

Contemporary Teaching Approaches in the Early Years (3 – 7)

Teach, Inspire and Protect (TIP)

Erasmus + Project

St Nicholas College

Mġarr Primary School

Malta



Ministry for Education and Sport (MEDS)

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This document is dedicated to all those adults and educators committed to working with young children, with the hope that it will inspire other College Principals, Senior Leadership Team, educators, parents and other stakeholders to:

- listen to young children and appreciate their immense potential;
- support the implementation of new pedagogical approaches;
- promote love, care and respect for the natural world;
- develop all outdoor spaces, in intelligent and creative ways for and with children.

May all children have ample opportunities to play, learn, explore and enjoy.

Executive Summary

This document presents the transformational process undertaken by Mġarr Primary School, under the guidance of the Ministry for Education and Sport in collaboration with BirdLife Malta and partners over a three-year Erasmus+ Pilot Project for the Early Years. The intent behind the project was twofold, namely; the appreciation of the natural outdoor environment and use of outdoor spaces, and the successful implementation of the Learning Outcome Framework in the Early Years.

With the collaboration of all participating members of the project, (BirdLife Malta, SEO, LTL, INAK) and the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (DLAP) within the Ministry of Education and Sport (MEDS) the school worked to transform its outdoor environments and enhance the educators' pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning.

Through this project changes in pedagogical approaches were supported to encourage the move away from traditional top-down styles of instruction, towards approaches that call for active participation of children. The holistic development of children was enhanced with contributions of all stakeholders involved. This transformation process involved the cooperation of the School Leadership Team (SLT), the contributions and commitment of educators, the participation and support of parents and school minor staff, and most importantly, the pupils in all Kinder and Year 1 and Year II classes.

A Case Study

In this case study, feedback was collected from SLT, educators, parents and children during the process of change through the TIP project, which started

December 2018 up until December 2021. The feedback gathered informed all training and decisions taken throughout the project. Information from SLT and parents was gathered through discussions and meetings, while important perspectives and concerns from educators were compiled during training sessions, workshops, discussions and tasks. More specifically, data regarding pedagogical changes adopted and benefits derived have emerged clearly through an interview with educators. The educators' ideas about what changes to bring to the school outdoor spaces were gathered through discussions and a questionnaire. The ideas and views of the children were central to the whole process. Children's voices emerged through educators' observations and documentation of children's outdoor play. Educators held discussions with the children about their favourite outdoor experiences and what they wished to have available in the school. The children expressed their preferences through drawings and writings.

Results

i) School Outdoor Spaces

The school has succeeded in developing all outdoor areas in attractive and functional ways, to enable young pupils to enjoy a variety of experiences that stimulate all the children's areas of development. One has just to walk around the school grounds to appreciate the improvements to outdoor spaces. All areas have had major improvements and have been turned into safe, attractive, fun and stimulating spaces where children can play, investigate/explore, learn about nature and appreciate its produce, plant and grow seeds, work, rest, engage in physical activity and generally enjoy themselves.

ii) Pedagogical Approaches

The implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF, 2017) called for a shift in the way we view children, and a better understanding of how children learn. This pedagogical shift calls for a change in perceptions, from the view of children as needy and incompetent to one where children are perceived as capable, and creative beings. This implies that educators are now required to listen closely to what children have to say and support the child's innate curiosity, interest and enthusiasm to explore and learn through discovery in collaboration with others. Through this approach children are the protagonists of their own learning and can express themselves and their interests. Professional educators follow children's interests, strengths and needs, while at

the same time ensure that curriculum content is delivered in meaningful contexts that stimulate and support children's holistic development.

Traditional modes of teaching and learning are culturally ingrained and difficult to eradicate. Early Years educators at Mġarr were offered training and support throughout the duration of the project to comprehend the benefits of the changes required in terms of pedagogical approaches, and to support them in the transformative journey relative to the approach. During the TIP project, pedagogical approaches gradually started shifting from a focus on exclusively teacher-led strategies towards more child-led and child-initiated approaches. Through these opportunities, children gained more space and time to express themselves in different modalities, to co-construct their knowledge with peers and adults, and to better understand concepts through concrete experiences derived from their own interests. As a result, children are intrinsically motivated and enthusiastic to learn and find out more about the topic of interest.



Kindergarten children exploring the natural outdoor environment at Mġarr



Kindergarten children exploring the natural outdoor environment at Mgarr



Parents volunteering work during summer 2020

Abbreviations

MEDE – Ministry for Education and Employment (prior to February 2022)

MEDS – Ministry for Education and Sports (as from February 2022)

DLAP – Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes

CT – Curriculum Time

SEO - Sociedad Espanola de Ornitologia

INAK - INAK located in Kremnica, Slovakia is part of the Civic and Social Organizations Industry.

LTL – Learning Through Landscapes, UK

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care

TIP – Teach, Inspire, Protect.

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

UNSDG – United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

NCF – National Curriculum Framework, Malta

LOF – Learning Outcome Framework, Malta

EY EO – Early Years Education Officer

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

HoS – Head of School



Introduction

The Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (DLAP) within the Ministry for Education and Sport (MEDS) strives to offer high-quality educational services. High-quality education has a positive impact on all aspects of human development and growth, including health and well-being, resilience, knowledge and understanding, problem solving skills, and the development of environmental ethics, amongst others. MEDS has launched the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) and the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF, 2017) to enhance the quality of the educational experience of children, starting from the Early Years. The Erasmus+ Project (TIP) has shown how increased contact with nature and well-planned and developed outdoor environments can enhance children's learning experiences and their holistic development.

The project sought to consolidate the implementation process of the NCF and LOF through pedagogical approaches that value children's interests and outdoor environments. The Emergent Curriculum approach and the Project Approach are meant to help educators move away from rigid modes of teaching and learning which often rely heavily on drilling and memorisation. The Emergent Curriculum enables educators to respond to the individual needs of children and provide an adequate learning experience for all. Improved use of the outdoor spaces available reconnects pupils with nature, leading to the formation of noble ideals, such as those related to love and respect of the natural world. These sentiments can be translated into eco-sustainable behaviour later in the child's life.

This document provides guiding principles, key ideas and practical suggestions to schools and other Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions who wish to provide enriched learning environments to young children in Early Years settings. It presents a case study of how one state primary school worked towards the maximization of children's potential, their holistic development and their appreciation of the natural world through stimulating outdoor learning experiences. Outdoor learning refers to experiences provided to support children's play, exploration and discovery in both the natural world and the built outdoor environment. This report views children as competent and capable beings who have a right to active participation in their own learning. It also builds upon the underlying concepts outlined in both the NCF (2012) and LOF (2017) and supports early years educators to make frequent and effective use of outdoor spaces for the well-being and academic success of all children.

The learning processes, strategies and tools utilised throughout the development of the Teach, Inspire and Protect (TIP) Erasmus+ project are documented for the benefit of early childhood educators and institutions who wish to provide adequate and stimulating outdoor environments that respect children's well-being, and their need to explore, enjoy and learn. The TIP Project aimed to bring multiple benefits to young children; their health (both physical and mental), to learning, development, resilience, self-esteem and confidence. It also raises children's awareness of sustainability issues and helps develop a strong sense of belonging in their community.

The challenges and successes experienced by the different stakeholders throughout this project were essential in informing the planning and development process of the project. This document does not strive to offer a pre-constructed formula for all to follow in the same manner. Rather, it aims to;

- inspire educational leaders, educators, parents, other professionals and the community at large to take responsibility in safeguarding the environment, while valuing outdoor play / learning spaces for the holistic development of the very young;
- instil in young children appreciation and respect for themselves, nature and the environment;
- promote pedagogical approaches that value children's interests, needs, abilities and competences while providing high quality education;
- encourage all stakeholders to collaborate in making intelligent and creative use of spaces available both within school grounds and in their community;
- develop an outdoor design to facilitate learning experiences that are meaningful for children, using recyclable materials and natural resources that respect the environment;
- adopt the LOF to maximise each child's potential in all areas of development.

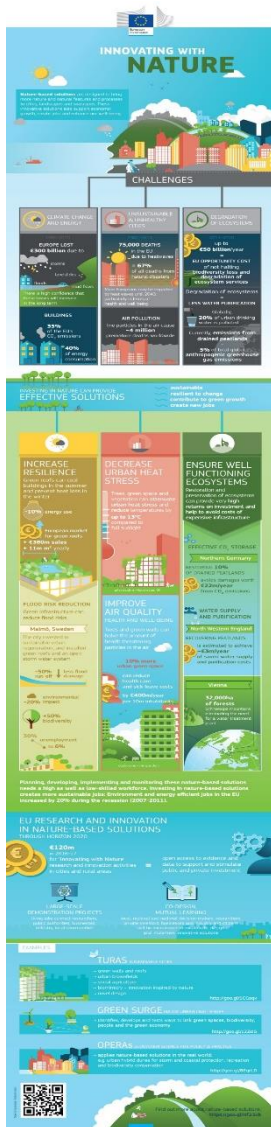
The European Commission (EU Commission, 2011) has emphasised that access to universally available, high quality inclusive ECEC services is beneficial for all. It not only helps children to unlock their potential but can also contribute to engaging parents and other family members to improve employment, parent education, and leisure-time activities. High quality early years provision has a significant impact on children's social, emotional and cognitive development and is a key factor in improving outcomes for children's educational attainment.

International Perspectives: Protecting the Planet.

1.1 Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG, 2030) are a call for action to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. It is recognized that ending poverty calls for strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs, (education, health, social protection, and job opportunities), while tackling climate change and environmental protection.

With just under ten years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal, world leaders at the SDG Summit in September 2019, called for action. The UN Secretary General called on all sectors of society to act on three levels:



- **global action** for smarter solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals;
- **local action** through policies, budgets, institutions, governments and local authorities; and
- **people action**, civil society, the media, the private sector, unions, academia and other stakeholders.

These actions are set to generate an unstoppable movement pushing for the required global transformations by 2030.

The world is becoming increasingly urbanized. Malta is no exception. Globally, we are dealing with a series of ongoing challenges that are primarily linked with mankind's inappropriate attitude towards nature.

- Climate change and loss of biodiversity is progressing at alarming rates.
- As a result of an unhealthy ecosystem, pandemics and diseases are striving to the detriment of the wellbeing of mankind. Biodiversity tends to diminish through the cutting down of forests and building more infrastructure which consequently increases the risk of diseases and pandemics.

Ecologists have long suspected that while some species are going extinct,

those that survive and thrive, are more likely to host potentially dangerous pathogens that can make the jump to humans (Gibb, 2020).

- Intrinsically linked with the above, experts in the field are concerned about the increasing levels of environmental-related and anxiety in children and youths.
- In his publication ‘*Last Child in the Woods*’, Richard Louv (2005) introduces the term ‘Nature-deficit disorder’ which refers to diminished use of the senses, motor skills, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical disorders. Children are mostly susceptible to prolonged time spent indoors, and the use of technology is replacing traditional and more engaging ways of children’s play. These changes could well be linked to the major loss and destruction of natural spaces in urban areas, in our cities and schools.

1.2 The EU and Nature Based Solutions

The ambition of research and innovation policy is to position the EU as leader in innovation to achieve more sustainable and resilient societies.

The Commission defines nature-based solutions as;

“Solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience. Such solutions bring more and more diverse, nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes, through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions.”
(EU Commission, 2011).

Nature-based solutions focus on using nature’s own resources, air, water and soil, in ways that address environmental challenges. These solutions help create economic growth, through new products and services that increase the natural capital rather than deplete it. The objective is to work with nature rather than against it to provide sustainable ways towards a greener economy that is competitive while at the same time respecting nature.

Connectedness with nature occurs when one is conscious of nature and everything it is made up of. Nature connectedness is stable over time and influences various situations and decisions taken in one’s life. In other words, it shapes one’s own

attitudes and behaviours in relation to the natural world (Zylstra, Knight, Esler Le Grange, 2014).

The connectedness with nature approach is supported by the biophilia hypothesis (Eckardt, 1992). The biophilia hypothesis claims that humans possess a biologically based attraction to nature and their well-being depends, to a great extent, on the relationships with the surrounding natural world (ibid).

1.3 EU - The Green Deal

The European Green Deal is the newest EU growth strategy, approved in the EU Parliament at the beginning of 2020. It focuses on improving human well-being by making Europe climate-neutral and protecting the natural habitat. One of the priorities of the European Green Deal is the preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity, through nature-based solutions.

Moreover, the European Green Deal integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and places them at the centre of the EU's process of drafting and implementing policies so that the EU promotes a model for human development which is compatible with a healthy planet. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. The vision aims to provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. The SDGs are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership.

The SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), target 11.7 is particularly focused on achieving universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green spaces for children, among others. In other words, children have the right to access nature for their well-being and holistic development, and for the sustainable development of the planet.

Theoretical Perspectives

2.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989)

The UNCRC has become a powerful catalyst for action on behalf of young children, who are increasingly perceived and respected as persons in their own right, capable of interacting with the world around them, who can think

carefully and creatively and make new meanings. Malta is one of the signatory countries that supports children's rights as outlined by the UNCRC (1989).

According to the UNCRC, every child has the right to access quality Early Childhood Education and Care where service provision allows for democratic spaces that nurture learning dispositions and foster 21st century skills. By endorsing the Convention of the Rights of the Child UNCRC (1989), 'Malta is obliged to comply with the agreed principles and standards' to ensure that children's '*best interests* are given primary consideration' (National Children's Policy, 2017, p. 13).

The UNCRC document specifically states that children should be listened to (Article 12) and should have their ideas, theories, queries and perceptions taken seriously by adults. It also states that all children have a right to quality education (Article 28), and most importantly, they have the right to play and leisure (Article 31). Children learn best through hands on, sensory play-based experiences in adequately resourced environments, indoors and outdoors and together with adults and with peers. Early Years' service provision in Malta strives to promote learning through child-centred and inclusive pedagogical and assessment practices.

2.2 A New Conception of the Child

Historically, young children have not been viewed as competent beings but rather as objects of concern; as naturally unregulated, innocent, needing protection, lacking knowledge and information, unable to make choices, and generally incompetent. This view of the incompetent child has a direct impact upon how we treat children. When children are denied the opportunity to be active agents in their own learning process, the message conveyed is that they do not know, are not capable, do not possess the skills, might get things wrong, or might cause a mess. These negative implications disempower the child. This often induces the child to refrain from trying and persevering and turn to the seemingly 'more competent' adult to complete the task for them.

A conception of children as 'needy and incompetent' disempowers children who may grow to believe they do not have the ability and potential to learn, and consequently feel demotivated.

Through Europe and throughout the world, there is an evolving movement towards the view of children as competent beings, endowed with abilities that

enable them to fully participate in matters concerning them. Increasingly childhood studies put an emphasis on childhood as a social and cultural construct which seeks to understand children's worlds and recognise their agency (Clark and Moss, 2001).

Children are defined as being:

- Experts in their own lives, with competence to communicate unique insight into their experiences and perspectives;
- Skilful communicators, employing their many languages to express themselves (not only through words but also through drawings, emotions, movement etc.);
- Active agents, influencing and interacting with the world around them;
- Meaning-makers, since they construct and interpret events occurring in their lives.

Indeed, children have a remarkable capacity to be creative and to actively participate with others and use a wide range of communicative skills. Young children are perceived as social actors whose development is facilitated through social relationships and active participation. With the diligent guidance of sensitive and caring professionals, children flourish and become more confident and resilient learners when they are really listened to through their different modes of communication and expression.

This new construction of childhood implies viewing the child as rich in imagination and creativity, strong in building friendships, and powerful in thought and ingenuity. The child is viewed as having 'infinite capabilities' with 'a hundred languages.' As stated by Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia Approach;

'If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations, and questions, and are protagonists in knowledge-building processes, then the most important verbs in educational practice are no longer 'to talk', 'to explain' or 'to transmit'.... but 'to listen'. Listening means being open to others and what they have to say, listening to the hundred (and more) languages, with all our senses' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; p. 97)

Children are naturally observant, curious, imaginative, uninhibited, responsive to stimuli and profoundly affected by their experiences. Schools and initial education institutions play a key role in fostering and developing children's

creative and innovative capacities. Young children require an environment that is conducive to enhance the development of creative skills and provide opportunities for children to manifest the said skills (EU Commission 2010).

The characteristics of a creative person include:

- Engagement – intense concentration, they are absorbed in listening, observing or doing;
- Expressions of individuality – trust in one's own understanding and readiness to challenge own ideas or those of others;
- Curiosity – observing closely and looking beneath the surface;
- Making connections – seeing relationships among apparently unrelated ideas and combining and recombining elements to create new forms;
- Insight – raising interesting questions;
- Self-initiated learning – working at a task without prompting, exploration;
- Resilient – persisting at a task even when it proves difficult.

Viewing children as competent beings does not mean they are completely autonomous beings. They require care, support, assistance and encouragement from responsible adults. It is essential for children to spend quality time being involved and engaged in experiences that entail thinking and discussion with caring adults who take the time to respect children's ideas and give them the opportunities to express their thoughts. This enables children to feel empowered, build self-confidence, develop a love for learning, enhance their creative thinking and develop their skills, knowledge and values.

2.3 Outdoor Spaces and Brain development

Child's play is not just all fun. The act of play is a crucial component in the growth and development of the brain, body and intellect. Children acquire knowledge experientially, through play, experimentation, exploration and discovery. Many of the fundamental tasks such as, exploring, problem-solving, risk-taking, development of fine and gross motor skills, understanding how things work and basic knowledge, can be most effectively learned through outdoor play. When children run, jump, crawl through tunnels, climb trees or walk along narrow planks, they grasp the meaning of prepositions and geometry concepts much more easily. Moreover, they develop self-awareness and self-regulation, comprehend their limits and develop their self-esteem and resilience. When children are given the opportunity to physically demonstrate and experience action words or

descriptive words through first-hand experiences, word comprehension is immediate and long lasting. The words are used and learned in context, as opposed to trying to make children memorise them through mere repetition. Active participation and hands on experiences promote emergent literacy and a love of language. When children are curious about a given topic, let us say, insects, they discuss with adults, look up information in books or on the internet. In the process they learn that printed texts carry meaning. Similarly, if children play with containers in water, sand or with other materials, they gain better understanding of quantitative concepts, than children who are just presented with the words and their definitions. Learning-by-doing, creates more neural networks in the brain and throughout the body, making the entire child a tool for learning.

At kindergarten level (3 to 5) the child's brain development is at a crucial phase for socialization and gaining independence. At this age, children go from believing that everyone sees the world the same way, to understanding that there can be multiple points of view. Much of this learning and understanding takes place through play. As children begin to play with others, they learn by trial and error to cooperate and negotiate with other children through sharing and turn taking. Along with gaining more socialization, outdoor play increases children's motor functions and independence. During preschool years, children also develop executive functions, which control memory, timing, and sequencing. Developing these abilities is essential for more complex physical activities. As adults, we may view outdoor play as just that; play. In reality the child's brain is developing and acquiring new skills that are essential for independence.

The Educational Reform in Malta.

3.1 Aims and Principles of The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF)

Malta's Educational reform promotes a revolutionary change to Early Years Education by viewing children as capable of self-directed inquiry and school as an extension of life, rather than as a preparation for life.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) proposed pedagogical approaches which have been re-proposed in the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF, 2017) for the Early Years. The implementation process on approaches of these policy documents initiated with Kindergarten educators in Kinder 1 classes during scholastic year of 2018-2019. The new approach in teaching and learning in the early years, promotes a holistic educational experience that supports every child's needs and interests through direct participation, irrespective of gender, race, faith or socio-economic background. The curriculum derives from the

children's interest and their exploratory needs and ensures that pedagogy in the early years is underpinned by the five broad learning outcomes (NCF, 2012 p. 45). The Curriculum Framework entails the use of an integrated play-based approach which scaffolds children's learning to a higher level of competence. Such pedagogies are conceptualised as learning processes rather than prescriptive content to be transmitted to learners.

Pedagogical approaches grounded in prescriptive planning supported by adult-led activities increase the risk of narrowing down the curriculum to academic content and ignore the significance of other learning opportunities. Furthermore, summative assessments (e.g. checklists) promote a one-size-fits-all agenda and a linear model that focus more on ages and stages rather than on the individual's competences and skills. Conversely, the introduction of authentic assessment linked to the LOF for the early years, ensures that the focus is on what children know at present, making learning visible and enabling adults to capture a true picture of the child's holistic development. The LOF allows for multiple paths of learning processes, where children learn and develop, at their own unique pace, towards achieving increasingly higher levels of the five core competences of the National Curriculum Framework (2012). Through authentic assessment practices, educators observe, notice and identify children's learning, recognise its significance and respond in ways that foster further learning.

Following the agreement with the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) in 2017, the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (DLAP) initiated the process of change in pedagogical approaches in the Early Years. Inspired by the internationally acclaimed Reggio Emilia Approach, the Directorate (DLAP) believes that by adopting responsive pedagogical approaches emerging from children's own interests and through authentic assessment methods, the quality of educational experiences in the early years would be greatly enhanced for both educators and learners. In agreement with the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions were developed to provide training and support to all Early Years practitioners for the effective implementation of the pedagogies described in the official curricular and assessment documents.

The NCF presented the educational journey in state schools into four distinct cycles:

Early Years (0 to 7 years)

Junior/Primary (8 -10 years)

Middle School (11 – 12 years)

Secondary School (13 – 15 years)

The Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 and the National Curriculum Framework for All (2012), clearly promote a readiness to depart from traditional curriculum structures and practices that may restrict learning, towards learning approaches that focus on understanding, emphasising the learning process and active co-construction of knowledge and meaning-making, rather than the mere transmission and acquisition of content.

The main thrust of these documents requires all early years educators and practitioners to:

- respond to children's interests;
- arouse their curiosity;
- instil an inquiry-based approach to learning;
- support and facilitate the children's journey of discovering the joys of learning.

In the early years, children are called to be active participants in their own learning.

3.2 Pedagogical Approaches: Implications to Teaching and Learning

For the first time in the educational history of Malta, the Early Years were recognized as relevant and important for laying solid foundations in the educational process of young children. Now considered central, the Early Years featured in the official documents (NCF and LOF) as the educational foundations for children aged zero to age seven/eight. The implications of this development are significant and far reaching. The zero to three age cohort now fall under the Ministry for Education and Sport as opposed to the Ministry of Health and Social Services. This move away from a split system favours continuity and facilitates young children's transitions from childcare centres to Kindergarten and to Year1. Through these phases, children experience the same pedagogical approaches to enhance young children's learning. The NCF recognises the extraordinary learning potential of very young children and seeks to improve the quality of their learning experiences. The LOF builds upon the

principles outlined by the NCF and promotes forms of authentic assessment that fully respect the rhythm of young children's individual learning processes and their holistic development.

Other important implications of these documents include the Paradigm shift required by all stakeholders concerning the view of children and childhood. This is a positive development for the Early Years. To support early years educators in the implement process, substantive training sessions were delivered for more effective teaching and learning. These sessions supported educators to become aware, reflect and gradually introduce the necessary changes in their teaching/learning practices. The paradigm shift from traditional top down approaches to ones that are flexible and allow room for pupils to participate actively in their own learning, is not without challenges. Culturally ingrained ideas about how children were traditionally deemed to learn, are now being challenged and new strategies and approaches are being implemented to ensure the maximisation of each child's potential.

3.3 The Emergent Curriculum

The emergent curriculum is a philosophy of teaching and an approach to curriculum planning that focuses on being responsive to children's interests in order to create meaningful learning experiences. This philosophy prioritizes the active participation of children, relationship-building, flexible and adaptable methods, inquiry and play-based learning. The curriculum is child-initiated, collaborative and responsive to the children's needs. Proponents of this approach to learning advocate that knowledge of the children is the key to success in such an educational program. (Cassidy, Mims, Rucker, & Boone, 2003; MachLachlan, Fleeer, & Edwards, 2013; Wein, 2008).

An emergent curriculum begins with educators as facilitators who carefully record observations on children at play. It encourages educators to create opportunities for children to play, investigate, explore and discover through first hand experiences, such as sensory bins, learning invitations and provocations, visits to venues, outings and discussions with experts. Children are observed as they play, explore and interact with the resources and the environments available to them. This documented evidence is used to inform planning. Educators prepare meaningful experiences for the children based on their interests, needs and strengths observed. Equipped with such information, educators then develop

experiences that compliment and build upon the emerging interest, along with open opportunities for play that cater for multiple ability levels. Observations on these planned experiences can then be modified to accommodate more in-depth investigations on the topic of interests. The educator alternates experiences and opportunities that are child-initiated and adult-led, while guiding children's learning experiences through guided learning and co-construction of knowledge. The co-construction of knowledge is supported by posing open ended questions and engaging in conversations that stimulate the child's thinking and problem-solving skills. There are other pedagogical approaches that build upon children's interest such as inquiry-based learning, play-based learning and nature-based learning. As the curriculum emerges and develops, early years practitioners ensure that time is set aside for reflection on their practices and observations. Educators benefit greatly when they share and discuss their experiences with colleagues as it helps them deepen their understanding and reflect upon their practice. The educator is better equipped to carefully plan opportunities that support and scaffold each child's learning process. The emergent curriculum lends itself very well to teaching strategies, such as integrated and differentiated teaching which support the individual needs, strengths, interests and abilities of every child.

3.4 How to connect with nature at school

Nature-based learning is a great way to help children connect with nature. Nature-based learning, or, learning through exposure to nature and nature-based experiences, occurs in natural settings or where elements of nature are brought into built environments, such as native flowers, shrubs, trees, ponds which in turn attract insects, birds and other wildlife.

Nature-based learning means offering direct experience, cognition, personal and social learning, affective development and time spent in contact with nature. This approach addresses the essentials of human experience: thinking, feeling and acting (Brody, 2005).

Meaningful learning takes place when learning is situated in real life events; it is a personal construction of knowledge through various cognitive processes mediated by social interactions. Cognition and physical experiences lead to affective development.

Nature-based learning enables educators to provide cross-curricular learning opportunities (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998). Knowledge and understanding of one's own natural environment build a sense of appreciation and respect for

nature in all its forms, so that it may be appreciated, well cared and protected. Malta offers various opportunities for nature-based learning. It is blessed with plenty of sunshine, clear waters around the island's rocky shores and sandy beaches, and a rich and interesting underwater world, amongst many others natural features. These natural environments stimulate interest in children and their fascination to discover, learn and understand.

3.5 The Project Approach

The project approach refers to an in-depth investigation of a topic or area of interest to the children (Wien, 2008). It is structured into three distinct phases:

- the identification of an area of interest;
- the development of the investigation through visits, observations and explorations, stories, interviews, songs, constructions, representations, role play etc, and;
- the celebration and closure of the topic at hand.

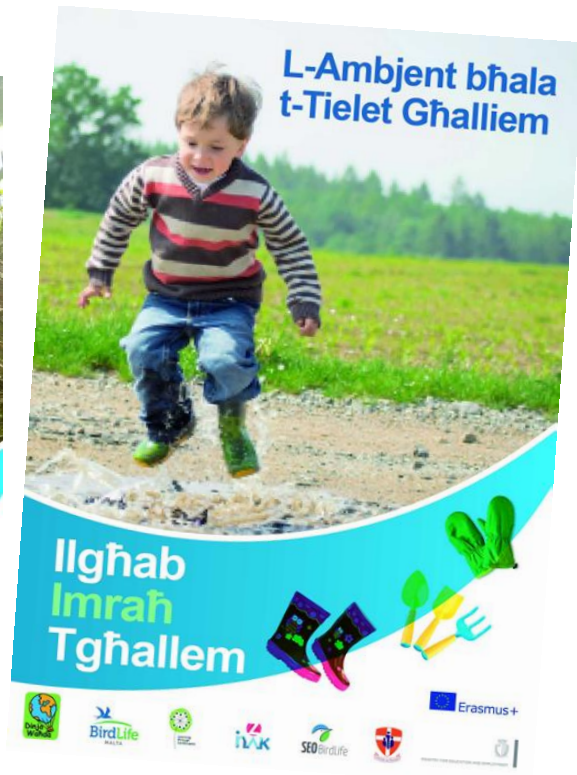
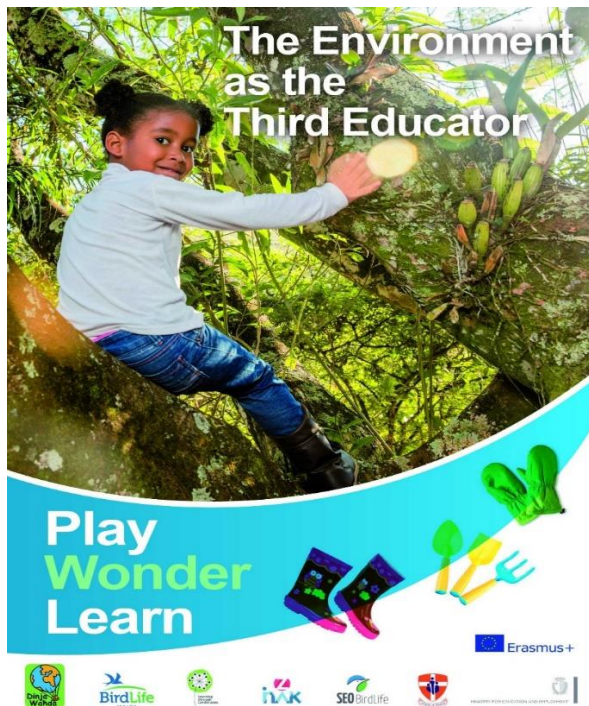
This approach was deemed appropriate for the implementation of the early years principles within the NCF, (2012) and LOF, (2017). Given Malta's historically inherited British model of education, the project approach supports educators' transition from traditional top down teaching and learning approaches to more flexible and responsive ones based upon children's interests.

In emergent curriculum settings and environments, there should be opportunities for children to involve all the senses, challenge creativity, hear and use oral and written language, explore art media, practice solving problems and interpersonal issues, engage in investigations and ask questions, explore and use a variety of material, and acquire various physical skills, cognitive and interpersonal skills (Mach Lachlan et al., 2013).



Kindergartners playing with loose parts

The Outdoor Environment



Poster designed and created for awareness raising on TIP project

4.1 The Third Educator

The environment is a fundamental component in the educational process of young learners. In the internationally acclaimed Reggio Emilia Approach, the environment is regarded as the third educator. The very first educator of a child is the family and the second important educational agent is the school. Within the school grounds, the environment requires to be flexible and undergo modifications by adults and children in order to be responsive to the children's needs.

“We value space, to create a handsome environment and its potential to inspire social, affective and cognitive learning. The space is an aquarium that mirrors the ideas and values of the people who live in it.”
(Malaguzzi, 1998 in Moss, 2016).

Quality Early Years Education offers learning opportunities for all learners, both indoors and outdoors, within the child's everyday context. When children are given the time and space to pursue interests, they can engage in thinking,

reflecting, consolidating and mastering the knowledge, skills and abilities they are learning. (Bilton,1998)

In order to accommodate different types of learning, the environment should provide opportunities for children to work in groups of different sizes, as well as independently. In addition, the use of open-ended resources, such as Loose Parts, (i.e recyclable materials like cardboard, wooden boxes, drapes, pieces of wood, pipes and strings) allow children to experience and manipulate materials in different ways. This enables children to understand the world around them through everyday objects, contexts and realities that support their holistic development and learning processes.

4.2 Outdoor Learning promotes Cross Curricular Approaches

Cross curricular approaches occur when skills, knowledge and attitudes of different subject areas are applied to a single experience, idea, theme or question (Barnes, 2015).

Outdoor learning experiences lend themselves well to cross curricular learning. While playing outside with mud, water or sticks, it is easy to develop skills and gain knowledge pertaining to specific subject areas such as language (questioning, describing, discussing etc.), mathematical concepts (heavy/light, full/empty/ more/less, counting, adding), and scientific aspects of habitats, soil, insects and the like. There is also the social aspect of collaborating and communicating with others, planning and organising play, assigning roles, solving problems or creating situations and constructing new and original scenarios.

The seminal evidence compiled in the Plouden Report (DES 1967, par. 535 p.197) indicates that:

‘rigid division of curriculum subjects tends to interrupt children’s trail of thought and of interest and to hinder them from realising the common elements in problem solving..... some work at least should cut cross subject division at all stages of the primary school.’

Cross curricular approaches encourage group solutions, collaborative learning, creative combinations and the development of independent learning. In the face of a future full of exceptional and unpredictable changes, cross curricular methods become a necessity.

The Council for Learning Outside (2011) outlines the importance of outdoor play for the well-being and healthy development of children. The following are arguments in favour of taking young children outside.

Learning outside the classroom supports the development of healthy and active lifestyles by offering children opportunities for physical activity, freedom and movement, and promoting a sense of well-being.
Learning outside the classroom gives children contact with the natural world and offers them experiences that are unique to outdoors, such as direct contact with the weather and the seasons.
Playing and learning outside also helps children to understand and respect nature, the environment and the interdependence of humans, animals, plants, and lifecycles.
Outdoor play also supports children's problem-solving skills and nurtures their creativity, as well as providing rich opportunities for their developing imagination, inventiveness and resourcefulness.
Children need an outdoor environment that can provide them with space, both upwards and outwards, and places to explore, experiment, discover, be active and healthy, and to develop their physical capabilities.
The outdoor environment offers space and therefore is particularly important to those children who learn best through active movement. Very young children learn predominately through their sensory and physical experiences which supports brain development and the creation of neural networks.
For many children, playing outdoors at their early years setting may be the only opportunity they have to play safely and freely while they learn to assess risk and develop the skills to manage new situations.
Learning that flows seamlessly between indoors and outdoors makes the most efficient use of resources and builds on interests and enthusiasms.
Anyone who takes children outside regularly sees the enjoyment, and sense of wonder and excitement that is generated when children actively engage with their environment.

4.3 Appreciation of Nature: Self-regulation and Risk-taking

There are a multitude of reasons why it is beneficial for children to spend time outside, including self-awareness, self-confidence and self-regulation.

In recent years, an excessive fear of danger with an over-emphasis on safety, led adults to overprotect children. As a result, children are often deprived of enriching experiences for fear of getting hurt.

However, children need to take risks in the context of play to promote their learning and development. The risks and challenges of being outdoors provide rich opportunities for learning and for the development of problem-solving skills. In this context, children are drawn to experiences that allow them to test the limits of their physical, intellectual and emotional development (Little & Wyver, 2008).

In recognition of the benefits of risky play, Canadian researchers and play advocacy organisations recently developed a *Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play* (2015), which advocates that playing outdoor in nature, with all the risks that it entails, is essential for the development and health of the child. They recommend increasing opportunities for self-directed play in all settings, at home, at school, in childcare, in the community and in nature.

WAYS OF ENCOURAGING AND SUPPORTING RISKY PLAY

But what do we mean by risky play? We do not mean engaging in dangerous behaviour or pushing children beyond their abilities or playing in hazardous areas. Risky play refers to play that involves thrilling, exciting, physically challenging activities like climbing, jumping, balancing, or rough and tumble play. These experiences provide a sense of fun, enjoyment and adventure. From a child's perspective, risky play is just play and part of the natural progression in their learning. As the child tries new things, challenging oneself and extending skills by moving out of one's comfort zone to push the limits of current capabilities. The fear of risk is attributable more to adults and their (often over-protective) desire to keep children safe. It is important that risk be 'calculated' and gauged according to the child's age and ability, allowing room for exploration and challenge. Supervision and support remain, until children have acquired the necessary skills and self-regulation strategies to handle situations safely. Educators may then expose them to increasingly challenging play-situations and opportunities that help build their competences and self-regulating abilities. (Little & Wyver, 2008)

There are many benefits attributed to outdoor play. Such opportunities may include:

- advance physical fitness and gross motor development;
- improve nutrition;
- improve eyesight;
- promote cognitive development;
- improve academic performance;
- lessen the symptoms of ADHD and improves concentration;
- promote self-confidence;
- promote social and emotional development;
- build understanding and appreciation of ecosystems, food systems, and environmental processes;
- enhance moral and spiritual development.

Being in nature can help children to actively engage with a variety of stimuli that are significantly different from what they encounter in their day-to-day experiences.

Time spent outside drastically reduces stress levels in both adults and children. As we don't have as many distractions for our brains to filter out, time spent in nature allows our attention to focus naturally, reducing stress, fatigue, and anxiety (Naeyc, 2019).

An example of good practice in this regard may be referred to Cities across the US, who are trying to support early childhood development by bringing in nature to children in places where they live, play and learn. Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) have identified how to achieve this through four main pathways: ([Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#)),

- Enhancing parks and public spaces with natural elements such as boulders, logs and paths to encourage hands-on unstructured nature play.
- Adding nature to outdoor spaces at early childhood centres and preschools, as well as family, friend, and neighbour-based child care.
- Incorporating nature-based programming at city facilities, such as libraries and recreation centres.
- Supporting nature preschools, which use outdoor learning strategies to teach content across a wide range of curriculum.

Teach, Inspire, Protect Erasmus+ Project (TIP): A Case Study

The TIP Erasmus+ project was launched during the phase when the Maltese educational system initiated the implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework (2017) within the early years classes (3 to 7 year olds) based upon the aims and principles outlined in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) and Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF, 2017). Both documents entail a paradigm shift from traditional methods of teaching and learning towards more rights-based pedagogies that view children as competent and capable of participating actively in their own learning. This enables children to become active and engaged citizens.

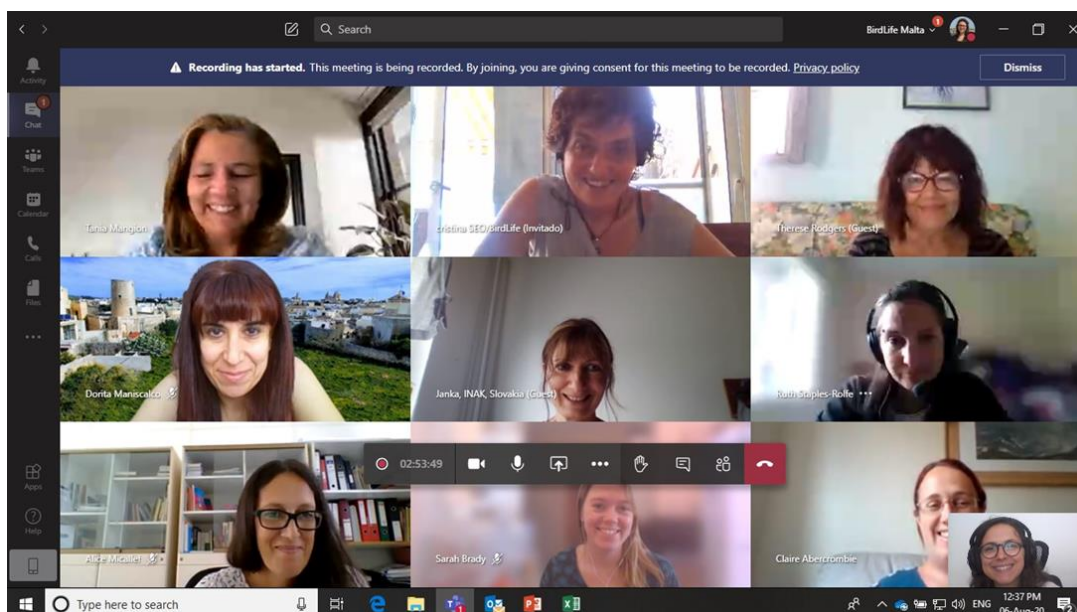
The partners in this project are:

- BirdLife Malta - <https://birdlifemalta.org/>

Who are responsible for: Dinja Wahda

<https://birdlifemalta.org/environmental-education/schools/dinja-wahda-plus/>

- Learning Through Landscapes Trust (LTL), UK - <https://www.ltl.org.uk/>
- Sociedad Espanola de Ornitologia (SEO Birdlife), Spain, - <https://seo.org/>
- INAK Slovakia - <http://trochuinak.sk>
- St Nicholas College, Mgarr Primary School <https://www.facebook.com/SNC-Mgarr-Primary-School-122214989166577/>
- Ministry for Education and Sport (MEDS) Formerly referred to as; Ministry for Education, Development and Employment, (MEDE)
<https://education.gov.mt/en/early-years/Pages/default.aspx>



Transnational meeting with TIP partners during COVID restrictions

5.1 Project Objectives

The project was conceived with the intent of increasing the use of outdoor spaces for improved pupil's academic achievements and overall development and to instil appreciation and respect for the environment. From its conception, the project included the participation of all stakeholders, namely the partners in the TIP project, Senior Leadership Team (SLT), educators, children, parents and minor staff.

The overarching objectives of the project were to:

- promote contemporary teaching approaches in school communities and other ECEC institutions based upon the Learning Outcome Framework;
- design teaching qualifications and training concepts which equip teachers with skills and the confidence to try new innovative methods of engaging learners;
- encourage teachers to think critically on how to use their school environment to enhance learning;
- enhance outdoor experiential and child-led learning;
- share innovative teaching methodologies through existing networks to influence best practices at an EU level;
- digitalising and creating online teaching resources to engage teachers and students.

The Proposed Action Plan for the TIP project was designed by DLAP with the intent of sustaining the implementation process and to ensure the project's success. The plan included developing different areas and different stakeholders as shown in the diagram below.



The diagram illustrates how the TIP project worked to achieve its main objectives of introducing new pedagogical approaches through observations, training and collaboration with various stakeholders. The aim was to develop available outdoor environments at Mġarr Primary School.

The designed action plan called for the active participation of all stakeholders. The action plan presented for scholastic year 2019/2020 was incorporated into the school's Development Plan.

The three-year plan design included the following objectives for each year:

1. 2018/2019; **Create a vision** for all stakeholders to increase their awareness of the benefits of outdoor learning and to strengthen their commitment to the project.
2. 2019/2020; **Form a Design** through the observation and analysis of children's needs/skills/interests, the spaces available within the school grounds, the educators' ideas and perspectives for the creation of effective and stimulating learning experiences, SLT initiatives and parents' contributions.

3. 2020/2021; **Transform Spaces** by SLT, parents and other stakeholders to physically construct and develop spaces into enriching and inviting play-based learning environments.



5.2 Raising Awareness

Multiplier events were organized to raise awareness about the benefits of outdoor activities. MEDE launched the project in March 2018 at the Salina Nature Reserve, through a half day Seminar. Invitations were sent to College principals, Senior Leadership Teams, Educators, Quality Assurance Leaders and Education Officers from different sectors. During the event, the outdoor environment's benefit to health, well-being and learning were highlighted. Workshops and discussions were held emphasising the overall benefits of outdoor play and learning for young learners.



Outdoor activities during The First TIP Multiplier Event

A walk to enjoy the natural beauty of Salina served also to testify to the damages caused by pollution and incorrect waste disposal. Participants had the opportunity to make creative representations in writings, drawings, collage or paintings of that morning's experience. Unrefined salt crystals from the salt pans at the Reserve was made available to participants who enjoyed manipulating and observing it. Participants enjoyed these sensory experiences and commented on how infrequently they had the time to look closely and appreciate the natural environment around them.

Another Multiplier Event was organised by Mġarr Primary School, this time targeting the school's educators and parents, as well as representatives from all other state primary schools. The event was enriched by informative sessions on

the benefits of outdoor learning followed by an interesting display of photographs and artefacts of children's learning experiences. Posters were distributed to continue raising awareness about the benefits of outdoor play and learning.



During these events, discussions were held about changes in family lifestyles and how they may impinge negatively on young children's quality of life. Factors discussed included the increased levels of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, mental health issues, sedentary lifestyles, excessive use of technological devices, decreased amounts of time spent pursuing outdoor leisure activities and reduced time for socialization. Furthermore, due to the increase in construction sites, recreational spaces are being depleted. The need to re-establish contact with nature, particularly in the early years was made evident. Other important issues such as sustainability and the need to safeguard our natural and built environments for present and future generations were also discussed.

Children are increasingly missing out on experiences which enable them to enjoy the natural world. Outdoor areas invite children into action and into individual and small group play, foster creativity, promote wonder and encourage each child's natural curiosity and desire to explore and learn. Effective early years environments are the product of informed and well-planned decisions taken by caring adults in the best interest of the children. Spaces and environments often reflect the values, skill and needs of those who design and occupy them.

5.3 Parental Involvement

Parents and the larger community were considered important stakeholders for the success of this project. Parents were in fact encouraged to get involved and to participate actively in this project.



A Parents Information Meeting

A Parents Afternoon was scheduled to inform parents about the project and included a tour around the school. On this occasion parents were encouraged to contribute their ideas on how to improve young children's outdoor learning experiences. On another occasion, a Parents Open Day was planned with the objective of having parents/guardians enjoy outdoor play sessions with their children. This was postponed indefinitely due to the COVID 19 pandemic and consequent lockdown in March 2020.



Parents contributing their ideas about outdoor spaces during a session held by MEDS.

The Parents School Council were involved actively in all stages of the project. The parents were enthusiastic about the project and willingly contributed their time and ideas. They involved themselves by painting games on the concrete part of the school grounds. They also painted

pellets to transform them into music walls, decorated car tyres and supported several other school initiatives.

5.4 Create a Vision



5.4. (i) Training for Educators

DLAP Officials viewed the TIP project as a pilot project that would inspire other schools in Malta. It is envisaged that the project serves as a source of inspiration for other schools to develop their own outdoor-learning spaces. The intent is to value children's learning and developmental needs according to the children's own interests and abilities. Just as the new pedagogical approaches require the active participation of learners, the inclusion of their experiences and their prior knowledge, the project strived to include the perspectives, skills, knowledge and abilities of all stakeholders. Training sought to empower the Senior Leadership Team and educators by providing them with the relevant information and support, valuing their ideas and encouraging their active participation.

The educator's training was fundamental in the support of the LOF implementation process and to transform rigid, one size fits-all traditional practices into new pedagogical approaches. These approaches are based on children's interests and are inclusive and respectful of how young children learn. Intensive training was provided to educators in the implementation process of the

LOF, to motivate and encourage their involvement in improving outdoor spaces to enhance learning.

Training was provided at two distinct but complementary levels:

- At national level: Intensive, hands-on training was offered to all educators in Kindergarten classes, in preparation for the implementation process of the LOF and consequent changes in pedagogy;
- At school level: The aim was to raise awareness on the benefits of outdoor play and learning, to reinforce the national training on new pedagogical approaches according to the LOF, and to emphasise their contributions in the development of outdoor spaces within the school.

At national level:

The Agreement reached with the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) in 2017, marked the commencement of the implementation process of the LOF within state schools. Innovative pedagogical approaches, such as the Emergent Curriculum, were adopted to embody perspectives outlined by policy documents based on the view of children as competent beings and holders of rights.

Throughout scholastic year 2018/2019, DLAP organised Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) training sessions for all Kindergarten educators within state schools. Church and Independent schools received training on request. Sessions included the following:

- ✓ the identification of children's interests;
- ✓ the view of the child as a competent being and implications for teaching and learning;
- ✓ the emergent curriculum;
- ✓ the Project Approach;
- ✓ the observation and planning process for children's learning based on children's interests, needs and abilities, and;
- ✓ the authentic assessment of young pupils and the use of an online assessment tool available for all state kindergarten educators.

At School Level

The Early Years Educators from Mgarr (Kindergarten educators and Year 1 and Year 2 teachers) received intensive training to support them in developing appropriate teaching and learning methods for young learners, in line with the implementation of the LOF. They were made to become increasingly aware of the multiple benefits of outdoor learning experiences. Training supported their abilities in developing appropriate teaching and learning opportunities to involve, motivate and engage young learners.

Curriculum Time (CT) are allotted periods of time whereby educators meet to discuss their experiences, observations or queries with other educators and professionals. These CT slots were also utilised to support and train further educators in the implementation of the LOF. Seminars, Professional Development sessions, webinars, discussions, workshops, hands-on activities, readings, and tasks were offered by the Early Years Education Officer to improve teaching and learning practices, with a focus on natural outdoor environments and child-initiated experiences. Exposure to the latest developments in EU policy documents and other international developments in ECEC were presented with the intent of broadening the educators' perspectives and to facilitate change. The overarching objectives were to:

- reconceptualise educators' and parents' beliefs on how young children learn, the image of the child as a competent learner and the importance of listening to the child's voice;
- develop an understanding of the LOF and how it links to the emergent curriculum and project approach as non-static pedagogical tools which allow for continuous growth and change;
- gradually acquire skills to plan a nature-based early years curriculum that is inclusive, flexible, creative and just, and which enables educators to meet the needs of every child;
- introduce the concept of risk-taking as an essential component for the healthy development of the child;
- empower educators and children to co-construct knowledge and work together to investigate, explore and ensure that children participate actively in their own learning processes;
- develop a pedagogy of listening to ensure that children's interests, needs and strengths are at the core of the emergent curriculum, so that a balance is reached between child-initiated and teacher-led learning opportunities.



A training session for Early Years Educators

While working closely with the school and educators, the Early Years, Education Officer from the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes could clearly identify areas in need of further support to improve the quality of the educational process.

To enhance reflective practice, a Kindergarten educator who was enthusiastic about the Emergent Curriculum Approach, was asked to share her experience on how to build upon the children's genuine interests, strengths or needs. She shared ways in which children were given time and space to investigate, gather knowledge and understandings, share ideas and prior knowledge and construct new meaning. Educators had the opportunity to go through the various successful learning experiences which this educator had organised to stimulate children's learning.

An area of concern which emerged from discussions with the educators was related to young children's language development. The EY Education Officer supported the educators in comprehending their role in engaging children in meaningful conversations, based upon the children's innate curiosity and intrinsic motivation to investigate and learn more about topics of interest to them.

Training was also offered to enhance educators' questioning skills. Such skills are necessary to enrich the children's learning experience and their engagement in the co-construction of knowledge. Furthermore, Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) techniques were outlined, and strategies proposed, to help educators understand where the child is at in the learning process and how to effectively extend thinking skills (Queensland Study Authority 2012).

The emergent curriculum philosophy requires adults to develop their listening skills in order to get to know their pupils better. Loris Malaguzzi termed this as ‘a pedagogy of listening’. Throughout the first year of the project, educators were encouraged to observe, reflect and evaluate children’s outdoor play experiences. This helped them to take note of spaces available within the school and of the impact these have on children’s learning. Based upon observations and feedback collected, the Early Years Education Officer involved in the project discussed the following points with the SLT and all the early years educators at Mġarr school;

1. The value of the Emergent Curriculum, outdoor learning spaces, documentation and assessment for learning in informing their planning to support the children’s holistic development;
2. The value of outdoor spaces and the Reggio Emilia Approach, in relation to teaching and learning and the well-being of children;
3. The organisation of tasks, workshops and discussions for the evaluation of the outdoor environments available. Educators reflected on various aspects including the following:

‘How is the environment currently being used?’

‘What challenges are being experienced?’

‘Do educators feel comfortable taking children outside?’

‘Why?’

‘What are the risks involved, both real and perceived?’;

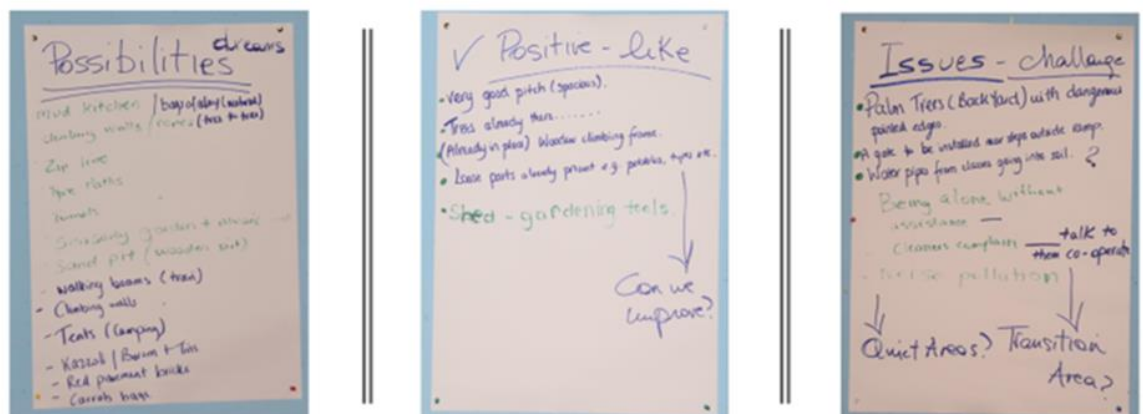
4. The frequent observations of children’s play and how it helped educators identify the children’s skills, strengths and needs, and to scaffold learning.



Educators discussing how to organise outdoor spaces

To create a shared vision for the TIP project at Mğarr School, the following steps were taken by DLAP:

1. Identifying the educators' perceptions with regards to the use of outdoor spaces in their practices; inquire and reflect about their fears whether real or perceived, challenges and beliefs;
2. Raising educators' and parents' awareness of nature-based learning;
3. Analysis of the grounds and spaces available at Mğarr, and reflections about their use or lack of use;
4. Identifying which experiences benefit pupils the most and spaces to develop within the school grounds to offer a pleasant, flowing and enriching experience.



Sharing our Vision to inform Design

Ideas for changes in the outdoor environment started to take form. The increased awareness of the benefits of outdoor learning spaces naturally led to a desire to form a concrete design of what the early years educators and SLT thought would best benefit their pupils.

The following are DLAP projections for 2019/2020 designed to support the necessary changes.

Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment Design - the Early Years Scholastic Year 2019/2020				
DLAP Projections for the development and design of Mgarr Outdoor Learning Environment.				
Steps for creating learning environments		How will this be achieved?	Who will be involved?	Resources
Vision	Observe/Plan/Document Cycle	2 Professional Training sessions for developing a vision 2 Curriculum Time sessions with educators in small groups 'Planning for learning experiences outdoors'.	DLAP delivering sessions to: KGEs and LSEs Teachers Year 1 and 2	PPT Presentations/ Workshops/ Discussions Educators Documenting children's experiences.
	Discuss with educators	SLT to join in outdoor session Curriculum Time (CT).	DLAP delivering sessions to: SLT KGEs and LSEs Teachers Year 1 and 2	Curriculum Time Room
	Share with SMT / approval	Meeting – sharing of experience; The way forward.	DLAP delivering sessions to: SLT KGEs and LSEs Teachers Year 1 and 2	Meeting Room
	Share with the Families and Community	Parents Afternoon - Early Years Video 29/11/2019. Parents tour school grounds 06/03/2020*	SLT delivering to: Educators Students Parents	Outdoor area school grounds Kitchen area

		Parents Open Day – Outdoor Play sessions 13/03/2020*		
Design	Creating a drawing; pupils and educators	Collection of feedback through questionnaires from Educators and from children through drawings/writings. Analysis of data collected	DLAP, Educators and pupils DLAP	
<i>Compiled by Tania Mangion</i> <i>*Cancelled due to COVID19</i>				

5.4 (ii) The Educators' Comments

Prior to the introduction of the project, outdoor spaces had been primarily used for scheduled break times and for Physical Education sessions. Children would occasionally be taken outdoors for educational experiences; however, these were sparse and far in between. Learning would often take place in the classroom.

With increasing awareness, and the request to observe and document children at play outside, educators began to organise outdoor learning opportunities more frequently. The enthusiasm of the children and the success of these experiences encouraged educators to offer more opportunities and a gradual increase of the use of outdoor spaces was observed. Children were mostly fascinated when in contact with the natural environment, namely the nature areas, the garden and soiled grounds. This is what a Kindergarten educator at Mġarr wrote about a broccoli and cauliflower planting episode, related to their 'Falling Leaves' topic which had emerged from children's interests in leaves.

'students showed interest in learning more about harvest and hence, we decided to plant our own crops. We hope that we will reap some vegetables to make some yummy broccoli soup in the colder months. We started off by discussing what crops we need to grow and how we should take care of them. Students were all involved in the process of preparing the tools as well as the grounds we were about to plant on – they picked up big rocks,

removed weeds and ploughed the soil. The students chose the best spot to plant their crops, they dug a hole to put their plant in and watered their newly planted crops. ' (October 2020)

A Year 1 teacher found that her pupils were so enthusiastic about working the soil and growing plants in their own nature corner, that she documented her class experiences in an e-book that was made available on the school web site; https://read.bookcreator.com/EiCvgwN4zQzNCEI6CKEpeZyW6rVcKfewcgMm5Dffk_A/lzyVV7CYQPGEkENbrjTddw

During such outdoor play and learning opportunities, educators realized that children took more initiative in their play, collaborated more and organised their own games. Another Kindergarten educator from Mgarr writes;

'The focus of the learning opportunity was number recognition. A tuff tray, toy cars and pebbles were made available to the children together with some number cards.

As soon as I placed the items on the tray, children started making trails with pebbles and mounting cars on top of them. I instructed them about the game I had intended playing, that is, to find the number which I called out and place a pebble or a car on it. I realised that this activity turned out to be more child-led than teacher-led, since it turned out to be completely different from how I had planned it! However, the children had the opportunity to play around with cars and pebbles, and to call out the numbers themselves, while I reinforced and supported their learning' (January 2021).

5.5 Form a Design



Following the various training opportunities received and discussions made, educators at Mġarr school were asked to work on the design of the outdoor spaces within the school. They were given a school plan to show the various areas available with potential for development to foster learning experiences for the early years.

While working in groups, educators explored different possibilities and ideas based on their knowledge and experience of working with young pupils that offer enhanced learning opportunities for children. They were exposed to ideas from books and online resources available. They worked on developing outdoor areas that could lend themselves to a variety of uses, according to what they had observed from the children's interests, needs and abilities.

The selection of proposed ideas and areas for children's play/learning experiences had to be identified while keeping in mind the following objectives:

- experiences that offer greater potential for learning and development;
- better use of spaces available;
- elements of risk;
- organize spaces that flow in harmony with each other;
- create spaces that are aesthetically pleasing;
- ensure plans are feasible logistically and financially;
- ensure spaces are sustainable in terms of maintenance and manpower.



Early Years practitioners discussing outdoor spaces during a workshop

Educators were encouraged to make suggestions related to the appropriate resources for their pupils' needs. The observations and documentations of pupils' outdoor learning experiences helped educators better understand their pupils' preferences, needs and learning processes. During training sessions, educators had also been exposed to and discussed various ideas and examples of resources adequate for the development of outdoor spaces, often with the use of recycled and natural materials.

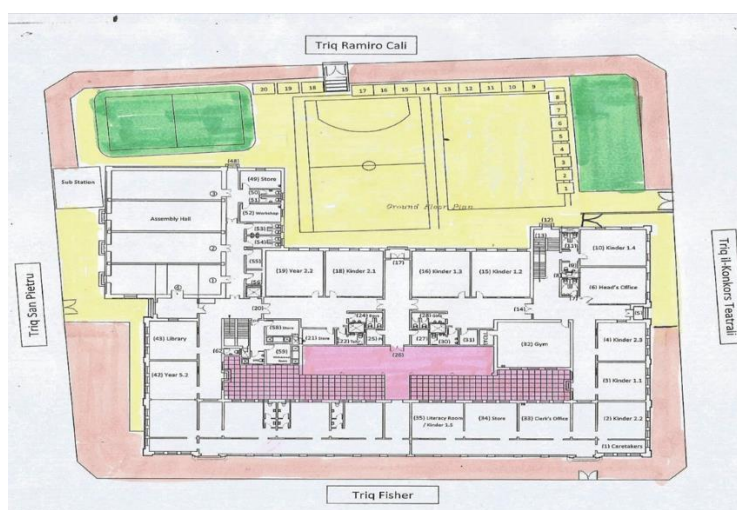
The educators toured the school after school hours. They discussed the spaces available and how these could best be transformed into stimulating areas to support pupils' learning and development.

A questionnaire was drafted by the Early Years Education Officer to collect the educators' ideas on what type of areas they would consider developing, keeping in mind their pupils' abilities, skills and needs. The areas identified by educators are illustrated in diagram below:-

THE VISION... FROM MGARR EDUCATORS



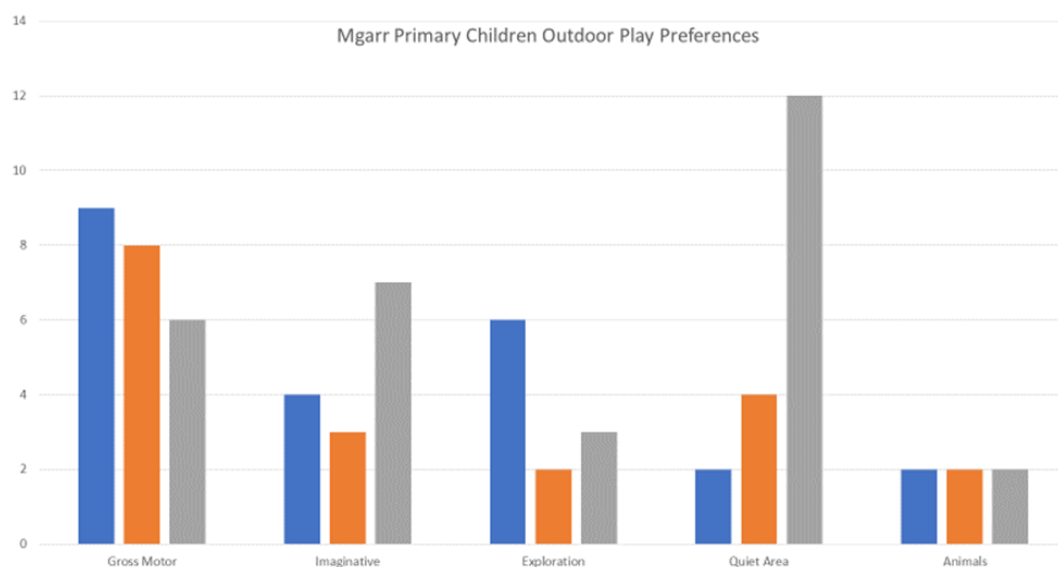
Educators worked together to identify where to allocate the new desired resources on the school grounds. They had been adequately informed through webinars and reading materials on different ideas for outdoor resources and options for development. In groups they discussed the feasibility of the proposed learning stations, given the spaces available and their pupils' needs. Finally, suggestions were marked on an enlarged school site plan. The list of stations identified included: a mud kitchen, a climbing frame, water play, a sensory path, a Circle Time area, a role play area, a music wall, a blackboard, a tree house, a sand pit, and an exploration/excavation area, amongst others.



Mgarr Primary School site plan

5.5 (i) Children's Voices

In one of the webinars about outdoor design, educators were asked to engage children in discussions about their own outdoor experiences, and on the ones they enjoyed the most. The children discussed this in class with the educators and then drew and wrote their ideas of what they would like to have in their outdoor school spaces. A number of children chose to draw and write about outdoor experiences they enjoyed most.



The children's ideas and preferences were grouped in five broad categories as depicted in the graph above. Each broad category was subdivided in three most frequently mentioned outdoor experiences. Colour coding of the graph above is not of any relevance in this graph. The sequence of the type of play/areas mentioned are here listed in descending order, namely:

- Gross motor: playground swings (e.g. slide, see-saw, climbing frames etc) Football and swimming.
- Imaginative: role play (e.g. police/doctor) games (e.g. hide and seek, hopscotch) and camping/tents.
- Exploration: e.g. sand, water, flying kites.
- Quiet Area: e.g. gardening and observing nature, picnic area, reading/learning,
- Animals: e.g. insects and bugs, fish pond, pets/animals.

The afore mentioned categories that scored highest were; gross motor, imaginative and group games, explorative experiences, quiet areas where children could enjoy their lunch-time, chat with friends, and pet, play or care for animals. One child spoke of having a zipline in school, meaning that the child had been exposed to this experience and had enjoyed it greatly. Another child spoke of flying a kite. It is understandable that children speak the most about their prior experiences, which is evident in their frequent mention of the swings and football pitch. This helps us reflect, on the type of leisure and play options children are being offered. The survey highlights the fact that children are rather limited in terms of choices offered and indicates it is time for us adults to reflect on the need to offer children a broader variety of outdoor experiences other than the playground and football pitch options.



One of the children's favourite outdoor experience evolved largely around the use of the nature corners, or 'little fields' as they would often refer to them. There they loved exploring, observing bugs, playing with dirt, twigs and stones, mud and digging dirt. Most of all they loved planting and caring for the plants and watching them grow. They learnt a lot about caring for nature and observed changes closely. When small creatures ate at their produce, the children discussed this with the educator and concluded that all creatures had a right to live since they played an important role in the eco-system.



Growing endemic seeds in small recycled containers for planting.



Planters for growing crops, before the patches of land allocated for each class.



Children showed great interest and love for all living creatures, from bugs to birds, pets and farm animals. Some had the opportunity (pre-COVID) to visit farms and ride a pony.

Through increased use of outdoor spaces, Kindergarten children needed to have wellington boots readily available, so they could enjoy outdoor spaces under all weather conditions. As a result, the school created a transition area, with lockers, low benches and a large rug, where children could change into adequate clothing. In wet weather children loved to put on their wellington boots to go check their growing plants or observe and explore their nature areas. Changing environmental conditions offered a broad variety of different experiences depending on the seasons.



Climbing trees; another fun and exciting experience

Children enjoyed climbing trees within the school grounds. Developing their gross motors skills, co-ordination, balance and self-regulation. They enjoyed the different perspectives from new heights and experienced wonderful adventures from the poles of their Pirate ships, or from the height of skyscrapers as Super Heros.



Growing pretty Lobelia

Following are some of the drawings of six and seven-year-old children in Year 1 and Year 2 classes and their respective writings.



'I like going to the swings, building things, playing with the ball and with animals.'



'I like to play outside in our garden with puppy and my sister on the grass or the slide, and swimming.'



'I want to play outside, ride my bike and watch nature.'



'I like going on the slide. I enjoy playing with dirt and sticks too and watching nature.'

Analysis was made of all the data collected by the EY Education Officer and the findings were shared with the Head of School and Senior Leadership Team. The Head of School; mobilized people, purchased items and made contacts to start works required in the school. The School Council was involved in supporting school improvements. Parents and educators willingly volunteered to collaborate to achieve the goals and targets set.



5.6 Transform Spaces

The works undertaken by the school were extensive and organised in a timely manner to ensure works be concluded in the shortest time possible. The pandemic brought a lot of uncertainties and fear of works slowing down or ceasing completely were real. The works included some structural work, namely the construction of a ramp at the entrance reserved for Kindergarten children. A list of works done is depicted through the following table for the scholastic year 2019/2020 (including both summers) as compiled by Mgarr SLT.

DATE	TIP Project – Works carried out.
Oct 2019- March 2020	Outdoor learning experiences by early years classes ensued. Everything has been documented in pictures.
Oct 2019- March 2020	Outdoor learning opportunities by GREEN CLUB and DINJA WAHDA KLABB continued. One of these was sectioning off parts of soil area, and

	planting flowering shrubs as borders around these working spaces. These will be given to interested classes as nature corners, to own and work out.
OCT 2019	Large yard – enclosed playing area – repairing and repainting of all wooden structures including the house, the slide and surrounding wooden fence.
	Enclosed playing area in large yard – existent rubber flooring to be replaced by artificial turf. Order was made, now waiting for action by FTS to be taken.
OCT 2019	Large yard – Football Pitch – Repairing and repainting of surrounding wooden fence.
	Football pitch in large yard – existent artificial turf which is worn out to be replaced by new turf. Order placed and waiting for further action by FTS
Nov 2019	Large yard - Ramp with railings installed at the main gate to facilitate safer entry for kindergarten kids and special needs children.
22.4.2020	EARTH DAY – Children were asked to do outdoor activities related to the Planet and upload them on PADLET – Those who did not have a garden or fields could draw a slogan about the environment. https://padlet.com/dorita_maniscalco/ix0nljzu0yi74e28
May 2020	Repainting of small yard (in which Kindergarten children play) adding a light green feature wall to brighten up the place.
May 2020	Bought blue shed, wooden tables with seating, 3 large plants and planters to install around the wall of new turfed area to plant climbers and add greenery to it.
June 2020	Small yard – hanging of activity wall-mounted educational panels.
June 2020	Painting of floor games across the large yard by volunteers among the staff and the parents in the school council.
June 2020	Laying of artificial turf covering part of the small yard to make it look like a garden.
June 2020	Enclosing the new turfed area in small yard with wooden fencing and gate.
June 2020	Purchase of 6 planters to plant flowering creepers and place them against the walls of the remaining area in small yard to add greenery and hopefully attract butterflies and other insects to the area (upon suggestion by Birdlife Malta).
June 2020	Purchase of sturdy tricycles to be used by early years pupils for physical development (gross motor skills).
June 2020	Purchase of water toys for our enticing back garden (outdoor area behind head's office).
May/June 2020	Painting of tyres by parents and students at home during lockdown (involvement of parents). These are to be used in creative ways by

	children as they deem fit. Apart from natural loose parts, the children showed a strong liking of these tyres (child-led learning).
June 2020	One parent who works in concrete offered to make concrete stepping stones which we can then paint in any colour and place across the soil area. We are waiting for the first sample.
June 2020	Purchase of small individual pieces of wooden fencing to be placed around working spaces (in addition to flowering shrubs) in the soil for classes to own and carry out activities in.
March-June 2020	Weekly online special assemblies (during COVID-19 lockdown) on outdoor activities by early years classes.
August 2020	<i>Compiled by Mgarr SL: Dorita Maniscalco and Therese Rodgers</i>

By December 2020, the details of work in progress as presented by Mgarr SLT were as follows:

- *‘We bought small kitchen basins for the mud kitchen (which will also have drainage facilities) and the carpenter has started working on it.*
- *We have the names of additional parent volunteers who came forward to join the working group.*
- *Part of the school garden was divided into small areas with pretty wooden fencing, where each class can sow or plant or create whatever the children want. They can go to their little field any time of day because it is only theirs, so no timeslot is needed. We had very good response and everyone planted and decorated excitedly, even building rubble walls around some of them.*
- *We have made two wooden benches from reusable material to be used in the transition area.*
- *We are soon going to have a nature artist from Birdlife Malta coming to school to paint some of the yard walls in the tricycle area.*
- *We shall soon bring pallets for the music wall and to be used as platforms for the mud kitchens.*
- *More tyres have been painted to decorate the garden walls. Children can plant flowers inside them and they may be hung as ornaments.*
- *Blackboards are going to be hung against some walls in the yard as suggested by educators.*
- *We have bought ropes and small pulleys for kids to erect tents wherever they want. One class has already done this.*
- *The climbing wall studs will soon be stuck, at present waiting for the artist to paint a nature scene as background.*

- *The drama area is being designed and a big chest will be made available to keep costumes and other props inside’ (December 2020).*

5.6 (i) New Play Spaces for Learning and Development

The following are brief descriptions and images of work done to enhance the children’s play and learning experiences within Mgarr school.

The Football Pitch

The football pitch needed sanding and painting. Termites were discovered in the fence and it was therefore disinfected and had some parts replaced. New nets were bought for the goal posts. The children used to enter the pitch through the goal posts because there was no door in the pitch. A new door was cut out in the fence and now the children can access the pitch through this door. The old turf was replaced with new turf.



Football Pitch, Before



After

The Ramp

There was no ramp at Mgarr Primary School. Mothers with pushchairs, special needs and Kindergarten children could only access the school by making use of a ramp used by vehicles. A MEDS architect was called in and the ramp was completed in a few months. A safe railing was specifically constructed for this ramp. The Kindergarten pupils are using it in the morning to enter school and during dismissal. Entrance and exit from school are, as a result, much smoother and safer for everyone.



The ramp was constructed to serve kindergarten pupils and mothers using wheeled chairs.

The Outdoor Classroom

An outdoor classroom was constructed behind the football pitch. This was an area which was never used because the soil had hardened too much, that not even a motor soil turner could penetrate it. Furthermore, there was a certain concern related to the use of using this area, since it was rather secluded, and a large palm tree stump was considered dangerous for the children. However, with a lot of good will, the area was deemed worth transforming into an outdoor classroom. To create this space the following works took place:

- the whole area was cleaned up;
- good soil was added to the area;
- the walls were painted and some of them restructured;
- a large blackboard made from marine plywood was installed;
- benches and tables in wood were constructed;
- a large tent was bought together with planters;



Outdoor Classroom, Before

After.

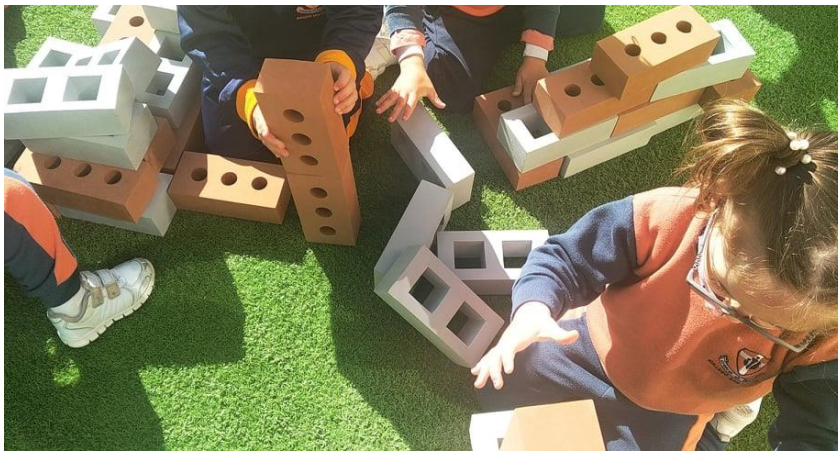
Picnic Area

Part of the internal yard, traditionally dedicated to Kindergarten pupils, was secluded by a wooden fence and turned into a turfed picnic area. The benches complete with umbrellas, also served as an outdoor class room. Storage units were bought to contain resources for outdoor play, including loose parts (pieces of materials for making tents, pegs, blocks and more).



Picnic area for Kindergarten: Before

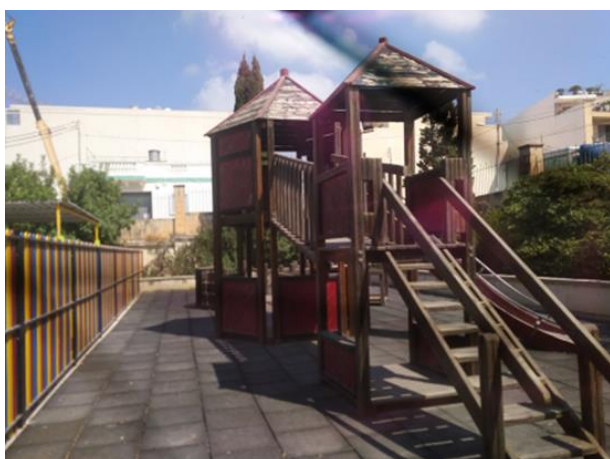
After



Kindergartners playing with blocks in the picnic area

Play Area

The play area was sanded and painted. A new fence was constructed, and new synthetic turf laid.



Fenced Wooden Play Area; Before



After

Area Behind the Head's Office

Behind the Head of School's office, a fibreglass tent was installed to protect students against the elements. Two mud kitchens made from heavy duty wood were also installed. They are complete with fictitious burners and sinks with working drains. Utensils were bought for these kitchens to make the experience more realistic and further stimulate children's play.



Mud Kitchen & Loose part Area; Before



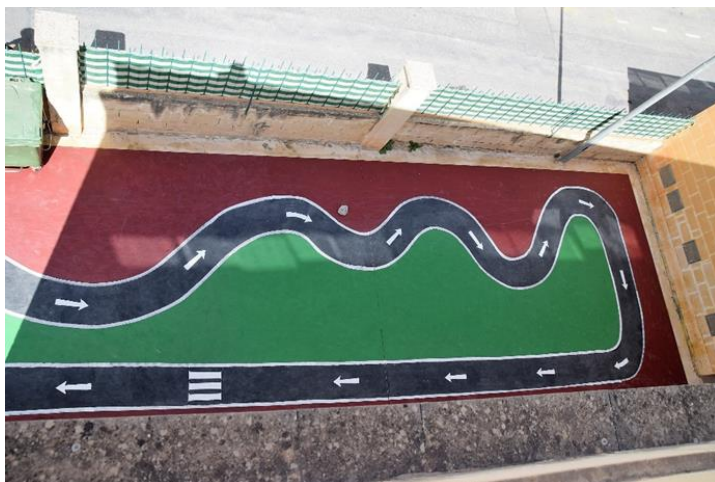
After



Kindergarten Children playing in the Mud Kitchen

Tricycle Area

The area next to the school hall had long laid unused, other than for the storage of large recycle bins. It has now been transformed into a tricycle area, on which roads, stop signs, and a zebra crossing were painted on the concrete floor, and trees drawn on the surrounding walls to create a lovely play area. New tricycles were bought for kindergarten children, and larger ones for Year 1& 2 pupils.



Tricycle area

Wall-mounted Blackboards and other Play Resources



The internal yard, which has always been reserved for Kindergarten pupils, underwent further improvements with the introduction of wall-mounted blackboard and other play resources. A vertical garden is also included in the area and provides a lovely atmosphere and contact with nature.



The Sand Pit

A sand pit was built from heavy duty wood. Appropriate toys were bought for the children to engage in rich imaginative play.



Climbing Frame

The climbing frame was a new introduction to the array of exciting experiences thought out for the Kindergarten children which turned out to be one of their favourite activities. They found climbing challenging, yet they persevered until they succeed in their endeavour. On one side they climb with the help of knobs while on the other side they use knotted ropes.



Musical Walls



Parents volunteered to sand and paint pellets and collected different recycled materials to create fun music walls.

Nature Corners: Little fields

All early years classes were extremely interested in planting and in gardening, however there was not enough planters available for all classes to engage in such activities. The School decided to make better use of the soil areas around its premises which had long been left idle.



Division of soil at Mgarr School into little nature areas, prior to fencing.

The soil area was divided into equal parts and these were in turn surrounded with wooden fencing. Each class was assigned its own patch of land or nature

corner which they could work on and use for sowing and growing plants. For the very first time, the School's Green Club was also assigned its own piece of soil as their nature area. The children were very enthusiastic about exploring these areas.



Different kinds of vegetables were grown as well as seasonal flowers and flowering bushes. These attracted insects that in turn were useful for pollination. Children watched in fascination caterpillars turn into pupa and then into butterflies. When butterflies lay their eggs on the crops, the caterpillars gobbled up much of the luscious leaves. Awareness was raised about the fact that these creatures had an important role to play in the eco-system, and that they should not be destroyed. The children harvested the remaining crops and used them to prepare and enjoy in salads. They proudly took the rest of the crops home, talking about how they had grown and cared for them. As they carried the produce home with beaming faces, it was clear that the planning and design of the nature corners for classroom use, had been a truly successful idea.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The development and transformation of the school grounds at Mgarr Primary School reflects a process that entailed a positive experience for educators, children, and parents. The co-operation and initiatives of all stakeholders in this project contributed to the success of the project.

The pupils stood to gain a lot from the new opportunities provided. The use of outdoor spaces and the variety of new play experiences further stimulated children's developmental areas and enhanced their learning and understanding. The significant number of opportunities provided, supported children in overcoming some of their fears. Fear of being incapable, fear of trying and failing, fear of getting dirty or fear of getting hurt. Furthermore, the opportunities improved their creative expression, induced them to ask more questions and generally fired up their enthusiasm to try out new things, explore and investigate. The quality of the children's educational experience was enriched and made more meaningful since it emerged from their own interests, needs and strengths. The children are participating actively in their own learning through concrete and relevant experiences which make learning deeper and more effective. Moreover, it was evident that in such processes children comprehend better how things work and that understanding of concepts was facilitated. Children memorised knowledge, facts and events more readily as it related to their own experiences. Their self-awareness, self-confidence and behaviour was notably improved with each learning experience. Educators also noted that children's levels of resilience improved. With the educator's support, children were given more space and time to work, share knowledge and experiences and solve problems together. The open spaces instilled in the children an increased sense of freedom and empowerment. Above all, the children's joy, interest, motivation and enthusiasm provided satisfaction to both adults and children.

Parents gladly noted the difference in their children's level of enthusiasm to come to school. They were pleased to note that their children talked much more about their experiences and were often amazed at their young children's knowledge, understanding and use of vocabulary. Some others were pleasantly surprised that their children were enjoying the experience of eating healthy food like soups and salads made from the produce the children had themselves grown in their nature corners.

Several factors contributed favourably to the transformation process and to its success, namely:

- ✓ large school grounds;
- ✓ collaborative Senior Leadership Teams;
- ✓ continuous and supportive training for educators by MEDS;

- ✓ willingness of educators to collaborate in the face of changing pedagogies;
- ✓ children's enthusiasm, motivation and active participation;
- ✓ parental support and involvement;
- ✓ previous and continued commitment to 'Dinja Wahda' initiatives <https://birdlifemalta.org/environmental-education/schools/dinja-wahda-plus/>

Like all transformative processes, the TIP project encountered several challenges. One of the major setbacks was evidently the onset of the COVID 19 in March 2020. The Pandemic situation had a significant impact on all stakeholders in all areas related to the project, namely the pedagogical aspect of teaching and learning and the development and use of outdoor spaces. The lockdown periods, March 2020 and March 2021, complicated the process greatly with restrictions slowing down works and impacting negatively the teaching and learning, which had to be transferred online for a period of time. Families found it difficult to take their children outside due to the pandemic.

All significant changes bring with them strong elements of uncertainty, fear and instability. Apart from the Pandemic, the process of change itself, initiated by the implementation of new pedagogical and assessment approaches, instilled fears and concerns in educators. The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) issued directives to its members to suspend the introduction of the Assessment Tool specifically designed to facilitate the educators' observations and documentation of their pupil's learning process. As a result, educators did not use the time to familiarise themselves further and gain confidence in the use of the new digital tool.

The Teach, Inspire and Protect (TIP) Project was the first of its kind to be implemented in a local school. One of the partners, Learning Through Landscapes (LTL), shared their knowledge with regards to changing landscapes in schools in other countries. The partners of this project had the opportunity to visit and witness changes effected in a Spanish school for young children. The whole process was a learning curve for stakeholders and MEDS had to continually plan, implement and evaluate steps taken to respond to the attitudes and beliefs of educators, the educational and cultural trends ingrained in the school culture, and the physical environments available at Mgarr Primary School. Moreover, the evaluation and analysis of the developmental process of the project was considered as an opportunity of collaboration amongst stakeholders to find the best ways to achieve goals set for the benefit of the school's early years pupils.

The challenges encountered during the development of the TIP project, included:

- ✓ COVID 19 Pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions.
 - parents were deprived of witnessing first hand their children's outdoor experiences, visiting school premises and participating in excursions and other activities;
 - children could not benefit from the new pedagogical approaches, the joy of meeting their peers and working together with the new resources being installed/constructed;
 - teachers could not continue working with pupils at school and observe / assess and explore outdoor spaces in their daily practice.
- ✓ initial doubts and fears about the project: The idea of using the outdoor spaces for learning aroused concern amongst educators in terms of safety and the fear of children getting hurt;
- ✓ frequent changes in the School Headship, with three different Heads changing roles during the three-year project. This was a major constraint which hindered continuity and sense of ownership of the project;
- ✓ instability caused by the simultaneous changes due to the implementation process of Learning Outcomes Framework and new pedagogical approaches, namely the Emergent Curriculum Approach and the Project Approach. Educators found it threatening to let go of their well-established roles as leaders to be able to follow children's interests, strengths and needs;
- ✓ the introduction of a new digitalised Assessment Tool available for educators on the My School portal caused strong resistance from some educators who resorted to trade unions and exerted pressure against its introduction;
- ✓ changing culturally ingrained perspectives of children as needy and incompetent, to the view of children as competent and capable beings. Adults may tend to underestimate the children's capabilities, and unwittingly deprive them of the time and space to grow holistically and happily. Culturally ingrained perspectives about children and childhood are not easily eradicated;

- ✓ educating parents to refrain from stifling their children's holistic development and well-being through overprotection and a view of the child as incompetent;
- ✓ informing partners and stakeholders of the Maltese changing pedagogical perspectives from traditional, rigid, top-down approaches to more responsive and flexible ones (Emergent Curriculum and the Reggio Emilia Approach);
- ✓ introducing new perspectives of the healthy elements of risk-taking in young children's development and growth. Over protection greatly hinders the children's learning experiences and limits their opportunities to grow intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally.
- ✓ the project as an original, made to measure endeavour, with no pre-determined blue print to follow. The project evolved through a responsive approach based on observations, research, discussions, training, documentation, and feedback collected namely from educators, children and parents. A unique solution for unique settings.

Through this project stakeholders sought to maximise the potential of all spaces available within the school grounds. The main objective was to address effectively the needs, interests and strengths of the pupils in the community and to create the best learning environments for the children in the early years. The idea behind the Mgarr case study is to encourage other schools to embark on similar projects and maximise the potential of their outdoor spaces for the benefits of children's learning and well-being. A school within a town has different options available from one located by the sea, in rural areas or in proximity of agricultural land. Each school has its own specific structure, features and contexts with different opportunities and constraints. The TIP project sought to achieve its success by listening and empowering children, educators, SLT, parents and the local community. Listening to the different perspectives and suggestions is necessary to make informed decisions in the best interest of the children. In the TIP process, children's voices were listened to through the educators' observations, documentations, class discussions, drawings and writings.

Recommendations

In early years settings/school, it is important that all stakeholders are empowered and directly involved in the process of change. The project belongs to everyone within and around the school: SLTs, educators and teachers, ancillary staff, parents, children and the local community. While listening and considering all ideas and perspectives, the final goal is the well-being, holistic development and

academic achievements of all the children. The major recommendations for high-quality learning experiences for children and a successful outdoor project may be outlined as follows:

1. Inform and train educators and other stakeholders with regards to benefits of outdoor learning and child-centred pedagogical approaches.
2. Early years educators should fully comprehend the value of the Emergent Curriculum approach and the importance of exploration, discovery, risk-taking and self-directed learning for young children.
3. Establish open communication channels that help educators feel valued and motivated since it is the educator who is best able to understand the learning and developmental needs of their children including the social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects. Discussions and exchange of ideas about the project ensure that choices made are in the best interest of the pupils.
4. Observe well the children who shall be using the spaces about to be transformed. Identify their needs, strengths and interests. Observe how they make use of what is available on the school grounds, how this may be improved and what areas may be introduced to address given interests and needs. Consider a broad range of opportunities to ensure areas offer opportunities for everyone.
5. Make a detailed analysis of spaces available. All spaces used and unused need to be assessed and evaluated carefully. Look into all related features such as access, drainage, sun hours/shade, safety aspects, noise levels, proximity to other public/private areas, green areas etc.
6. Reflect on how to enhance the children's learning experiences and how to integrate aspects from the curriculum so that the whole curriculum (content-syllabi/resources/learning experiences-pedagogy) may be brought outside. The emergent curriculum approach is a responsive approach that promotes hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences based on children's interests, strengths, and needs.
7. Document/research the different designs/equipment and use of areas in order to maximise the learning experiences. It is best to use open-ended opportunities to reach various levels of abilities and skills. To respect the natural environment, it is suggested that natural recycled materials as opposed to plastic are used.
8. Ensure that there are different areas that offer opportunities that cater for a variety of preferences such as areas to connect with nature, quiet areas,

stimulating spaces for exploration, areas for eating/talking and discussions, role play areas with resources that offer a wide range of opportunities, (such as loose parts), areas that support physical development (balance, speed, hanging, climbing, sensory play, construction areas) and so on.

9. Form working groups with stakeholders who are willing to offer support the project in various ways, such as raise funds, assist, share experiences and expertise or make donations. Involve different stakeholders for support in achieving desired goals, such as NGOs, local businesses and Local Council.
10. Involve children in discussions. Give them opportunities to express their ideas, preferences and curiosities through various modes of communication and self-expression.
11. The project needs to be sustainable throughout extended periods of time. Regular maintenance and upgrading are necessary procedures to ensure optimal performance and to eliminate unnecessary risks and dangers.
12. Observe and monitor adequate use of resources for deep learning, stimulation of creative thinking, problem solving and appreciation of the natural environment and all living things.
13. It is important to have access to nature spaces for the wellbeing of children, their holistic development, and to enrich their learning experiences through the different learning opportunities that nature has to offer such as watching birds, observing bugs and insects, growing native species and pollinator-friendly plants, enjoying trees and shrubs, and generally appreciating and connecting with nature.
14. Opt for areas that are flexible and easily transformable to respond to varying needs of pupils using recyclable and natural materials as much as possible.



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