ABSTRACT
The educational attainment of the Maltese population is lower than in other European countries and the number of post-secondary graduates is lower than in most other European Union countries. The development of human capital represents the key factor of national social and economic development. In such a situation, schoolteachers are crucial in supporting children to achieve their potential and in this way contribute to national development. To achieve this mission, teachers need wide professional knowledge and, in Malta as a bilingual country, they need strong communication skills in Maltese as well as in English. This study examined the impact of student social background on the literacy competences of entering teacher education candidates. This study found a wide variation in these participants’ English language comprehension skills and some association with the type of school attended that could be related to social background.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Social Class, Student Teachers, Teacher Education, Malta
Malta fared poorly. The percentage of low achievers in reading among 15-year-olds was 36.3%, this being almost twice the EU average of 19.6% in 2009. At the time, only 64% of Maltese students were estimated to have a proficiency in reading literacy that was at or above the baseline needed to participate effectively and productively in life, compared to an average of 81% in the OECD countries. Malta was notable among PISA 2009+ participants in that it had a relatively large proportion of advanced readers but also a relatively large proportion of poor and very poor readers in the population making for an unacceptably wide dichotomy. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011 and 2016 surveys reaffirmed that the performance of Maltese 9-year olds was very weak, ranking the country in the 35th position of 45 participating countries in 2011 in English and the 40th position of 50 participating counties in 2016 in Maltese (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013, 2017).

In 2014, Malta’s average tertiary school-age population enrolment rate for the previous decade was under 40% (UNDP, 2014). In 2014, the tertiary education attainment rate of people aged 30-34 was 26.6%. This was among the lowest in the EU and well below the 2020 national target of 33%, but it had increased by 3.2% between 2011 and 2014 (European Commission, 2015). The National Employment Policy document reports that Malta has one of the highest rates of the general population with a low level of education (equivalent to International Standard Classification of Education- ISCED levels 0-2) and the second highest share of workers in the European Union (44.1%) who have an educational attainment of ISCED 2 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). Among those with an ISCED level 3-4, Malta has the third lowest share of workers among the EU Member States. It ranks seventh from the last of EU member states for tertiary-educated workers (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). Fifty-five percent of employers in Malta have reported difficulty in recruiting candidates for high-skill positions. This ranks Malta in the third position out of 27 EU Member States, implying that the pool of skilled human resources is limited (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). Malta is one of few EU countries where the “share of people with low levels of qualifications is lower among non-EU born people than native born” (EIGE, 2017, p. 16). This situation underlines, among other factors, the importance of having competent teachers who can act as cornerstones and models for children in their educational development.

Characteristics of entering teacher candidates

Brookhart and Freeman (1992) report that entering teacher candidates typically come from homes where socioeconomic status is not as high as that of the other university students. Coulta and Lewin (2002) also suggest that in developing countries, student teachers tend to come from families with lower levels of education compared to others. Richardson and Watt (2006) reported similar findings in an Australian context where the background characteristics of beginning teacher education candidates included being female, young, and coming from less than affluent family backgrounds.

Although teaching ranks high in its perceived value to society, it does not rank as highly for status and salary (Johnston, McKeown and
McEwen, 1999). In many countries, this may not draw the highest achievers to the profession (Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000). Furthermore, teacher candidates may be perceived as only average in comparison to other students and increasing feminisation of the teaching profession has contributed to a drop in the professional status of teachers (Everton et al., 2007). Literacy, achievement and cultural mobility

According to Haines and Dijk (2016), Dutch students of English are usually expected to produce work in the academic genre at level C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) for writing and speaking by the end of their bachelor’s programme. This means that they would need to have a level of bilingualism that enables them to engage in “fluent, spontaneous communication” (Haines and Dijk, 2016, p. 36) in the second language. This does not assume that they are fully in possession of Byram’s (1997) different levels of savoirs of culture-specific and culture-general knowledge affecting language and communication.

On the other hand, children need to develop good literacy skills since their reading skills are associated with later educational achievement and good reading skills are associated with higher levels of academic achievement and qualifications in adulthood (Ritchie and Bates, 2013; Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder, 2005). Teachers’ language and intercultural competence influence students' communicative competence in the language in question (Sercu, 2006). Furthermore, students' reading skills also correlate with their socioeconomic status (Kutner et al., 2007). Research suggests that reading ability is positively associated with self-esteem (Kiuru et al., 2012), which predicts improved economic prospects (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Childhood reading skills have substantial effects beyond the classroom with direct associations between these variables and attained socioeconomic status later in life. This is so even when controlling for intelligence, social class of origin, academic motivation, and duration of schooling, which themselves are also affected by reading skills (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Kieffer (2012) notes that there is general agreement that socioeconomic status, usually indicated by parental income, education, and occupation, has a powerful relationship with early reading. Furthermore, high-socioeconomic status backgrounds tend to benefit children through material and social resources that provide them with the opportunity for success in learning to read prior to school entry (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002). Sénéchal, Lefevre, Thomas, and Daly (1998) found that home language and literacy experiences play a central role in students' learning through the development of students’ oral language skills. Good language comprehension assumes greater importance later in the learner’s life and may even be a contributor to improved socioeconomic status (Catts, Hogan, and Adlof, 2005). The link between teachers’ language competence and their ability to support pupil language learning emerges very clearly. In the Maltese context, Vallejo and Dooly (2008) found significant associations between weak literacy skills and poor upper secondary attainment and early school leaving. They also found strong associations between illiteracy and poverty. Sapolsky (2005) documents the links between poverty, low socioeconomic status, poor social capital and poor health and
improving these leads to upward social mobility and societal change. Malta’s bilingual status continues to be an important cultural heritage of its recent colonial past and proficiency in English is an asset in this bilingual context (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). In addition, English is the language of most of the textbooks across curricular subjects in both primary and secondary school classes in all three school sectors (State, Church, and Independent). English became the language of instruction in most Church schools before 1978 (Portelli, 2006). In the State school sector, Maltese is the language of instruction except during the English lesson. In 1987, State support for Church schools conditional upon the abolition of selection criteria resulted in these schools admitting children from all social classes thereby increasing the percentage of Maltese language speakers in them (Busuttil, 2001). All Independent schools in Malta use English as their preferred main language of instruction and communication (Bonnici, 2010). It is desirable for effective teaching to model a foreign language at the level of competence equated with the C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and to expose children to the culture of the language through nursery rhymes, songs, popular history, folklore and tradition and current affairs (Sercu, 2006). In the Maltese context, competence in English is associated with access to good standards of education (Camilleri Grima, 2013) and good command of English should lead to facilitated learning if for no other reason than because text books are in their majority written in English (Borg, 2013). Additionally, learning to read successfully occurs within a familial cultural setting and is not a pure instructional process divested of its cultural roots in a decontextualized skill-and-drill environment (Gee, 2004). Since language is an important form of social capital that necessarily improves social connectedness (Dashwood and Son, 2011), teachers are ideally positioned to enhance learner’s connectedness in relation to DiMaggio’s (1982) cultural mobility model and address it as a social justice issue (Dashwood and Son, 2011). Thus, the link between high-quality teaching and learning and children’s later success in life can never be emphasised too strongly.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The main objective of this study was to explore whether participants’ social background and literacy related habits were associated with reading comprehension in the English language. A second objective was to obtain an indication of this cohort’s level of English reading comprehension.

The sample consisted of 79 students attending one of the accredited B.Ed. teacher education courses consisting of eight males and 71 females studying to become primary school educators; their age ranged from 18.1 to 22.1 years. The sample was divided into two groups based on students' performance on the Suffolk Reading Scale (Hagley, 2002) through the use of a median split. Participation in this study was approved by the institutional ethics review board and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

**Assessment instruments**

The measure of reading comprehension chosen was the Suffolk Reading Test 2 (SRS2L3). A
previous local norming of the first two levels of
the test (not the level used) proved it to be a useful
tool for distinguishing between the various levels
of competence of English reading comprehension
in the Maltese school going population (Firman,
Martinelli, Camilleri and Ventura, 2010). The
SRS2L3 is a group-administered test that is a
time-efficient and reliable instrument suitable for
the examination of reading comprehension of a
large number of students in a limited time.
All participants completed a questionnaire
comparable to the PIRLS 2011 adapted to older
respondents. The validity of this measure had been
established in previous studies (Gilleece, 2015;
Araújo and Costa, 2015) and was deemed an
appropriate tool for exploring the participants’
previous and current exposure to literacy.
Participants were asked about their use of
television, playing video games, ownership and
borrowing of books, perceived adequacy of
literacy, facilities for studying, the type of school
they attended, other demographic information
such as how frequently English was spoken at
home and their parents’ levels of education.
Participants were required to provide a self-
reported ranking of their overall academic ability.
This addressed, in part, the notion of a broad
indication of a ‘composite of cognitive processes’
that is a requirement for most studies in this area
(Georgiou and Das, 2014, p. S112). Participants’
rating of responses to the questionnaire is
described in terms of median values due to the
limited numbers of respondents in this exploratory
study. The descriptive and inferential statistical
tests used included percentages and the Chi-square
test, with a probability value set at the .05 level of
significance. The Mann-Whitney U test was used
to validate the two groups created through the
median split. Sixty-five percent of participants
reported that they watched television for 1 to 3
hours a day, 44% played computer games for up
to 1 hour a day, 53% read articles on the internet
for up to 1 hour a day and 59% read books also for
up to 1 hour a day. This draws the picture of an
active teenager, engaged with computer games,
online and print media. When asked to reflect on
their literacy skills as secondary school students,
none rated their reading as inadequate. However,
73% acknowledged that they needed to develop
good reading skills for their academic
development. Most of the participants (81%)
spoke Maltese exclusively at home. Fifty-nine
percent of participants reported that they borrowed
library books once a month or more often and
67% of those who borrowed books borrowed them
in English. Ninety-five percent had a computer at
home as a younger person, 89% had the use of a
desk or table dedicated to their study purposes and
93% had their own books but only 45% reported
having more than 20 books of their own before
age 16 years. Thirty-five percent of participants
read daily newspapers and 57% read magazines as
younger persons. As secondary school students,
they attended a selective public secondary school
(54%) and a smaller number attended a Church
secondary school (42%). The remaining 4%
comprised participants who attended state
comprehensive or independent schools. Three
percent of respondents described themselves as
having weak overall ability, 66% as having
average ability and 31% as having above average
ability.

Participants’ level of English reading
comprehension
The Suffolk Reading Scale 2L3 is normed on a United Kingdom population and reaches a ceiling of just under 16 years. Long-term assessment tests indicate that reading gains slow down significantly around age 17 years (NCES, 2014). Thus, one may assume with relative safety that little substantial progress in reading occurs beyond age 15 years. Scores in the participants’ interquartile range (middle 50%) ranged from a UK reading-comprehension age of 13 to just under 15 years. Scores within one standard deviation of the mean (middle 68% of the participants) ranged from the age equivalent score of 12 years 4 months to over 15 years 4 months. This suggests wider variability than is desirable with a consequent effect on the participants’ level of the English language generally and their ability act as useful models for English usage in a classroom teaching situation.

A Mann–Whitney test using a median split analysis of the SRS L3 data found that the scores of the higher achieving group (Mdn = 58) were significantly different to the scores of the lower achieving group (Mdn = 52), U = 10.5, p < 0.05. This validates the use of the median split for the analyses described below. A chi-square test was performed to examine the impact of the frequency of English spoken at home on students' literacy skills, and no relationship was found between the two, χ² (1, n = 79) = 1.2, p = .36.

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between borrowing books regularly and students' reading comprehension, and no relationship was found between the two variables, χ² (1, n = 79) = .02, p = .9. When a comparison was made between performance on the reading comprehension measure and whether the language of the books borrowed was English or some other language, a relationship was found between the two variables, χ² (1, n = 79) = 4.64, p = .031, φ = .27. This supports the alternative hypothesis that reading books in English is associated with better performance on the reading comprehension measure. The phi value of .27 is interpretable as having a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). No relationship was found between how many books were read in English per month and participants’ performance on the reading comprehension test, χ² (1, n = 53) = .48, p = .38.

No relationship was found between reading comprehension and having had a computer at home as a younger person, χ² (1, n = 79) = .27, p = .53, or having had the use of a desk or table dedicated to study purposes, χ² (1, n = 79) = .4, p = .4. No relationship was found between having 25 or more books and less than 25 books as a younger person and reading comprehension, χ² (1, n = 73) = .261, p = .609.

A relationship was found between reading daily newspapers as younger persons and the participants’ performance on the reading comprehension test, χ² (1, n = 79) = 4.43, p = .04, φ = .24. This supports the alternative hypothesis that reading daily newspapers is associated with better performance on the reading comprehension measure. The phi value of .24 is interpretable as having a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). No relationship was found between reading magazines and the participants’ performance on the reading comprehension test, χ² (1, n = 79) = .09, p = .77. A relationship was found between the type of school attended by the participants and their performance on the reading comprehension test, χ² (1, n = 79) = 5.93, p = .02, φ = .27. This
supports the alternative hypothesis that school type is associated with performance on the reading comprehension measure. The phi value of .27 is interpretable as having a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Here, 60% of State school participants were classified as low scoring on the reading comprehension test and 40% were classified as high scoring. Conversely, 68% of church and independent schools participants were ranked as high scoring and 32% from this school sector were classified as low scoring. Another relationship was found between the fathers’ level of education and the participants’ performance on the reading comprehension test, $\chi^2 (1, n = 76) = 5.38, p = .03, \phi = .27$. This supports the alternative hypothesis that fathers’ level of education is associated with performance on the reading comprehension measure. The phi value of .27 is interpretable as having a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Here, 97% of the low scoring group had fathers with a low level of education and the remaining 3% had fathers with a higher level of education. Eighty percent of participants in the high scoring group had fathers with a low level of education and the remaining 20% had fathers with a higher level of education (advanced level/ISCED level 5 and above). No relationship was evident between mothers’ levels of educational attainment and the participants’ performance on the reading comprehension measure, $\chi^2 (1, n = 76) = 2.89, p = .24$.

Finally, a chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between the three self-reported levels of ability and students' reading comprehension, and no relationship was found, $\chi^2 (2, n = 79) = .53, p = .77$.

**DISCUSSION**

This discussion focuses on the demographic and educational variables associated with higher performance on the reading comprehension assessment. One proviso to be made is that the group of participants is small and by virtue of being in higher education, is a self-selected higher achieving group. Therefore, some findings reported in the literature about the general population cannot be borne out. Notwithstanding, the findings of this present study provide interesting insights into the background of the participants in the specific group studied.

There was a moderate association between borrowing books in the English language and better performance on the English reading comprehension measure. This supports Trzesniewski et al.’s (2006) assertion that childhood reading skills have positive all round effects beyond the classroom. A similar effect size was identified for the relationship between reading daily newspapers as younger persons and performance in the reading comprehension test.

A clear distinction emerged in relation to English being spoken at the school attended. Participants receiving their secondary education in Maltese speaking schools were more likely to feature in the lower performing group on the reading comprehension test than participants who received their education in English speaking schools. This is in keeping with Sénéchal et al’s (1998) finding of the positive effect of language exposure and literacy experiences on language. This strong association between the type of school attended and participants’ reading comprehension requires further examination because the social selection of students who attend English speaking schools is
probably more important than the type of school attended (Martinelli and Raykov, 2015). These findings support Kieffer’s (2012) and Bradley and Corwyn’s (2002) assertions that socioeconomic status and education are inextricably linked. The last relationship to emerge was between the fathers’ level of education and the participants’ performance. Participants falling in the upper half of the median split tended to have better-educated fathers than those falling in the lower half. This was in keeping with Kutner et al. (2007) who documented established links between better-educated parents and children with improved literacy outcomes. Furthermore, it is also in accordance with Sapolsky’s (2005) link between socioeconomic status and social capital, all of which have the underpinnings of higher levels of education. Finally, one must breach the effect of intelligence on developing reading comprehension. The consensual view is that the domain-general IQ is inadequate to explain reading achievement unless replaced by a composite of cognitive processes that are important predictors of reading fluency and reading comprehension (Georgiou and Das, 2014). Thus, IQ may be irrelevant for reading, but intelligence is not and one would expect more intelligent individuals to perform better in most areas of academic endeavour. In this study, participants’ self-ranking on an ability continuum was not associated with their literacy competence. The author posits the view that while the positive relationship between intelligence and reading comprehension may hold true for broad areas of achievement, it may not hold for the narrowly focussed test that was administered. Even so, this being a select group, participants’ range of ability would be expected to be less diverse than that of the wider population, thereby leading to a nonsignificant result. Other findings arising from this study suggest that in line with Coulta and Lewin (2002) and Richardson and Watt (2006), participants came from families with lower SES and the majority had fathers with no more than a secondary level of education, even if some possessed additional technical certification. In conclusion, results require cautious interpretation because the participants in this study represented only one stream in the teacher education programme in one particular year thereby limiting the transferability of the findings to other groups. A deeper analysis would also require face-to-face interviews and in-depth questioning with the participants.

**Implications for policy and practice**

The characteristics of the participants provide some evidence that is useful for the decision-makers and stakeholders like recruitment bodies and teacher educators. This study suggests that some candidates entering teacher education possess lower than desirable English language skills, with 25% of participants demonstrating a level of English comprehension that was lower than that of a 13-year old native-born first language speaker of English. This suggests that candidates intending to serve as primary school teachers may lack the competence to lay the foundations for language skills in their pupils. Additionally, based on the candidates’ self-reports, the majority of respondents identified a need to develop better reading skills for their academic progress. One way to address this issue would be to introduce higher entry requirements. This will almost certainly ensure that only the
more able students in English may be admitted to the primary school teacher education course but this double-edged measure could have a deleterious effect on the number of the applicants. Alternatively, English enrichment study units followed over the duration of the teacher education programme could help improve the English language skills of those deemed to need such help. Other options include recruitment from different student cohorts, namely from the Independent school sector but this is not viable unless the public perception and valuing of the teaching profession is radically improved. In conjunction with the above, better incentives for teaching profession like significantly enhanced pay and benefit packets and improved career prospects may serve this goal. This should eventually translate to increased teacher effectiveness and learners who are better equipped to participate in a workforce that more than ever before, calls for higher entry-level qualifications and preparedness.

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