

'He is very happy. Yeah, he's actually laughing':

A holistic insight into inclusive education in a Maltese primary school

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ABSTRACT

This article presents specific findings from a Master's degree thesis (Bugeja, 2023) that sought to investigate the inclusion of disabled students in a primary state school in the Maltese islands. The rationale underpinning the research was inspired by figures extracted from European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education EASNIE (2019/2020), which indicated that 97% of disabled students attend mainstream schools. However, the rate of early school leavers among these students is significantly higher than that of their non-disabled counterparts (Gauci *et al.*, 2021, citing latest EU data). Consequently, disabled students are inadequately prepared for the world of employment (Mugliette, 2020). In light of these concerning findings, the primary objective of this paper is to present the concept

of inclusion in a primary state school from a holistic perspective, highlighting the protagonists of education, the students. A mixed-method approach utilising a qualitative-driven embedded design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was employed, involving triangulation through interviews, questionnaires and a focus group. The findings revealed prejudices among educators, who believed that not all students are eligible for inclusion, attributing learning failure to impairments. These biases were more nuanced in the feedback provided by the Learning Support Educators (LSEs), while all participating students concurred that all students, irrespective of their diversity, can learn together. Other findings indicated that the support system in place may hinder social inclusion, leading to integration rather

KEYWORDS

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

MALTA

DISABLED

SOCIAL INCLUSION

LSE

than inclusion. These findings may be attributed to the lack of effective training in the field of inclusion, a predominant theme throughout the research. The study has conveyed a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by the inclusion of disabled students in the researched school. It also underscores the importance of training and strongly advocates for a shift among educators and parents/guardians from a deficit-thinking approach to a rights-based perspective on inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Malta and Gozo are the two inhabited islands that form part of the independent Republic of Malta situated in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. Malta (316km²) and Gozo (67 km²) together have a population of 516,000 (National Statistics Office Malta, 2021). Malta's school system comprises 150 state schools (free of charge), 34 Catholic church schools and 18 independent schools. Following the publication of *For All Children to Succeed* (MEYR, 2005), which proposed greater collaboration between schools to meet the needs of all students (EASNIE, 2014), state schools were organised into ten colleges, each consisting of a cluster of ten primary schools, a middle school and a secondary school (Rieser, 2020). The reform, implemented in 2010, aimed to establish learning communities (EASNIE, 2014), enhance school networking and foster a collaborative culture through resource and practice sharing (EASNIE, 2016). As part of this process, four special schools and a special unit were renamed as resource centres and integrated into a college (EASNIE, 2014). The reform sought to promote the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools and offer support, services and expertise through resource centres (EASNIE, 2016; Gauci *et al.*, 2021). The term 'disabled students' itself reflects the social model of disability, highlighting societal barriers that disable individuals through a systematic lack of consideration for diversity.

INCLUSION IN MALTA

Inclusion is a process meant to mitigate barriers that impede the attendance, participation and progress of students (UNESCO, 2017). In Malta, the attendance of disabled students in regular schools radically increased from 33% in 1992 (Bartolo & Borg, 2009) to 97% in 2020 (EASNIE, 2019/2020). This overwhelming increase necessitated the hasty engagement of LSEs, who were not all trained (Spiteri *et al.*, 2005). Most of the time, the LSEs were assigned sole responsibility for the education and

inclusion of disabled students (Bajada, 2019; Callus & Farrugia, 2013; CRPD, 2023; EASNIE, 2014; Zammit, 2019). An external audit conducted by EASNIE (2014) criticised the Maltese inclusion system for considering inclusion as another initiative rather than a rights-based issue. Such harsh criticism may have led to a new inclusive policy document titled *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion*, which was published together with *A National Inclusive Education Framework in 2019* and revised in 2022. These publications drew on the context of the *Framework for Strategy for Malta 2014-2024*, which aimed to provide equal opportunities to all students, embrace inclusion and reduce unemployment (MEDE, 2014).

EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSION

Some educators still embrace the medical model of disability that considers disabled students as deficient beings to be 'fixed'. Failing to understand that the difficulties in learning do not stem from the students themselves but from the environment is potentially one of the most challenging barriers that need to be overcome; otherwise, instead of inclusion, educators risk creating situations of exclusion and segregation inside regular schools (Bartolo *et al.*, 2007) or an undesirable increase in students attending special schools. To this end, MacArthur & Kelly (2004) highlighted the need for educators to develop self-awareness through the cultivation of self-reflective habits and inquisitive minds that call into question biases and misconceptions surrounding the capabilities of disabled students.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Disabled students who attend mainstream schools had more opportunities to develop friendships when compared with those attending segregating settings (Cologon, 2013; 2019). Despite the widespread acceptance of inclusion, a slew of difficulties and barriers continue to undermine its practice. The engagement of educators to support disabled students

in regular classrooms is prevalent in several countries (Bartolo & Borg, 2009; Buttigieg, 2021; D'Alessio, 2011; Rutherford, 2012; Webster & Blatchford, 2015). While the role of LSEs is crucial in the education experience of disabled students, a heavy reliance on support staff may have led to excessive supervision, resulting in limited interaction with peers (Azzopardi, 2010; Cologon, 2019; De Schauwer *et al.*, 2009) and with the class teacher. Moreover, interaction between disabled and non-disabled students is often driven by a sense of care and assistance rather than perceived as an opportunity to acknowledge the rights of disabled students (Cologon, 2019; MacArthur & Kelly, 2004). This interaction is commonly seen as a benevolent act, sometimes even rewarded by educators (Psaila, 2015), reinforcing the misconception that disabled students depend on charity. Such situations may indicate the replication of specialised education within mainstream schools couched under the term of inclusion, potentially labelling some students as 'others'. Tanti Burló (2017) and Brock and Carter (2016) emphasised that placing students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers without meticulous planning does not guarantee social inclusion.

SUPPORT PROVIDED TO EDUCATORS

The need for Professional Development in inclusive education is felt internationally. Results from TALIS in 2013 suggested that teaching disabled students is the area in which educators felt they needed the most training (OECD, 2014). EASNIE (2014) reported that schools in Malta do not consider the educators' continuous professional development (CPD) in inclusion as important as other areas. Indeed, when educators' training revolved around diversity, it was reported that it only targeted LSEs. It could be because LSEs are considered 'the face and shoulders of inclusivity' (Borg & Schembri, 2022, p. 138). To this end, *A National Inclusive Education Framework* highlighted the importance of CPD for inclusive and equitable schools (MEYR,

2022a), while MEYR (2022b) included the training opportunities to support inclusive education as one of its four key benchmarks.

While educators insist on the crucial importance of training, the nature and timing of training provision are open to discussion (Florian, 2019). The author argued that training provision is typically elective, thus preparing educators for different categories of students' needs, which in turn perpetuates the idea that not all educators are prepared to teach all students. Florian (2019) suggested that instead of focusing on specific disabilities or difficulties, training be focused on removing barriers to learning and adopting rights-based approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a case study as it sought to obtain an in-depth understanding (Thomas, 2017) of inclusive education in a Maltese primary school from a holistic standpoint. The school chosen for this case study had a population of 350 students, 10% of whom held a statement of needs, qualifying for the support of a full-time or shared LSE, an individual education plan (IEP) and other accommodations according to their needs. Additionally, the school is home to several immigrant students, students coming from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and religious beliefs, and other students who, despite not being formally stated, have specific needs and may benefit from inclusive education. Therefore, although the focus of this

research was on the inclusion of disabled students, in recognition of the broader term of inclusion, the selected school was a relevant case.

As shown in Figure 1, the case study utilised a mixed-method approach characterised by a qualitative-driven embedded design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), within an interpretive paradigm. The data was collected concurrently in a single phase. Qualitative data yielded in-depth views and explanations for the closed-ended questions, while the quantitative data complemented qualitative findings, capturing the perspectives of a greater number of participants (Dawadi *et al.*, 2021). A total of 23 online questionnaires were distributed among three different stakeholder groups, namely teachers, LSEs and parents. These questionnaires included closed- and open-ended questions, providing qualitative and quantitative questions that sought to enhance the validity and reliability of the data. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with two members of the senior leadership team (SLT). Questions were pre-planned, exploring the same themes as those in the questionnaires and seeking to address the research questions. Given that this research focused on inclusive education, particular emphasis was placed on amplifying and underscoring the voices of the students, who are the protagonists of education. A focus group with six students, representative of the norm, was organised. The group consisted of students with disabilities and non-

disabled peers, who were recruited based on age, gender, nationality and diversity, as recommended by Gibson (2007) and Gibson (2012). During the focus group, a booklet was used to raise a discussion prompted by photographs, and this was followed by questions asking about their personal experience concerning the pictures.

All the participants were provided with information regarding the research through an informed document (BERA, 2018). Child-friendly letters of information and assent forms were provided to minors along with information letters and consent forms for their parents. Data collection methods were developed in English; however, to prevent any misunderstandings, all communication with parents and students was also translated into Maltese.

The response rate for the study was 100%. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse, summarise and present findings related to a data set derived from the completed closed-ended questions in the questionnaires by the sample population. It lent itself to the presentation of a summary of the quantitative data set through a combination of tabulated and graphical descriptions and discussion of the results found. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was used to analyse the responses to open-ended questions of all the stakeholders. Given the small size of the Maltese islands, meticulous care was exercised in the way background details were presented to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality (BERA, 2018).

FINDINGS

In this study, the educators were teachers, LSEs and SLT members. Findings showed that only one teacher specialised in inclusive education, while a significant majority of participating LSEs (71.4%) held a Bachelor's Degree in inclusive education. The SLT training areas focused on general education administration and management.

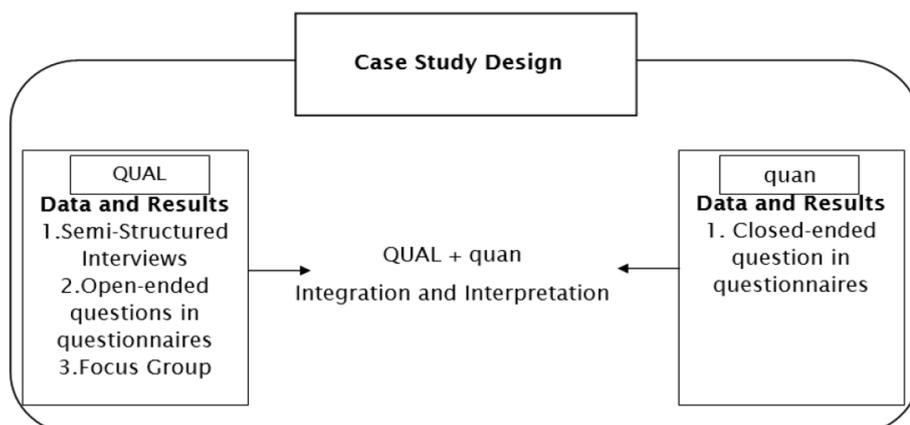


Figure 1: Embedded design of mixed methods diagram

The participating parents had at least one child with a disability attending the school, with 50% of the disabilities related to autism. All the parents reported that their children received support from an LSE except for one, whose needs stemmed from learning difficulties. The participating students included three boys and three girls, ranging from nine to eleven years old. One student had physical needs, another one had a neurological condition, whereas a third student had learning needs. One student was not Maltese while the other two did not have any visible or hidden specific needs. The heterogeneity of this group served to represent a diverse class population and provided a range of perspectives.

ADULTS' DEFICIT THINKING MINDSET ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Different stakeholders were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the proposition that all students should be educated together regardless of their diverse needs. 63% of the teachers disagreed with this statement whereas, in sharp contrast, 72% of LSEs agreed. It was evident that the proportion of teachers who opted for 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' largely aligns with the 75% of the participating parents, who likewise did not agree that all students should be taught together. The consensus among teachers and LSEs who did not agree was that disabled students may disturb other students and that mainstream classes were not equipped to meet their needs, especially when the disability is severe. One teacher reported:

I believe that certain severe disabilities where the student is not benefiting at all when being included in the mainstream, and on the other hand, the classroom setting and routine is making him/her more frustrated, shouldn't be taught together with the other students.

The two SLT members also concurred that the school may be failing to address the needs of all the students. One of the SLTs

remarked that 'extreme cases' should not be placed in a regular class for the entire day. Referring to disabled students as 'cases' may be interpreted as a Freudian slip, suggesting the continued influence of the medical model of disability within the educators' perspectives, which, according to D'Alessio (2011), views students as requiring assessment for provisions. The assumption that disabled students stand to gain if placed in segregated or specialised places may potentially perpetuate ableist beliefs and ingrained prejudices (Cologon, 2019).



Figure 2: Extract from the social/emotional inclusion section of the booklet used during the focus group

In contrast with the adults, when the participating students were shown a picture (see Figure 2) of a disabled student, they agreed that he would have no difficulty learning together with them in class with support. The discrepancy between the views of adults and those of minors can be attributed to the fact that adults grew up in a society that embraced the medical model of disability. This was a time when disabled persons were perceived as less educable, in need of charity, or more suitably educated in segregated places (Camilleri & Callus, 2001). Conversely, students aged between nine to eleven years have always been educated in heterogeneous

groups, as a result of which they may harbour fewer prejudices about disabled children than adults. Revealingly, when a minor participant was asked to give his interpretation of a picture (see Figure 2), he exclaimed:

He is very happy. Yeah, he's actually laughing.

Tellingly, his initial thought about the student was not focused on the disability, or on difficulties with learning, but on the happiness displayed.

As opposed to student participants, the participating educators attributed the difficulties they encountered to the students' impairments, with the exception of two LSEs and one teacher who linked the challenges to debatable teaching approaches, curriculum and teacher attitudes. Pinning the blame for any difficulties on students may be creating situations of stigmatisation, segregation and exclusion within typical settings, as pointed out by concerned parents. Specifically, one parent complained that their child consistently sat at the back of the class with the LSE and that the lessons were predominantly auditory, posing accessibility issues for some students. Additionally, another parent expressed concern that their child was occasionally excluded from certain activities based on the teacher's perception of their child's capabilities. These responses might suggest that though disabled students are predominantly admitted to mainstream schools, instances of segregation and/or exclusion persist.

SOCIAL INCLUSION VS HELP/PITY/CHARITY

Findings indicated that social inclusion might be lacking at school, with disabled students interacting mostly with the LSE and not with their peers. Although according to the majority of parents' and educators' responses (78.3%), disabled students have meaningful relationships with their peers, the parents' open-ended responses indicated a different story. For example, a parent reported that:

No peer in their class knows how to spend at least two minutes with them [students with autism] in a social activity.'

Another parent lamented the fact that their child spent their break alone and was not encouraged to interact with their peers, adding that their child's socialisation needs were not being met. Such negative comments may suggest that social inclusion is not given its due importance at school. For instance, 62.5% of the teachers and 71.4% of the LSEs reported that they had neither organised nor had they ever been involved in programmes designed to build friendships. The only initiative mentioned by 33% of educators was the buddy system. An LSE reported that they designed a roster that changed daily so that a student would be 'assigned' to play with disabled students. Unfortunately, this system gravitates more towards help and care than friendship (MacArthur & Kelly, 2004) because children are not given a choice. Besides, being on a roster to play with someone can be seen as a chore. Moreover, the buddy system initiative can end up supporting and perpetuating the Maltese ableist culture which, according to Callus (2021), is that of feeling sorry for the disabled and not doing anything about it.

Students also perceived the absence of support for social inclusion. Notably one student acknowledged the necessity of games organisations to foster friendship between disabled and non-disabled students. The same student's comments regarding a student with disability indicates that initiatives such as the buddy system may foster sentiments of care, pity and charity towards disabled students, rather than cultivating meaningful friendship.

Yeah, like I would feel very grateful to what like for what I have and I feel sorry for him and I'll try to help him as much as possible.

Moreover, commenting about how best

to play with disabled students, another student said that they could play with them using a shape sorter or other similar toys. It is therefore likely that, since disabled students are constantly seen working with LSEs, students may perceive that that is the way to interact with them. In this respect, the constant support of LSEs may be hindering the social inclusion of disabled peers (Azzopardi, 2010; Cologon, 2019; De Schauwer *et al.*, 2009; Psaila, 2015; UNCRPD, 2018) while adversely affecting their sense of belonging (Crouch *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, a student expressed a sense of unease when asking the teacher questions as she was overly dependent on the LSE seated beside her all day. Students recommended assigning a designated desk for the LSE to assist anyone needing support, as depicted in a student's drawing (see Picture 1). Both the drawing and focus group discussions revealed that the support provided unintentionally hinders inclusion by limiting interactions among disabled peers, class teachers and non-disabled peers. These limitations

may contribute to increased stigma and segregation, undermining a sense of belonging.

LACK OF TRAINING IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The National Inclusive Policy and Framework (MEYR, 2022a) recommended that all educators receive training opportunities to establish a robust inclusive environment. In response, both SLT members acknowledged the necessity for training; however, they both reported that the school had not organised any training focused on inclusive education. Similarly, they commented that inclusion was not identified as a priority area in School Development Plans.

Teachers' and LSEs' responses aligned with the literature (Borg & Schembri, 2022; EASNIE, 2014), highlighting educators' insufficient preparedness as a major concern. The lack of training in inclusive education may be attributed to the persistent mindset that distinguishes between general and special education (Florian, 2019). Trapped in this mindset,

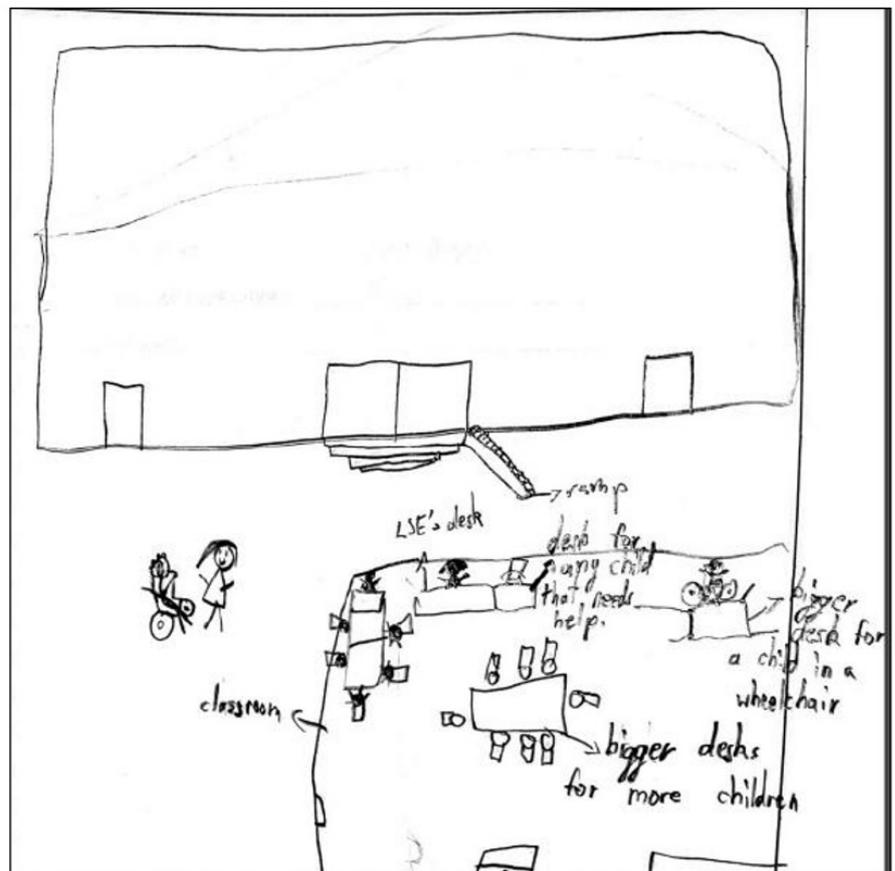


Figure 3: A student's drawing of an inclusive school

teachers are viewed as primarily responsible for the majority of students, while LSEs are seen as solely responsible for disabled students. Consequently, teacher training tends to focus on areas other than inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive schools are widely recognised as a fundamental human right, aligning with the broader goal of fostering a genuinely inclusive society. Despite this knowledge and understanding, both existing literature and the findings of this small-scale research have shone a harsh light on the challenges and barriers that hinder the implementation of inclusive practices in the specific Maltese primary school under investigation.

Expanding the sample size to encompass an entire college would have offered a more comprehensive perspective. Further work might involve conducting additional interviews to enhance the complexity of the study by providing deeper insights and

further details. Moreover, incorporating observations could add value, robustness and validity to the research.

The main challenges to fostering inclusion within this school stem from a deficit-thinking mindset and attitudinal biases. This mindset attributes inclusion difficulties to students' impairments rather than acknowledging the barriers imposed by societal expectations regarding what is deemed 'normal' and the absence of a more accessible and differentiated curriculum. Relocating disabled in mainstream schools while maintaining an ableist mindset does not translate into genuine inclusionary interventions. Indeed, concerns raised by parents and students highlighted instances of segregation and exclusion within the school environment. Despite the literature indicating that disabled students attending mainstream schools are more likely to develop friendship relationships with their peers, the findings indicate that the relationships revolved around care, help and pity – a far cry

from the genuine inclusionary culture. Other challenges that were cited include insufficient and inadequate training and an inflexible curriculum. By acknowledging and recognising these barriers, schools will have taken an important initial step towards the mitigation and/or elimination of these inhibitory barriers. The insights provided by the study may serve as a solid foundation upon which schools can reflect and consider taking the necessary remedial actions to address and overcome these challenges. The schools' communities must commit to facing and overcoming this ongoing challenge, aiming to constantly improve inclusive practices and create an environment where no student is merely 'tolerated' and provided with an LSE, but where all students feel valued, supported and genuinely included.

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