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Inclusive Education in Malta: Exploring Primary Teachers' Perceptions on Including Students with Autism in Maltese Mainstream Classrooms

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Abstract: Mainstream schools are experiencing a surge in the enrollment of students with diverse needs. This increase places additional demands and responsibilities on teachers, who are required to respond to these needs and ensure these students' successful inclusion in all aspects of school life. This article draws on findings from a larger explanatory sequential mixed-methods study to critically examine how Maltese primary school teachers perceive inclusive education, with a particular focus on including students with autism in mainstream classrooms.

The broader study involved one hundred ninety-eight Maltese primary teachers, who completed semi-structured questionnaires, followed by in-depth interviews with ten volunteer participants. While most participants expressed generally favourable perceptions towards inclusion, the implementation of inclusive practices remains inconsistent. Reservations regarding inclusion became more pronounced when involving students with low-functioning autism. Many teachers reported feeling inadequately supported, unprepared, and overwhelmed when teaching these students, underscoring the need to reconceptualise inclusion not merely as a question of physical placement but as a commitment to inclusive practice.

The study concludes that while positive perceptions are vital, support from Senior Leadership Teams, adequate resources, a reconsideration of current practices, and flexible curricula are fundamental to turning genuine inclusive education into a lived reality for all students, including those with autism.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; teachers' perceptions; inclusion; mainstream classroom

Introduction

Inclusion is not merely a policy but rather a measure of how a society values diversity and equity. Although educational systems have made significant strides in creating more inclusive environments, the journey continues, with a considerable number of students still facing exclusion based on their association with groups perceived as *different*. Among this group are those on the autism spectrum, for whom inclusion remains an aspiration due to persistent barriers that prevent full participation in educational settings. This ongoing marginalisation and forms of otherism reinforce a pronounced distinction between '*us*' and '*them*', accentuating individual traits and undermining the principles of equity and belonging. Discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, national origin, and social class is not a contemporary issue; it has been a persistent challenge throughout the history of education, often stemming from entrenched stereotypes and societal biases (Ocay et al., 2021).

Having a clear and shared understanding of 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' is the initial step toward creating classrooms where diverse needs are met. However, although inclusion is not a modern innovation (Bajada, Callus & Borg, 2022), with its roots traced back centuries, it is complex to define. Evolving in the 1700s and becoming more institutionalised in the twentieth century, many scholars, policymakers, and educators have, up to now, interpreted it in various ways. As interpretations are shaped by the beliefs, cultural contexts, and actions of individuals, the term 'inclusion' remains ambiguous to this day, with no universally accepted definition.

Despite inclusive education being a widely endorsed principle, its practical application often varies depending on teachers' perceptions and students' specific needs. This article forms part of a larger doctoral study focusing on the Maltese primary school context, investigating how Maltese primary teachers perceive mainstream classrooms in addressing the educational needs of students with autism.

Literature review

Inclusive education in Malta and beyond

The history of inclusion is a story of gradual transformation, moving from a time when students with additional needs or disabilities were fully rejected and humiliated to a contemporary movement advocating

for impartiality and inclusive environments. Reflecting on the roots of inclusion within the Maltese context, around the early 19th century, children with disabilities were often subjected to social stigma and discrimination. Disability was misunderstood by the general population and considered taboo, to the extent that these individuals were ridiculed, marginalised, and hidden underground in cellars to avoid public shame (Camilleri & Callus, 2001). Viewed as a burden and considered a curse or punishment from God, they were denied recognition and a sense of identity within society.

Up to the 1940s, the prevailing model of education emphasised uniformity, expecting all students to progress from one grade level to another and eventually transition into the workforce. This model was not designed to accommodate students with disabilities who did not fit the standard criteria. This inflexible structure denied access to formal education to students who struggled, leaving them without opportunities to learn in different ways and be included. Within this context, these students were not only unsupported but also excluded from education, reinforcing their isolation from society.

Internationally, following World War II, there was growing recognition of human rights, and social attitudes began to shift, sparking a gradual move away from invisibility. As a result, specialised educational approaches emerged to advocate for the dignity and worth of all students with disabilities. Interestingly, the first efforts to recognise students' rights and develop early forms of educational provision in Malta originated from religious institutions and charitable organisations (Bartolo et al., 2002). However, while these institutions marked the first critical steps in recognising the right to education for all students, they remained physically and socially detached from mainstream classrooms where neurotypical peers, i.e., peers without disabilities, were taught the regular curriculum. This separation, though well-intentioned, bolstered the idea that students attending these institutions were '*different*' and unable to thrive within mainstream education, thus necessitating segregation from their neurotypical peers. While progressive in intent, this framing still portrayed such students as objects of charity rather than worthy of full inclusion.

Although not disability-specific, the notion of inclusive education began to evolve with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declared education a fundamental right for all, laying the groundwork for a collective effort against discrimination (Anderson, 2015). During

this time, rather than adapting the system to meet the needs of these students, students were expected to change and 'fit in' by adjusting to the system themselves. Building upon this, in 1954, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka declared it illegal to discriminate against individuals or deny them equal educational opportunities (Russo et al., 1994). This principle introduced new ideas about integration, reinforcing the concept that separate education is inherently unequal. Under these landmark declarations, while students with disabilities gained access to mainstream schools, they were still placed in separate classrooms within the same buildings, perpetuating segregation under the guise of inclusion.

Nevertheless, these landmarks contributed to paving the way for inclusive education, evolving from the acknowledgement of education as a fundamental human right and challenging exclusion to defining inclusion as meaningful participation and equal opportunities for all. In 1997, the UK Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) accentuated the focus on access by asserting that all children should be "*included as equal partners in the school community*" (p. 5). A year later, the same department expanded this view by stating that inclusive education not only entails access but also involves enabling the right to learn and the full "*participation of all pupils in learning which leads to the highest level of achievement*" (DfEE, 1998, p. 23). This revision of the definition of inclusive education emphasised that concentrating solely on physical presence in a mainstream classroom, defined as a space where students with disabilities receive the same academic and social opportunities as their peers, proves insufficient if it does not also involve a holistic, needs-based approach that identifies and supports all students. The necessity to shift away from merely integrating students by placing them in mainstream classrooms without support to actively meeting their individual and social needs, by restructuring cultures, revising policies, and implementing inclusive practices, has also been referenced in numerous subsequent documents.

In 1975, in the United States, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) heralded a new era, endorsing a free and appropriate education for all children in the 'least restrictive environment', with Yell et al. (2017) describing this term as one meaning, as much as possible, an environment where an individual's specific services are catered for. Nonetheless, Dreilinger (2021) critically pointed out that EHA employed labels such as '*handicapped*' and '*crippled*' to describe certain students, reflecting now-outdated terminology, with

these students often remaining on the periphery of educational inclusion and still facing marginalisation. This legislation, which had a worldwide influence, laid the groundwork for other frameworks in inclusive education and was later revised and rebranded as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. In this revised act, the previously used terms to refer to students with disabilities started to be deemed disrespectful, reflecting a broader societal shift in perceptions of disability. As awareness increased, so did the dignity and recognition of the educational rights of students with disabilities. Around the same period, Malta's Education Act underwent a gradual transformation, moving away from segregation towards inclusion, declaring that children with mental, emotional, or physical impairments should attend special schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009).

The 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education marked another turning point in the global consensus on inclusive education, driven by the EHA. This framework signified a growing international alignment with other countries, including Malta, that began their journey towards offering equal opportunities and accommodations for all students in regular schools. Although this act did not explicitly mention the term 'inclusive education', Article 3 strongly emphasises that educational institutions should strive to accommodate "*all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions*" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994, p. 5). This vision was entrenched in subsequent global movements, including the No Child Left Behind Act, the Education for All initiative, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which further reaffirmed the concept of an inclusive education system at all levels. Collectively, these acts shifted the discourse from integration to full inclusion, acknowledging that support, meaningful participation, and the removal of barriers are critical in fulfilling children's right to education.

The transition towards inclusive education in Malta involved the introduction of Learning Support Educators (LSEs), enabling students with special needs to spend increasing time with their neurotypical peers in mainstream school settings. In 2000, a Statementing Moderating Panel and Appeals Board was introduced in Malta to establish practical measures for assessing students with educational difficulties and ensuring a fair assessment process. Around the same time, a series of additional acts and documents were introduced to prohibit discrimination and strive for equal recognition of individuals with

special needs. These included the Equal Opportunities Person with Disability Act, the Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), and the Creating Inclusive Schools document, which aimed to provide local educators with guidelines for fostering a more inclusive learning environment (Bartolo et al., 2002). Some years later, further policy documents and reforms, including amendments to the Education Act, the For All Children to Succeed initiative, the Inclusive and Special Education Review, and the National Curriculum Framework, were introduced to underscore the importance of genuine inclusion in Maltese mainstream schools. While these were significant milestones within the Maltese educational system, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) even commended Malta for its efforts in fostering inclusive environments, this commendation was short-lived.

Three years later, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2014) reported that only 0.1% of students with individual educational needs in Malta were educated in special schools away from mainstream classrooms. This statistic indicated considerable progress in reducing segregation. However, EASNIE challenged the praise received by WHO, citing formal structures, traditional teaching methods, strict discipline, and high-stakes exams as factors that continued to hinder educators' flexibility towards diversity, thus impeding the Maltese educational system from implementing effective inclusive practices. While advancements had been made in understanding inclusive education, this criticism prompted the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research, and Innovation (MEYR) to publish additional documents aimed at broadening opportunities for all students to develop the necessary skills, values, and attitudes to become active and successful citizens. These frameworks comprised the Respect for All Framework, the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, and the National Inclusive Education Framework.

Yet, despite these initiatives, the Maltese Association of Parents of State Schools Students (2015, p. 2) pointed out gaps between policy and implementation, noting that students with special needs were still "*being inserted in the system and not being able to have them included as should be the case with all children*". Following this, the National Inclusive Education Framework, the Learning Outcomes Framework, and the Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion reinforced the need for students with special needs not only to attend mainstream typical schools "*but also belong as valued members through active participation and the elimination of the barriers limiting the participation and*

achievement of all learners" (MEYR, 2019, p. 8). This reflects a shift from early exclusion and marginalisation towards a commitment to inclusive education, where diversity is endorsed and cherished for all.

As this transition unfolded, researchers continued to refine the practical definition of inclusion. While this term has sparked intense debate in academic circles, there is a unifying factor in its core principles. A common thread across definitions is the commitment to equitable access to education and the inherent right of every student to attend their local schools (Krischler et al., 2019). Nonetheless, while many definitions frame inclusion as a rights-based issue, others adopt a more quantitative approach, specifying that a mainstream school is considered inclusive if students with an identified disability are present for at least 80% of the school day alongside their peers (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Although this measurable data sets a quantitative benchmark for actual participation levels, focusing solely on attendance rates might cause aspects such as students' quality of experience, engagement, and emotional well-being to go unnoticed or overlooked, creating ongoing challenges to achieve consistently. This becomes particularly apparent when considering students with autism, whose inclusion often hinges on teachers' understanding of their unique characteristics and support needs.

Autism in Malta

Autism Spectrum Disorder is not a recently discovered condition. It has been acknowledged for several decades, with its understanding evolving. The term 'autism' was first introduced by Eugen Bleuler in 1911, though it was initially used to refer to individuals exhibiting common symptoms of schizophrenia. Autism as a developmental condition was comprehensively detailed in 1943 by Leo Kanner, followed by Hans Asperger in 1944. During this period, children with autism were perceived as perfectly oblivious to their surroundings, emotionally incapable, and, as a result of a tragedy or poor parenting, particularly the inadequate emotional nurturing by the refrigerator mother (Cleary et al., 2023). This notion was discredited around the late 20th century.

The formal recognition of autism with defined symptoms was established in the 1980s in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Following several revised editions of the DSM, the DSM-5 provided specific definitions and standardised criteria for diagnosing autism, which remained largely unchanged in its most recent edition, the DSM-5-TR. According to the DSM-5 and the DSM-5-

TR, persistent deficits in social interaction and communication, along with two types of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, must be present for a diagnosis of autism in individuals. In 2013, the DSM-5 introduced three severity levels of autism, ranging from Level 1 or High-Functioning to Level 3 or Low-Functioning autism for those requiring very substantial support. Between 2023 and 2024, the most commonly used terms to refer to students with autism in Malta were found to be 'High-Functioning' and 'Low-Functioning' autism.

Autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by persistent challenges with communication skills, social interaction, and repetitive patterns of behaviour, is a lifelong condition lasting throughout a person's life (Attard & Attard, 2023). Yet, with early diagnosis and intervention, along with the right supportive environments, individuals with autism can make significant progress and thrive. In Malta, the 'Lenti fuq l-Iżvilupp ta' Wliedna' is a nationwide screening programme that detects early signs of developmental delays in young children. Targeting those between 2 and 3 years of age, it aims to identify learning or developmental difficulties, or autism, and enable timely access to appropriate intervention services before these children enter formal education. Although autism is typically identified in childhood, there can also be late diagnoses, especially in girls who often mask autism or adapt their traits when young but face greater challenges in concealing it during puberty (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020).

While there is still no precise statistical prevalence rate of students with autism in Malta, recent estimates by Calleja (2023) suggest that approximately one in 65 individuals is on the autism spectrum. In response to the heightened awareness and diagnoses, Malta has taken steps to release various campaigns and publications on autism to improve general understanding and facilitate early identification and support. The Autism Toolkit was published in 2018 to assist teachers in implementing inclusive practical strategies that allow all students to thrive within a mainstream educational environment (Galea Soler & Pace Gellel, 2018). However, despite these efforts, the "*Maltese society still maintains a strong culture of shame, and a wrong view of autism*... [society still] *hurts people on the autism spectrum and their families*" (Government of Malta, 2021, p. 9). The Autism Toolkit was followed by the Respecting Diversity Safeguarding Entity: Malta's 2021-2030 National Autism Strategy (Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021), which focused on early intervention, education, healthcare access, and employment opportunities for individuals with autism. Rooted in

neurodiversity principles, these strategies sought to foster a Maltese society that respects, supports, and empowers individuals with autism throughout every phase of life.

Following the publication of the national autism strategy, the first-ever Maltese book about autism, Il-kuluri tal-Awtiżmu, was released in 2023 by Attard and Attard. This book presents various aspects of autism to assist educators and parents/guardians in achieving the core objectives outlined in the national autism strategy. Recently, Azzopardi et al. (2023) published an article critiquing the Maltese educational system, raising questions about whether inclusion in our mainstream classrooms is merely about physical placement for the sake of appearance or whether it truly provides a sense of acceptance and belonging. It is "*high time to have another evaluation of the way inclusive education is working – or not working – in Malta*" (Calleja, 2024, para. 5). In this quote, Calleja refers to Prof. Callus who contends that policies alone are insufficient and must be accompanied by ongoing evaluation and assessment to determine whether individuals with autism are genuinely benefiting from inclusion efforts in Malta. Although de Gaetano, the Chairperson of the Maltese Autism Advisory Council, specified that "*the reality on the ground is much more complex, and things are harder than they seem*" (Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021, p. 11), by collaborating as a country, we can undertake significant measures and achieve meaningful change.

Research methodology

This article draws on a broader doctoral study grounded in Critical Disability Theory (CDT) to highlight the importance of shifting from the medical model of disability to a more inclusive and accessible approach for all, regardless of their level of abilities or needs. This extensive work examined Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of including students with autism through the perspectives of their backgrounds, pedagogical understandings, and experiences, which shape their approach to these students. It also explored both established and emerging factors affecting these perceptions and analysed the findings through the lens of CDT. Given

- the upswing in the number of students with autism being educated in Maltese primary classrooms;
- the interplay between primary teachers' perceptions and their influence on inclusion, development, and learning; and

- the notable lacunae in the literature within the Maltese context on this subject,

it was paramount to investigate these teachers' perceptions. To provide a more focused analysis, this paper limits itself solely to exploring Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of including students with autism in mainstream classrooms.

Employing a pragmatic paradigm as its epistemological and philosophical framework, this study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to triangulate data sources and methods, thereby enriching the comprehensive understanding and validity of the subject. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review board and the MEYR before the study commenced. In line with the research questions, the initial quantitative component aimed to capture broad patterns in teachers' perceptions. This involved distributing both paper-based questionnaires and electronic versions created via Google Forms.

The statistical results and insights gathered from the first quantitative phase were analysed to identify patterns and inform the development of the qualitative interview guide. The second phase comprised semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, allowing participants to expand on questionnaire findings and provide more in-depth insights into their perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism. Participants could choose to conduct the interviews online through Microsoft Teams or face-to-face at their respective institutions. Following the interviews, the quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and integrated to provide a deeper understanding of the data.

Research participants

For this study, primary teachers of all ages, genders, and levels of working experience were eligible to participate, provided they were currently employed in one of the three identified school sectors, i.e. state, church, or independent. As a primary teacher and part-time lecturer, I selected this group because I recognise the pivotal role teachers play in shaping what happens within the four walls of the classroom environment. Spending most of their time with students during the school day, teachers have a profound impact on students' development, making their perceptions and practices central to the learning process.

Due to certain restrictions imposed by MEYR, the potential for generalisability and drawing broader conclusions was constrained. The questionnaires were sent via email or handed out to only 40 Heads of

Schools across Malta and Gozo, who were asked to act as gatekeepers. Obtaining responses from these gatekeepers within the required timeframe proved challenging, requiring me to send reminders via email and follow up with phone calls. Nonetheless, 26 confirmed they would forward or distribute the questionnaires to the primary teachers working in their respective schools. A total of 198 teachers participated in this study, resulting in an overall response rate of 52.6%. Participants represented a diverse group in terms of age, professional experience, school type, and gender, with the majority being female.

Ten primary teachers volunteered to take part in the interviews. Although the number of interviewees was relatively low compared to the number of schools involved in the questionnaire, their backgrounds were diverse, with at least one teacher from each educational sector. This enabled a more in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years, with qualifications spanning from supply teachers to master's degrees, and with varying exposure to autism-related training. All participants were female, reflecting the broader gender distribution within the total teaching population. According to the most recent statistics by the National Statistics Office (2024), in the scholastic year 2022-2023, out of 2,120 primary teachers employed across the three Maltese educational sectors, 1,821 were female, indicating a strong female majority in the teaching workforce. The qualitative stage yielded rich, detailed insights that significantly contributed to understanding the research topic.

Data collection and analysis

Following a pilot study with a small sample prior to main data collection, the quantitative phase used questionnaires consisted of 35 statements focusing on teachers' perceptions and understanding of inclusion, with teachers expressing their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale. Organised into three sections, the statements covered participants' demographic information and educational training; their perceptions of including students with autism; and their views on the four preliminary factors. These statements, adapted from the CDT perspective and tailored to the Maltese context, were reviewed by local experts for content validity and aligned with key inclusion themes such as the benefits of inclusive education, ableism, and autism. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, with the internal reliability being 0.731. If they wished to, participants could include additional remarks on their

chosen answers through open-ended comment boxes that were included at the end of each section of the questionnaire. A total of 202 questionnaires were collected, with four discarded as these were incomplete, leaving 198 valid for analysis. Following data collection, the questionnaires were analysed and evaluated using the latest version of SPSS.

The interview transcriptions were deciphered through the integration of structural coding, descriptive coding, and in vivo coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis method. This combination helped obtain large-scale data, deepen qualitative data analysis, and preserve participants' authentic voices. Using NVivo, data were organised, coded, and analysed using thematic analysis, with an integrated interpretation. A word cloud was generated to visualise frequently used words and phrases during the interviews, representing broader concepts and patterns.

Results

Aligning with the premises of CDT, 59.1% (N = 117) of Maltese primary teachers in this study expressed agreement with the idea that all students, regardless of differences, deserve the right to receive education in mainstream classrooms where they are valued and respected. In addition to this, 53.5% (N = 106) believe that mainstream classrooms foster a sense of community and lead to favourable outcomes for all students, with 77.3% (N = 153) of participants noting that such classrooms exert a positive impact on students' social development. Furthermore, 42.9% (N = 85) are confident that inclusion also enhances their academic growth.

However, while the majority of teachers believe that including all students in mainstream classrooms offers a two-way learning opportunity, some remain sceptical or oppose the practical implementation of mainstreaming, particularly for students with autism. Notably, 57.1% of the participants expressed uncertainty about its effectiveness for these students, indicating that inclusion did not seem to contribute meaningfully to their learning experiences. This reluctance was especially pronounced when faced with students exhibiting low-functioning autism, who display more severe symptoms and require greater support. As 69.2% (N = 137) consider mainstream environments challenging for low-functioning students with autism, they argue that these students' needs are better supported in specialised classrooms

rather than alongside neurotypical peers. Despite inclusive education being promoted as the ideal approach, only 11.1% (N = 22) fully endorsed placing students with low-functioning autism in mainstream classrooms.

Indeed, nearly 90% agreed that teaching these students in mainstream settings is inherently difficult and requires extensive modifications to the teaching materials. Additionally, 48% (N = 95) believe that although inclusion is a positive concept in theory, they encounter real-world obstacles in effectively translating it into practice, largely due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, an absence of support, overcrowded classrooms, and high classroom demands, all of which impede the realisation of inclusive principles. While many acknowledged these challenges and that accommodating such students increases their teaching workload, 83.3% (N = 165) disagreed that the responsibility for inclusion should fall solely on LSEs, an opinion shared by only 19 teachers who agreed that this should be the case.

Research indicates that teachers' perceptions of autism are a key factor in shaping inclusive practices, yet opinions remain divided, with 54.6% (N = 108) in agreement, 24.2% (N = 48) remaining unsure, and 21.2% (N = 42) in disagreement. Despite their hard efforts and experiences, nearly half of the participants still reported feeling unsuccessful in effectively teaching and including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Interestingly, even though most believe that such classrooms are challenging, a striking 71.2% (N = 141) opposed the statement that teachers should have the choice whether to have students with autism in their classrooms, implying that even in the face of challenges, Maltese primary teachers generally still possess a strong sense of professional responsibility.

Discussion

The majority of the participants supported the principle of inclusion, emphasising that all students have the right to learn together and be part of mainstream classrooms. This broad endorsement aligns with the principles of CDT, which claim that education is an inherent right for all and should extend beyond mere physical placement. Participants believed that inclusive education benefits not only students with special needs but also the entire classroom community, extending beyond academics to encompass communication, cohesion, and innovation. Interviewees mentioned that inclusion fosters diversity, empathy, and a

richer learning environment, describing it as a growing, dynamic experience. A few also turned their perspectives inward and recognised that teaching diverse students contributes to their personal and professional growth, helping them become better versions of themselves. This suggests that most primary teachers in this study advocate for a universal approach that embraces all forms of diversity and recognises the broader positive impact of inclusion, a view also supported by research. Teixeira et al. (2017) state that valuing inclusion makes teachers more cognisant of its benefits and fosters more positive perceptions. Torenvliet et al. (2023) note that this viewpoint reflects open-mindedness and generally empathetic attitudes towards inclusion.

However, while the larger study shows that most participants support inclusion, one cannot ignore a considerable number of them who expressed hesitations or reservations about its implementation, citing concerns about its effectiveness and feasibility. Teachers initially reported feeling more confident and positive about inclusion when it coincides with existing structures and when the learning environment is free from distractions. Positive perceptions among primary teachers tend to decline when it involves working directly with students with autism, especially with those with low-functioning autism, largely because these students are perceived to exhibit challenging behaviours and require a higher level of support.

This perceived difference underscores a gap between the idealised notion of inclusive education and the practical realities teachers face in mainstream classrooms. While most teachers initially accept inclusion and believe, especially early in their careers, that it would be feasible and rewarding to teach diverse students in mainstream settings, the reality proves more complex and inconsistent as they encounter varying levels of severity and behavioural patterns. Consequently, teachers often feel overwhelmed and frustrated, with their initial belief in the simplicity of inclusion supplanted by a more negative outlook shaped by their classroom experiences. Unanimously, participants agreed that doubts about practice arise when difficulties emerge in helping these students cope in mainstream classrooms, which strains classroom dynamics and instruction time.

Their perceptions are further influenced by some teachers' limited understanding of neurodiversity and their view of students with low-functioning autism as 'different' from their peers. In both questionnaire responses and interviews, some teachers repeatedly used language that

distinguished students with autism from their neurotypical peers as '*normal*' and '*other*', implying an underlying perception that students with autism are 'abnormal' and perpetuating a binary view of students and ableism. Their language frames neurotypical students as the norm and students with low-functioning autism as being outside it, subtly suggesting they are burdens and disruptions to the 'normal' flow of classroom life, undermining the goals of inclusive education. This reveals a potential gap in Maltese teachers' understanding and a conditional attitude towards inclusion, where they view inclusion as more about accommodating those 'deserving of inclusion' rather than modifying environments to accommodate diverse learning needs. Such notions of normalcy are critically challenged by CDT, which asserts that it is society that shapes this perception and endorses exclusionary standards, not students who fail to meet social expectations. It stresses that institutions should adapt to diversity instead of requiring students to conform to predetermined standards of competence or behaviour.

Managing the demands of inclusive classrooms can lead to implicit or explicit labelling, with teachers questioning whether students with low-functioning autism truly benefit from mainstream settings (Iqbal et al., 2022). While some support full inclusion, others favour a hybrid model, spending part of the week in special units located within the same school and part in mainstream classrooms. A number of respondents oppose inclusion entirely, believing that students with low-functioning autism, described as '*the problem*', may, in their own words, "*get nothing*" from mainstream classroom settings. Rather than attributing the challenges to barriers that fail to meet students' needs, some conclude that these students do not benefit from mainstream education and would be better placed in special schools, where they can receive targeted support. This reinforces a deficit-oriented view of autism, misunderstanding the challenges faced by these students as evidence that they are unfit for mainstream education, once again undermining the principles of inclusion.

Some participants described inclusion as not just ineffective, but as a "*disservice to have them in class*", harming both the students and neurotypical peers. One participant stated that it is unfair for the latter to "*go home with headaches and have a generally disruptive and unhappy year*". Others expressed frustration that neurotypical peers constantly deal with disruptive behaviour "*just because he has autism*", emphasising that everyone has the right to learn, not only students with autism. These comments reveal that, whether inadvertently or not, some Maltese

primary teachers still practise ableism, raising questions about their understanding of inclusive education and the blurring of the distinction between inclusion and integration.

Inclusion involves not only placing students with autism in mainstream classrooms but also adapting teaching practices to support them. Nonetheless, underlying their beliefs is the assumption that students with autism, especially those with low-functioning autism, must change to fit the existing system. Such beliefs reinforce the idea of autism as a medical condition where these students cannot fulfil societal expectations of normality (AlWadaani, 2019). However, this is not because these students are incapable of success, but because existing systems and teaching methods lack the flexibility and support needed to accommodate their diverse needs.

Furthermore, some interviewees reflected on their own and their colleagues' experiences, sharing how the inclusion of students with autism, particularly those with low-function autism, has negatively impacted their mental and physical well-being, as well as that of those around them. They expressed frustration, feeling unfairly treated and expected to '*perform miracles*' with these students. Two took a step further, describing days spent feeling like '*punching bags*' and '*jugglers*'. Others viewed mainstream classrooms with students with autism as extremely challenging and even dangerous, describing these learning experiences as a "*nightmare*" and a "*war zone*". The perception of chaos highlights teachers' lack of confidence and reluctance to fully embrace the idea of inclusion, especially since students with low-functioning autism might not '*fit well*' into traditional classrooms and could pose greater challenges.

Interestingly, it is striking that despite such ableist views, teachers opposed the idea of exclusion, reflecting CDT's theoretical stance. Even when given the option to opt out of teaching students with low-functioning autism, they disagreed with sidestepping this responsibility, despite finding it emotionally and physically taxing. They agreed that this burden could be avoided if given collaborative support from colleagues, the Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), and the MEYR. An adequate support system is vital for creating an effective learning environment where all students can reach their potential. Valenti (2020) backs this up by arguing that in the face of a lack of sufficient support, even teachers in favour of inclusion may feel overwhelmed or disillusioned.

The study also shows that perceptions are shaped not only by student characteristics but also by external barriers, which, if unaddressed, reveal a spectrum of views. Beyond the barriers set out at the beginning of the study, teachers reported additional factors hindering inclusive education and contributing to neutrality or negativity. They mentioned limited resources, a poor understanding of diverse needs, a vast curriculum, time constraints, and when their voices are unheard in decision-making. The shortage of well-equipped schools makes it even more difficult to provide quality education to students with autism, especially those with low-functioning autism, and hampers the development of an inclusive environment. This dissonance often leads to heightened stress and illuminates the complexity of managing inclusion. Without the tools and confidence to effectively meet diverse needs, teachers risk frustration and burnout, which affect their day-to-day experiences, classroom dynamics, teaching strategies, and perceptions of inclusion. Valenti (2020) emphasises that this can result in exhaustion, stress, and professional burnout, as teachers are expected to implement inclusive practices without proper training, time, or resources. Disillusionment with teaching students with low-functioning autism can create biases, influencing attitudes, practices, and the learning environment (Valenti, 2020).

Anchustegui-Vila and Ustrell-Torrent (2017) and Ayers et al. (2024), as well as CDT research, demonstrate that many challenges faced by students with autism in mainstream settings stem from systemic rigidity and poorly adapted environments. Factors such as fluorescent lighting, high-pitched voices, unstructured environments full of colour, strong odours, and uncomfortable temperatures cause overstimulation and discomfort for students with autism, making it harder for them to focus and learn (Anchustegui-Vila & Ustrell-Torrent, 2017). In their research, Ayers et al. (2024) recommend that teachers adopt a more reflective approach and actively incorporate inclusive values into their daily practice, which can reduce educational inequalities and promote behavioural change.

In summary, the larger study's findings show that most participants view the inclusion of all students positively, demonstrating a strong commitment to diversity and equal access. However, some ableist perceptions persist when it comes to teaching students with autism, especially those with low-functioning autism, rooted in interrelated factors that Maltese primary schools often lack. Teachers feel

overwhelmed by insufficient resources, lack of trained staff, and inadequate support and space for multi-sensory rooms, leading even supporters of inclusion to feel frustrated and resistant. Research on CDT underscores that without proper training, managing the sensory and communication needs of students with autism is overwhelming, often causing burnout. The tendency to prioritise convenience over equity, seen throughout the study, leads some teachers to revert to practices of segregation and believe that specialised units are better suited for these students. Although inclusion is endorsed in theory, it remains poorly implemented in practice, exposing a gap between policy and reality, and suggesting that true inclusion is not yet fully embedded in Maltese schools or within the participants' institutions.

Recommendations for teacher education and policy reform

Based on these findings, the study recommends improvements in Maltese teacher education and policy related to the inclusion of students with autism. Primarily, there should be a greater focus on communication and collaboration among educational stakeholders, recognising primary teachers' voices as key contributors directly involved with students. This would foster better support across school environments.

Teacher preparation programmes and ongoing professional development need updating with more practical, hands-on autism and inclusion training. Using evidence-based tools, such as the Autism Toolkit, and training teachers in Universal Design for Learning principles can help in planning inclusive lessons and creating a safe, supportive learning environment for diverse profiles. Curriculum reforms should become more flexible, allowing teachers to adapt content and delivery methods to incorporate current knowledge and cater to students' strengths and needs.

Moreover, schools must be better resourced to support inclusion, with accessible materials, support staff, and multisensory rooms. Utilising digital platforms, engaging with experienced educators, viewing videos of teachers working with students with autism, and sharing practical knowledge and experiences can foster reflective practice. In a nutshell, a multifaceted approach combining structural support, staff training, curriculum flexibility, and increased awareness can help create more equitable learning environments for all students, including those with autism.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the dynamic and evolving nature of Maltese primary teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Initially, the majority of Maltese primary teachers expressed favourable views on providing all students with the opportunity to learn and be included in a mainstream classroom alongside neurotypical peers, believing that this results in several positive benefits, both for the students and educators themselves. However, significant hesitation persists among some teachers' perceptions, especially when questions focus directly on students with low-functioning autism. Many of these teachers' concerns do not stem from a failure to recognise these students' rights to inclusion but reflect contextual, institutional, organisational, and societal limitations. These issues depend on students' conditions and severity levels, a lack of support from administrators, and insufficient knowledge and training on how to meet these students' needs. Teachers expressed feeling more positive and confident about teaching those who conform to the 'norm' and align more with productivity. This agreement, primarily regarding those considered to be 'deserving of inclusion', followed by reservations, suggests a possible gap in teachers' understanding, which can reinforce segregation and stigma against students with low-functioning autism. Despite this, many primary teachers maintain a principled commitment to inclusive education and disapprove of the idea of opting out from teaching students with autism.

Findings from this study reaffirm that the perceptions of primary teachers play a crucial role in providing a successful, inclusive learning environment where each student, regardless of their individual needs and abilities, is valued and supported equitably. The findings underscore the need for more support provided to teachers by SLTs and colleagues, shared power in decision-making processes, comprehensive professional development sessions, efficient classroom resources, adaptable environments, curricular flexibility, and the importance of addressing the issue of responsibilisation. True inclusion demands moving beyond viewing students with autism as burdens to be managed and instead embracing them as integral contributors to an inclusive learning community. Only when teachers embrace this shift can schools become spaces that value diversity and provide the required tools for every learner to thrive.

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