



## Perception of Freedom in the Educational Context. Listening to Parents' Voices Outside the Classroom

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### Abstract

*During their educational journey, students have different perspectives of what this voyage consists of and where it will lead them to. Nevertheless, many are those who live this process like on a conveyor belt which takes them towards a destination which is not necessarily as desired by them even though they keep moving forward. This is certainly a very sad situation especially when parents are part of their son's/daughter's educational journey and do not encourage and listen to the students' voices and their ideas to build a trajectory of their own – almost a tailor-made educational experience. However, before asking questions and expecting answers, one ought to decipher how much parents and students alike consider themselves the owners of their own educational journey and whether they feel free enough to speak up and portray their opinion on their education. This reflective attitude should also include the parents'/guardians' attitude towards the students' experience and whether the former allow the latter to walk through paths which may seem unheard of or even leading to fruitless trajectories. This argument goes farther than the class or school environment in general. The deliberation between different possibilities unimpededly is a philosophical issue 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. Students and parents perceive freedom from different points of view within the context of formal education. Both sides 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. This reflects their opinion within an educational system which dictates a menu of choices.*

**Keywords:** *Freedom in Education, Trajectories, Choice, Parent involvement, Ownership*

### 1. Introduction

Freedom and liberty are concepts which are intertwined with choice. 'Freedom and liberty in choice' are not just related to the exact moment of choice but go even farther. To perform a choice, there are important decisions which allow this choice to happen, including a free and informed environment. To scaffold a system geared towards this informed freedom, there needs to be a rational, informed, and voluntary system of choices where critical thinking as well as thorough analysis are key elements in the system.

The notion of choice is surely applicable to education systems which guide the students towards a developmental act enlightened by "*freedom and liberty in choice*" [1] not only of subjects and courses but more importantly, the trajectories towards which the student will eventually act as a citizen within our societies. Decision-makers in the educational realm operate a framework whereby the possible options are evaluated, resulting into the best possible outcome according to their assessment hoping that "the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that children develop" will serve "for their benefit and for the benefit of others" [2].

In this paper I shall reflect upon the concept of freedom as it is perceived by parents in Malta following an online questionnaire randomly shared amongst parents on various platforms with a response of 500 participants. The parents who participated were asked to give a general outlook of their own education and how their choices are now reflected onto their own sons' and daughters' choices in education. Here I will be reflecting on a few of these questions and how these respondents, who are now today's parents, look back at their own education trajectories.



## 2. The Parent's Voices

### 2.1 The Participants

The questionnaire was offered to a wide audience of parents from various ages and genders; however, it is interesting to note that from 500 respondents, only 33-(6.6%) were male, and 467-(93.4%) were females. Their 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.

Notably, 237-(46.2%) have a tertiary level of education and the bare minimum of the respondents have only a primary education or less. With this information in mind, the respondents were also asked about the type of institution they attended up to their secondary years with 30-(6%) answering they attended in 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. The type of educational institution attended by the respondents.

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

### 2.2 The Perception of Freedom

To make a true and free choice, one requires a free mind where the agent, despite living in a particular context, s/he is not led or coerced into a choice because of the context (family, institution, society etc) but by a process of authentic deliberation. Despite all the values and interests that might influence the deliberative process, it is essential to "analyse the source of the concept, that is to search for the original impression that generates it" [3] enabling the agent to determine the options and the consequences of such choices.

The participants in the questionnaire were asked about their own influences during their own schooling years. Their experience in education reflects in some way the experience they pass on to their children depending on the positive or less positive acquaintance with education. This exercise in ownership is not merely the 'feeling' of the student. During their educational journey, parents too have their own perspectives of it based upon their own past experiences. However, when parents are fully immersed in their children's educational voyage, ownership is felt and expressed. Parental



involvement and ownership are the aim we may strive for, and which also involves the free will of the parents themselves.

A sound educational system endowed with the philosophy whereby a student is seen as a free agent, gives the student him/herself (and his/her parents/guardians) the ability to freely choose schools and subjects, and moreover the educational framework through which s/he can pursue a particular trajectory. Ownership and autonomy in the process of choice for an agent is to allow free will to prevail. The more owned is the process, the more likely is the prospect of lifelong learning. The question lies whether the educational structure allows agents to opt for free decisions or a subtle coercion towards specific choices because of the institution's limitations as well as the national agenda that pushes towards or away from specific trajectories.

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 4. The perception of the respondent's control over their own educational trajectories

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

Table 5. Some of the main influences/interferences mentioned by the respondents.

The fact that 252-(50.4%) do not know or disagree with the statement of themselves owning the process of subject choice (Vide table 4) reflects the level of ownership that today's parents had during their educational journey as students. Their attitude in their children's educational journey today is certainly affected in some way by their own lack of ownership for the various reasons that characterised their school years.

Contrastingly, when the respondents answered the question which asked them to identify the source, if any, of their influences or interferences, it was interesting to note that 149-(29.8%) had no influence / interference whatsoever. This is an interesting answer because within the education system in Malta, different schools offer different options and not all possible options are offered in every school. Thus, the limitations of the institution itself was not felt as an influence or interference by these respondents. Some others blamed their influence/interference on the school system 152-(30.4%) while 134-(26.8%) claimed that their parents / guardians did influence or interfere their choices in education. It was only 56-(11.2%) who were influenced by their friends and their choices whilst they were in the process of deciding for themselves.

A critical mind that can analyse and process any values which may directly or indirectly influence decision-making is still able to think over and above that same influence. This would enable the agent to reflect on the given options, their values and the consequences that follow if any option is chosen over a set of other availabilities. It is beyond reasonable doubt that all students are influenced in some way or another. However, it is equally undoubtedly true that if any influence, interference, or constraints are purely accidental and not on purpose to limit free will, critical minded students will be able to own the process and pursue further their choices with an intrinsic sense of freedom.

### 3. Applying Freedom Towards Flourishing

A crucial question which all stake holders in the educational decision-making process need to reflect upon is the degree (if any) of bestowing values and beliefs onto students. This is more relevant if the values and beliefs being conveyed are at loggerheads with the values and beliefs that the students already possess. The more educators elicit from the students and provide a journey of development



through the elicited information, the better will the student perceive the input given to and from him/her.

The mix between 'directive' and 'non-directive' teaching is still a valid pedagogical approach. Eliciting as well as imparting knowledge as a set of facts is an integral part of education. Yet this should not restrict the educator from making use of false beliefs, either to develop or else to make use of an example in a respectful manner. When an educator specifies what is to be considered as an education good for students to aim to flourish [4], knowledge and truth are key elements to an effective formation. Depending on what flourishing is intended, the educational goods would vary not only in content but also in the density with which these are presented as decisions such as this are often part of a collective decision-making process.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a way of conclusion, the assumption that education is either 'a total control' or else 'total free will of the student' goes totally against the nature of education itself. For, if the student is totally free in his/her will, then the educational goods presented to him/her are completely useless, almost doubting the freedom of will of the student with a limited amount of goods as well as possible trajectories. What Robert F. Dearden suggests is that the development of "autonomy as an educational aim" within 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". What Dearden is suggesting is that the whole process is not only owned but also powered by the agent's "own activity of mind". [5]

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