

## *Parents and Their Voices Outside the Classroom: Perceiving Freedom in Education*

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2021  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Education is perceived in different ways depending on various factors. Many parents and students alike go through the process in a passive way and keep moving forward simply because the system pushes them forward. This may lead toward destinations which are not necessarily according to their wishes, nor beneficial for their future prospects. It is a requisite in this whole discourse that before expecting answers, we ought to decipher the level to which parents and students alike feel not only involved but also the owners of their own journey in education, free enough to put forward their opinions on their education, considering an attitude from parents/guardians towards the experience that student is passing through and whether the former allow the latter to walk through paths which may seem unheard of or even leading to fruitless trajectories. The discernment including different possibilities is certainly a philosophical argument which is more concerned on the freedom and liberty of the individual rather than the institution (be it the class or the school). The class or school environment should be scaffolded upon the individuals' personal perception of freedom within the system the s/he operates. Students and parents perceive freedom according to their different points of view within the context of formal education. They may or may not think they are in control of the educational journey and whether the choices made are in fact the result of their decision, reflecting their opinion within an educational system which dictates a menu of choices.

Keywords: Parental Involvement, Freedom in Education, Choice, Ownership Trajectories

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## Introduction

Freedom is a concept directly linked with choice. ‘Freedom and liberty in choice’ are not only linked to the exact moment when choice is affected but go even beyond that moment. In order to be able to make the choice, there are decisive decisions which serve in favour for the choice to happen which includes the necessary freedom and information needed. Such a system aimed towards an informed process of freedom, needs to be scaffolded through rational, informed and voluntary choices which promotes critical thinking while analysing the key elements in the system itself.

The concept of choice is also elemental to the education systems which provide students with the opportunity to discover and develop towards “freedom and liberty in choice”<sup>1</sup>. Decision makers in these education systems employ the system by evaluating the possible options, also resulting into the foremost outcome in line with their assessment, with the hope of “the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that children develop”<sup>2</sup> for the benefit of the student/citizen as well as others in society. Students on the other hand not only choose subjects and courses but also their lives’ trajectories which will eventually lead them to become active citizens in society.

In this paper I shall give consideration to the notion of freedom and its perception by parents in Malta subsequent to a questionnaire which was randomly shared amongst parents through various online platforms with a total of 500 respondents. The participants were asked about their general opinion about their own education and their choices in their educational trajectories and how their experience influences their own sons’ and daughters’ choices in education. I will hereby reflect on the questions and how the respondents, today’s parents, answered as they look back at their own education.

## Voices of Parents

### The Participants

The questionnaire was put forward to a broad audience, all of whom were parents from different genders and ages. Yet it is interesting to note a few demographic points resulting from the respondents of the questionnaire. From a total of 500, only 33(6.6%) were male respondents, and 467(93.4%) were females. The ages varied from 18-25 years with 16 (3.2%) respondents; 26-35 years with 122(24.4%) respondents; 36-50 years with 293(58.6%) respondents; 51-65 years of age with 58(11.6%) respondents and 66 years and over with 11-(2.2%) respondents.

Age	
18-25 years	16-(3.2%)
26-35 years	122-(24.4%)
36-50 years	293-(58.6%)
51-65 years	58-(11.6%)
66 years and over	11-(2.2%)

Table 1. Age of Respondents

It is interesting to note that 237(46.2%) had a tertiary level of education and only the very least of the respondents only had a primary education or less. Keeping this information in mind, the respondents also answered about the type of education institution they attended up to their secondary years with 30(6%) affirming that they attended a private or independent school; 143(28.6%) attended in a Church / Faith School while 327(65.4%) attended in a public state school.

Education level	
Tertiary (PhD)	6-(1.2%)
Tertiary (Masters)	68-(13.6%)
Tertiary (1 <sup>st</sup> degree)	157-(31.4%)
Up to post-secondary	148-(29.6%)
Up to secondary	119-(23.8%)
Primary level or less	2-(0.4%)

Table 2. Education Level Obtained by Respondents.

Type of Educational Institution	
Private/Independent	6-(1.2%)
Church/Faith	68-(13.6%)
State/Public	157-(31.4%)

Table 3. Type of Educational Institution Attended by the Respondents.

Note: In Malta, primary and secondary education (compulsory education) is divided into three sectors: State/Public, Church/Faith and Private/Independent.

### Perception of Freedom

For a truly free choice to be performed, it is required for an agent to have a free mind, where despite the particular circumstances that the agent is living in, the context does not coerce him/her to make a particular choice because of the context itself (be it society, an institution, family etc). On the contrary, it is the deliberative process which should lead the agent toward that particular decision. Of course, there may be values and interests that may influence the process of deliberation, yet it is crucial to “analyse the source of the concept, that is to search for the original impression that generates it”<sup>3</sup> so that the agent is enabled to decide upon the options and the consequences of the choice/s performed.

The respondents in the presented questionnaire were interviewed regarding the influences they experienced along their own educational journey. Their own educational experience impinges, to a certain extent, upon the perception and/or experience they pass on to their children, depending on whether they had a positive or less positive encounter with education. The ownership experience is not simply a ‘feeling’. Perceptions also form part of experiences and parents too have their perspectives of the educational journey based upon their own experiences. Nevertheless, ownership is felt and more importantly, expressed, when parents are fully immersed in their children’s educational voyage. It is therefore of utmost importance to strive for parental involvement and ownership.

A qualitative educational system equipped with the vision of the student being a free agent, would provide the student (and his parents/guardians) with the free choice of schools, subjects, trajectories and the whole needed framework which aids him/her to follow a particular path in education. Autonomy and ownership in the process of choosing needs to allow free will to prevail. For a good prospect of lifelong learning to be engaged, the more owned does the process needs to be. The issue remains whether the educational structure permits students to opt for decisions which are free or else a type of coercion which specifically leads towards choices due to institutions' limitations as well as the national agendas that lead towards or away from specific trajectories.

Influences	
School System	152- (30.4%)
No influence/interference	149- (29.8%)
Parents/Guardians	134- (26.8%)
Friends	56-(11.2%)

Table 4. Some of the Main Influences/Interferences Mentioned by the Respondents

Ownership / Control	
YES strongly agree	51-(10.2%)
YES agree	197- (39.4%)
Not Sure	122- (24.4%)
NO disagree	112- (22.4%)
NO strongly disagree	18-(3.6%)

Table 5. The Perception of the Respondent's Control Over Their Own Educational Trajectories

When 252(50.4%) respondents state that they do not know or disagree with the statement of themselves owning the process of subject choice (Vide table 4), this suggests the ownership perception that parents of today's students had during their own experience as students. Their own viewpoint in their children's journey in education today is surely in some way influenced by their deficiency in ownership due to various basis that distinguished their schooling years.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that when respondents replied to the identification of the possible origin of their interferences or influence, 149(29.8%) respondents answered that they had no influence / interference. This is an intriguing reply due to the fact that in the Maltese education system, different scholastic institutions provide divergent options and not all possibilities are provided in every school. Therefore, institutional limitations were not perceived as an influence or interference by the respondents. Others declared that the school system interfered 152(30.4%), while 134(26.8%) stated that it was their parents / guardians that influenced their choices in education. Only 56(11.2%) declared that they were influenced by friends and their choices, as they were in the decision-making process themselves.

## **Freedom Towards Flourishing**

Critical minds are able to examine and process values which in/directly influence different choices yet still able to think beyond the same influences. Such an ability enables the agent to ponder upon the different possibilities, the principles and the consequences of any choices while discarding others. Undoubtedly, all students get their influence in some way or another. Nevertheless, it is also true that if any influence or constraint is purely accidental and not purposely limiting free will, a critical minded student should have the propensity for ownership of the process and follow his/her choices with an intrinsic liberty.

One important issue which education stakeholders need to have in the decision-making process is to what extent should values and beliefs be bestowed onto students. This is even more pertinent should the emanated principles and ideals be in disagreement with the principles and ideals that the students already own. The student's perception in the learning process would be ameliorated with the educator's eliciting of the information from the student's part. This eliciting from the educator accompanied by development through the elicited knowledge, would enhance the student's perception to be in favour of the input provided to and through him/her.

The blend between 'directive' and 'non-directive' teaching still is a valid pedagogical approach. The eliciting and the imparting of knowledge as a collection of elements is a crucial ingredient in education. However, false beliefs should also be part of the educator's tools so as to develop or make use of an example in order to portray a message. When an educator identifies what should be deemed an education suitable for students to prosper<sup>4</sup>, truth and knowledge are crucial for an efficacious development. Conditioned as to what prosperity is targeted, the educational goods would differ in content as well as the intensity with which these are conferred as such decisions are often combined decision-making activity.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, one cannot assume that in education any stakeholder is or should be in 'a total control' or else that 'the student has a total free will' as this is against the nature of education itself. If the student were to be totally free in his/her will, it would result in the educational goods presented to him/her being completely useless, almost putting in doubt the freedom of will of the student with a limited amount of goods as well as plausible trajectories. Robert F. Dearden portrays that the evolution of "autonomy as an educational aim" in the context of the development of a person where his/her "thought and action in important areas of his life are to be explained by reference to his own choices, decisions, reflections, deliberations". Dearden is thus suggesting that the whole exercise is not only owned but also driven by the agent's "own activity of mind".<sup>5</sup>

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