

## Training Needed for Educators to Work with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools: the Maltese Perspective

Vanessa Saliba

*The Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology, Malta*  
vanessa.saliba@mcast.edu.mt

**Abstract:** Due to the high proportion of learners with disabilities attending mainstream schools in Malta, Maltese educators encounter various challenges when working with autistic students in inclusive schools. In this article, the training needed by the senior management team (SMT), teachers and learning support educators (LSEs) when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta is discussed in light of research showing that training for educators can ease the challenges of working with autistic students in mainstream schools, thus making it a positive experience. Data were collected through qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. All primary school educators in one college were invited to participate. A total of 172 educators accepted the invitation and filled out a questionnaire. Nineteen of the 172 participants agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. The findings show that Maltese educators lack training in working with autistic students, resulting in a number of challenges for them. The findings include several suggestions put forward by the participants about what training they need.

**Keywords:** autistic students; inclusive education; Maltese education system; training

### Introduction

Promoting inclusion, particularly within education, has been a key objective of the Maltese government (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2014). Given that 'Malta has one of the highest proportions of learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs attending mainstream education' (EASNIE, 2014, p. 29), a significant number of mainstream classrooms in Malta include children who often display common traits associated with autism. Although educational institutions have adopted inclusive education policies, such classroom dynamics can still limit students' academic and social opportunities (Odom et al., 2004), lead to

increased tension within the classroom environment (Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011), and impact the quality of interactions between autistic students, their peers, and their teachers (Barnard et al., 2000).

These challenges can hinder the implementation of inclusive practices; however, they also serve as a critical prompt for all stakeholders in mainstream education—particularly members of the school management team, teachers, and learning support educators (LSEs)—to be adequately prepared to support effective learning for all students. Regrettably, many senior management team (SMT) members, teachers, and LSEs feel insufficiently equipped to support students with disabilities and special educational needs (SENs). As highlighted by EASNIE, ‘No stakeholder group considers that the initial or in-service training for SMTs, teachers, learning support assistants (the former name for LSEs) or other educational professionals fully meets the demands that these professionals face in schools’ (EASNIE, 2014, p. 49), and there are ‘limited professional development opportunities for teachers in meeting diverse learning needs’ (p. 46). This concerning reality underscores the urgent need for action, as the success of inclusive education relies heavily on the presence of well-prepared educators who are capable of effectively managing diverse classroom needs.

This article draws on research carried out as part of a broader study that explored the needs of educators—specifically senior management team (SMT) members, teachers, and learning support educators (LSEs)—working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta. The wider study examined needs related to resources, services, training, and support; however, this article focuses specifically on the training needs of these educators. The aim is to explore how these needs relate to the effective inclusion of autistic students in mainstream educational settings. The article begins by providing a definition of autism and outlining its various characteristics to contextualise the discussion. It then examines the challenges associated with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream classrooms, as well as the pivotal role educators play in fostering inclusive practices. In this context, the significance of appropriate training for educators is addressed. This discussion is followed by an overview of the research methodology and a presentation and analysis of the study’s findings.

## **Literature Review**

### *Autism and its many facets*

According to the definition presented in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), autism can be understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder. Furthermore, the DSM-5 describes an individual with autism as a person with tenacious deficits in social communication and interaction, which include

reduced social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interactions and the lack of other skills needed to develop, preserve and understand relationships (APA, 2013). It adds that autistic persons exhibit repetitive behaviours and limited interests and activities (APA, 2013). Such a definition of autism confirms that, until recently, autism has been viewed as a disease, a disorder or a deficiency, with Baron-Cohen (2017) arguing that we still, in fact, understand it as a disorder today. This view is underpinned by the medical model of autism, whereby autism is viewed as a set of impairments or deficits that should be fixed or cured (Larsen, 2018).

Contrary to this, the neurodiversity movement promotes the social model of autism, which ascribes the cause of the disability to society (Krcek, 2013), rather than autism itself. Indeed, this model suggests that society can change and adapt to accommodate autistic people (Larsen, 2018). In line with this, it is argued that autistic individuals should be proud of their identity and oppose possible treatments or cures (Bagatell, 2010; Brownlow, 2010; Clarke & Van Amerom, 2008; Hahn & Belt, 2004). Autism is believed to be part of the natural variation in humans (Armstrong, 2010; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Ortega, 2009). In view of this, self-advocates are opposed to interventions that try to alter an autistic individual by changing their 'unusual' behaviours, such as avoidance of eye contact or repetitive body movements (Chamak, 2008; Orsini & Smith, 2010; Ortega, 2009).

Baron-Cohen (2017) aligns with the neurodiversity movement in challenging the view of autism as a disorder or disability, instead promoting the perspective that autism represents a difference in social interaction and communication (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). However, in many cultures – including Maltese culture – autism is still predominantly viewed through the lens of the medical model, which tends to emphasise deficits and limitations. This perspective often overlooks the strengths and positive attributes associated with autism, which may include exceptional observational skills, outstanding long-term memory, strong visual abilities, methodical thinking, innovative problem-solving, creativity, determination, and resilience, among others (Bennie, 2019).

*The autistic child in the mainstream school: What are the challenges?*

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) stated that inclusion is a very complex phenomenon and one of the least understood areas of education. At the same time, however, educators are expected to include more autistic students in their classrooms, most often with little or no support (Horrocks et al., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013). Undoubtedly, a well-implemented mainstream education benefits autistic students in many different areas (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Eldaret et al., 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010; Vakil et al., 2009), but that does not negate the fact that it is challenging. Among the different challenges that educators encounter in mainstream settings are

appropriately managing students' needs (Lindsay et al., 2013; Wilmhurst & Brue, 2010), insufficient knowledge of autism and lack of assistance (De Boer & Simpson, 2009). Allen and Cowdery (2005) and Warnock (2005) explained that a lack of training in autism may leave teachers ill-equipped and unable to perform at their best when working with autistic students. Emam and Farrell (2009) observed that teachers of autistic students often feel anxious and tense, as they find it difficult to deal with the students' difficulties, especially those concerned with social and emotional understanding. They also find it difficult to build relationships with autistic students because of the difficulties in socialisation.

According to De Boer (2011), teachers perceive themselves as lacking sufficient knowledge about how to educate students with special needs, resulting in low self-confidence. Indeed, Symes and Humphrey (2011) found that autism awareness training helps educators develop empathy and, as a result, start to better understand and adapt their teaching techniques. Lozic (2014) determined that there are numerous reasons why mainstream education might be unsuccessful for autistic students, including failure to understand behaviours, challenges with social skills, failure to recognise students' difficulties and students' anxiety. Lindsay et al. (2013) also found that lack of training and school policies about inclusion are all challenges for educators of autistic students, as is the unavailability of resources (Saliba, 2023).

Lindsay et al. (2013) also highlighted the lack of time that teachers have to dedicate to autistic students as another challenge they encounter, especially when they have a large number of students in their classroom. Lindsay et al. (2013) noted that inclusive education is sometimes difficult due to the lack of awareness among other staff members, students and parents. They argued that parents are often unwilling to share their child's difficulties openly with educators, while at times they also deny their child's challenges. Teachers also encounter difficulties when other children in class do not understand the behaviours of autistic children (Lindsay et al., 2013). Robertson et al. (2003) found that this latter issue depends significantly on the student-teacher relationship: the more negative the relationship, the less likely the child will be socially accepted. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out the beliefs of Acedo et al. (2009), who argued that the starting point of inclusive education lies with the attitudes of the educators because 'attitudes add a complex dimension to inclusive education policies that go beyond amending the system' (p. 232).

In view of what has been discussed above, I believe it is safe to argue that while autism in mainstream schools can present itself with several challenges, the views that educators have of autism will definitely affect their attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools. More specifically, on one hand, educators who view autism from the medical model perspective are more likely to find it challenging to include autistic students in

their classroom. On the other hand, educators who perceive autism from the perspective of the social model are more likely to have more positive attitudes and focus more on the positives of inclusion. This is especially true in view of the extremely important roles that educators have in inclusive settings, as will be discussed in the following section.

#### *The role of the educator in including autistic students in mainstream schools*

Educators play a crucial role in the success of inclusive education (Acedo et al., 2009; Smelova et al., 2016). As the individuals who work directly within inclusive settings, they carry the primary responsibility for implementing inclusive practices (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018).

SMTs are entrusted with leading inclusive schools (Hoopey & McLeskey, 2013). As Villa et al. (1996) pointed out, SMT's support of teachers is significant, as it affects teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Lindqvist and Nilholm (2014) referred to a list of the numerous responsibilities entrusted to SMTs, including proposing solutions to challenging situations, gathering information about national examinations, collecting important documentation such as Individual Education Plan (IEP) documents, and being knowledgeable about the different teaching methods an educator can employ so that they can support their staff in their teaching, among other assigned duties.

Teachers are expected to possess the knowledge and skills needed to address the different needs and abilities of all students (Johnson, 2016). They are responsible for communicating with family, special educators and other professionals so as to be able to plan for meeting the students' diverse needs (Utley & Obiakor, 2001). Moreover, they are also responsible for planning the IEP after consulting family members and professionals, as well as including any adaptations and modifications necessary for the student to be in a mainstream classroom (Johnson, 2016; Vakil et al., 2009). The teachers' role in the IEP process is particularly significant, as they have the most contact with students and they are the ones most likely to notice deficits in children's development in cases where students have not yet been diagnosed (Johnson, 2016). Moreover, teachers are responsible for delivering content, managing students' challenging behaviours and, above all, promoting and modelling social acceptance of people with disabilities (Johnson, 2016).

LSEs are the ones who work most closely with students (Blatchford et al., 2009; MacBeath et al., 2006), as they have the responsibility to teach and support the students assigned to them (MacBeath et al., 2006). Not only do LSEs support their students physically (Logan, 2006; Wren, 2017), they also modify schoolwork and support the students in becoming as independent as possible (Wren, 2017). Indeed, they help the students to acquire as many skills as possible to function in society, including conversational skills, turn-taking, social confidence and politeness (Wren, 2017). LSEs also have behaviour

management roles (MacVittie, 2005), considering that students sometimes have behavioural challenges (Wren, 2017). In addition, LSEs are required to encourage students (Logan, 2006) by providing praise (MacVittie, 2005).

Research shows that LSEs are viewed by their students very positively, including as being their friends (Wren, 2017), as those who support and guide them (Cable, 2003) and as those who protect them from harm (Logan, 2006; Wren, 2017). On the other hand, parents consider LSEs to be the ones promoting inclusion for their child within the classroom and school, supporting social interaction with peers and managing behavioural issues (Farrell et al., 1999), and as a point of reference for information and advice (Cable, 2003). LSEs often consider themselves as mediators between school and home (Shaw, 2001). They are also often the ones who seek clarification from the teacher on behalf of the student and act as advocates for parents and support them (Cable, 2003; Shaw, 2001).

*The importance of training for educators working with autistic students and the controversy surrounding it*

Considering the many facets of autism discussed above, it comes as no surprise that educators' knowledge of autism varies significantly among them. In truth, how much knowledge educators have of autism is a debated subject. Tobias (2009) argued in favour of educators being knowledgeable about autism, as this helps them understand autistic students' behaviours in the classroom. Ho (2004) and Attwood (2012) further explained that a lack of knowledge may result in educators misinterpreting students' behaviours as rebellious, disobedient or emotionally disturbed, whereas students might be experiencing a meltdown as a result of a sensory overload (Martin et al., 2019a).

However, others have argued that knowledge of autism might have negative effects. Hodge (2016) noted that 'labels are exposed as agents of "disablism" and not the essential enablers of children that many teachers assume them to be' (p. 242). This idea had been brought up earlier by Hardman et al. (1999), who emphasised that labelling is a process used by society to produce descriptors to classify individuals with behaviour different from what is considered normal. As noted by Samkange (2015), the labelling theory explains how society plays a major role in defining behaviours through labels, where behaviours that do not conform to the norm are considered deviant. A number of issues arise in light of the labelling theory, which require careful consideration. One such issue is that people tend to behave in the way they are labelled. Another issue is that labelling leads to stigmatisation (Samkange, 2015). Moreover, negative labels contribute to low self-esteem and rejection (Crossman, 2014).

Hodge (2016) explained the three 'disabling effects' (p. 244) as presented by Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000). First, professionals use labels as a

justification for the therapy autistic children receive, which tends to be invasive, expensive, at times painful, and with the sole purpose of normalising the child (Nadesan, 2005; Shyman, 2015). Second, parents and other non-medical professionals are disempowered, and the knowledge they have of the child is often rejected and disregarded (Gillman et al., 2000). For example, a mother whose child was diagnosed with autism soon thought she could no longer help him, as soon as he was diagnosed, whereas she was supporting him just fine prior to diagnosis (Hodge, 2016). In another case, a pre-grade teacher relied on other professionals to help a child who was exhibiting certain behaviours, rather than trying to help him herself first (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018). Third, educators may misinterpret certain behaviours as autistic behaviours, whereas they might be the result of an education system that is not accommodating that particular child's differences and needs (Cheng, n.d.).

Moreover, according to Gillman et al. (2000) and Mercieca and Mercieca (2018), labels lower others' expectations of the labelled child, referred to as 'relational construction' by Goodley (2001). This refers to the idea that due to the child's behaviour being interpreted in light of a label, there will be lower expectations for the child in respect to educational achievements as well as in life in general. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) explained that when labelled, the child will then start to be seen in the light of the label, and hence, 'the focus is no longer on the child but on a collection of specific impairment behaviours and characteristics that are associated with the particular label' (Hodge, 2016, p. 247).

Despite the numerous arguments against the idea of having the knowledge about autism discussed here, there are also many other factors involved that further require specific training and knowledge to adequately deal with autism. As will be discussed later, especially in the findings and analysis section of this research, educators strongly consider a lack of training as one of the challenges they encounter when working with autistic children in mainstream schools. This fact cannot be left unnoticed. Blair (2016) and Wright (2017) both argued that training should include preparation for dealing with the various disabilities that educators may encounter, including autism, especially since diagnoses of autism are increasing. According to Gonzales-Gil et al. (2013), adequate training helps professionals to be more inclusive, adding that such training needs to focus on both curricular and methodological elements, which can be used to make schools more inclusive.

Jindal-Snape et al. (2005) found that parents consider teacher training as an empowering tool that helps their children in inclusive settings. Training helps teachers learn more about teaching approaches (Leach & Duffy, 2009) that are considered important for autistic students (Lian et al., 2008). Hess et al. (2008) asserted that the more strategies teachers are equipped with, the more able they are to meet students' needs. Glashan et al. (2004) added that training makes teachers more confident when working with autistic students. Training

increases awareness (Leblanc et al., 2009) and reduces anxiety and stress among teachers (Probst & Leppert, 2008; Sinz, 2004), ultimately leading to more positive attitudes towards inclusion (Horrocks et al., 2008). Alquraini and Gut (2012) and Martin et al. (2019) insisted on the importance of ongoing training, while Martin et al. also argued that educators need to continuously refresh autism awareness, as this leads them to better understand autistic students. Martin and Milton (2017) further emphasised that interventions will not be effective unless the reasons behind a child's behaviour are understood.

Messemer (2010) observed that training improves educators' perceptions of inclusion. Hence, she argued that training should be based on teachers' needs and target issues raised by them, such as behaviour management, accommodations, modifications and understanding of students' IEPs. Moreover, Bhatnagar and Das (2013) underlined that training should also include opportunities for teachers to reflect critically on their practices.

Training can take many forms. Mizell (2010) suggested individual reading and research, study groups, team meetings, university courses, observation and coaching, online courses, conferences, whole-school programmes and workshops, among others. Mizell added that different forms of training have different benefits. Morrier, Hess and Heflin (2011) further noted the importance of hands-on training with autistic students, while Groom (2006) supported shadowing, mentoring and classroom observations as effective methods of providing training to new educators.

As already noted above, the development of the specific skills required to work with autistic students calls for specific training and knowledge (Hess et al., 2008). Therefore, training about autism should target a number of competency areas, such as knowledge of autism, the role of parental involvement, various teaching approaches, communication skills, social skills, adaptive behaviours and transitions, classroom structure and behaviour management (Scheuermann et al., 2003). Shyman (2012) added other areas to the list, including the theories, laws and policies, definitions, current trends, the development and characteristics of autistic students and tips for social interaction. Moreover, Shyman stressed the importance of being aware of language issues among autistic students, as well as instructional planning, assessment and professional and ethical practice.

Busby et al. (2012) also noted that training should include clinical experiences and be practical with more case-based and field-based experiences, whereas Shyman (2012) noted that the content of the training should be based on the latest research to help educators determine evidence-based practices and evaluate the best methodologies. Moreover, educators should be trained in how to write insightful and informative reports about autistic students (Busby et al., 2012).

Finally, Shyman (2012) insisted on the importance of continuously monitoring and assessing educators' job performance and student outcomes through direct evaluation (Lerman et al., 2004) and self-assessment (Grey et al., 2005).

Having provided an overview of the literature on the topic being researched, I will now move on to discuss the methodology used in this research study.

## **Methodology**

As noted in the introduction, this article reports on one aspect that was explored in 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 training available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta?
2. What are the perceived needs vis-à-vis the training of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic children in mainstream primary schools in Malta?

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

In order to be able to investigate the educators' perceived needs in this regard, a qualitative approach was adopted – qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed. The research participants of the study were SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools within one of the 10 colleges that in Malta 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. Each of the existing colleges has an identical structure; moreover, all government schools and the services they receive all follow the same procedures.

Ethical approval from the educational institution's research ethics committee was first obtained, followed by permission from the Directorate for Education in Malta. I also obtained permission from the college principal to conduct the research at the college. Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet about the study prior to obtaining their informed consent. An email was sent to all the heads of the primary schools within the chosen college after obtaining all necessary permissions. After the approval of the heads of the schools, I visited each school and personally invited prospective participants to participate.

Out of 266 questionnaires that were distributed to the prospective participants, 172 were returned, resulting in a percentage response rate of 65% from the questionnaire. The questionnaires comprised three sections and mainly included open-ended questions, which asked participants about their background, knowledge and attitudes about autism and the training they felt that they needed. The questions on the questionnaire corresponded to the research questions, which guided the analysis and discussion (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). The questions were also informed by international and national literature about the research topic in question, which ensured the clarity of the research objectives and proper identification of prospective research participants and key questions (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Participants who wished to participate in an interview could fill in the form attached at the end of each questionnaire.

The participants interested in the interview were contacted following the collection of the questionnaires. A total of 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were also divided into sections linked to the questionnaire and focused on themes emerging from the responses through open-ended questions. The aim was to obtain more detailed information on the inclusive system and autism and on the training that participants need.

Pilot testing for both data collection methods was done before the actual data collection process. The pilot tests yielded relevant and helpful feedback about the questionnaire, mainly regarding rewording ambiguous questions, questions asking about multiple issues at once and the need for more space to provide detailed responses. The pilot tests revealed no deficiencies in the planned questions for the interviews.

Data collection was distributed over the period of one scholastic year (academic year 2018–2019). The questionnaire data were plotted into an Excel sheet, which provided me with a variety of responses among participants and guided me in terms of what questions to ask during the interviews. Data plotting helped me identify issues that needed further exploration. The data from the interviews were organised by research question, where I reported and discussed all the data relevant to that question.

Validity and reliability were ensured during the analysis process 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 collected by means of the questionnaire. In addition, 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). In addition, this research also used two types of triangulation as a measure to ensure trustworthiness. These were 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). Among the advantages of triangulation is the improved accuracy of data, having a fuller picture of the issues being investigated and providing the researcher with added confidence in their research data and findings (Denscombe, 2010).

### **Findings and analysis**

In this section, I will present and discuss the perspectives of Maltese educators with regard to training in the local context. I will start off by presenting their perspectives about the training they currently have, followed by their perceptions of the training they think they need to be able to work effectively with autistic students in mainstream primary schools.

Most of the SMTs reported that the only training they received about autism consisted of general information they received at university during their undergraduate, master's degree or post-graduate diploma studies, professional development (PD) sessions or in-school training, or some general sessions or voluntary courses they attended. Many teachers reported that PD sessions or in-school training were the only training they received, while an even greater number of teachers reported that they had received no training at all. One teacher insisted that '[they] are not given training on autism. [They] are not given [any]', while another specified that they 'hardly ever heard the word autism during [their] training at university during the 80s'. On the other hand, the absolute majority of LSEs reported that they had received training through credits during their diploma studies in a Facilitating Inclusive Education course, that was specifically designed for LSEs. However, it was noted by one LSE that the training they received during this course '[had] nothing to do with when you experience working with students with autism'. The majority of SMTs, as well as almost half of the teacher participants, stated that this training did not address all issues, while a good number of teachers said they did not know whether or not the training they received addressed all issues. The same applied to LSEs, half of whom also reported that the training did not address all issues. One participant explained further that 'you cannot possibly get trained in a one-off session'. This corresponds to the beliefs of Alquraini and Gut (2012) and Martin et al. (2019) about ongoing training, which will be discussed further below.

On being asked about what sort of training they would like and/or what the training should entail, participant educators suggested a variety of factors that would make the training they receive more effective. Below, I will be discussing these factors.

### *Basic factors for effective training*

Participants insisted that training should be for everyone, including SMTs, teachers, LSEs and parents, with one LSE maintaining that 'all people who come in contact with these children at school need training (and proper training) about the needs and challenges they have and try to understand both the child and the LSE'. According to the participants, training should also be provided in small groups, as opposed to large groups of educators at one time. Moreover, they also noted that training should be ongoing, as was indeed suggested by Alquraini and Gut (2012) and Martin et al. (2019), who argued that ongoing training provides educators with refreshed autism awareness, leading to a better understanding of autistic students. Two educators explained that it is not possible to learn everything about autism in a two-hour session, as is commonly the case where educators are presented with a great deal of information in a training session of short duration, with one of them specifying:

*[the training] needs to be very specific, not like going to a meeting, let's say, a two-hour meeting and [the lecturer] mentions around ten conditions and you learn something about every one of them, but you almost learned nothing.*

Apart from that, as one participant also noted, there are continuous updates in the field of autism, such as new services, new resources and new methods of teaching, which educators could only be made aware of through training:

*...even, for example, the services are updated. There are advancements in care. Resources, there are new resources. We will not always know about them. Right? There could be new methods. Even as a school, I'm saying. Why shouldn't we know about them? Where are we going to get knowledge from?*

This confirms the beliefs of Leach and Duffy (2009), who stated that training helps educators learn about teaching approaches.

### *The trainer*

Participants also noted the importance of the choice of speaker for training purposes, with one particular educator stating that sometimes it is not about the kind of training but more about the way the trainer delivers the message. Another participant also highlighted the importance of the training provided involving interaction between the speaker and the listener.

More importantly, participants noted that is essential that training is provided by professionals, with one participant insisting that 'training [should be given by] people who have had more experience with students with autism than us! Not people who have acquired their knowledge only from courses and who have not really worked in this field'. This confirms the assertion of Alquraini and Gut (2012) that training should be provided by experts. At the same time, this statement takes us back to what was discussed by Mercieca and Mercieca

(2018) earlier, that educators believe professionals know more about autism than they do. This statement somewhat contradicts this, as the participant educator was hinting that at times, professionals giving training do not have the expected expertise in the subject.

*Including the practical aspect*

A very strong aspect of training that was very much requested by the participants of this research was the practical aspect. Indeed, participants suggested various ways and means that, according to them, would make the training they receive more practical, and thus more effective.

A large number of participants insisted that the training should be hands-on. One participant argued that we continuously preach in favour of hands-on learning, but then training for educators remains grounded in lecture. The participant argued, 'Things need to become more interactive. And it's not discussions only. [Training could include] producing resources and have icebreakers about them'. Such arguments conform with the beliefs of Busby et al. (2012) and Morrier et al. (2011), as previously discussed. Another suggestion by the participants, which also agrees with Busby et al. (2012) and Morrier et al. (2011), is that training should be offered in the form of workshops, which is the kind of training where the educators themselves can become more involved.

Another participant mentioned the importance of having job shadowing opportunities, as, according to them, it is the most effective way to learn, which agrees with the ideas of Groom (2006). One participant emphasised the importance of training being provided continuously in such a way that makes it possible for the educator to receive training, go back to the classroom to practice what they have learned, and then go back to training to discuss and share their experiences and improve their practice:

*I would like to have ongoing training... they provide some training, then we go into the classroom, we experience things, then we go back [to training] sharing our difficulties, how we can cater for them...*

This suggestion reflects the idea of Bhatnagar and Das (2013), who stressed that training should include opportunities to reflect on practice.

Many of the participants insisted that the training they are provided with should be based on practical guidelines on how to work with autistic students in the classroom, providing tips and strategies on how to best relate to autistic students and better adapt to their needs. This indeed conforms with the ideas of Hess et al. (2008), who stated that the more strategies educators are equipped with, the more they are able to meet students' needs. It also confirms the beliefs that training increases awareness (Leblanc et al., 2009) and that training makes

educators more confident when working with autistic students (Glashan et al., 2004).

Participants also suggested that through training, they could be provided with reliable online sources to which they could refer when they need further tips, information and resources they could use. Some participants also suggested the use of case studies during such training to further make the training more practical. One participant went on to explain that it is not enough for educators to know that autistic students learn through visuals, but it is also necessary to guide educators as to what sort of visuals are most appropriate for autistic students, as based on their experience, they had found that not all visuals work well with autistic students. The suggestions regarding practical guidelines and strategies emerged very noticeably in this research, with one participant specifically arguing that, since every child is different, 'professionals are needed to guide [educators] on what strategies could be used with each child after these professionals have worked with and observed each of these children'. The suggestions made here by the participants all confirm the desire among educators for more training, awareness and knowledge about autism, which aligns with the ideas found in the literature discussed earlier in this paper.

As I noted, a number of participants emphasised the importance that the professionals delivering training should provide practical guidelines. This point was further emphasised when a number of participants argued that certain professionals not only do not provide practical guidance, but they even give impractical advice. One participant went on to explain that:

*A [professional] told me when the child reverts to a tantrum ... take all the children out of the classroom. I did this twice. It was ridiculous. How can I keep going in and out of the classroom with twenty students because one of them did a tantrum! So it's true that some things are impractical. The [professional] tells you do this, do this, do this, they throw it in your face, and it doesn't work. It doesn't work at all. They should come into the classroom themselves and show us how it works.*

#### *Specific for the target audience*

Participants also noted the importance of training being specific in the sense that it should target the very particular needs of different educators. This confirms the findings of Shyman (2012), who found that training tends to lack specialisation in specific areas. For this reason, one participant suggested that educators receiving training should be grouped separately according to their particular needs and then provided with training that targets those needs. Grouping educators in this way would result in smaller groups of educators receiving training, and therefore this would also accommodate those who suggested that training should be given to smaller groups of educators rather than in large groups at one time, as discussed above.

Furthermore, one participant commented that educators need to be aware of the existing resources, strategies and services that children might be encountering at home or with other educators and that educators should be trained in how to also use these so there could be continuation between home and school, as was indeed suggested by Hedges et al. (2014). For this reason, training should include information on how to use all the resources, strategies and services available.

Another participant noted that the hardest thing for them when working with autistic students is how to relate to the students. Indeed, this participant admitted being totally at a loss in this regard: 'How should I relate with him? They are all stubborn. How can I... sometimes I just leave him [do whatever he wants]. Sort of... Because I don't even have time...'. This, to a certain extent, reflects what Ho (2004) and Attwood (2012) explained concerning how a lack of knowledge among educators can lead to misinterpreting students' behaviours, as was indeed happening to this educator, who expressed the feeling that they could not handle the student's 'stubbornness'. Moreover, it also points to Hodge's (2016) argument that labels can act as agents of disablism. In this case, the educator had concluded that all autistic students are stubborn, whereas this so-called stubbornness might have been a reflection of many other issues resulting from a variety of factors the child was experiencing. It is also important to note that the educator seemed to be feeling overwhelmed by the child's behaviour. In this context, therefore, it is clear that the educator participant would find it very beneficial if training focused more on how to relate to autistic students, which would also help them understand the behaviours of autistic students better, ultimately making the education experience of both the child and educator a better one. As indicated by Probst and Leppert (2008) and Sinz (2004), training helps to reduce anxiety and stress among educators, which seemed to also be the case here. It is worth pointing out that this particular situation clearly reflects the need for ongoing training, as clearly explained by Martin et al. (2019a).

#### *Others*

Apart from the suggestions discussed above, a number of participants also noted their wish that training should resemble a support group, where they would not only get trained but, at the same time, have the opportunity to open up about any difficulties they are facing and share their experiences. This corresponds to research showing the importance of support among educator colleagues (Berzina, 2010).

Another participant also pointed out that training should include the voices of parents who could provide educators with many insightful views on their experiences, ultimately helping educators understand their children more. The

idea that parents are a beneficial resource for educators emerged several times in this research (Saliba, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

In the initial sections of this paper, I discussed the many facets of autism and argued that the knowledge of autism among educators varies significantly. I also presented several arguments that dispute the idea that educators have adequate knowledge about autism. In the subsequent sections, I discussed a number of challenges that educators encounter when working with autistic students in mainstream schools, one of which is the lack of training. The serious nature of these challenges has been defined by the findings this research study has presented, which clearly indicate that Maltese educators need more training and have clear views on what training they need.

Ultimately, we are faced with two very essential questions: Is knowledge about autism beneficial to teachers and their students? And do teachers need training about autism? In closing, I will put forward my views on training for educators with respect to autism to answer these questions.

Considering the many benefits that come with receiving training and considering the effects of a serious lack of training about autism among Maltese educators, I definitely believe such training is an integral part of being an educator. It is necessary for educators to have the basic knowledge of autism, of the resources, services and current teaching approaches to be used with autistic students for a more inclusive classroom, and of the best ways to work with autistic students. This will ensure that educators understand autistic students better, especially the challenges they encounter, so that they can support these students better. When educators are better trained, it leads to a better educational experience, not only for the educator but more importantly for autistic students themselves.

However, in light of the disabling effects that knowledge of autism can at times present, as discussed above, I would argue that apart from the suggestions put forward by the participants of this research, training should also inform educators about the disabling effects of diagnostic labels, so that they are made aware of an educator's tendency to be discouraged by such labels. Being made aware of such factors will help the educator to reflect more on their behaviour and hopefully help them to avoid such instances in their practice. In this respect, I very much believe in what Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2012) suggested: educators should apply the use and refuse concept when dealing with labels. This means that when the label is beneficial to the child in terms of accessing resources, then it should be used; when the label is going to restrict the child's opportunities, then it should be rejected.

Further, in this paper, I have described some of the attitudes that educators have towards inclusive education for autistic students and how these play a significant role in their effectiveness in the classroom (Acedo et al., 2009). Whatever the amount and type of training an educator receives, inclusive education for autistic students will still present challenges, as I have explained. However, training will help the educator in different ways and will definitely ease the challenges, but for inclusive education to be effective and successful, the educator needs to have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. In this respect, I would argue that the training that educators receive should also include an attempt to reverse any negative views of inclusive education among educators. This, together with the training suggestions discussed above, can lead to a more inclusive system of education for all.

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### **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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