Resources and services needed by educators to work with autistic students in mainstream primary schools: the Maltese perspective

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Abstract: Maltese governments have invested considerably in education and inclusion in society. In this article, the resources and services needed by the senior management team (SMT), teachers, and learning support educators (LSEs) when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta are discussed. This is done in light of research showing that resources and services in inclusive schools can ease the challenges of IE and make it a positive experience. Data was collected through qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. All primary school educators in one college [i] were invited to participate. 172 educators accepted the invitation and filled out a questionnaire. Of the 172 participants, 19 agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. The findings show that in the Maltese education system several services already exist for autistic students. However, such services have certain deficiencies that must be addressed. Moreover, the findings show that certain resources and other services are lacking.

Keywords: autistic students; inclusive education; Maltese education system; resources and services

Introduction

Maltese governments have invested considerably in education, which is the main sector contributing to the development of well-educated citizens aspiring towards further education and well-paid careers. The government has also worked towards promoting a more inclusive society through the implementation of inclusive education (IE). However, the aspirational ethos of inclusion differs from its actual implementation in Maltese schools, as highlighted by the External Audit Report of the European Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2014). The EASNIE (2014) found that 'SMTs do not feel adequately supported in effectively implementing inclusive education within their schools' (p. 41) and that there is 'limited professional development opportunities for teachers in meeting diverse learning needs' (p. 46). It also identified 'limited support options for addressing individual learning needs' (p. 51). In addition, the report stated that 'LSAs[ii] are not seen as class teaching team members and therefore do not act as such' (p. 53). It further highlighted the 'difficulties in role uncertainty' (p. 51), which refers to school stakeholders who do not know what type of professional can help them deal with particular difficulties at work. These conclusions do not augur well for the abovementioned aims of the Maltese education authorities, highlighting the need for this study. This article is based on research conducted as part of a larger study that aimed to investigate the needs of educators (senior management team [SMT] members, teachers and learning support educators [LSEs]) working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta regarding resources and services, training, and support. This article focuses on the educators' resources and services' needs, examining them in view of educating autistic students in mainstream schools. First, I discuss the different aspects of the term IE to clarify the concept for readers. I also describe the challenges arising from implementing IE in practice to help readers understand the importance of educators having the necessary resources and services. Finally, I discuss factors that make IE effective to provide a basis for discussing the findings of this study.

Literature Review

Defining IE

IE is a demanding concept to implement, as it requires work on diverse aspects. It is one of the most challenging concepts in today's educational systems

(Acedo et al., 2009). A definition in the *Guidelines for Inclusion* (UNESCO 2005) delineates inclusion into four elements:

> *Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. Inclusion is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem (*Acedo et al., 2009, 13–15).

This definition presents inclusion as:
- A process;
- Requiring the identification and removal of barriers;
- Aiming at the achievement of all students in attendance, participation, and quality learning; and
- Emphasising groups of learners that are more at risk of exclusion and marginalisation (Acedo et al., 2009).

As a process, inclusion is a 'never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity' (Ainscow, 2005, 118). Moreover, according to Ainscow, removing barriers to inclusion depends on planning for improvements in policy and practice based on various literature sources so that evidence can be used to stimulate creativity and problem solving. He also stressed the need to consider factors like where children are educated; how reliable and punctual their attendance is; the quality of their experience, which must incorporate their own views (participation); and the outcomes of students across the curriculum (quality learning). Finally, Ainscow explained that the emphasis on groups at risk of exclusion highlights our moral responsibility to ensure that such groups are carefully monitored, and measures are taken 'to ensure their presence, participation and achievement in the education system' (2005, 119). In addition, for Booth and Ainscow (2002), IE is 'a process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of mainstream schools' (p.696).

IE has become an intensely studied concept in the decades since the Salamanca Statement (Krischler et al., 2019), which is often used as a departure point in research on the subject (Magnússon, 2019) and considered 'the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education' (Ainscow & César, 2006, 231). Nevertheless, despite the intensive focus on IE, it is defined differently by different scholars (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, 2017). This lack of a universal definition is problematic and confusing in the domain of education research, reforms, and application of practices (Ainscow et al., 2000; Krischler et al., 2019). Specifically, as Krischler et al. (2019, 633–634) state, 'challenges of definition are a key reason why IE has been implemented inconsistently'. These differences in interpreting IE may stem from the varying understandings in different contexts and be because international policies must be adapted according to the existing policies of each country (Magnússon et al., 2019). Ainscow (2020) noted that certain countries still consider inclusion a way to educate all children, whatever their dis/abilities, within general education settings. He added that on the international level, however, inclusion is becoming more a principle that embraces diversity among all learners, starting with the belief that education is the basis for a more just society and a basic human right.

This variation in definitions of IE has resulted in differing views thereof and of inclusion itself among educational stakeholders and professionals (Krischler et al., 2019). Moreover, Magnússon (2019) discussed numerous fields of tension associated with IE, such as 'the question of *who* is in focus' and the organisation of inclusion [iii]. There are different typologies of inclusion, including the typologies of Ainscow et al. (2006) and Göransson and Nilholm (2014). Each typology posits different views of thereof, such as inclusion as a way of focusing on groups with disabilities, as a response to disciplinary exclusion, as the mere placement of disabled students in mainstream schools, and as the creation of communities.

A review of the main policies and frameworks for inclusion in Malta shows that in theory, the authorities responsible for education and IE in the country share a similar understanding of IE, and various aspects are evident that support the definition of inclusion above [iv]. However, in practice, this does not seem to be the case. Depares (2019) states that even today, segregation remains the reality for many individuals with disabilities, especially in education. Among other factors, one of the main reasons for this according to Oliver Scicluna, the then Maltese Disabilities Commissioner, is an outdated

curriculum that does not promote inclusion (Depares, 2019). While society's perception of people with disabilities has improved, they are still sometimes viewed as material for charity (Curmi, 2020; Depares, 2019). Moreover, despite efforts towards a more inclusive system of education, marginalisation remains strong (Bajada, 2019). Mercieca and Mercieca (2019) argue that the declaration of IE in official documents differs from the segregation evident in practice. Certainly, the discourse among school administrators and educators reflects their medical model view towards disability, acting as a major barrier for IE (Bajada, 2019), and that of policymakers, which insinuates that a disability stems from the individual (Bajada, 2019; EASNIE, 2014). One example of this is the need to appear in front of an assessment board to determine whether a child is eligible for an LSE (Bajada, 2019; EASNIE, 2014; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019).

IE for autistic students: the challenges in practice

The literature highlights several benefits of IE: it is not only beneficial to students with disabilities or with special educational needs (SEN), but also justifiable on educational, social, and economic grounds (Ainscow, 2020). Despite this, it seems that providing effective IE is more challenging than implied in the literature, as is evident in the Maltese context (see Galea, 2018; Saliba, 2020). This is because several factors play significant roles in successfully implementing inclusion, such as the educational culture and a society's dominant way of viewing disability (Saliba, 2020).

Furthermore, the attitudes of educators towards IE render it challenging to implement. Attitudes are certainly the starting point of IE, as they 'add a complex dimension to inclusive education policies that go beyond amending the system' (Acedo et al., 2009, 232). The international literature shows that educators' attitudes towards IE vary. For example, Khochen and Radford (2012) reported generally positive attitudes among teachers and head teachers, while Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Patton et al. (2016) highlighted the neutral attitudes of school personnel. Noteworthy is the considerable discrepancy between how educators view the idea of inclusion and their attitudes towards it in practice (Leach & Duffy, 2009). Various findings suggest that general education teachers support the philosophy of inclusion, but do not want to teach in inclusive settings (Farrell, 2000).

Since teachers are key to the successful experience of autistic students in mainstream classes (Emam & Farrell, 2009), the factors underlying such attitudes towards IE are important. These factors include lack of training (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007; Khochen & Radford, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2013); educators' previous experiences with inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002); lack of knowledge about disabilities, perceived loss of time dedicated to general education students, and insufficient support in dealing with challenging students (Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007); the type of disabilities of students in their classroom (De Boer et al., 2011; Khochen & Radford, 2012); manner in which instructions are delivered, the classroom's learning environment, and extent to which instructions and the environment are favourable to students with SEN (Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007); lack of funding for resources and of human resources (Khochen & Radford, 2012); unavailability of resources in general (Lindsay et al., 2013); insufficient knowledge of autism, support, and assistance (De Boer & Simpson, 2009); and understanding and managing behaviour and socio-cultural barriers, and creating an inclusive environment (Lindsay et al., 2013).

Thus, while the concept of inclusion is supported in theory, enacting it is complicated (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006). However, it is possible, as elaborated next.

Is effective IE possible?

Research shows that for effective IE, educators need a variety of resources and services to help them implement inclusion. Important is that one factor increasing educators' negative attitudes towards inclusion is the lack or unavailability of material and human resources (Khochen & Radford, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2013) and of funding for such resources (Khochen & Radford, 2012). Thus, the aim of this article is to discuss the resources and services Maltese educators consider essential to work with autistic students in mainstream primary schools. Hence, I now review the international literature on educators' needs vis-à-vis resources and services before discussing the findings of this study.

One sought after resource is training, which should be provided before entering the profession and promote the idea that inclusion is achievable (Busby et al., 2012). As mentioned, educators' attitudes play a significant role in the success of IE (Acedo et al., 2009); thus, educators who will work in

inclusive schools must have a positive attitude towards IE. Moreover, training should provide educators with strategies and procedures that promote positive results in IE and benefit autistic students. It must also give access to current research and the best practice teaching strategies needed for teaching autistic students (Busby et al., 2012) and that will benefit all students in class (Martin et al., 2019). Campbell et al. (2007) added that educators should be informed of the resources and services available to autistic students and their families so that they can direct them to these. This could also form part of educators' training. Equipping educators with the knowledge of how to work best in inclusive environments will increase their confidence to work with autistic students in inclusive settings (Westling, 2010).

Alongside training, educators also need adequate time to develop lesson plans and resources and to attend meetings with professionals, administrative staff, and colleagues (Messemer, 2010). These activities should not be conducted in educators' free time; thus, Messemer (2010) suggests providing them with time slots in their schedules dedicated to this work.

Also important are financial resources. A lack of funding results in shortages of education assistants, resources, and equipment, which lead to the failure of IE (Frederickson et al., 2010). For example, Lindsay et al. (2013) highlight equipment such as computer software, assistive technology, and fidget toys as essential resources in inclusive settings. Berzina (2010) further emphasised the need for additional staff in inclusive schools, which allows educators to work more effectively with autistic students by supporting them when dealing with challenging behaviour arising from autism and the time constraints of the inclusive classroom (Busby et al., 2012). Hence, Frederickson et al. (2010) argued in favour of increased funding to help autistic students. Furthermore, Berzina (2010) found that an increase in salary serves as a financial resource in itself and serves as a good incentive for educators.

However, having additional staff in schools does not automatically serve as an essential resource if there is no communication and collaboration among all staff members concerned. Communication among educators as well as between educators and parents is an essential component for effective inclusion (Waddington & Reed, 2006), as is collaboration. Extra pressure on educators by parents is a barrier to effective inclusion (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014). Moreover, for effective collaboration, educators should be aware of the procedures and practices to adopt when collaborating with colleagues (Busby

et al., 2012). In addition, Rose (2001) suggested a whole-school approach focusing on practices and learning styles to help autistic students, rather than focusing on students' limitations. In this respect, Bhatnagar and Das (2014) argued that an inclusion policy in schools eliminates differences in school management between schools by providing them with basic guidelines they can follow. Here, collaboration between educators and parents is especially beneficial, as inconsistencies in the use of strategies between schools and the home will lead to deficiencies in structural support (Hedges et al., 2014). Therefore, improved structure and consistency in school policies is important.

The literature also shows that educators feel more secure and encouraged when provided with safe and thoughtfully arranged schools and classrooms (Berzina, 2010), as this provides a more comfortable work environment. The physical environment of the school plays an important role in promoting or demoting the idea of inclusion (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). In addition, therapeutic services such as speech, language, and occupational therapy should be provided on school premises so that students do not leave the school grounds to receive such services (Glashan et al., 2004; Morewood et al., 2011). This would enable teachers to ask for help from professionals when needed.

Regarding professionals, apart from speech and language therapists, a school psychologist is an important resource for educators in inclusive schools. According to Anderson et al. (2007), psychologists offer many services including training and disseminating research showing the benefits of inclusion, assisting in the development of behavioural and educational plans by providing effective behavioural interventions for the classroom, reviewing schools' behaviour policies, providing emotional and psychological support to educators, and advocating for educators' needs to school administrators and education department officers.

Against this background, the aims, methods, and results of this study are now discussed.

Methodology

As noted, the research reported in this article was part of a wider study on the perceived needs of educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta. This article addresses the following research questions:

1. What do SMT members, teachers, and LSEs think about the resources and services available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta?
2. What are the perceived needs vis-à-vis resources and services of SMT members, teachers, and LSEs working with autistic children in mainstream primary schools in Malta?

As mentioned, the original study investigated these research questions in light of educators' needs vis-à-vis resources and services, training, and support. However, the focus of this article is on their perceived needs vis-à-vis resources and services only.

Given the benefits of IE for autistic students and the significant role of educators' attitudes in the effectiveness thereof, it was important to investigate their perceived needs to maximise their experience when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools and the experiences of the students as well. For this, a qualitative approach was adopted, and qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed. For the purpose of this study, 1 of the 10 colleges in Malta was selected for the research. Each of the existing colleges has an identical structure, are all government schools and the services they receive all follow the same procedures. The research participants were SMT members, teachers, and LSEs working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools within the chosen college. The recruitment of participants started after obtaining ethical approval from the educational institution's research ethics committee, followed by permission from the Directorate for Education in Malta. After selecting the college, I first obtained permission from the college principal to conduct the research therein. Participants gave their informed consent after being provided with a detailed information sheet. After obtaining all necessary permissions, an email was sent to all the heads of schools of the primary schools within the chosen college. After their go-ahead, I visited each school and personally invited prospective participants to participate.

In total, 266 questionnaires were distributed to the participants, and 172 were returned, which means I had a percentage response rate of 65% from the questionnaire. The questionnaires comprised three sections. Mainly open-ended questions asked participants about their background, knowledge and attitudes about autism, and the resources/services they need. The questions on the questionnaire corresponded to the research questions, which guided the

analysis and discussion (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Moreover, before formulating the questionnaire, I also familiarised myself with the international and national literature about the particular research topic to ensure clarity of research objectives, proper identification of prospective research participants and key questions (McGuirck & O'Neill, 2016). The end of each questionnaire included a form to be completed by participants who wished to participate in an interview.

Following the collection of questionnaires, the participants interested in the interview were contacted. Nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with this sample. The interviews were also divided into sections linked to the questionnaires. The open-ended questions focused on themes emerging from the responses in the questionnaires. The aim was to obtain more detailed information on the inclusive system and autism, and on the resources and services participants need. Both data collection methods were pilot-tested before the actual data collection process. For the questionnaire, the pilot tests yielded much feedback regarding rewording ambiguous questions, questions asking about multiple issues at once, and the need for more space to provide detailed responses. For the interviews, the pilot tests revealed no deficiencies in the planned questions. Data collection was distributed over the period of one scholastic year (academic year 2018–2019). After the questionnaires were collected, I plotted the questionnaire data into an Excel sheet, which provided me with a variety of responses amongst participants and guided me in terms of what questions to ask during the interviews. Data plotting helped me identify issues that needed further exploration. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I organised the data analysis by research question, reporting and discussing all the data relevant to that question.

During the analysis process, I ensured validity and reliability by taking a number of precautionary measures. One such measure was the linking of new data emerging from the data analysis to already known data discussed in the questionnaire. Moreover, the interpretation of the data, as presented in the data analysis, was supported by evidence from the actual data obtained from the participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This research also used two types of triangulation as a measure to ensure trustworthiness: data triangulation (having different sources; in this research, these were the SMT members, the teachers and the LSEs) and methodological triangulation (adopting different methods to acquire data; in this research, these were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) (Flick, 2009). Triangulation has a number of advantages,

including the improved accuracy of data, having a fuller picture of the issues being investigated, and providing the researcher with added confidence in his or her research data and findings (Denscombe, 2010).

Findings and analysis

The findings of this research indicate that educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta have certain perceived needs vis-à-vis resources and services. These are discussed below.

Human resources

Human resources seem to be one of the most needed resources, as identified in the questionnaires and interviews, with almost half the interviewees commenting on it. A shortage of skilled human resources is evident, which are highly needed in the Maltese IE system. This corroborates the findings of the literature discussed earlier, where Berzina (2010) and Busby et al. (2012) emphasize the advantages of additional staff in schools. The literature also identifies a lack of human resources as a factor that negatively affects educators' attitudes towards IE (Khochen & Radford, 2012). One SMT argued that skilled human resources 'should be willing to teach and at the same time learn from [autistic] students', and another that skilled human resources should be able to give 'practical advice on particular cases'. A participant explained that as an SMT, it is more difficult to have skilled human resources than to buy material resources for the educators in their schools, because whereas they can simply buy the latter, the others need to be available. The SMT asserted that human resources should not only be skilled, but also available and willing to help, stating that educators need:

> *Not help that takes a week to arrive. Or that takes three weeks. But help that [can be found] there and then, if possible, that comes to study the case and tell [them], 'listen, if you do this it would be better'. Or if we avoid certain situations that trigger this kind of behaviour, it would be better.*

In this regard, participants noted the importance of managing human resources appropriately. One participant provided an example of an LSE who was assigned two students on a shared basis: one had ADHD and the other was autistic. This participant explained that in this case, the lack of consideration when assigning LSEs to students meant the LSE as a resource

was not being used to its full potential, because the LSE was supporting two students with different, if not opposing, needs.

Despite such situations, the LSE is another human resource considered highly important in the inclusive classroom, especially by teachers. This was identified by four interviewees, all teachers. One maintained that the teacher would not manage without an LSE in class. Another contended that the LSE can support the child in a way that the teacher cannot, since the LSE knows the child very well, is always next to the child, and has the tools needed to simplify and clarify whatever the teacher presents in class. Another teacher added that for some students, it is not extra resources that are needed but simply the guidance of an LSE, hence the importance of having one in class.

In addition to LSEs, parents are another important subgroup of human resources, as they provide educators with feedback on the progress of their child or the difficulties the child is encountering. Moreover, parents provide resources when these are unavailable at school, as one particular educator noted: 'the school provides … nothing… [the only resources are] what the parent provides'.

Training

As mentioned, participants highlighted that human resources should be skilled enough to be able to advise educators. This is why participants emphasised the need for specifically trained educators. The need for more training in different ways and aspects surfaced in this research, not only regarding specialised educators who provide particular services, but also for educators including SMTs, teachers, and LSEs, and tradespeople who will be working on refurbishments in the school. This would ensure they know about the challenges of autism and can adapt the work done to the needs of autistic students. The importance of training is discussed in the literature (Busby et al., 2012). As with the lack of human resources, a lack of training negatively affects educators' attitudes towards IE (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007; Khochen & Radford, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2013), as does a lack of knowledge about autism (De Boer & Simpson, 2009). This further highlights the importance of educators having the necessary training.

According to the participants, training should be more hands-on and expose educators to students' different needs. Moreover, one interviewee suggested

adapting training to particular educators' needs, explaining that a teacher might be more interested in learning how to teach literacy, whereas an LSE would be more interested in learning about a particular disability. Educators noted that training is one way of increasing awareness among peers, educators, and society.

Adequate environments

Another important resource in the Maltese inclusive system of education is the classroom and school environment, which numerous participants indicated in the questionnaire as a need when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta, as did many interviewees. Berzina (2010) discussed the importance of a comfortable environment, and Humphrey and Symes (2011) noted the role of the physical environment in promoting IE. The literature also lists the environment as a significant factor in forming educators' attitudes towards IE (Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007; Lindsay et al., 2013).

According to the participants of this study, having more spacious classrooms makes the environment more adequate. These should be adapted to the needs of autistic students, for example, by choosing suitable colour schemes and furniture. They suggested that spacious classrooms also include an area wherein students can calm down when feeling overwhelmed. They were especially in favour of a multisensory room in each school: 9 out of 19 interviewees insisted on this. This issue did not surface in the literature, though it was strongly argued for in this study, which reflects the specific needs of educators in the Maltese context. Regarding the need for such a room, one SMT explained that:

> *…without this room, generally the teacher effectively sends the LSE away and tells her, 'Take him or take her somewhere' and generally they end up running around [on] the ground[s], as usual, until he calms down, whatever… I think if there is a specific room, he will be able to continue learning in this room until he can return to the 'normal' class.*

Data from this study revealed that the services of the resource centre in Malta are very good, but participants noted that the idea of a resource centre is stigmatised, resulting in many parents refusing this service for their children. This is therefore another reason participants highlighted the importance of having suitable spaces, preferably a multisensory room, in each school.

However, some schools' initiative to create such a room faced numerous obstacles such as a lack of space in the school. According to an SMT, they have 'a difficulty of space… like the room… where are we going to get a room?' Another argued about the lack of support from superiors to create such spaces in the school: 'As soon as the word *multisensory* was mentioned, the doors started closing, because [according to the superiors] a multisensory room should only be found at a resource centre'. Therefore, the school had to raise the required funding to create this space. The same interviewee lamented the lack of funding, emphasising the unfairness of this with regard to autistic students: 'So the resources from the centre, what's coming to us? Is there a need to fundraise for these things? If it is quality education for all? For every child? Because if it is for every child, it's for all'.

Material resources

Material resources are another essential part of the inclusive classroom. These provide highly effective teaching to students with different needs, including to those who are autistic. Moreover, resource unavailability is a factor contributing to educators' attitudes towards IE (Lindsay et al., 2013). Many participants highlighted in the questionnaire the need for multisensory and technology-related resources, as did 11 of the 19 interviewees. These resources are lacking in their schools. Lindsay et al. (2013) also emphasises the importance of such resources. One SMT listed some essential material resources for schools, including software for students with writing difficulties, Chester mice, Numicon shapes, flashcards and visuals, and kinetic sand and bubble mixtures. Participants also mentioned the need for a colour printer at school so that educators can print the resources they prepare.

Financial resources

Participants, especially SMTs, expressed their need for more allocated funding to invest in more resources for their school, which would benefit autistic students. This supports Frederickson et al.'s (2010) findings regarding about the importance of increased financial resources. Furthermore, like the other factors mentioned, a lack of funding affects educators' attitudes toward IE (Khochen & Radford, 2012). An SMT also expressed the need for guidance on to how to wisely spend the funding received.

Appropriate statementing

This research highlighted the need for appropriate statementing of children. Here, participants claimed that statementing sometimes takes place after the child is observed for only a short time; thus, it does not necessarily reflect the child's real difficulties. It was also suggested that all children be screened for autism [v] prior to admission in Kinder 1 [vi] to ensure they get immediate support when starting school if they are encountering challenges. Moreover, the process of statementing is lengthy, even in cases considered urgent. An SMT explained:

> *The child still needs to go through the same process of the psychological report, then the statementing, which can take much time. Because the psychologist needs to come and do the assessment, then send the report, this takes months because although the head of school presses the issue to expedite the process, nothing is being done when the case is extremely urgent.*

This issue did not surface in the literature, but was significant for the participants of this study.

Support services for educators

Participants expressed the need for support services available to them within a short time when needed. In fact, insufficient or no support significantly affects educators' attitudes towards IE (De Boer & Simpson, 2009; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007). Participants also conveyed their wish to have psychological services available to them as well, in addition to being available to students, because they require much support considering the many challenges they encounter daily. This was also suggested by Anderson et al. (2007). Furthermore, participants need the support services of people who could replace educators when they need time out of the classroom. This time out could include going to the bathroom, going to the office for photocopying, or having a short break. As educators cannot leave students unsupervised, this would be a beneficial support service. Above all, participants stressed the importance of receiving support from colleagues and professionals working with the child, specifically the need for teamwork between professionals in a multidisciplinary team. Such support eases the implementation of inclusion, as noted by Waddington and Reed (2006). Participants also emphasised the need for handovers regarding the child from

professionals to the teacher and LSE to ensure the continuation of therapy goals at school. In addition, an SMT suggested that the education system establish a national assessment criteria and national record-keeping system of autistic children, like there is for typically developing children, so that if the autistic child changes schools, the educators at the new school will have a detailed and professional handover and continuation of learning. This seems related to the local context, because the literature does not identify this need in other countries.

Additional services needed

Besides improving existing services, participants also noted many services currently not provided but that should be available in their college. These include the services of a behaviour therapist, clinical psychologist, and counsellor, and the provision of a hydrotherapy pool within the college. It was also noted that consistency is needed in the use of strategies between school and home, which highlights the importance of updating educators' training with current behaviour therapies, as mentioned. Moreover, it was stressed again that psychological services should not only be given to students but also to their parents. Since the service of the resource centre was considered efficient and beneficial, participants highlighted the importance of providing such services not only at the resource centre, but also at every individual school.

Conclusion

In this article, I provided an overview of the resources and services needed by Maltese educators, namely SMTs, teachers, and LSEs, when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta. The perspective adopted shows that IE is complicated to define and implement; thus, educators in inclusive schools encounter various challenges. However, I argued that with the necessary resources and services, IE is not only possible to implement, but also beneficial to autistic students and their peers.

As stated in the introduction, the Maltese government strives to invest in education to contribute to the development of educated citizens to increase Malta's economic growth. It is therefore worrying to realise that educators perceive a severe lack of resources and services and the services they do receive as deficient. This, however, should not dishearten us from implementing inclusion in schools. Rather, it should be an incentive to the government to work harder in providing quality education to all students including those

who are autistic by providing educators with the necessary resources and services they need. This should be done by listening not only to autistic voices, but also to educators who work directly with autistic students.

This article explores and discusses an aspect of IE from the perspective of educators and from a small country striving to better its inclusive system of education, which I believe is of interest for international researchers in the field, as they can compare and contrast similar research from other countries and other perspectives.

As stated earlier, this research adopted 1 of the 10 existing colleges in Malta as a sample, which in itself is a limitation of this study, as other colleges might have differing perspectives. Moreover, since the interviews were conducted in Maltese, another limitation lies in language translation when transcribing data, despite having put special attention to retain as much as possible the exact same meaning in the original text.

Further research in this area can explore the needs of educators in Malta working with autistic students in a mainstream middle or senior school, and/or the needs of educators in Malta working with autistic students in a private or church school. Having a different context, both studies could uncover similar or contrasting views. Moreover, research can also go a step further into creating a resource pack to be used with autistic students. Having found from this study that service providers have a large workload that is hindering them from providing an efficient service, it is also worth investigating the opinions, challenges and needs of service providers and/or therapists who provide services to students, as this would provide us with a different perspective.

Acknowledgement

Data availability statement:

The data that support the findings will be available from White Rose e-theses Online at https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/28434/ following a two-year embargo from the date of publication to allow for the publication of research findings in academic journals.

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[i] In Malta, the term *college* refers to a cluster of primary schools, a middle school, and a senior school, which are in geographic proximity under the direction of a college principal.

[ii] LSA is the abbreviation for *Learning Support Assistant* and refers to what we now know as LSE.

[iii] Magnússon referred to the four typologies of Göransson and Nilholm (2014) to argue that the idea of the organisation of inclusive education has been given different interpretations.

[iv] See the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012), National Inclusive Education Framework (NIEF) (2019), and Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (PIES) (2019).

[v] Currently, a screening programme (*Lenti*) is offered to parents of very young children, but this is voluntary.

[vi] Compulsory education in Malta is mandated for children aged 5–16 years. It comprises six years of primary schooling, two in middle school, and three in senior school. However, before primary school, children usually attend two years of kindergarten (Kinder 1 and Kinder 2, age 3–5), hence the reference to screening children for autism before Kinder 1.