned with EU and global trends. However, the findings revealed a persistent gap between the policy's overarching vision and its operationalisation. Teachers and school leaders frequently described challenges in translating the LOF's principles into actionable classroom practices, highlighting a disconnect between high-level aspirations and on-the-ground realities. This disconnect underscores the importance of aligning policy design with the lived experiences of educators. Ball's (2012) policy enactment theory provides a critical lens here, emphasising that policies are not static texts but are continuously interpreted and negotiated by stakeholders. In the case of the LOF, systemic centralisation constrained these interpretive processes, leaving teachers and leaders with limited agency to adapt the framework to their contexts. Addressing this requires iterative policy strategies that actively engage educators as co-constructors of reform, fostering a sense of ownership and shared purpose. Stenhouse's (1975) concept of curriculum as a process is particularly relevant in this context. By positioning educators as reflective practitioners, his framework highlights the potential for policies like the LOF to serve as tools for professional inquiry rather than rigid mandates. However, the data revealed that the LOF's emphasis on measurable outcomes (merely box-ticking exercises) often overshadowed opportunities for creative and adaptive practice. To bridge this gap, policy-makers must prioritise reforms that empower teachers.

7.4.2 Fostering adaptive and inclusive policy-making

Both data sets highlighted the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to reform. Participants frequently noted that the LOF's prescriptive framework failed to account for the diverse needs and conditions of schools (even the differences between state, church and independent sectors), reinforcing perceptions of the reform as disconnected from classroom realities. Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change emphasises the importance of adaptive capacity-building, where policies evolve in response to stakeholder feedback and contextual challenges. For Malta, this requires creating mechanisms for continuous dialogue and iterative refinement, ensuring that reforms remain responsive to the dynamic realities of education.

Senge's (1990) systems thinking framework further underscores the importance of adaptive strategies, particularly in fostering organisational learning. The findings revealed a lack of feedback loops in the LOF's implementation, leading to inconsistencies and misalignment across different levels of the system. Establishing structured feedback mechanisms, such as regular consultations with actors and pilot testing phases, could address these gaps, enabling policy-makers to refine reforms based on lived experiences.

7.4.3 Balancing centralisation with local autonomy

Centralisation emerged as a recurring theme in the findings, highlighting its strengths and limitations. While centralised governance facilitates uniform policy dissemination, it often constrains the flexibility required for schools to adapt reforms to their unique contexts. Participants frequently described the LOF as a top-down initiative that left little room for localised decision-making, reinforcing the perception of autonomy as rhetorical rather than substantive.

Ball's (2012) emphasis on the relational dimensions of policy enactment highlights the importance of balancing centralised structures with collaborative processes. Similarly, Senge's (1990) systems thinking approach advocates for decentralised decision-making, where schools act as nodes of innovation within the broader system. For Malta, this balance requires rethinking governance models to grant schools greater agency while maintaining systemic coherence. Bezzina (2015) emphasises the importance of empowering schools and leaders to act as local agents of change within centralised systems. He suggests that

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decentralising certain decision-making processes can create opportunities for schools to adapt reforms to their unique contexts without undermining national policy goals. This perspective reinforces the need for a governance model that supports both systemic alignment and localised flexibility in Malta's education system. Stenhouse's (1975) advocacy for professional inquiry offers a pathway for addressing this tension. By involving leaders and teachers in the design and adaptation of policies, reforms can align more closely with classroom realities, fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. This approach is supported by Fullan's (2007) emphasis on relational trust, which is essential for building stakeholder engagement and bridging the gap between policy intentions and implementation.

7.4.4 Prioritising capacity-building and relational trust

Professional development and relational trust emerged as critical enablers of successful reform. Both data sets revealed gaps in the CPD provided to teachers and school leaders, with many participants describing professional development sessions as overly theoretical and disconnected from practical challenges. Bezzina (2015) stresses that sustainable educational reform requires transformational leadership practices that cultivate distributed leadership, build relational trust, and foster the development of professional learning communities. His argument resonates with the findings of this study, where participants consistently emphasised the need for leadership models that move beyond hierarchical authority towards genuine collaboration and shared decision-making. However, the persistent tension between centralised mandates and local school autonomy identified in this research highlights the difficulty of embedding such transformational practices within Malta's current governance frameworks (Bezzina, 2015). Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change highlights the centrality of capacity-building in equipping stakeholders with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to engage with reform. Senge's (1990) focus on feedback and learning processes further underscores the need for iterative and context-sensitive professional development. For example, CPD programmes incorporating peer coaching, collaborative workshops, and reflective practice could address the disconnect between policy goals and classroom realities. Stenhouse's (1975) framework reinforces this, advocating for professional development initiatives that position teachers as active agents of change, fostering a culture of inquiry and adaptation.

Relational trust was another recurring theme in participants' accounts, reflecting the relational dynamics of Malta's small-island context. Teachers frequently described a lack of trust between teachers, school leaders, and policy-makers, undermining their confidence in the LOF. Fullan (2007) argues that trust is a prerequisite for effective reform, enabling stakeholders to address uncertainties and collaborate toward shared goals. For Malta, rebuilding trust requires transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and sustained engagement with all actors involved in the reform process.

7.5 Exploring the experience of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms in Malta

The three sub-questions explored in this study converge on the main research question: *What is the experience of educational system-wide change and curricular reforms, such as the LOF, in the postcolonial small-island state of Malta?*

7.5.1 Aspirations and systemic constraints

The LOF was framed as a revolutionary reform to transition Malta's education system into a learner-centred, outcomes-based framework, echoing global trends in education reform. However, its enactment revealed a persistent tension between these aspirational goals and the systemic constraints inherent in Malta's centralised governance structures. As Sahlberg (2011) and Fullan (2007) argue, transformative reforms often struggle to gain traction in systems marked by rigidity and hierarchical decision-making.

The findings revealed that participants broadly supported the LOF's vision but frequently perceived its implementation as compliance-driven. Teachers described feeling constrained by documentation requirements and prescriptive directives, which reduced opportunities for pedagogical innovation. This reflects Ball's (2012) argument that policies are not static entities but are continuously interpreted and reshaped during enactment, often in ways that dilute their transformative potential. Similarly, Senge's (1990) systems thinking framework highlights the limitations of top-down reform models, which frequently fail to incorporate

the iterative feedback loops necessary for adaptive learning. Malta's colonial legacy further shaped the LOF's systemic constraints. Cassar (2022) and Sultana (1996) note that post-colonial education systems often retain hierarchical governance models that prioritise external benchmarks over localised innovation. In this context, the LOF's learner-centred ideals clashed with the bureaucratic and centralised policy implementation structures, reinforcing perceptions of the reform as disconnected from classroom realities. Stenhouse's (1975) concept of curriculum as a process provides a counterpoint to this rigidity, advocating for reforms that empower teachers as active curriculum developers rather than passive implementers.

7.5.2 Relational dynamics and trust in a small-island context

The relational dynamics of Malta's small-island context were both a strength and a limitation in the LOF's enactment. As Baldacchino (2002) argues, small-island states are characterised by close-knit communities where professional and personal networks overlap, creating unique opportunities and challenges for systemic reform. These dynamics were evident in participants' descriptions of informal collaboration and knowledge-sharing among teachers and leaders, which enabled some degree of adaptation despite systemic constraints. However, relational proximity also amplified resistance to change, particularly when reforms were perceived as externally imposed or misaligned with local realities. This reflects Ball's (2012) insights into the political and relational dimensions of policy enactment, which emphasise the role of power dynamics in shaping how policies are interpreted and negotiated. Participants frequently highlighted the role of unions in these dynamics, describing their dual role as both advocates for teachers' rights and critics of the LOF's design. As Maguire et al. (2018) note, unions often challenge reforms they perceive as threatening professional autonomy, creating tensions that can undermine collaborative reform efforts.

The findings also revealed a pervasive lack of relational trust between policy-makers and educators. Teachers expressed feeling excluded from the LOF's design, viewing it as an externally imposed framework prioritising global benchmarks over local needs. This aligns with Priestley et al.'s (2015) critique of top-down reforms, which often fail to engage stakeholders meaningfully in the policy design process. Fullan (2007) argues that trust is foundational for systemic change, enabling stakeholders to align their efforts toward shared

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goals. In Malta, rebuilding this trust requires transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and sustained engagement, as Senge's (1990) systems thinking framework emphasises.

7.5.3 The emotional and professional dimensions of reform

The emotional labour of reform was a theme in participants' accounts, reflecting the hidden costs of systemic change. Teachers and school leaders frequently described feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and disillusionment, particularly when faced with conflicting expectations and insufficient support. These experiences resonate with Hargreaves' (1998) observations on the emotional dimensions of teaching, which are often intensified during periods of reform.

Reform fatigue, described by participants as a "reform treadmill," reflects the pressures of accountability-driven change. Ball's (2003) critique of performativity in education is particularly relevant here, as teachers frequently described being overwhelmed by documentation requirements that detracted from their core pedagogical responsibilities. Fullan (2007) emphasises the importance of addressing these pressures, noting that resilience and relational trust are critical for successful reform implementation. Despite these challenges, the findings also highlighted moments of professional growth. Teachers who engaged with the LOF as an opportunity for inquiry and experimentation described a renewed sense of creativity and purpose. This aligns with Stenhouse's (1975) emphasis on professional inquiry as a driver of teacher learning and collaboration. However, such potential was often unrealised due to systemic inefficiencies and a lack of targeted capacity-building initiatives (Sultana, 1998).

7.5.4 Post-colonial dynamics in policy design

Malta's colonial history continues to influence its education system, shaping governance structures decision-making processes, and framing reforms like the LOF. As Sultana (1996) argues, post-colonial systems often retain hierarchical and bureaucratic models inherited from their colonial past, prioritising compliance with external expectations over locally

driven innovation. This was evident in the findings, where many participants described the LOF as an imported framework that lacked resonance with Malta's cultural and pedagogical traditions. For teachers, this translated into perceiving the reform as externally imposed and misaligned with their professional realities. Malta's reliance on international benchmarks to validate its education policies further reflects its post-colonial legacy. As noted in Chapter 2, globalisation pressures often compel small states to align with international standards, even when these frameworks fail to account for local complexities. The LOF's emphasis on outcomes-based education mirrored global trends, but its rigid accountability mechanisms and prescriptive documentation requirements conflicted with the relational and adaptive nature of teaching in Malta's small-island context (Baldacchino, 2002). Participants frequently described this tension as undermining their sense of professional agency, reinforcing the perception of the LOF as a "tick box" exercise rather than a meaningful reform.

This reliance on external frameworks is not unique to Malta. As Sahlberg (2011) and Fullan (2016) note, many small states adopt international education models to signal alignment with global standards, often at the expense of local autonomy and relevance. However, such approaches risk diluting the transformative potential of reforms as they fail to engage with the socio-cultural and professional realities of local actors. Stenhouse's (1975) concept of curriculum as a process provides a counterpoint to this rigidity, advocating for a participatory approach where educators are central to the design and evolution of reform. By framing curriculum development as an iterative and inquiry-driven process, Stenhouse offers a pathway for bridging the gap between global aspirations and local needs. The findings also highlighted how Malta's small size exacerbated these dynamics. As discussed in Chapter 2, small-island states often face challenges related to administrative capacity, resource allocation, and professional learning (Baldacchino, 1997; Sultana, 1998). In Malta, these limitations compounded the difficulties of implementing an externally driven reform like the LOF, as teachers and school leaders lacked the time, resources, and autonomy to adapt its principles to their contexts. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in policy-making processes, moving from a top-down approach to one prioritising local agency and contextual relevance. A locally driven approach would involve greater collaboration between policy-makers, educators, and community stakeholders, ensuring that reforms like the LOF reflect the lived realities of those tasked with their implementation. This aligns with

the findings of Crossley and Watson (2003), who argue that effective education reform in small states depends on balancing global influences with local participation. For Malta, embracing this balance could help reframe the LOF as a tool for transformation rather than compliance, fostering a stronger sense of ownership and engagement among educators.

7.5.5 Sustainability and the future of reform

The LOF's enactment raises critical questions about the sustainability of systemic educational reform in small-island states. As discussed in Chapter 3, sustainability is not merely about implementing change but about embedding reforms within systems, cultures, and practices in ways that endure beyond the initial rollout (Fullan, 2016). For Malta, ensuring the long-term impact of the LOF requires addressing the systemic, relational, and professional challenges identified in this study. A key challenge to sustainability lies in the capacity-building deficit highlighted in the findings. Teachers and school leaders frequently cited a lack of targeted professional development as a barrier to engaging meaningfully with the LOF. This aligns with Fullan's (2007) assertion that effective reform depends on equipping stakeholders with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to address change. However, the data revealed that CPD sessions focused on theoretical principles rather than practical strategies, leaving educators ill-prepared to translate the LOF's goals into classroom practice. As Senge (1990) argues, sustainable reform requires iterative learning processes that empower individuals to co-construct solutions, creating a culture of continuous improvement.

The relational dynamics of reform also play a crucial role in sustainability. Fullan (2007) notes that trust and collaboration are essential for embedding change within educational systems. In Malta, the findings revealed a lack of trust between policy-makers and educators, undermining the LOF's potential to inspire collective ownership and commitment. Addressing this requires deliberate efforts to rebuild trust through transparent communication, participatory decision-making, and sustained engagement. Priestley et al. (2012) emphasise that trust is not an abstract ideal but a relational practice that must be cultivated through consistent and meaningful interactions among stakeholders. Sustainability also depends on reimagining governance structures to balance centralised oversight with local autonomy. Sahlberg (2011) critiques over-centralised systems for stifling innovation and responsiveness, a dynamic evident in participants' descriptions of the LOF's top-down implementation. For

Malta, fostering sustainability means granting schools and educators greater agency to adapt reforms to their unique contexts, as emphasised by Stenhouse (1975) and Senge (1990). By positioning reform actors as active participants in the reform process, policymakers can create conditions that support localised innovation and long-term commitment to change.

7.6 Discussion of the theoretical framework

Now that I have provided insights into the research questions, I would like to discuss the theoretical framework underpinning this research, providing a comprehensive lens for examining the complexities of educational reform in Malta. This section revisits each theoretical component, discussing how it shaped data generation, evolved during the research process, and contributed to the key insights presented in this study.

7.6.1 The framework's role in generating data

The theoretical framework played a foundational role in shaping the data collection tools, ensuring they captured the nuanced dimensions of policy enactment and reform processes. Each theoretical component informed specific aspects of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide.

- **Systems thinking (Senge, 1990):** The interconnectedness of policy directives, classroom practices, and leadership dynamics influenced the questionnaire design, prompting questions that explored relationships across different levels of the education system. For instance, how teachers interpreted policy guidance and how schools tackled systemic bottlenecks were key focus areas.

- **Curriculum as process (Stenhouse, 1975):** His process-oriented curriculum theory guided the creation of interview questions that explored the dynamic and context-specific ways educators adapted the LOF to their realities. This approach ensured that the tools captured how participants engaged in reflective inquiry and curriculum adaptation.

- **Policy enactment theory (Ball, 2012):** The situated nature of reform processes shaped interview prompts to examine how participants negotiated the tensions between centralised directives and localised needs. It particularly informed questions on how teachers interpreted ambiguous policy goals within their schools.

- **Resistance to change (Fullan, 2007):** Fullan's emphasis on capacity-building and relational trust ensured that the tools also addressed the emotional and professional dimensions of reform, encouraging participants to share their experiences of support (or lack thereof) during the LOF's implementation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives enriched the data collection process, enabling the generation of multi-dimensional insights into the lived experiences of the actors. The alignment between the framework and data collection tools ensured the study remained theoretically grounded while allowing space for emergent themes to surface.

7.6.2 Evolution of the framework during the research

The theoretical framework evolved during the research to reflect the specificities of the Maltese context and the complexities revealed in the data. Initially, the framework focused on structural and procedural aspects of reform, such as leadership roles and systemic interdependencies. However, early findings highlighted the significance of emotional and relational dynamics, prompting an iterative re-evaluation of the framework. Participants described the emotional toll of reform, including feelings of isolation, frustration, and undervaluation. These insights necessitated a stronger focus on the emotional dimensions of change, aligning with Fullan's (2007) emphasis on trust and resilience.

Similarly, relational trust between teachers, leaders, and policy-makers emerged as a central theme, further reinforcing the importance of this dimension within the framework. Small-island studies (Baldacchino, 2002) were integrated into the framework to address Malta's unique socio-cultural and geographical context. This provided a lens for examining the relational proximity and overlapping professional networks that characterise Malta's

education system, adding depth to the analysis of systemic constraints and relational dynamics.

7.6.3 Senge - exploring interconnectedness

Systems thinking was instrumental in framing the research design, particularly in understanding how policy directives interact with classroom practices and leadership structures. The questionnaire and interview guide were designed to capture these systemic interdependencies, probing how teachers and school leaders experienced the relationships between centralised policies, professional autonomy, and local adaptation. For example, the data revealed that teachers often relied on informal networks to bridge gaps in formal policy guidance, reflecting the adaptive behaviours emphasised in systems thinking literature (Sterling, 2003).

However, the findings also revealed systemic bottlenecks which disrupted the feedback loops necessary for effective reform. Senge's (1990) concept of "learning organisations" offers a critical lens for understanding these dynamics, suggesting that reform success depends on fostering organisational structures that enable continuous learning and adaptation. In Malta, this would require more flexible governance models that empower schools to act as nodes of innovation within the broader system.

The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably disrupted educational systems worldwide, and Malta was no exception. Participants frequently observed that the pandemic was often presented as a key justification for halting the implementation of the LOF. While this decision was presented as necessary to allow schools to adapt to the immediate challenges of the crisis, many questioned whether it was a genuine rationale or a convenient excuse to delay addressing deeper systemic issues. The data reveal that, even before the pandemic, schools were already struggling with the demands of the LOF. Teachers described feeling overwhelmed and underprepared, with many viewing the reform as yet another layer of complexity added to an already strained system. COVID-19, in this context, seemed to magnify existing challenges rather than create entirely new ones. By pausing implementation, the ministry may have inadvertently reinforced a narrative of systemic inertia, where external crises become reasons to defer progress rather than opportunities to innovate. From a systems

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thinking perspective (Senge, 1990), crises like COVID-19 can serve as catalysts for reflection and adaptation, revealing weaknesses in the system and prompting strategic responses. However, in Malta's case, the decision to pause implementation appears to have further fragmented the reform process, creating uncertainty and mistrust. While some participants acknowledged the genuine need to prioritise immediate concerns during the pandemic, others argued that the pause reflected a deeper reluctance to confront the challenges of reform. Addressing this perception requires clear communication from the ministry, emphasising that such pauses are part of a deliberate strategy to refine and strengthen reform efforts rather than a means of avoiding them.

7.6.4 Ball - the situated nature of reform

Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment theory enriched the framework by emphasising the contextual and relational dimensions of policy implementation. This perspective shifted the focus from policy as a static text to policy as a dynamic process shaped by the interpretations, negotiations, and adaptations of stakeholders. Policy enactment theory was particularly relevant for analysing how teachers and school leaders made sense of the LOF. The data revealed variability in how the framework was interpreted and enacted across different schools and contexts, reflecting Ball et al.'s (2012) argument that policy implementation is inherently situated. For instance, teachers in resource-rich environments were more likely to engage positively with the LOF, while those in under-resourced schools often experienced the reform as an additional burden. This variability highlights the importance of context-sensitive policy strategies that account for the diverse conditions in which reforms are enacted.

The theory also provided a lens for examining the relational dynamics that shape policy enactment. The findings underscored the critical role of trust and communication in fostering stakeholder engagement, aligning with Ball's (1994) assertion that the narratives constructed around policy are as influential as the directives themselves. For Malta, this suggests that future reforms must prioritise inclusive and dialogical approaches to policy communication, enabling those involved to co-construct meaning and alignment.

7.6.5 Fullan - the centrality of capacity-building

Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change provided a practical framework for understanding the processes of professional learning and capacity-building that underpin successful reform. Fullan emphasises that systemic change requires sustained investment in developing the skills, knowledge, and agency of teachers and leaders - a central principle to this study.

The data revealed gaps in the professional development provided to policy-takers, with many stakeholders expressing a lack of preparedness to implement the LOF effectively. These findings resonate with Fullan's (2007) assertion that reforms often fail when they neglect the capacity-building needs of those tasked with enacting change. In Malta, addressing these gaps would require iterative and context-sensitive CPD models that equip actors with the tools and confidence to approach the reform. Fullan's emphasis on the emotional and relational dimensions of change was also highly relevant to the findings. The emotional labour experienced by teachers and school leaders during the LOF's implementation highlights the importance of fostering relational trust and resilience within reform processes. This suggests that capacity-building initiatives should focus on technical skills and supporting the emotional and relational well-being of leaders and teachers.

7.6.6 Stenhouse – the curriculum (really) as a process

Stenhouse's (1975) emphasis on professional inquiry and reflective practice was particularly relevant for examining teachers' roles in adapting the LOF. The findings revealed a core tension between the LOF's prescriptive requirements and the dynamic, context-specific nature of teaching. Stenhouse's critique of rigid curriculum frameworks offered a critical lens for understanding how such approaches risk stifling creativity and reducing curriculum to a compliance exercise. Stenhouse's vision of curriculum as a process highlights the potential for reforms to serve as vehicles for teacher learning and collaboration. The findings showed that where teachers were afforded opportunities to adapt the LOF, they demonstrated greater engagement and innovation, reinforcing the value of this approach.

The findings of this study revealed a core tension between the LOF's standardised, outcome-driven approach and the dynamic, context-specific teaching practices. Policy-takers often contended with reconciling the rigidity of the LOF's documentation requirements with the fluid and relational nature of their professional roles. Stenhouse's (1975) critique of overly prescriptive curriculum models provided a critical lens for understanding this dissonance, highlighting how such frameworks risk stifling creativity, undermining teacher agency, and reducing curriculum to a compliance exercise. These findings reaffirm the value of Stenhouse's vision of curriculum as a process where teachers are empowered as active developers rather than passive implementers. His principles also resonate strongly with the findings from the third research question, particularly regarding the role of teachers in shaping and enacting the LOF. The data revealed that teachers demonstrated greater engagement and innovation when they were afforded opportunities to adapt the curriculum to their specific contexts. This aligns with Stenhouse's argument that curriculum development should not merely be a top-down process but one that actively involves teachers as reflective practitioners.

Locally, the application of Stenhouse's principles offers a pathway for bridging the gap between policy goals and classroom practices. By integrating his ideas into professional development initiatives, the LOF could be repositioned as a dynamic framework that supports teacher learning and fosters collaboration. For example, workshops encouraging teachers to co-construct curriculum adaptations could align the LOF's aspirations with Stenhouse's vision of inquiry-based reform.

7.6.7 The crossroads of change - a holistic perspective

Integrating the four theoretical perspectives enabled the research to capture the complexities of educational reform. At the core of this integration is the concept of the "crossroads of change," introduced in Chapter 3, which serves as a central linking element. This crossroads symbolises the intersection of structural, relational, and professional dimensions of reform. This crossroads was particularly evident in the data, which revealed how systemic constraints, such as resource limitations and centralised governance, intersected with relational dynamics, including trust, collaboration, and resistance. However, the integration of the four theories also posed challenges, particularly in maintaining coherence across multiple conceptual

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lenses. The evolving nature of the framework, shaped by emerging data and contextual insights, underscored the need for flexibility and reflexivity in theoretical framing. While the concept of the crossroads of change provided a unifying thread, it also required ongoing critical engagement to ensure that the interconnected dimensions of reform were fully captured and addressed.

7.6.8 Reflections on the framework

Reflecting on the theoretical framework's role in this study highlights its multi-dimensional approach as a notable strength. Its capacity to address both macro- and micro-level dynamics ensured that the analysis was broad in scope yet deeply contextualised. However, the framework's reliance on established theories presented limitations, particularly in accounting for emergent phenomena specific to Malta's context.

For example, the strong influence of unions on policy enactment was not fully anticipated in the framework's initial design, highlighting the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in theoretical framing. As my analysis evolved, additional literature, such as the work of Maguire et al. (2018), which includes Ball, provided insights into the roles that unions play in shaping how policy is enacted in schools. Their study highlights the discomforts, oppositions, and resistances that union representatives navigate, often blending accommodation and resistance in complex ways. This perspective deepened my understanding of how unions in Malta simultaneously advocate for teachers' rights while also shaping the pace and nature of reform implementation. Recognising this reality underscores the need for theoretical frameworks to account for the subtle and contingent dynamics of resistance and collaboration within policy enactment processes. Additionally, integrating multiple perspectives requires attention to maintain coherence and avoid theoretical fragmentation. While this multi-layered approach enriched the study, it also posed challenges in balancing the structural emphasis of systems thinking with the relational and contextual insights of policy enactment and curriculum theories.

Despite these challenges, the theoretical framework offers contributions to the study of educational reform, both within Malta and beyond. Its integration of systemic, processual, and relational perspectives underscores the importance of context-sensitive and iterative

approaches to policy-making. The implications of this framework are noteworthy. For policy-makers, it highlights the need to design reforms that are ambitious in their goals and also grounded in the realities of those involved. For teachers and leaders, it underscores the importance of professional agency and relational trust in fostering engagement and sustainability. For researchers, the framework offers a comprehensive approach to studying educational change, demonstrating the value of combining established theories with emergent insights to address complex and evolving phenomena.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter offers a reflective synthesis of the study, focusing on its contribution to knowledge, originality, reflexivity and researcher positionality. It draws together the insights developed throughout the thesis to highlight what has been learnt about system-wide curricular reform in Malta and about the complex dynamics of educational change more broadly. While the LOF aimed to revolutionise the Maltese education system, the research findings have shown that genuine transformation requires more than structural realignment; it demands shifts in culture, agency, leadership and relational trust.

The chapter begins by identifying the main contributions of the study, both conceptual and empirical, positioning them in relation to existing national and international literature. It then critically examines the study's originality, noting how it advances understanding of policy enactment, curriculum development, and system reform from the perspective of policy-takers. Reflexivity is addressed explicitly, acknowledging how the researcher's professional and personal experiences shaped the research process, choices, and interpretations. The discussion also engages with positionality, recognising the intersubjective nature of knowledge production in this context.

Building on the critical analysis of previous chapters, the Conclusion explores broader questions raised by the study: how community, collaboration, and resistance are reconfiguring reform efforts at both micro and macro levels; the challenges of embedding inquiry-driven, context-sensitive CPD and CPL; and the deeper postcolonial dynamics that continue to shape Malta's educational policymaking. The chapter closes by offering final reflections on what has been learnt through the research journey, highlighting future directions for policy, practice, and research.

8.2 Contributions of the research and implications of the findings

This study's originality lies in its integrative conceptual framework, combining systems thinking, policy enactment theory, curriculum development theory, and reform theory to analyse curricular reform from a small-state, policy-taker perspective. Moreover, it highlights under-explored dimensions in the literature, including the emotional and relational labour of policy-takers and the subtle dynamics of resistance and collaboration in small island contexts. The study's reflexive orientation, its commitment to methodological pragmatism, and its contextual sensitivity to Malta's postcolonial legacies also contribute to its originality. By synthesising theoretical, practical, contextual, and methodological insights, the research offers contributions to the academic understanding of educational reform while addressing the needs of practitioners and policy-makers.

8.2.1 Conceptual and theoretical contributions

At the heart of this study lies the development of a framework that integrates four theories. Anchored in the novel concept of the "crossroads of change," this integration provides a powerful lens for analysing the complexities of reform processes in diverse contexts. The research enriches these theoretical perspectives by addressing underexplored dimensions, particularly the emotional and relational aspects of policy enactment. Ball et al.'s (2012) work on the situated nature of policy processes is extended here to demonstrate how trust, emotional resilience, and relational dynamics influence policy-takers' engagement with reform. This insight is especially relevant for small-island contexts, where relational proximity amplifies both collaboration and resistance (Baldacchino, 2002; Sultana, 1998).

Similarly, the findings refine Fullan's (2007) emphasis on capacity-building by highlighting how systemic constraints and professional agency interact to enable or hinder reform. This duality reveals that capacity-building efforts must address technical skills and also the emotional and relational well-being of educators, particularly in contexts where reforms impose significant emotional labour. Stenhouse's (1975) process model is revitalised in this study, which illustrates the continued relevance of his principles for analysing contemporary reforms like the LOF.

8.2.2 Practical contributions

The study offers practical insights for teachers, school leaders, and policy-makers tasked with implementing and managing systemic educational reforms. For policy-makers, the findings emphasise the critical importance of iterative and inclusive approaches to reform. Mechanisms for clear, consistent communication and stakeholder feedback are essential for building trust and fostering alignment between policy goals and practice. The research demonstrates that policy-takers are more likely to engage positively with reforms when they perceive them as co-constructed and contextually relevant.

A major gap identified in this study is the absence of robust evaluation mechanisms. While evaluation is referenced in policy discourse, participants frequently noted a lack of clear tools or processes for assessing the implementation and outcomes of reforms like the LOF. This absence fosters uncertainty and risks superficial implementation, as there is little opportunity for reflection or evidence-based adaptation. As Fullan (2007) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) argue, evaluation should go beyond accountability, serving as a cornerstone for continuous improvement. For Malta, the development of a comprehensive evaluation framework (complete with guidelines, resources, and training) should be a policy priority. Moreover, the study underscores that professional development must be inquiry-driven, context-sensitive, and job-embedded to foster authentic professional growth. Withdrawal-type training is insufficient; sustainable reform requires collaborative, school-based learning communities where professional learning is continuous, adaptive and responsive to everyday pedagogical challenges.

For teachers and school leaders, the findings highlight the importance of fostering distributed leadership and collaborative practices. Professional networks and shared expertise can help schools approach systemic constraints more effectively, enhancing both individual and organisational capacity for change. Furthermore, professional development initiatives should be tailored to the demands of reform, equipping educators with practical strategies for integrating new frameworks into their teaching. Context-sensitive CPD programmes that emphasise real-world application and inquiry-driven learning are particularly valuable. In advocating for inquiry-driven and context-sensitive CPD, this study aligns with Bezzina and Caruana's (2019) call for a profound rethinking of teacher education in Malta. They argue

that transforming schools requires transforming teachers' professional identities through practices that promote critical inquiry, collaborative engagement, and innovation. Rather than perceiving professional development as episodic or compliance-driven, Bezzina and Caruana (2019) suggest it must be embedded within everyday school life, empowering educators as co-constructors of reform and change agents within their professional communities.

8.2.3 Contextual and policy contributions

This study situates its findings within the growing body of literature on small-island education systems (Baldacchino, 2002; Schembri & Sciberras, 2020), highlighting how the close-knit nature of Maltese society amplifies both collaboration and resistance. The research also sheds light on the influence of post-colonial dynamics. As a small-island state with a colonial legacy, Malta's governance structures often reflect hierarchical and centralised models, which can hinder the flexibility and inclusivity needed for effective reform (Sultana, 1998). Participants frequently perceived the LOF as an externally driven initiative, a perception that underscores the broader reliance on imported policies rather than locally developed frameworks. Collaboration and resistance are not binary opposites but co-constitutive forces in Maltese education: educators' efforts to adapt reforms collaboratively often contained elements of subtle resistance, seeking to recontextualise external policies to fit local realities. This dynamic, shaped by postcolonial governance legacies, underscores the need for a more dialogic and emancipatory approach to educational reform that recognises teachers not as passive recipients, but as active agents of change.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward a bottom-up approach to policy formulation. Local actors must be actively involved in shaping reform from its inception, rather than being included only during implementation. This approach fosters ownership, trust, and alignment between policy goals and practical realities, creating a foundation for more equitable and sustainable change.

The unequal distribution of burdens in reform processes also emerged as a systemic challenge. Teachers, as the primary implementers of the LOF, faced disproportionate pressures when

compared to leaders, including increased administrative tasks and emotional labour. This imbalance reflects broader power dynamics within Malta's centralised system.

8.2.4 Methodological contributions

The methodological approach of this study offers contributions to the field, particularly through its use of an MMR design. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the research was able to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive analysis of policy-takers' experiences. This approach underscores the value of combining macro- and micro-level data to explore complex phenomena like systemic reform.

A key strength of the study's methodology lies in its alignment with pragmatism as a guiding philosophy. Pragmatism, with its focus on practical solutions and context-driven inquiry, emphasises the importance of selecting methods that best address the research problem (Biesta, 2010; Morgan, 2007). The decision to adopt a mixed-methods design reflects this pragmatic orientation, enabling the study to capture both the breadth and depth of policy-takers' experiences. Pragmatism also informed the study's iterative approach to theoretical framing. As themes emerged during data collection and analysis, the framework evolved to incorporate these dimensions, reflecting the pragmatic emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness (Dewey, 1929). This flexibility allowed the study to remain grounded in its conceptual underpinnings while addressing the specificities of the Maltese context. Furthermore, the pragmatic focus on practical application is evident in the study's implications for policy and practice. By linking methodological choices to actionable outcomes, the research demonstrates how methodological rigour can serve both academic and practical ends. This dual focus underscores the importance of bridging the gap between research and real-world application, particularly in fields like education reform, where stakeholders are actively seeking solutions to complex challenges.

8.2.5 Synthesis of findings

Several critical findings emerged from this study. First, the success of curricular reforms such as the LOF depends less on the technical quality of the policy design and more on the

relational trust, distributed leadership, and collective agency that enable meaningful enactment. Second, collaboration and resistance were found to be intertwined forces: teachers often resisted aspects of the reform not out of rejection but out of a desire to adapt reforms authentically to their school contexts. Third, emotional labour and relational dynamics emerged as powerful mediators of reform processes, extending beyond the more technical factors discussed in previous Maltese studies (e.g., Abela Cascun, 2020; Debono, 2019; Farrugia, 2018; Mifsud, 2014). This study highlights a shift from earlier findings focused largely on leadership structures or policy communication toward a deeper understanding of the cultural and emotional dimensions of reform. New issues surfaced include the role of perceived professional marginalisation, the subtle erosion of relational trust through bureaucratic reform implementation and the inadequacy of imported reform models disconnected from local realities.

8.3 Limitations of the study

Every research endeavour operates within constraints that shape its scope, methodology, and applicability. This study is no exception. While it provides insights into policy-takers' experiences with system-wide educational reform in Malta, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These include methodological challenges, contextual specificities, theoretical boundaries, and the researcher's positionality. Reflecting on these limitations ensures transparency and also identifies areas for future research to build upon these findings.

8.3.1 Methodological limitations

The MMR design enabled a comprehensive exploration of the LOF's enactment by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. However, several methodological constraints influenced the study's outcomes.

First, the quantitative component relied on self-reported questionnaires, which are inherently subject to participant bias. In tightly-knit professional communities like Malta's, relational proximity may heighten concerns about confidentiality, potentially shaping participants' responses. While safeguards were in place to address these concerns, the possibility of social

desirability bias remains a methodological limitation. Second, the questionnaires provided a static snapshot of participants' experiences at a specific point in time. While this approach captured immediate perceptions of the LOF, it could not track how these perceptions evolved as the reform progressed. A longitudinal design would have provided richer insights into the dynamic processes of adaptation, resistance, and eventual normalisation of the reform, highlighting how policy-takers' experiences shifted over time. Finally, the qualitative data, while offering depth and context, was constrained by its reliance on purposive sampling and a relatively small participant pool. Although efforts were made to include diverse voices, teachers, school leaders, and Ministry officials, the sample may not fully reflect the range of experiences across Malta's education system. Including additional perspectives, such as those from underrepresented sectors, could have further enriched the findings.

8.3.2 Contextual specificities

Malta's unique socio-cultural and governance context offered a rich lens for examining the LOF, but it also limits the generalisability of the findings. For instance, the amplified influence of unions, which emerged as a critical factor in shaping policy-takers' responses, is particularly pronounced in Malta's small-island context. In larger systems with more diffuse power structures, union influence may manifest differently or hold less central importance. Similarly, challenges associated with centralisation, such as limited school autonomy and rigid bureaucratic processes, are not unique to Malta but likely vary in scale and complexity across different contexts. The study's findings are also temporally and culturally specific, shaped by Malta's ongoing efforts to align its education system with EU standards while retaining its local identity. These dynamics create a layered reform environment that may not be directly applicable to other settings. While the study contributes to broader discussions on policy enactment and small-island education systems, its insights should be adapted carefully when applied to different contexts.

8.3.3 Researcher positionality

My researcher's positionality is both a strength and a limitation in this study. My familiarity with Malta's education system provided contextual depth and facilitated participant engagement, but it also carried the potential for interpretive bias. My prior knowledge of the LOF and its implementation may have shaped the framing of questions or influenced how participants' responses were interpreted. To address this, reflexivity was central to the research process, as outlined in Chapter 4. Deadling with insider-outsider tensions was a continual reflexive exercise, requiring conscious strategies to balance my embedded knowledge with critical distance. This dual positioning enriched the research, allowing for nuanced interpretations, but also demanded vigilant self-scrutiny to avoid the risks of over-identification or undue familiarity with the research context. In fact, peer debriefing, triangulation through MMR design, and critical reflection were employed to mitigate potential biases and enhance the reliability of the findings. Nonetheless, the subjective influence of the researcher cannot be entirely eliminated, underscoring the importance of transparency in documenting the research process. Future studies led by external researchers or employing co-researchers with diverse positionalities could provide alternative perspectives.

8.3.4 Challenges of systemic reform research

Systemic reform is inherently complex and dynamic, posing unique challenges for researchers. Capturing the interaction between structural, relational, and professional factors requires balancing depth with breadth, and certain nuances are inevitably overlooked. For example, while this study focused on leaders and teachers, it did not include the perspectives of students, parents, or external stakeholders who also play pivotal roles in shaping reform outcomes. Their inclusion in future research could provide a more holistic understanding of the LOF's impact. Additionally, systemic reform is rarely linear, and its outcomes often evolve over time. The study's cross-sectional design, while effective in capturing immediate responses, could not fully explore the longitudinal effects of the LOF. Future research employing longitudinal methodologies could track how reform efforts mature, highlighting shifts in stakeholder engagement, policy coherence, and long-term outcomes.

8.3.5 Reflexivity

Engaging with this research journey has been a 'transformative/ process, reshaping my understanding of educational change, systemic complexity and professional agency. Initially approaching the study with a belief in the rational implementation of well-designed reforms, I came to recognise the deeply relational, emotional, and political dimensions of reform enactment. The voices of teachers and leaders challenged me to reframe simplistic notions of resistance, revealing its constructive and adaptive functions. Reflexivity was an ongoing epistemic stance, guiding data generation, analysis and interpretation. This journey has heightened my awareness of how my professional experiences informed my inquiry, strengthened my commitment to context-sensitive, collaborative approaches to educational development and deepened my appreciation for the resilience and creativity of educational communities undergoing change.

8.4 Research recommendations

The findings of this study offer insights into the dynamics of system-wide educational reform and provide a foundation for actionable recommendations.

8.4.1 Recommendations for policy-makers

Adopt inclusive and iterative policy-making processes - The study revealed that the exclusion of teachers and school leaders during the LOF's design phase contributed to its perception as externally driven and disconnected from classroom realities. Drawing on Stenhouse's (1975) principles of inquiry and collaboration, policy-makers should engage stakeholders at every stage of reform, from co-design to evaluation. This can be operationalised through advisory panels, pilot testing, and iterative consultation sessions, ensuring reforms align with educators' lived realities. Such co-constructive approaches foster ownership, trust, and long-term engagement.

Strengthen communication channels for clarity and cohesion - Inconsistent and fragmented communication was a recurring issue in the LOF's rollout, undermining trust and engagement. Policy-makers should develop centralised yet adaptable communication strategies that address the unique needs of different stakeholders. Comprehensive guides, liaison officers to bridge gaps between central authorities and schools, and regular updates through digital platforms could ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment across the system.

Empower schools with greater autonomy. - The study highlights the limitations of Malta's centralised governance model, which restricted schools' ability to adapt the LOF to their specific contexts. Decentralisation efforts should allow schools and college networks more discretion in resource allocation, professional development, and curriculum adaptation. For example, empowering schools to contextualise assessments and allocate budgets could enable reforms to be implemented in ways that resonate with local needs while maintaining systemic coherence.

Balance innovation with stability to avoid reform fatigue. - The relentless focus on innovation, often driven by changing leadership and external benchmarks, destabilises the education system and exacerbates reform fatigue. Policy frameworks should adopt a strategic, measured approach that allows for reflection, adaptation, and consolidation between reform cycles. By pacing reform initiatives, policy-makers can create an environment of trust and stability, reducing resistance and fostering gradual, meaningful change.

8.4.2 Recommendations for teachers and school leaders

Promote distributed leadership and collective agency. - Schools that embraced distributed leadership were more successful in tackling the LOF's challenges. School leaders should actively involve teachers in decision-making, creating task forces or working groups to address specific reform elements collaboratively. This approach leverages collective expertise, fosters a sense of shared responsibility, and enhances the capacity for change. Embed professional development within the reform process. –

Professional development emerged as a critical enabler of reform success, yet many participants highlighted gaps in its design and delivery. Teachers and school leaders should

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advocate for context-sensitive CPD programmes that focus on practical, inquiry-driven learning. Peer mentoring, action research, and collaborative workshops can provide opportunities for educators to experiment with and adapt to new frameworks in real-world settings.

Build relational trust through transparency and collaboration. - Relational trust emerged as a key factor shaping reform outcomes. Transparent communication about policy goals, timelines, and expectations can mitigate scepticism and foster buy-in. School leaders should prioritise open dialogue within their professional communities and strengthen partnerships with unions and policy-makers to create a culture of trust and mutual respect.

Recognise and value incremental progress. - Reforms often overlook the incremental efforts of teachers and leaders who work tirelessly to align practices with policy expectations. Recognising these contributions through regular feedback, platforms for sharing successes, and mechanisms for celebrating achievements can enhance morale and motivation. Fullan's (2007) emphasis on relational trust underscores the importance of valuing gradual progress as a foundation for sustainable change.

8.4.3 Recommendations for future research

Expand the scope to include additional perspectives. - This study focused on teachers, school leaders, and curricular leaders, but systemic reform impacts a broader range of stakeholders. Future research should explore the perspectives of students, parents, learning support educators, and community leaders to provide a holistic understanding of reform dynamics. For instance, narrative inquiry could illuminate students' experiences of reform, while participatory approaches could empower them as co-researchers in examining how reforms affect their learning and well-being.

Adopt longitudinal research designs. - Reform is an evolving process, and cross-sectional studies capture only a snapshot of its complexity. Longitudinal studies could track changes in perceptions, practices, and outcomes over time, offering insights into how initial resistance transforms into acceptance, or deepens into disillusionment. Repeated surveys, panel

interviews, and document analysis could provide a comprehensive view of reform trajectories and their long-term impact.

Examine reform dynamics in comparative contexts. - Expanding research to include comparative studies across small-island states or similarly centralised systems could enhance understanding of how contextual factors influence reform. Case studies and cross-national analyses could identify effective strategies for balancing global standards with local autonomy, offering lessons for Malta and other small systems experiencing similar challenges.

Investigate the evolving role of unions. - The study highlighted unions as both facilitators and barriers to reform. Future research should delve deeper into their role in shaping policy enactment, exploring how unions can contribute to more collaborative reform processes. Network analysis, discourse analysis, and stakeholder interviews could uncover the dynamics of union influence and identify strategies for fostering productive partnerships with policy-makers and educators.

Evaluate the impact of external influences on reform. - Malta's education system operates within a globalised policy environment shaped by international benchmarks and frameworks. Future research could examine the alignment, or misalignment, of these external models with Malta's cultural and systemic characteristics. Policy borrowing and lending analyses, as well as historical-comparative studies, could offer insights into how global influences shape local education reforms.

8.4.4 Recommendations for enhancing policy frameworks

Incorporate robust feedback mechanisms. - Feedback loops are essential for ensuring reforms remain adaptive and responsive. Structured mechanisms such as regular stakeholder surveys, pilot testing phases, and iterative consultations should be embedded into policy frameworks to enable real-time problem-solving and refinement.

Balance accountability with professional autonomy. - The tension between outcomes-based accountability and professional agency emerged as a central theme. Future reforms should

balance clear policy goals with flexibility for educators to determine how best to achieve them. Policies that trust educators' professional judgment while maintaining accountability can foster greater engagement and innovation.

Reframe accountability to reduce the "Big Brother effect." - Participants frequently described feeling over-monitored and undervalued due to excessive documentation and compliance measures. Policy-makers should shift the focus from surveillance-based practices to a model of trust and empowerment. This could involve streamlining reporting requirements and creating spaces for collaborative dialogue, fostering a culture of shared responsibility rather than top-down enforcement.

8.5 Final comment

This thesis represents the culmination of a deeply personal and professional journey into the realities of educational reform in Malta. It was driven by my profound commitment to understanding the lived experiences of those who approach and experience systemic change and to advocating for reforms that empower teachers, school leaders, and students. Through the voices of teachers, leaders, and policy-takers, this study has sought to illuminate the challenges, tensions, and opportunities inherent in the process of transformation. As I reflect on this journey, two pivotal occurrences have shaped my final thoughts. The first pertains to the recent (November 2024) elections for the Council for the Teaching Profession in Malta for the 2024–2027 term. While nominations for secondary school representatives in both the state and non-state sectors were evident, the absence of any primary school teacher willing to contest these elections was striking. This lack of representation among primary teachers raises pressing concerns about leadership and advocacy within the sector, as they play an indispensable role in shaping the foundations of education. Their absence from such a critical platform not only highlights a gap in representation but also signals the need to empower leadership at all levels. If primary education in Malta is to be adequately supported and represented in policy discussions, steps must be taken to inspire, encourage, and enable leadership within this crucial sector.

The second reflection centres on the recurring tendency to import educational frameworks and policies from abroad, a practice colloquially referred to as "buying policies." Perhaps the decision to adopt frameworks like the LOF from international contexts was not the most

effective approach for Malta. While international practices can provide insights, they must be adapted thoughtfully to reflect the cultural, historical, and structural realities of the context they are intended to serve. Malta is not short of talent. It is home to exceptional educators, academics, and leaders who possess a deep understanding of the local educational scenario. These individuals are more than capable of designing policies that are aspirational yet grounded, bold yet context-sensitive. Trusting and investing in the expertise within Malta is not merely an option, it is an imperative. Transformation begins by listening to and empowering those who live and work within the system, allowing their voices to shape the reforms that directly impact their realities.

Returning to the themes of this thesis - revolution and transformation - it is evident that the LOF represented an ambitious attempt to revolutionise Malta's education system. However, as this study has shown, revolutions in education cannot be measured solely by the rhetoric of policy documents or the aspirations of reform architects. True revolutions are measured by their impact in classrooms, in the lives of students, and in the daily practices of educators. Transformation, by its nature, is complex, iterative, and deeply relational. It demands structural change, cultural shifts, and, most critically, trust and collaboration. As this study has revealed, the LOF's enactment illuminated both the potential and the fragility of systemic reform, underscoring the need for a shared commitment to a vision of education that is inclusive, empowering, and sustainable. This journey has not only deepened my understanding of systemic reform but has also reaffirmed my belief in the transformative power of education. Education is not merely a mechanism for transmitting knowledge; it is a vehicle for equity, opportunity, and hope. As I conclude this thesis, I am filled with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. I hope the insights shared here will inspire meaningful action, fostering reforms that empower those at the heart of education - teachers, school leaders, and students.

Revolutions in education do not occur in isolation. They are the collective result of courage, collaboration, and a firm belief in the shared journey of transformation. This PhD is both a critique and a call to action - a call to trust in our people, to embrace the unique strengths of our context, and to commit wholeheartedly to the shared task of educational reform. While Malta's education system is not without its flaws, it is rich with potential, waiting to be realised through the collective efforts of its people. To my readers - whether policy-makers,

teachers, leaders, researchers, or advocates for change - I leave this final thought: educational reform is not a destination but a journey. My hope is that this thesis contributes to that journey, offering insights and, above all, inspiration for the road ahead.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval from the University of East Anglia

EDU ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER 2019-20

APPLICANT DETAILS	
Name:	Heathcliff Schembri
School:	FSS/EDU
Current Status:	**PGR Student**
UEA Email address:	h.schembri@uea.ac.uk / beb17jbu@uea.ac.uk
EDU REC IDENTIFIER:	**2019_12_HS_AB_NN**

Approval details	
Approval start date:	**1.6.20**
Approval end date:	**31.12.2023**
Specific requirements of approval:	Be sure to follow any guidance related to social distancing whilst the corona virus is still active. This would apply to conducting your interviews in a virtual setting or any other activity requiring close contact with a participant. Please follow any government based guidance on such matters as you progress.
Please note that your project is only given ethical approval for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethical approval by the EDU REC before continuing. Any amendments to your project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU REC Chair as soon as possible to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.	

Kate Russell EDU Chair, Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 2: Ethical Approval by the Ministry for Education – Heads of College Network & Heads of School

GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION
DIRECTORATE FOR RESEARCH, LIFELONG
LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY

Tel: 25982743   **researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt**

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 25th March 2021

Ref: R03-2021 767

To: **Head of College Network**
From: **Director**

Title of Research Study: *An education 'revolution' in Malta? A study of an outcomes-based framework (LOF) and its enactment by primary school leaders and teachers.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Heathcliff Schembri** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/ Alex Farrugia
Director
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
Great Siege Road | Floriana | VLT 2000
t: +356 25982443 e: alex.farrugia@gov.mt | www.education.gov.mt

MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

MINISTERU GĦALL-EDUKAZZJONI
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

Tel: 25982743   **researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt**

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 25th March 2021

Ref: R03-2021 767

To: **Head of School**
From: **Director**

Title of Research Study: *An education 'revolution' in Malta? A study of an outcomes-based framework (LOF) and its enactment by primary school leaders and teachers.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Heathcliff Schembri** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/ Alex Farrugia
Director
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
Great Siege Road | Floriana | VLT 2000
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MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

MINISTERU GĦALL-EDUKAZZJONI
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION

Appendix 3: Ethical Approval by the Secretariat for Catholic Education

Segretarjat ghall-Edukazzjoni Nisranija
16, Il-Mall, Furjana FRN 1472
Num. ta' Tel. 27790060
Num. Tal-Fax 27790078

Secretariat for Catholic Education,
16, The Mall, Floriana FRN 1472
Tel. No. 27790060
Fax No. 27790078

The Head
All Primary Church Schools
Ms. Angela Charles
Service Manager – Curriculum Entitlement
Secretariat for Catholic Education

14th February 2021

Mr Heathcliff Schembri, currently reading for a Ph.D. in Education at the University of East Anglia (UEA), request permission to distribute online questionnaires to Senior Leader Team, Teachers and Head of Departments at the above mentioned organization.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Mr Heathcliff Schembri, to carry out the stated exercise subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the organization concerned.

Rev Dr. Charles Mallia
Delegate for Catholic Education

Appendix 4: Research Tool 1 (Questionnaire) - Participant Information Letter and Consent Form

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education

Heathcliff Schembri

Research Student

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

Email:h.schembri@uea.ac.uk

An education 'revolution' in Malta? A study of an outcomes-based framework (LOF)

and its enactment by primary school leaders and teachers

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1)   What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experience of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in Malta. This study aims to understand the experience of this reform and how school leaders and teachers relate to curricular system-wide change. You have been invited to participate in this questionnaire because you are an SLT Member/Teacher in Malta.

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this statement carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling me that you:

✓   Understand what you have read.
✓   Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.

(2)   Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Heathcliff Schembri, a PhD researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia (UEA), under the supervision of Dr Agnieszka Bates and Professor Nigel

Norris. This study is being funded by the Government of Malta under the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (TESS).

(3)   What will the study involve for me?

You will participate in this online questionnaire which will seek your views on the introduction and the enactment of the LOF in Malta. You will be asked questions relating to your views on the LOF, the LOF material, if the LOF has made a difference in schools and if the LOF has changed the way teaching and learning is being done in Malta etc.

(4)   How much of my time will the study take?

The questionnaire should take approximately fifteen (15) minutes to complete.

(5)   Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before you have submitted the questionnaire. Your workplace/school will not be affected if you decide to withdraw from the study. Once you have submitted it, your responses cannot be withdrawn because they are anonymous and therefore we will not be able to tell which one is yours.

(6)   Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7)   Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

This study will seek to draw on your experience of the LOF introduction and enactment to enhance system-wide curricular change in Malta. It is hoped that participating in this study will allow you space to reflect on your work and on the changes in our education system.

(8)   What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2018).

Your responses will be stored securely and will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will **not** be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

I will need to write and disseminate a report of this research to the TESS office within MEDE.

(9)   What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. You can contact me on h.schembri@uea.ac.uk or +356 79091911. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me.

(10)   Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. If you wish to receive feedback, you may contact me on h.schembri@uea.ac.uk by December 2022 and I will provide you with a one page lay summary of the findings. (If a paper questionnaire is used, then participants will be also given a paper consent form which will feature my email address.) You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11)   What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Heathcliff Schembri
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
h.schembri@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisors:

Dr Agnieszka Bates
Lecturer in Education | School of Education and Lifelong Learning | Lawrence Stenhouse Building University of East Anglia | Norwich Research Park | Norwich NR4 7TJ
Tel: +44 (0) 1603 592627 | Email: agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk

Professor Nigel F.J. Norris

University of East Anglia | Norwich Research Park | Norwich NR4 7TJ

Tel: +44 (0) 1603 592620 | Email: N.Norris@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Nalini Boodhoo at N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk

(12)   OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

If you are happy and consent to take part in the study simply access the questionnaire by clicking the button below and answer the questions. By submitting your responses you are agreeing to the researcher using the data collected for the purposes described above.

Appendix 5: Research Tool 2 (Interviews) - Participant Information Letter and Consent Form

Heathcliff Schembri
Research Student

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

An education 'revolution' in Malta? A study of an outcomes-based framework (LOF) and its enactment by primary school leaders and teachers

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – SENIOR STAFF/TEACHERS/SLT

(13)   What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experience of the introduction and enactment of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in Malta. I am interested in understanding how you have experienced this reform and how you relate to curricular system-wide change. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a MEDE Senior Staff/SLT Member/Teacher in Malta.

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:
- ✓   Understand what you have read.
- ✓   Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓   Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓   You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(14)   Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Heathcliff Schembri, a PhD researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia (UEA), under the supervision of Dr Agnieszka Bates and Professor Nigel Norris. This study is being funded by the Government of Malta under the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (TESS).

(15)   What will the study involve for me?

I would like to interview you and, if possible, to audio-record our interview. The interview will seek your views on the introduction and the enactment of the LOF in Malta. You will be asked questions relating to your views on the LOF, the LOF material, if the LOF has made a difference in schools and if the LOF has changed the way teaching and learning is being done in Malta etc. The interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient for you. I will be happy to meet either in your workplace or a public place such as a café in a part that is safe and secure. You will be able to review the transcript of your interviews, if you wish to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the discussion.

(16)   How much of my time will the study take?

The interview will last approximately an hour.

(17)   Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?
Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You are also free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from the records and will not be included in any results, up to the point I have analysed the results. Your workplace/school will not be affected if you decide to withdraw from the study. If you wish, you may also receive and comment on the interview transcript within a month of the interview date. Any information that you wish me to change will be changed accordingly.

(18)   Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(19)   Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

This study will seek to draw on your experience of the LOF introduction and enactment to enhance system-wide curricular change in Malta. It is hoped that participating in this study will allow you space to reflect on your work and on the changes in our education system.

(20)   What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2018).

Nobody other than me and my supervisors will have access to the data, which will be saved and stored securely on a password-protected private computer. Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. The results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain your name or any identifiable information about you. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications unless you agree to this using the tick box on the consent form. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

I will need to write and disseminate a report of this research to the TESS office within MEDE.

(21)   What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. You can also contact me on h.schembri@uea.ac.uk or +356 79091911.

(22)   Will I be told the results of the study?
You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a

one page lay summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished. If you wish, you may also receive and comment on the interview transcript within a month of the interview date. Any information that you wish me to change will be changed accordingly.

(23) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Heathcliff Schembri

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

h.schembri@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisors:

Dr Agnieszka Bates

Lecturer in Education | School of Education and Lifelong Learning | Lawrence Stenhouse Building

University of East Anglia | Norwich Research Park | Norwich NR4 7TJ

Tel: +44 (0) 1603 592627 | Email: agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk

Professor Nigel F.J. Norris

University of East Anglia | Norwich Research Park | Norwich NR4 7TJ

Tel: +44 (0) 1603 592620 | Email: N.Norris@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Nalini Boodhoo at N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk

(24) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and give it to me on the day of the interview. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓   I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓   I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

✓   The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓   I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

✓   I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓   I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓   I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓   I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me unless I consent to being identified using the "Yes" checkbox below.

☐   Yes, I am happy to be identified.
☐   No, I don't want to be identified. Please keep my identity anonymous.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording**   YES ☐   NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts**   YES ☐   NO ☐

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- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**

                                                                    YES   ☐   NO   ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

………………………………………………………   …………………………………………………………. …………………………..
Signature   **PRINT name**   **Date**

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓   I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓   I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

✓   The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓   I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

✓   I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓   I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓   I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓   I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me unless I consent to being identified using the "Yes" checkbox below.

☐   Yes, I am happy to be identified.
☐   No, I don't want to be identified. Please keep my identity anonymous.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording**   YES   ☐   NO   ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts**   YES   ☐   NO   ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**

YES ☐   NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

....…….   …………………………………………………….   ………………………..
Signature   **PRINT name**   **Date**

Appendix 6: Research Tool 1 (Questionnaire)

Questionnaire for Primary School Leaders and Teachers in Malta

An education 'revolution' in Malta? A study of an outcomes-based framework (LOF) and its enactment by primary school leaders and teachers.

(1)   What is this study?

You are invited to take part in a research study about your experience of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in Malta. This study aims to understand the experience of this reform and how school leaders and teachers in primary schools relate to curricular system-wide change. Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling me that you understand what you have read and you agree to take part.

(2)   Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Heathcliff Schembri, a PhD researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia (UEA), under the supervision of Dr Agnieszka Bates and Professor Yann Lebeau. This study is being funded by the Government of Malta under the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (TESS).

(3)   What will the study involve for me?

You will participate in this online questionnaire which will seek your views on the introduction and the enactment of the LOF in Malta. You will be asked questions relating to your views on the LOF, if the LOF has made a difference in schools and if the LOF has changed the way teaching and learning is being done in Malta, etc.

(4)   How much of my time will the study take?

The questionnaire should take approximately ten (10) minutes to complete.

(5)   Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before you have submitted the questionnaire. Your workplace/school will not be affected if you decide to withdraw from the study. Once you have submitted it, your responses cannot be withdrawn because they are anonymous and therefore I will not be able to tell which one is yours.

(6)   Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7)   Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

This study will seek to draw on your experience of the LOF introduction and enactment to enhance system-wide curricular change in Malta. It is hoped that participating in this study will allow you space to reflect on your work and on the changes in Malta's education system.

(8)   What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2018). Your responses will be stored securely and will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Heathcliff Schembri
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ

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h.schembri@uea.ac.uk

This study has been authorized by the Research Ethics Committee within the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, Ministry for Education.

* Required

Demographic Information

1. I currently work in: *

- ◯ the state sector.

- ◯ the church sector.

- ◯ the independent sector.

2. I work as: *

- ◯ a classroom teacher.

- ◯ a peripatetic teacher (e.g. Art, Music, etc.)

- ◯ a support teacher (e.g. Literacy, Maths, etc.)

- ◯ a Head of Department.

- ◯ an Assistant Head of School.

- ◯ a Head of School.

- ◯ an Education Officer.

- ◯ an Assistant Director

- ◯ a Head of College Network

- ◯

3. My highest qualification is a:

◯ Bachelor's Degree - Level 6

◯ Master's Degree / Post-graduate certification - Level 7

◯ PhD / Doctorate - Level 8

◯ PGCE

◯

4. What is the discipline or subject of your highest qualification?

5. I have been working:

	less than a year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	15+ years	N/A
in my current role for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
in the current school for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
in the Education sector for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

6. If you are a classroom teacher, which year group do you currently teach (scholastic year 2020-2021)?

◯ Year 1

◯ Year 2

◯ Year 3

◯ Year 4

◯ Year 5

◯ Year 6

7. If you are a Head of School, what is the student population of the school you currently lead?

○ less than 500 students

○ more than 500 students

8. If you are an Assistant Head of School, which areas are you responsible for this scholastic year 2020-2021? (Tick as many as you wish).

☐ continuous assessment

☐ curriculum

☐ examinations

☐ inclusive education

☐ pastoral care / behaviour

☐ all of the above.

☐

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System-wide Change

9. System-wide changes are changes which affect the whole educational system.

   Were there any system-wide changes that you have experienced during the years working in primary schools?

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

10. If yes, tick the ones which you have seen being introduced:

   ☐ Introduction of Common Entrance Exams in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Abolition of Common Entrance Exams in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of College Networks in Primary/Secondary Schools.

   ☐ Abolition of Streaming in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Benchmark Assessment in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Co-Education in Secondary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Interactive Whiteboard in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Nurture Classes in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Ethics in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Banding in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of One Tablet per Child (OTPC) in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Abolition of Half Yearly Exams in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of Continuous Assessment in Primary Schools.

   ☐ Introduction of My Journey in Secondary Schools.

   ☐

11. Are there any other system-wide changes in the Maltese education system which you have experienced? If yes, which one/s?

12. When I face such system-wide changes I usually:

	Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Completely	Depends
get frustrated.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
adapt easily.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
get motivated.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

13. If you ticked one or more 'Depends' in Q12, please justify your answer:

[   ]

Primary Schooling

14. Rank in order of importance the elements which contribute to good teaching in the primary school? Rank 1 as the most important, 2 as the second most important etc.

| availability of resources |
| high salary |
| national exams |
| parental involvement |
| pre-service training |
| school leadership |
| student ability |
| student engagement |
| teacher experience |
| the curriculum |

15. Which type of assessment best supports student learning in primary school?

○ national exams and summative assessment

○ continuous assessment

○ a combination of continuous and summative assessment

○

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16. In your view how beneficial are the following types of curricula in the primary school?

	Not beneficial	Unsure	Beneficial
Curriculum as a Syllabus to be Transferred (where the curriculum is seen as transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student).	◯	◯	◯
Curriculum as a Product (the teacher uses outcomes to measure learning).	◯	◯	◯
Curriculum as a Process (the curriculum is not a physical thing but rather, the ongoing interaction between teachers, students and knowledge).	◯	◯	◯

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The Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF)

17. Please tick the answer which indicates your preference. The LOF is a recent system-wide change which was introduced in Malta. The LOF has changed the way:

	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	Completely	Unsure
teachers prepare their teaching.	○	○	○	○	○	○
teachers deliver the lesson.	○	○	○	○	○	○
teachers assess their students.	○	○	○	○	○	○
students learn in class.	○	○	○	○	○	○
parents are involved in their children's education.	○	○	○	○	○	○

18. Is there anything else that has changed with the introduction of the LOF? If yes, what?

19. Rate the below CPD opportunities related to the LOF from the ones which you've experienced:

	Irrelevant	Slightly irrelevant	Somewhat relevant	Very relevant	Completely relevant	I haven't experienced this.
Attended conferences, seminars or information sessions.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Attended a CoPE session.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Discussed with a mentor.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Curriculum Time meetings.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Read material online.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Read Letter Circulars issued by the Ministry for Education.	○	○	○	○	○	○

:::

20. Rank the following learning opportunities in the order by which they helped you to learn more about the LOF. Rank 1 as the most helpful activity, 2 as the second most helpful activity etc. Place last any learning opportunities which are not applicable to you.

> Attended conferences, seminars or information sessions.

> Attended CoPE sessions.

> Discussed with a mentor.

> Curriculum Time meetings.

> Read material online.

> Read Letter Circulars issued by the Ministry for Education.

21. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, how many hours did you receive?

  ○ less than 10 hours

  ○ between 10 and 20 hours

  ○ more than 20 hours

22. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, was this during or after school hours?

  ○ During school hours.

  ○ After school hours.

23. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, was this mandatory or voluntary?

  ○ Mandatory.

  ○ Voluntary.

24. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, what were the strengths of this training?

25. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, what were the weaknesses of this training?

26. If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, how can the training be improved?

[   ]

27. The LOF helps teachers in their day-to-day teaching.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

28. The LOF helps teachers in their assessments.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

29. The LOF helps school leaders to understand the day-to-day teaching happening in their school.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

30. The LOF helps school leaders to understand the assessment happening in their school.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

31. The LOF helps students to understand what they are learning.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

32. The LOF helps students to understand how they are learning.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

33. The LOF helps parents to understand what their children are learning.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

34. The LOF helps parents to interpret better their children's assessment.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

35. Please tick the answer which indicates your preference. The LOF

	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Very	Completely	Unsure
has made a positive difference to primary schools in Malta.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
has made a positive difference to the school where I work.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
is a successfully implemented system-wide curriculum change in primary schools in Malta.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
is a successful system-wide curriculum change in all schools in Malta.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

36. In your view, what type of curriculum would best prepare primary students in Malta for the challenges of the future?

37. What are your suggestions for future system-wide changes in education in Malta?

38. Is there anything else which you would like to add?

Appendix 7: Questionnaire's Questions Justification

Section 1 - Questions 1 to 8

Question No	Question	Justification	Target Population
1	I currently work in a:	This question was included to identify the school setting where the respondent works, whether state, church, or independent. This was a compulsory question.	both leaders and teachers
2	I work as:	This question was included to determine the current role of the respondent. The roles included classroom teacher, peripatetic teacher, support teacher, Head of Department, Assistant Head of School, Head of School, and Education Officer. Following the pilot study, an 'Other' option was added to capture roles such as Head of College Network, hospital teacher, and teacher for the hearing impaired. This was a compulsory question.	both leaders and teachers
3	My highest qualification is a:	This question aimed to ascertain the highest qualification of the respondent, with options including Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree or Post-graduate certification, and PhD/Doctorate. An 'Other' option was added after the pilot study to accommodate any unrepresented qualifications. This was an optional question.	both leaders and teachers
4	What is the discipline or subject of your highest qualification?	This open-ended question was designed to learn about the discipline of the respondents' highest qualification, allowing for detailed explanations if necessary. Given the diverse range of qualifications available in Malta, this question provided respondents the opportunity to describe their specific discipline. This was an optional question.	both leaders and teachers
5	I have been working:	This umbrella question comprised three sub-questions: the duration of respondents' current role, their tenure at their current school, and their overall experience in the education sector. This was an optional question.	both leaders and teachers
5a	in my current role for:	This question sought to determine how long respondents had been in their current role, with a Likert-scale offering options from less than a year to over 15 years. An 'N/A' option was included following discussions with supervisors. This was an optional question.	both leaders and teachers
5b	In the current school for:	This question aimed to learn the length of time respondents had been at their current school,	both leaders and teachers

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		with a Likert-scale similar to 5a. An 'N/A' option was also included. This was an optional question.	
5c	In the education sector for:	This question focused on the respondents' total experience in the education sector, using the same Likert-scale options and including an 'N/A' option. This was an optional question.	both leaders and teachers
6	If you are a classroom teacher, which year group do you currently teach?	This question aimed to identify the specific year group taught by classroom teachers, with options ranging from Year 1 to Year 6, covering the primary education years in Malta. This was an optional question.	teachers
7	If you are a Head of School, what is the student population of the school you currently lead?	This question sought to determine the size of the school led by the respondent, with options of less than 500 students or more than 500 students. These categories reflect the typical divisions in Malta's educational leadership roles. The language used emphasised the leadership role without implying ownership. This was an optional question.	leaders
8	If you are an Assistant Head of School, which areas are you responsible for this scholastic year. (Tick as many as you wish):	This question identified the areas of responsibility for Assistant Heads of School, with options including continuous assessment, curriculum, examinations, inclusive education, and pastoral care/behaviour. Additional options 'All of the Above' and 'Others' were added after the pilot study to accommodate broader responsibilities in smaller schools and other unspecified areas. This was an optional question.	leaders

Section 2 - Questions 9 to 13

Question No	Question	Justification
9	System-wide changes are changes which affect the whole educational system. Were there any system-wide changes that you have experienced during the years working in primary schools?	To identify whether respondents have experienced any system-wide changes in their career.
10	If yes, tick the ones which you have seen being introduced:	To gather specific examples of system-wide changes that respondents have encountered.
11	Are there any other system-wide changes in the Maltese education system which you have experienced? If yes, which one/s?	To allow respondents to mention any additional system-wide changes not listed.

| 12 | When I face such system-wide changes I usually: (get frustrated, adapt easily, get motivated) | To understand respondents' typical reactions to system-wide changes. |
| 13 | If you ticked one or more 'Depends' in Q12, please justify your answer: | To gather detailed reasons for varied reactions to system-wide changes. |

Section 3 - Questions 14 to 16

Question No	Question	Justification
14	Rank in order of importance the elements which contribute to good teaching in the primary school. Rank 1 as the most important, 2 as the second most important, etc.	To identify the priorities of educators regarding the factors they believe are essential for good teaching.
15	Which type of assessment best supports student learning in primary school?	To understand educators' preferences and perceptions regarding different assessment methods.
16	In your view, how beneficial are the following types of curricula in the primary school?	To gauge educators' views on the effectiveness of different curricular approaches.

Section 4 - Questions 17 to 35

Question No	Question	Justification
17	The LOF is a recent system-wide change which was introduced in Malta. The LOF has changed the way:	To gauge the level of awareness among educators regarding the specific changes brought by the LOF.
18	Is there anything else that has changed with the introduction of the LOF? If yes, what?	To capture any additional changes not listed that educators have noticed with the LOF implementation.
19	Rate the below CPD opportunities related to the LOF from the ones which you've experienced:	To assess the relevance of various CPD opportunities related to the LOF.
20	Rank the following learning opportunities in the order by which they helped you to learn more about the LOF.	To identify the most helpful learning opportunities for understanding the LOF.
21	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, how many hours did you receive?	To quantify the amount of training received regarding the LOF.
22	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, was this during or after school hours?	To determine when the training was conducted, providing insights into its accessibility.

23	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, was this mandatory or voluntary?	To understand the nature of the training sessions regarding the LOF.
24	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, what were the strengths of this training?	To identify the positive aspects of the LOF training received.
25	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, what were the weaknesses of this training?	To highlight the areas of improvement for the LOF training.
26	If you were given specific training regarding the LOF, how can the training be improved?	To gather suggestions for improving the LOF training.
27	The LOF helps teachers in their day-to-day teaching.	To assess the perceived impact of the LOF on daily teaching practices.
28	The LOF helps teachers in their assessments.	To evaluate the effectiveness of the LOF in supporting teacher assessments.
29	The LOF helps school leaders to understand the day-to-day teaching happening in their school.	To determine how the LOF aids school leaders in understanding classroom activities.
30	The LOF helps school leaders to understand the assessment happening in their school.	To assess how the LOF supports school leaders in evaluating assessments.
31	The LOF helps students to understand what they are learning.	To gauge how the LOF impacts students' understanding of their learning objectives.
32	The LOF helps students to understand how they are learning.	To evaluate the LOF's role in helping students understand their learning processes.
33	The LOF helps parents to understand what their children are learning.	To understand how the LOF supports parental involvement in student learning.
34	The LOF helps parents to interpret better their children's assessment.	To assess the effectiveness of the LOF in helping parents understand assessments.
35	The LOF has made a positive difference to primary schools in Malta.	To evaluate the overall perceived impact of the LOF on primary schools.

Section 5 - Questions 36 to 38

Question No	Question	Justification
36	In your view, what type of curriculum would best prepare primary students in Malta for the challenges of the future?	To understand educators' perspectives on the ideal curriculum that addresses future challenges and prepares students effectively.

37	What are your suggestions for future system-wide changes in education in Malta?	To gather innovative ideas and suggestions from educators for improving the educational system on a broader scale.
38	Is there anything else which you would like to add?	To provide an open platform for educators to share additional thoughts, concerns, or suggestions that were not covered by previous questions.

Appendix 8: Research Tool 2 (Interviews) - Before Piloting

Semi-structured interview questions with experts/leaders/teachers (Before Pilot)

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself, your career to date and your role.

   Prompts:
   What changes have you experienced throughout your career?
   And specifically in relation to the curriculum?

2. Please tell me about your preferred way/s of teaching your students?

   Prompts:
   How does your preferred way of teaching relate to a type of curriculum?
   Has the way you teach been changed by LOF? For better or worse?
   If it changed, did this affect your students?
   Did the LOF change the way you assess students?
   What other changes happened by the introduction of the LOF?

3. My research focuses on the introduction and enactment of the LOF. Would you please tell me what your views on the LOF are?

   Prompts:
   roots / rationale / objectives / how it evolved (as a policy – policy can be mentioned in interviews with experts but not necessarily with teachers)

4. Please tell me about how you were introduced to the LOF and the training you have received.

5. What are your views on the LOF website materials?

6. In your experience, has the LOF made a difference to schools?

   Prompts:
   Has it made a difference depending on the type of school?
   Has it made a difference to your school?
   How, if at all, the LOF has affected the stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, school leaders?

7. System-wide changes happen regularly in Malta. I was wondering about your perspectives upon these changes.

   Prompts: NMC 1999, NCF 2012, Co-education schooling, Continuous Assessment & Abolishment of Mid-Yearly Exams, Introduction of OTPC One Tablet Per Child

8. What would be your suggestions for future system-wide changes?

9. What 'lessons' from the LOF experience would, in your view, be helpful in improving future changes in Malta?

   Prompt: and in any other educational systems/countries?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 9: Research Tool 2 (Interviews) - After Piloting

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself, your career to date and your role.

Prompts:
What changes have you experienced throughout your career?
And specifically in relation to the curriculum?

2. Please tell me about your preferred way/s of teaching your students?

   Prompts:
   How does your preferred way of teaching relate to a type of curriculum?
   Added: What is a "curriculum"?
   Has the way you teach been changed by LOF? For better or worse?
   Removed: If it changed, did this affect your students?
   Added: Did the LOF change the way other teachers in your school teach?
   Added: Did the LOF change the way children learn?
   Did the LOF change the way you assess students?
   Added: Did the LOF change the way change the way leaders lead the (or their) school?
   What other changes happened by the introduction of the LOF?

3. My research focuses on the introduction and enactment of the LOF. Would you please tell me what your views on the LOF are?

   Prompts:
   roots / rationale / objectives / how it evolved (as a policy – policy can be mentioned in interviews with experts but not necessarily with teachers)

4. Please tell me about how you were introduced to the LOF and the training you have received.

5. What are your views on the LOF website materials?

6. In your experience, has the LOF made a difference to schools?

   Prompts:
   Has it made a difference depending on the type of school?
   Has it made a difference to your school?
   How, if at all, the LOF has affected the stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, school leaders?
   Added: Was it a revolution, an evolution or otherwise?
   Added: Do you think the LOF is the best syllabus (curricular reform, approach) for primary schools in Malta?

7. System-wide changes happen regularly in Malta. I was wondering about your perspectives upon these changes.

   Prompts: NMC 1999, NCF 2012, Co-education schooling, Continuous Assessment & Abolishment of Mid-Yearly Exams, Introduction of OTPC One Tablet Per Child

8. What would be your suggestions for future system-wide changes?

9. What 'lessons' from the LOF experience would, in your view, be helpful in improving future changes in Malta?

   Prompt: and in any other educational systems/countries?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 10: Malta Union of Teachers Circulating Questionnaire

Support to Year 11 students following exams – clarification

The MUT has discussed with the Ministry for Education the arrangements being made for students in Year 11 (Form 5) upon completion of their school exams. It was agreed that following exams, teachers and LSEs shall be available to address students queries or difficulties and to support them as required. This shall be carried out online, as required and by using the allocated timetabled slots.

Questionnaire on Change in Malta's Primary Education

Do you work as a teacher or SLT member in a state, church or independent primary school in Malta? You are being invited to participate in an online anonymous questionnaire to voice your opinion about changes happening in Malta's primary education, accessible HERE. This research is being carried out by Heathcliff Schembri, a PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia. Thank you for your time - your contribution is appreciated! Feel free to share with your colleagues!

N.B. Please note that the Malta Union of Teachers is just helping out in dissemination of information and is not responsible for this initiative or its details. Queries and difficulties on the above should therefore not be directed to the MUT but to the entity responsible.

Membership queries

If you have any queries related to membership, including information on renewal, please send an email to membership@mut.org.mt.

by the MUT Communications Office

Telephone: 21237815, 21222663 | **Website**: www.mut.org.mt | **Email**: info@mut.org.mt