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Distribution of the sensible within the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action: maintaining patterns of inclusion and exclusion?

Daniela Mercieca and Duncan P. Mercieca

Abstract

This paper revisits The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action through Jacques Rancière's writing through the distribution of the sensible. It questions the supports provided within the Maltese state education system and asks readers to think again by asking what is left out. The Salamanca Statement is seen as reflected within the Maltese education system, both of which however position people and services in particular spaces. As systems they have a totalizing quality, which disables thought or possibility outside that which is given. They make assumptions about equality that is achieved, whereas Rancière writes about equality as a starting point and a presupposition. This is what gives democracy and politics a possibility, two values that are at the heart of inclusion.

Keywords: The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, Jacques Rancière, Distribution of the sensible, dissensus, equality.

Introduction

The guiding principle that informs this Framework is that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions... These conditions create a range of different challenges to school systems... Schools have to find ways of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities. There is an emerging consensus that children and youth with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children. This has led to the concept of the inclusive school. (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, 1994, p. 6)

In their various writings, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, p 28) often suggest that the middle of an argument or a concept is the best place to start, as the middle "is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed." Whereas it is assumed that what is in the middle somehow connects two other premises, yet Deleuze and Guattari argue that

Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p 28)

The opening quote of this paper is taken from point no.3 in the Introduction to *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (1994, p. 6). We did manipulate this quote, in the sense that we have not reproduced it in its entirety. The middle (phrase) for us is the 'school system', which links 'children with their diverse needs and disabilities' to 'the concept of inclusive education'.

Given that it is an official document (we do not use the term political on purpose, this will be explained later in the paper), as stated in the first line of the Statement “more than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca” (p. iii), the document makes repetitive calls for changes within schooling systems in order to provide “schools for all” (p.iii), and “urges States to ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the education system” (p. vii).

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, we argue that the term which links, that is, the schooling system, also has a life of its own. This means that the ‘system(s)’ is not at the service of inclusion, as is indeed echoed in the Salamanca statement. We argue here that school systems themselves create inclusion and thus use Jacques Rancière’s writings to help us question some assumptions about school systems and inclusive education. We situate this paper within a Maltese context and focus on some of the schooling systems that are in place to bring about inclusion.

The sense that is the system

Politics, in fact, is about matters of inclusion and exclusion. And it is about matters of relations between spaces and identities (Rancière, 2007a, p. 559)

Although we, the authors, have been part of the Maltese education system for many years, and through our involvement have contributed in its formation, the writing process of this paper has actually helped us to pause, ‘to stop’ for a moment and reflect on the system and how it has developed in the last 30 years. Appelbaum (1995) draws a contrast between the quickness of seeing with the groping of the blind person. It is generally assumed that a blind person lacks vision – and that is correct on a certain level. However, Appelbaum argues that “the groping, the halting progress with a stick, also has its privileges. The blind person sees what the person with vision does not, because she moves tentatively” (Law, 2004 p. 10). For Appelbaum in the groping there is a kind of poise, what he calls a ‘poised perception’. This is, “a gathering unto a moment of novelty. It is perception of traces of hidden meaning. It is the perception that belongs to the stop” (Appelbaum 1995, p. 64). This stopping for us has been important to ‘think again’ (Blake et al., 1999) about some of the structures within the Maltese educational system as we have learned to live and function within this system without questioning it, and live comfortably within the security and safety that it provides. We have forgotten, as Foucault (1995) argues, that these systems were created in a specific time, by some powerful actor/s, and that the alternatives to the systems that we have in place now, have been silenced and sidelined. We are writing this as we position ourselves within this educational system, and in fact are directing these arguments also to ourselves.

In process of writing this paper we had several informal conversations with a small number of people who have contributed extensively to the development of inclusive education in Malta. One person told us that today almost no one refers to *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action*. All Maltese policy documents regarding inclusion since The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, acknowledge its importance and claim it as the main contributor to the local inclusive process, but today its significance lies more in its historical nature. We were told that twenty-five years ago, the document was a *tour de force* in Malta where it came to

inclusive education. It was a document that educators, policy makers and parents referred to, and based their protest on at times. The way that inclusive education was envisaged within the document was revolutionary, not only as it started a debate at a national level, but it also gave people a document which they could fight with. In our informer's words: "inclusive education was a struggle, a fight. Parents fought with the schools. Teachers could refuse in those days to accept a child with disability in their classroom because they argued they were not trained."

Others, however, were more cautious when faced with this celebratory stance. *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* was a limitation to the inclusive process in Malta that had already started a few years prior to the publication of the document. The arrival of the Salamanca Statement was seen as arresting the trajectory of inclusion in Malta, which had been aiming to diminish segregation from the mainstream. According to *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* "special schools or units within inclusive schools may continue to provide the most suitable education for the relatively small number of children with disabilities who cannot be adequately served in regular classrooms or schools" (p.12). It also reads that such cases should be the exception (no.8 and 18). However, the words 'adequate' and 'exception' are open to interpretation, as each person within a gatekeeping committee, has different points of reference, and judges what can be seen as adequate and what can be an exception based on such varying measures.

Thus through these small openings, further possibilities of segregation within inclusion were 'allowed', and subsequently constructed. Tanti-Burlo (2010) argues this position. She refers to the work of Meijer, Soriano and Watkins (2003), in which they classified European countries into three categories based on criteria of how children with disabilities and learning difficulties are included in ordinary schools: the uni-directional approach in which the majority of children are included in the same school; the multi-directional approach where a myriad of approaches are available to the same child, that is mainstream and special education, and; the bi-directional approach, where two distinct educational systems exist parallel to each other, mainstream schools for mainstream children, and special schools or classes, for statemented children. Tanti-Burlo (2010) states that a

until a few years ago I was convinced that the Maltese experience fitted into the multi-directional approach as there were an ever-increasing trend towards inclusive practices, and therefore, towards the uni-directional approach. However, more recently, with the publication of various ministerial documents... the momentum and investment, in my opinion, has been shifted towards a more segregated education through the use of resource centers and learning zones. (p. 204-205).

This leads us to ask: how do inclusive education structures and systems work with exclusionary structures and systems? How are they co-exist? Are these not contradictory in their very nature? Can you be inclusive and segregating at the same time? The Salamanca Statement focuses on the term 'all children'. Is the schooling system naming any educational practice as inclusive? In one of the policy documents, practices and centres which segregate some children are justified as 'they further the principle of inclusion' – is this not a contradiction? The quote at the opening of this section captures all that we are arguing here. Inclusive acts and exclusionary acts are not neutral - they are political. The spaces that children and adults inhabit serve to

contribute to the formation of their identity(ies) – this is the political nature of the relation between spaces and identities. If a boy spends 2 hours of the day in a nurture room and 4 hours in a mainstream classroom, how does this experience construct the boy’s identity, and that of his teachers and peers? How does it affect their perceived relationships?

Rancière has been helping us to make ‘sense’ of some of these questions. There are two levels of sense-making – the first is of the structures within the Maltese state educational system and how relationships and mindsets are constructed and in turn construct our sense-making; the second concerns the constructions within the Salamanca Statement itself. Both are intimately related. For the purpose of this paper we are focusing on the Maltese state educational system, although it is through the sense-making of the Salamanca Statement that the structures we are writing about have evolved. What follows is a snapshot (some services and structures are being left out due to the complex nature of the system) of some of the services that operate within State schoolsⁱ.

Inclusion in Malta works most through a system of statementing. Children with disability that are statemented often receive the support of a Learning Support Educator - a person that mediates the child’s learning in the classroom and school. This could be on a one to one basis or shared with other students. Particular children get additional support from other professionals, such as teachers for the hearing impairment, teachers for the visually impaired, or dyslexia specialist teachers visiting the schools, among others. Most primary schools have a nurture room. The aim of this nurture room is to provide children with safe and secure spaces in mainstream schools that offer students reported as experiencing Social Emotional Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD) with “carefully structured routines providing a balance of learning, teaching, affection and structure within a homelike environment” (Rae, 2012, p.7)ⁱⁱ. The equivalent of this in secondary are called Learning Support Zones. The children who attend these are referred internally within the school, often by the teacher, or the Learning Support Educator, who expresses concerns about a child to the School Administration Team. The educational psychologist, prefect of discipline, guidance teacher or counsellor, together with the parent/carer, could be consulted on this child. Once a decision is made that a child is to attend one of these centres, then a plan is put together by a group of specialists working in these centers. The children attend there for part of the week, with the remaining time spent in the mainstream classroom. If the child attending the nurture room or Learning Support Zone is still manifesting behavior that is deemed too challenging even for the resources of these specialist spaces, then a process is started which ultimately ends in a placement for the child in a Learning Support Center. This is a school which provides specialized education and support to learners who exhibit SEBD.

The School Administration Team within the mainstream school is supported by a number of specialists who intervene, together with the Education Officer for Inclusive Education and the Assistant Director of Special Education. All meet for a case-conference where a decision is taken. Currently there are two national Learning Support Centres for secondary boys, two for girls, and one co-educational school for primary students. In exceptional circumstances, where this also does not work, the remaining options are home schooling, yet another school for boys with very challenging behaviours, or a Young People’s Unit located within a hospital for mental

health. There is also an Autism Support Unit that provides outreach support for children with a diagnosis, not to mention a number of NGOs that offer specialized programmes for children on the autism spectrum. Children attend there a number of days a week, with some attending almost daily. It must also be noted that recently all children at the age of 1 years 8 months are assessed on the MCHAT (see Mercieca and Mercieca, 2018) to try and identify autism as early as possible. The last point worth mentioning is the array of professionals at work in support schools: educational psychologists, prefects of discipline, social workers, guidance teachers, career advisors, counselors, early intervention teachers, home tuition, anti-bullying services, anti-substance abuse teachers, access to communication and technology unit and youth workers.

These professionals, services and systems have the aim of supporting children and their educators, which aim emanates from a discourse of justice that is acted out through a system of redistribution. Thus, particular groups of children will receive more or less according to their needs, very often from the state, in order to support them to be equal. According to Todd May, “there is general agreement that equality is, first and foremost, a matter of what people deserve” (2009, p.4). May argues that any system of redistribution implies a distributor, that is someone or a system that decides what needs to be given, and also a passive recipient of that which is given. May remarks that these two positions “taken together ... help sustain a hierarchical view of society in which the members of that society are conceived as individuals pursuing disparate and unrelated ends that the state helps them more or less to achieve” (p.5). Children, as well as involved professionals and administrators (including policy makers), are dependent on these systems to function in schools and in turn create the systems. But similarly one can argue that the system creates the children, the professionals and administrators – an economy of exchange here is in place. Any economy is built on relationships of exchanges: the deficit child (at times it is the exhausted teacher who has been constantly referring a particular child to senior management) in relation to the systems of services that have been developed to answer to these deficits.

We urge caution against the assumption that the child is the starting point of this economy. At times the system of services ‘hunts’ (Baker, 2002) for children’s deficits. The new government initiative to screen all children at the age of 1 year 8 months for autism is an example (see Mercieca and Mercieca, 2018). The justification for this is that early identification and early intervention will help children with autism cope better in life and will better enable their parents to support them. There is some relevance to this argument, even if there is very little evidence to support this. But in return an economy is built “that totalizes the field of concern” (Standish, 2005, p. 54) in that actors find it difficult to be or perceive matters otherwise, because “everything [seems to be] put in place through allotment and through justification” (May, 2008, p.47). As an example, the Autism Support Group will only offer their services to children who have been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. We had written elsewhere about the complexity of educational psychologist assessment and diagnosis, and about the various pressures on passing a judgement notwithstanding possible lack of clarity (see Mercieca, Mercieca and Bugeja, 2018). One of these pressures on the EP is the knowledge that a child will miss out on a particular service offering support unless a diagnosis is given. What is the practitioner in question supposed to do? The policy makers who placed the screening of all

children for autism high on the national agenda claimed that parents want this for earlier and easier access to services. Why do we need a label in order to access a service? Is there another way of structuring this, possibly one which would cater to the need without necessarily being labelled for life? Standish suggests that one way of understanding this economy is by keeping an eye open for what is ruled out (Standish, 2005, p.54). In this case, what is ruled out is the possibility of benefitting from a service without yet having a diagnosis. In one of our conversations we asked for reasons for this, whether it would not be a better service to provide according to presenting needs, rather than in response to a diagnosis. The answer is that that is one way of making sure that the service is not swamped with more requests than it can currently meet.

This takes us back to the issue of the distributor that decides what needs to be given, and the passive receiver who often is impossible to break from what is given and how it is given. May (2009) argues that if we work within this assumption, then the hierarchy is already in place. We cannot assume equality of the members involved in relationships within the economies of exchanges. There is elitism at play here (Standish, 2005). The system resolves what children deserve, what the professionals provide, and it is never the other way round. This is what we understand by closed economy and we think that Standish (2005) captures the frequent impossibility to think outside of these closed exchanges in the following:

The problem is precisely that many people cannot think outside its terms [the economy of exchange]. There is something curiously self-reinforcing, self-perpetuating and, for some, seductive about this entire way of thinking. (p.57)

Rancière's idea of equality could go some way towards addressing Standish's claim in the above quote. The above paragraphs have presented the distribution of the sensible, as described by Rancière, at the heart of the systems of services within Maltese State schools and within the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action. Rancière to help us view this economy of exchange otherwise and at the heart of this is his understanding of equality.

In reaction to Louis Althusser's thinking (Rancière's teacher and eventual colleague), Rancière developed the idea of equality that is not hierarchical (in which one has more than the other, bringing about the need to make the latter equal). According to Rancière, Althusser could not remove the divide between the 'ordinary worker' and those privileged by science (those who explain the worker). Equality for Rancière does not result from a process but must be conceived of as a given from the start. That is, it must be a presupposition of all those who act. All systems of services within the State schools in Malta work on the hypothesis that one day, the child who is receiving their services, will have a level of equality similar to that of the 'normal' child, or as close as possible. Their role is to support the child to achieve this. However, as Rancière claims, engaging in a process of equality results in creating a greater divide of achieving equality. This process only pushes the child in need further away from the possibility of ever becoming equal. For Rancière, far from being given equality, the child (the political actor) already possesses equality and has the ability to express it. He claims that allⁱⁱⁱ of us are able to create meaningful lives, including children and their families. "Our social and political contexts, while sometimes difficult and complex, do not involve essential mysteries that we are in principle incapable of comprehending without the assistance of a savant of some sort" (May, 2009, p.7).

Rancière develops this argument in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Rancière, 1991). This was Rancière's answer to the difficulties that France was facing around the 1980's on the issue of migration and education. In the book he recounts the story of a schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who was an exiled French teacher working in Belgium. He found himself in the awkward position of having to teach French, but he did not know the native language. Being caught in this position he tried an experiment that he was certain would be a complete failure (see Rancière, 1991, p.2). Jacotot got a dual-language copy of a single text for his students and gave them instructions through a translator: to see the words, learn French with the help of the translation, repeat over and over, and to read until they could recite it. Then they were to write what they thought about what they had read (ibid.). This was his only action. He did not explain anything at all, just gave them a set of instructions, and then distanced himself from them. He constantly asked himself: "How could these young people, deprived of explanation, understand and resolve the difficulties of a language entirely new to them?" (ibid.). After some weeks, Jacotot met the students again and realised to his amazement, "that his students *had learned* to speak and write in French without the aid of explication" (ibid., p.9).

What Rancière, commenting on Jacotot's experiment, points to is that "a sudden illumination brutally highlighted what is blindly taken for granted in any system of teaching: the necessity of explication" (ibid., p.4). For teachers, explanation is the backbone of teaching (they cannot do without explanation), explanation shows that the student "cannot understand it by himself" (ibid., p.6). Explanation has this "double inaugural gesture" as Rancière and Jacotot claim: the teacher "decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin...[and] ... having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task of lifting it" (ibid., p.6-7). The teacher is the one who knows, while the student does not and needs the teacher to explain it all. Even when students have books and other materials, still the teacher needs to explain these. The more the teacher explains the more the gap is widened between the teacher and the student, even if paradoxically the gap should be narrowing. Based on the premise that the student needs the teacher, the 'master explicator' as Rancière calls him, for all their knowledge, the teacher divides and distributes the knowledge that students should be getting. "To explain is to arrange the elements of knowledge to be transmitted in accordance with the supposed limited capacities of those under instruction" (Rancière, 2010, p.3). Also, explanation does not come in ones, but it becomes a never-ending series of explanations: "An explanation is generally accompanied by an explanation of that explanation" (Rancière, 2010, p.3).

Of course, the teacher knows that the child in front of him, even if he considers him ignorant "knows a lot of things, which he has learnt on his own by looking at and listening to the world around him" (Rancière, 2007b, p.6). The concern of the teacher is that what the child knows is all by chance and repetition, not intentional. Therefore, the role of the teacher is "to break with that process of hit-and-miss groping" and initiate the child into a systematic journey of knowledge.

Thus, Rancière suggests a shift: rather than thinking of equality as an end product, an aim, a goal to be reached; equality must be thought of as a presupposition in the minds of those who act.

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish. Equality, is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing. (Rancière, 2003, p.223)

Rancière's book (1991) focuses on the teacher, but this story can be told in many ways by substituting the teacher with other professionals and procedures of support who have the intention of helping children and teachers. It is this assumption of 'explanation' that is central: explaining how a life should be lived, that children are not able to 'govern' themselves. For Rancière, like Jacotot, children have this innate capacity for life and do not need the teacher's explanation to make sense of their lives (someone who constantly governs their lives). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action has laid out a system of support aimed at supporting lives, as shown above within the Maltese state education system. However, rather than allowing meaningful lives to be created, such systems, in presupposing deficit that has to work within the establishment, further consolidates these lives in their explicatory positions, that is, lives that are governed by others. One might query how else is a child with very challenging behavior to be managed in the mainstream? Following Standish we attempt to see what is being ruled out by the self-reinforcing system and question the very existence of the school, the curriculum, examination systems, the focus on writing, the requirement of sitting, all of which bring out difficulties in a child's behavior. The system, which makes this deficit prominent, is never touched – it is the child who is processed – through the system, creating disabling families in the process.

Thus for Rancière these systems and politics are a 'mechanism' that distributes one's place in society. This Rancière refers to the 'distribution of the sensible'. For Rancière the distribution of the sensible

Is a delimitation of space and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time (Rancière, 2004a, p.58).

As one can certainly notice the aesthetic element comes across very forcefully in Rancière's work. The focus on seeing and speaking raises a number of important questions: Who can see and speak? What can be seen and spoken? What is recognised as sight and speech? These questions take us to the heart of what politics and democracy is. So, for Rancière

what generally goes by the name of politics is the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it the police" (Rancière, 2004b, p.28).

Here we see a shift in the name of the concept that Rancière gives to politics that he calls police. The idea of police proposed is not purely a Foucauldian concept but "refers more broadly to the structure and justification of a social hierarchy... [and]

also a matter of how we perceive ourselves, one another, and the world” (May, 2009, p.8). As Gert Biesta (2010) puts it: “one way to read this definition of police is to think of it as an order that is all-inclusive in that everyone has a particular place, role, or position in it; there is an identity for everyone” (p. 48). The distribution of the sensible has to do with how bodies, for this paper, children’s bodies (but we must not forget parents and carers’ bodies and well as teachers’ and other professionals’ bodies), are ordered according to pre-established criteria: “the order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their ‘nature’” (Rancière, 1999, p. 101).

This section demonstrated that systems of inclusion that are advocated for in The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, distribute people in particular spaces, roles and identities. While our focus has been almost binary in approach, the systems of support and children, everyone is caught in this. The Salamanca Statement and the Maltese state education system are both systems of policing in that they lay out an order of things, one which creates and maintains some form of harmony. Rancière reminds us that the policing state is not negative. It is needed – yet it is not political and democratic, both values which we believe the Salamanca Statement is trying to promote. So the question is, how is one to introduce the political and democratic dimension?

Dissensus

For Rancière (2007a), the opposite of redistribution is dissensus. However, Rancière is very quick to point out that while the word dissensus implies conflict, the way he uses this word does not in any way imply conflict between individuals or groups of people. What he understands by dissensus is aesthetic in nature, that is,

there is dissensus when there is something wrong in the picture, when something is not at the right place. There is dissensus when we don’t know how to designate what we see, when a name no longer suits the thing or the character that it names, etc.” (p. 560).

So what is politics for Rancière? The following two quotes capture the main ideas:

politics only occurs when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone (ref)

I...propose to reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – *that of the part that has no part...* political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of the parts who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (my emphasis, Rancière, 2004b, p. 29-30).

For Rancière democracy and politics are very rare and when they do happen, only

locally and in small pockets, they are immediately swallowed up by the distribution of the sensible. The occurrence is like “a grain of sand had gotten into the machine” (Rancière, 1991, p. 3). It stops the machine momentarily but will quickly be assimilated. We end this paper by giving an example of this dissensus, or to continue using the metaphor of a grain in the machine. This is a study by Sarah Piscopo Mercieca (2017), then a trainee educational psychologist. We are aware of the limitations of this example, but we think it demonstrates, even if partially, the idea of dissensus as bringing about a political act. We choose this example as it brings three main factors together, namely the role of the educational psychologist, children with SEBD and Nurture groups. Piscopo Mercieca recounts how as a trainee psychologist she was determined to fulfill one of the most fundamental roles of an educational psychologist, that of eliciting and acknowledging children’s voices. She made a systematic review of studies investigating the school life of Maltese students who were reported to have SEBD. She recounts how her initial read made her feel empowered and hopeful that the voices of Maltese students were being listened to and acknowledged. However, she recounts,

the findings seemed to uncover a common negative experience of schooling of “poor relationships”, “victimisation”, “oppression and powerlessness” and “exclusion and stigmatisation” (Cefai & Cooper, 2009, p.40). Upon further reading, it seemed as though all these negative experiences had roots in not being listened to and thus not being understood. In fact, in their review, Cefai and Cooper (2009) report how the participants in these studies “would appreciate more consideration of their opinion and believe this would help both their learning...and their behaviour” (p. 45). The reality illuminated by the wish of these students, seems to demonstrate our system’s failure of enforcing children’s right to quality education and the right to be listened to (Mayall, 2000). Both as a researcher and as a trainee psychologist, I feel that students should not be put in a position where they “would appreciate” being listened to (Cefai & Cooper, 2009), but they should be empowered by professionals and researchers to be in a position where they would demand this right” (p.8-9).

In this regard she took up a study using the Mosaic Approach, which started with the assumption that children have a voice, in fact that children have a ‘hundred languages’ (see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012), often in forms and ways that we are not accustomed to. Piscopo Mercieca however notes that engaging in such a process is strenuous on herself as it challenged the way she thought and acted:

as I immersed myself in this approach I became aware that I had to clear fog from my own lenses, as I too could not see the children clearly. This process proved to be an arduous exercise demonstrated the challenge that listening brings, that required changes within for me to be able to listen (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014; Law, 2004). The first realisation of this challenge involved my struggle to stop myself from extracting knowledge from what the children were sharing. I found myself struggling with what to consider what was relevant to my research, since the children were sharing a number of things that were not necessarily related to their school experience” (p.39).

We want to recount only one of the many experiences that Piscopo Mercieca highlights in her experience in challenging herself in this process of listening. This is

when:

during a guided tour the children [labelled with SEBD] gave me of one of their outdoor schoolyards. As soon as we entered the yards, the children took me to the drainpipe and told me stories about how they tried to kill the cockroaches that come out of the drain. One of the participants added details of her encounter with a cockroach that went up her leg, which she managed to kill. I remember mentioning this episode as a side-note to my supervisor, as I had clearly discarded it as meaningless in my understanding of the children's school experience. I was taken aback when my supervisor made me aware of how my discourse had played very well into the dominant discourses, that not everyone's knowledge and not all knowledge counts. My adult and professional lens did not let me see or listen to the fact that this is a valid and meaningful experience, which for the participants was part of their school experience. This was one of the many instances that made me stop and delve into my own internal listening, as I became aware that my immersion into the Mosaic approach involved more than the use of a set of methods or a methodology... The more I delved into this approach the more I saw myself changing. It required me to relearn and revalue other languages that the children were presenting (Moss, 2006). This change helped me reach a deeper understanding of what is meant by considering children as competent experts (Langsted, 1994), which freed me to question my interpretations and to let the children lead. Only then could I see how my previous way of being was limiting my understanding of my participants' school experiences (Tolfree & Woodhead, 1999).

We think this example for itself, but we wanted to bring it as a moment of hope, a experience where the trainee psychologist is questioning her self and in so doing breaking the expected motions. Although initially inclined to dismiss the children's story and not acknowledge it as their voice, when she allowed that their story was not irrelevant, she saw them as equals and their story took centre-stage in her writing and in the formation of the kind of professional she is. Of course, she works within the system where she is distributed and continues to distribute. However, echoes of this experience produce a different discourse, even if temporarily and on a small scale, in the discourse of the sensible.

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ⁱ The education system in Malta is divided into three sectors: State school that cater for 50% of the children in Malta; Church school, which are funded by the State and cater for around 45% of the children; and Private schools, which are fee paying and have around 5% of the children attending. The State Schools are divided into 10 Colleges. A college refers to a cluster of Primary, Middle and Secondary Schools.

ⁱⁱ Cefai and Cooper (2011) explain how in order for Nurture groups to fit in Maltese context and schools, a nurture group framework specifically for Malta was designed. Due to local policies that encourage all students to be part of the mainstream class to safeguard inclusion (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005), nurture groups involved a part time arrangement, where students would meet 3 times a week for half of the school day (Cefai & Cooper, 2013). The framework proposed by Cefai and Cooper (2013) involves the nurture group as providing support for the school to become more inclusive, to support the development of emotional literacy, to serve as a hub for parent training and to address individual needs of the students, parents and school.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is tempting to start asking if all have the possibility of meaningful lives, and highlighting groups of people where this is impossible or hard to achieve. The moment this is done, one gets caught again within the hierarchical position.