

Voices of Inclusion: Perspectives from Maltese Education Stakeholders

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Abstract

This research evaluates the effectiveness of inclusive educational services for students with diverse learning needs (DLN) in Malta, drawing insights from inclusive education stakeholders. Utilising a mixed-method research design, data were collected from 102 participants, including school leaders, inclusion specialists, and Learning Support Educators (LSEs). The study aimed to identify systemic barriers affecting the quality of services for students with DLN. A thematic analysis, combined with descriptive and inferential statistics, revealed significant challenges such as bureaucratic complexities, lengthy assessment periods, and insufficient resources. Participants also noted the lack of ongoing professional development for educators and the competitive academic environment as barriers to fostering inclusivity. Recommendations emphasise the need for policy adjustments to streamline procedures, reduce assessment delays, and enhance resource allocation. Crucially, the findings indicate that schools require greater autonomy in resource distribution and recruitment to support students with DLN effectively. Additionally, a cultural shift promoting empathy and understanding within the educational setting is essential for cultivating a genuinely inclusive school culture.

Keywords: Inclusive Services, Inclusive Education, Support Services, Diverse Learning Needs.

Points of Interest:

- This study evaluates the inclusive education system of Malta from the perspective of stakeholders involved in inclusion about the identification process and support for students with diverse learning needs (DLN).
- The study identifies several key issues. It highlights the need for simpler processes and quicker assessments to identify needs and provide adequate support.
- The study also points out that schools need more resources, such as multi-sensory and calming spaces. It emphasises the importance of ongoing training for teachers to handle diverse learning needs effectively.
- Additionally, the study finds that Malta's competitive academic culture can make it harder to create an inclusive environment.
- The recommendations suggest improving support systems, providing specialised services within the schools, and encouraging a more understanding and accepting school culture. These changes aim to ensure that all students, especially those with DLN, have a better and more supportive educational experience.

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Introduction

Inclusive education is fundamental to providing equitable opportunities for all students within the educational system, including those with diverse learning needs (DLN). In Malta, as in many other countries, the effectiveness and inclusivity of educational services for students with DLN are crucial areas of focus for educators, policymakers, and professional stakeholders. Understanding the systemic barriers, stakeholder collaboration, and resource adequacy within the Maltese educational system is essential to optimally enhance support for these students. This research aims to evaluate the current educational services' effectiveness while also seeking to identify gaps in the present approach. The study attempts to understand institutional challenges better and propose necessary enhancements to support these students optimally within the educational setting. Additionally, this study provides a platform for professionals in inclusive education who are at the forefront of experiencing the realities of this system to voice their views and ultimately propose recommendations for a better, truly inclusive educational system.

Theoretical Framework

Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) propose a theoretical framework for understanding inclusive education by integrating social system theory and constructionist perspectives. Their framework emphasises the dynamic interactions within educational systems, highlighting how institutional norms and social constructions shape the implementation of inclusive practices. By focusing on communication processes and the meanings attributed to inclusion, this framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of the barriers and facilitators of inclusive education (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). This theoretical approach is particularly relevant for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive education services, as it provides insights into the systemic and contextual factors influencing educational equity and access. Thus, adopting this framework can enhance the understanding of inclusive education's complexities and inform strategies for improvement in practice.

Background

Malta's inclusive education policies prioritise equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities. The Education Act of 1987 is the cornerstone of Malta's educational framework, mandating accessible schooling for all citizens. The Constitution further guarantees educational rights for persons with disabilities. International agreements, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, reinforce Malta's commitment to inclusion. Significant policies include the Equal Opportunities Act (2000), which prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities, and the Framework for Education Strategy for Malta (2014–2024), which aims to foster personal and social development among all learners. Recent revisions to the National Inclusive Education Framework and the Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools emphasise high-quality, equitable education, encouraging schools to adopt inclusive practices. Key principles guiding Malta's education strategy include equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusivity.

The country has continually endorsed efforts to improve the quality of inclusive education. This has also been reflected at higher education levels, including changes in assessment procedures and widening access to academic and vocational courses for disabled young persons (Marić, 2018). The Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, the University of Malta, and various non-governmental organisations have been involved in these efforts to enhance inclusive education. In 2022, Malta revised its Inclusive Education Framework and Policy, emphasising the importance of creating an inclusive education system that supports the diverse needs of all learners and promotes their full participation and opportunities for realising their potential. The revised policy outlines strategies for implementing inclusive education in schools, focusing on quality inclusion. Quality education is provided through in-class approaches such as the Learning Support Educator (LSE) system and support services provided by

the National School Support Services (NSSS) in the case of State schools. In contrast, church and independent schools offer alternative provisions.

The introduction of the LSE system was pivotal in enhancing the provision of support within schools. This system aimed to ensure the active engagement of students with DLN in all educational activities within a mainstream setting. LSEs have become an essential resource in Maltese schools. In 2024 and 2018, LSEs were employed, supporting 4129 identified learners with special educational needs. LSEs work closely with learners, providing one-to-one or shared support at different levels, and are an integral part of the inclusive culture in Maltese schools. However, the support system is broader; the guidance service and psycho-social team also support learners with various developmental and life issues, helping them reintegrate into normal school life. Moreover, specialised services are also provided by the NSSS, Secretariat of Catholic Education and privatised services in independent school settings.

While supportive to many students throughout the educational journey, the inclusive education system also has many challenges. One of the key challenges is the lack of resources, including funding and personnel, to support inclusive education effectively. The lack of human resources has been identified at different levels, from top levels, such as Heads of Departments (Galea, 2020) to the lack of human resources to match the demand of LSEs. The high demand for LSEs and the limited number of available LSEs results in inadequate support for students with diverse educational needs (Vella Haber, 2023). Students with diverse needs have the same right to quality education as all peers. However, this quality is questionable when unqualified educators are trusted to support students who need specialised educators. Another challenge related to the role of LSEs is the changing role of the professional, where responsibilities and expectations might change depending on the specific situation; this renders the quality of services provided by the educators (Grech, 2019).

The lack of continuous professional development by teachers and LSEs to deal with diversity has often been attributed to hindering quality inclusive education. LSEs are only required to carry out a 10-week course to be lawfully employed; therefore, should individuals decide not to continue their professional development, they are in their right to do so. This, however, does not equip LSEs with the necessary tools to address the diverse needs of children. In such cases, knowledge comes only from work experience. Moreover, the fact that LSEs can be employed before receiving any training is considered a serious challenge, putting students who rely on untrained educators at a disadvantage, as they are not equipped to address the diverse needs of the students (Bartolo, 2010; Grech, 2019; Vella Haber, 2023). Such an employment model has often been described as a 'catching-up' model, which requires immediate attention and reform to ascertain specialised professionals for the job (Vella Haber, 2023). Nevertheless, professional development is not only the LSEs' problem. Are teachers, who are considered as the class managers trained and equipped to cater to all needs within the classroom? LSEs are, by definition, considered specialised educators, yet the teacher is expected to oversee everyone's learning. Do sporadic modules at the B.Ed. and M.Ed. levels prepare teachers to cater to the diverse classroom's needs unless they specialise in continuous further development? (Bartolo, 2010).

The highly competitive academic culture within the Maltese school setting has also often been described as a challenge towards inclusive education (Bartolo, 2010; Micallef, 2019). Many reforms, policies and curriculum changes have been proposed to counter-act this. However, success towards an inclusive system that celebrates learning rather than achievement on rigid, quantitative exams is still debatable. Thus, often, it creates a system where LSEs are working a catching-up game where they are striving towards making their learners achieve academic expectations, which leads to thinking about whether this is what we mean by true inclusion. Although the politically correct discourse on inclusion is widely accepted, many teachers in practice regard inclusive arrangements as an idealistic concept, often expressing that the ultimate determinant of success lies in the examination outcomes. This perspective highlights the challenges and discrepancies between the theoretical ideals of inclusion and the practical realities educators face (Bartolo, 2010).

The approach to integrate all students with DLN in Malta did not involve regular teachers in the process, often resulting in teachers not assuming responsibility for students with DLN (Bartolo, 2010; Vella Haber, 2023). This situation is particularly evident when the LSEs are absent during the day the child is sent back home (Bartolo, 2010). While this process is being attended to by the 'on-call' system in some

school settings. To date, this process – although unlawful – still takes place. This shows a lack of ownership of fully integrating students with DLN and a lack of planning and foresight on the matter. This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness and inclusivity of current educational services for students with DLN by analysing systemic barriers, stakeholder collaboration, and resource adequacy in the Maltese educational system. However, to effectively evaluate inclusive education services, it is essential to define "effectiveness" comprehensively, incorporating perspectives from various stakeholders. Effectiveness in inclusive education incorporates achieving desired educational, social, and developmental outcomes for all students, particularly those with disabilities and DLN (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Research indicates that effective inclusive education requires appropriate policies and the active involvement of teachers, families, and the community (Graham, 2022). For instance, Graham (2022) emphasises the importance of professional development and collaborative practices among educators to enhance the learning experience for students with DLN. Furthermore, adequate resources and support systems are critical in mitigating challenges students and educators face (Graham, 2023). By examining these factors, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how inclusive education can be effectively implemented and sustained in Malta. The research seeks to listen to the voices of educational stakeholders and evaluate whether the progress and improvement proposed by the policies are being reflected within the school settings. The following research question guided this research.

Research Questions

1. How does the current state of inclusive services in our educational environment affect the identification and support of students with learning difficulties?
2. How do stakeholder challenges impact the effectiveness of addressing and understanding students' learning difficulties?
3. What changes can be proposed to the Maltese educational system regarding physical resources and adaptations needed to effectively support students with DLN?

Method

The researcher followed the ethical protocol as stipulated by the Ethics Board at the Institute for Education. The data was collected through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire included four demographics, six close-ended, and nine open-ended questions. The demographic questions gathered information about the participants' background, such as the educational sector they were from (state, church, or independent schools) and their role (e.g., assistant head, head of school, head of inclusion, inclusion specialist/lecturer, inclusion coordinator, or LSE 3). The close-ended questions provided quantitative data, while the open-ended questions allowed participants to share their perspectives and experiences more qualitatively.

The questionnaire was tested for internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .73, indicating an acceptable reliability level across the 15 items. This suggests that the items are reasonably consistent in measuring the same underlying construct (George & Mallery, 2016).

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics using DataTAB software. Inferential statistics were used to test whether there were differences between groups of participants. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to identify differences between groups of participants, grouped according to their role and sector (State, Church, Independent). This test was used as a non-parametric statistical alternative the data was non-normally distributed (Ostertagova, 2014).

Qualitative Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted using Taguette software to identify recurring ideas and reactions from participants. The analysis involved several steps in identifying the primary themes from qualitative data collected via the online questionnaire. This process was maintained for each open-ended question to ensure consistency. As a first step, the responses were carefully read through to identify and code each response's main idea. For example, responses mentioning the need for more literacy resources were coded under "Physical Resources," while responses emphasising the importance of better training for educators were coded under "Training and Support." This step helped break down the data into manageable and meaningful units, as Braun and Clarke (2013) suggested. The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes, with related topics combined under a single theme. For example, financial, human, and specialised resources were combined under the theme "Resources." This step allowed for identifying patterns and relationships among themes and sub-themes, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018). The most prevalent and significant themes were prioritised and subsequently discussed. The data excerpts were also reproduced to ensure that unique insights were highlighted, including verbatim quotes to give a 'voice' to the participants while validating the data further. This step ensures that the analysis is comprehensive and provides a clear understanding of the participants' responses, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Participants

In Malta, the support provided to students with DLN is primarily integrated within mainstream education, with only a small percentage of students attending specialised Resource Centres. In 2021, 124 primary and secondary school students were reported to attend settings outside mainstream schools. The inclusivity policy mandates that mainstream schools offer various learning programs tailored to meet students' needs, including Individual Learning Programs (IEPs) for students with special needs, supported by LSEs and coordinated by Inclusive Coordinators (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, nd). All students attending state, independent, or church schools are assigned an LSE following recommendations by the Statementing Panel. The Statementing Panel issues an official statement of support after a set referral procedure for learners formally assessed by a psychologist or with a medical condition.

State schools in Malta are managed by a Head of School, supported by Assistant Heads and Heads of Department. Non-teaching educational staff, Heads of the Inclusion Department, Inclusion specialists and other consultants also play vital roles in providing inclusive services. Church and independent schools also implement the LSE system used in state schools, with LSEs employed under the same conditions. However, managerial roles may vary at the discretion of each school (Eurydice, 2023).

The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique to collect the views of educational stakeholders involved in inclusive education. After a review of the local educational setting, the researcher chose to include participants with a managerial role in inclusive education, participants who hold expertise in inclusive education, and LSEs who have a Bachelor's degree in inclusive education, therefore employed in the role of LSE 3. Individuals who held such a role during the time of research were forwarded a request for voluntary participation. One hundred and two (102) participants responded to the online questionnaire. 75% came from a state school background, 12% from church schools, 11% from independent schools and 2% from other backgrounds (Figure 1). The number of years of experience within the educational sector and specifically within their latest role is displayed in Table 1.

Figure 1
Qualifications of participants.

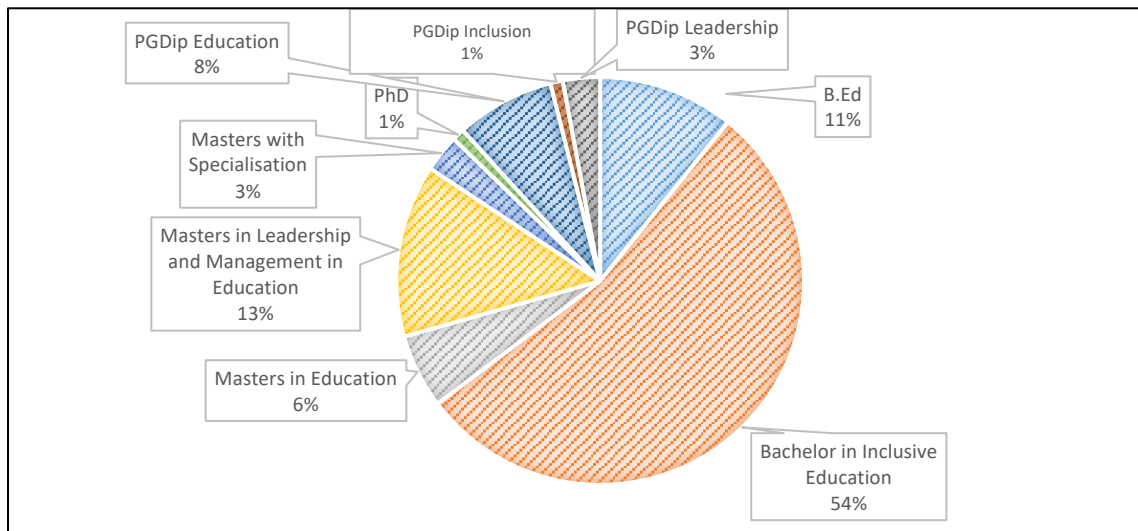


Table 1
Years of experience of participants.

Role	N	% Distribution	Mean Years of Experience in Education	Mean Years of experience in the role
Assistant Head of School	28	27%	21	7
Head of School	13	13%	28	9
Head of Inclusion	12	12%	26	7
Inclusion Specialist/Lecturer	5	5%	18	7
Inclusion coordinator	4	4%	24	6
LSE 3	40	39%	12	5

Results

The results of the study are presented in 4 sections. *Section 1:* Identification and ongoing support for students with DLN; *Section 2:* Ongoing support; *Section 3:* The effectiveness of Inclusive Education; *Section 4:* Change in Inclusive Education.

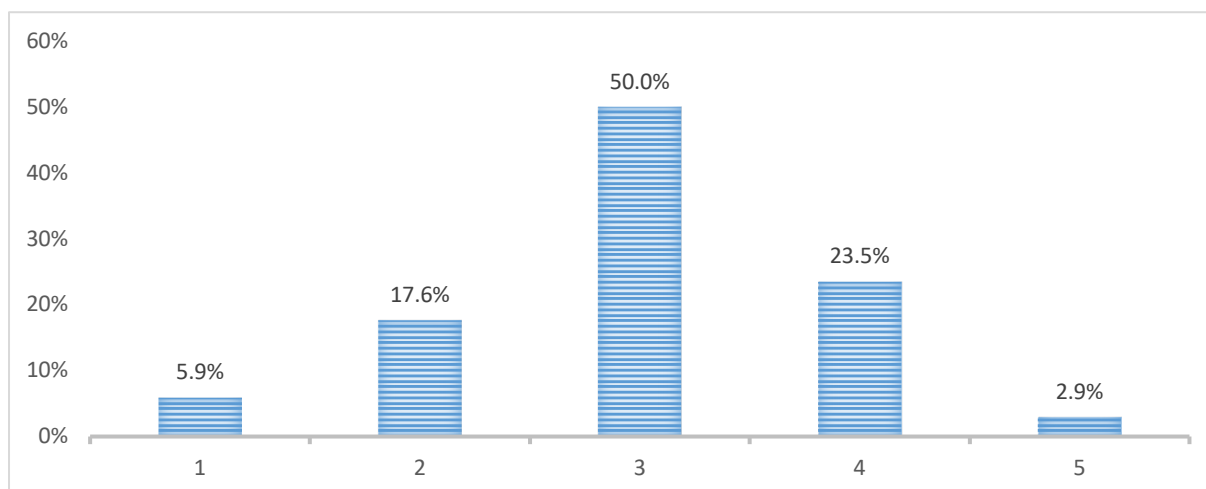
Section 1: Identification of Students with Diverse Learning Needs

This section first evaluates the processes of identifying students with DLN. Participants were asked to rate their experience of the identification process and consequently invited to elaborate further. As represented in Figure 2, a neutral response was provided when participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the initial identification and assessment phases, where 50% of participants rated the services a 3 on a 5-point scale, with 5 being the highest.

A *Kruskal-Wallis* test was conducted to examine differences between categories of the independent variable (school sector and role) and the dependent variable, "current effectiveness of inclusive services in identifying and supporting students with diverse needs." The tests showed no significant differences between the categories: $p = .587$ and $p = .24$, respectively.

Figure 2

Distribution of responses rating the effectiveness of the identification process.



A thematic evaluation of the questions investigating the challenges related to the initial identification phases of students with diverse learning needs identifies five main themes: Delayed Process -Injustice, Quality of Reporting, Injustice, Parental Involvement, and Lack of Collaboration.

Delayed Process - Injustice. Many participants recurrently mentioned delayed services. These included delayed and lengthy procedures for obtaining an official diagnosis through the Child Development and Assessment Unit (CDAU), a delayed statementing process particularly highlighted for older students, and long waiting times for initial assessment services provided by School Psychological Services (SPS) and Specific Learning Difficulty Services (SpLD). Many acknowledged that the lack of human resources is to blame for this.

"We need more professionals", "We need specialists", "the INCO can not do miracles with so many schools", and "SPLD / SPS professionals are needed in more schools, not in offices."

Head of School 10: "Apart from assessments taking very long, SPS carries months/years of waiting lists, followed by months/years of assessment process—followed by an additional waiting list at statementing level ..."

Assistant Head of School 5: "The process is ineffective and unjust. It takes ages to conclude and wastes precious early intervention time ... this also leads to children being sent back home and not accepted in schools."

Assistant Head of School 22: "...first it takes ages to have a professional observe the student, then it takes even longer for a report to be issued".

While others also maintained that the centralisation of services aggravates this.

Inclusion Coordinator 2: "There are only 2 inclusion specialists on the island who have to vet all applications from all the schools in Malta and Gozo. This results in backlogs."

The delayed process has often been reported to be unjust to students and parents. LSE 25 reported "having to send non-statemented KG students home because they still are not toilet-trained due to their diverse needs just because they are still waiting for a report."

Head of School 4 reported, "We had students in secondary school who have a lot of needs whose assessment started in the primary but took long; by the time the report was available, he was not eligible for specific services."

Quality of reporting. A significant number of participants maintained that besides having a lengthy process leading to a report of needs, when the report at hand is finally available, this is often inconclusive, does not represent the student's abilities or is not adequately written to be used for further referrals. Participants also reported the lack of observation, which is carried out in the school setting,

thus lacking understanding of the students' real abilities. The terms "misdiagnosis", "not well-written", and "no formal diagnosis is provided" have recurrently been expressed by the participants.

Head of School 11 additionally reported, "It is quite disheartening to see a pattern that only students with a particular diagnosis or wording on their report are provided support ... sometimes decisions are made without even considering the severity of the situation in the classroom."

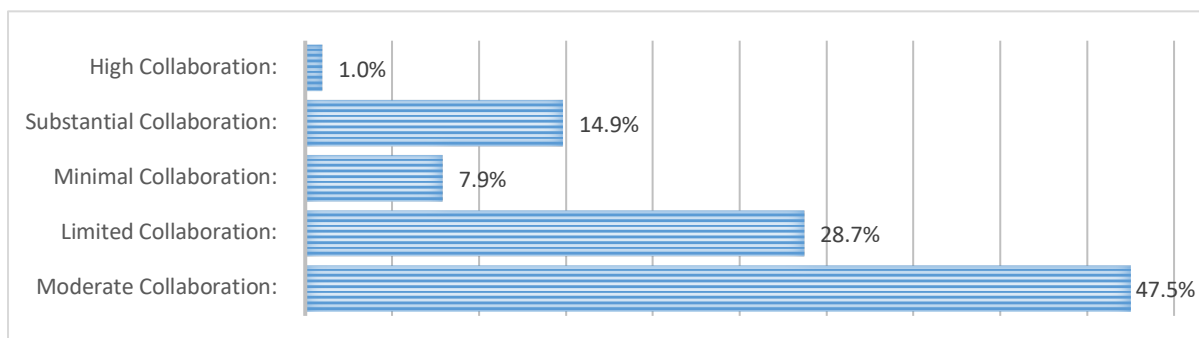
Lack of Collaboration. Many participants acknowledged that the number of services for students with diverse needs is increasing; however, poor collaboration is often noted, specifically in the initial phases. Participants reported that a quick visit sometimes dismisses the concerns of a teacher from a Head of Inclusion: "HOD often give their perception and in a 30-minute observation teacher's concerns are dismissed". The lack of collaboration is also highlighted with stakeholders from outside school services, such as health professionals and parents. Head of School 11 reported, "Ensuring collaboration is a major difficulty. It requires effective communication among educators, parents, specialists and administrators."

When asked to rate the level of collaboration between different stakeholders, the majority (48%) perceive it as moderate, while 29% see it as limited and 8% as minimal. Only 15% believe there is substantial collaboration, and only 1% consider it high (Figure 3). These findings suggest that while some collaboration exists between stakeholders, significant room exists for improvement. The high percentage of responses indicating moderate to limited collaboration (77%) highlights the need for stronger collaborations.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine differences between categories of the independent variable (school sector and role) and the dependent variable, "collaboration between stakeholders". The tests showed no significant differences between the categories: $p = .058$ and $p = .314$ respectively.

Figure 3

Distribution of responses rating the collaboration of stakeholders



Parental Involvement. Parental cooperation is essential in the initial phases of identifying students with difficulties, yet it can often be impeded by parental denial. While educators may recognise signs of learning challenges, parents sometimes struggle to accept or acknowledge these concerns, delaying seeking appropriate support. Participants reported that further support is essential to make sure that parents understand the importance of early intervention. LSE 31 reported, "The parents have to pass through a grieving phase until they reach acceptance- then the process can start. The process takes long..."

Section 2: Ongoing Support

The participants were asked to identify barriers hindering the support for students with DLN. The thematic analysis identified a Lack of Human resources, resources, trained staff, curriculum, and Disconnected Decision-makers.

Lack of Human Resources. Participants in the study have identified the shortage of learning support educators as a significant barrier to inclusive education. Many acknowledged the vital role in providing personalised assistance and support to students with diverse learning needs, where many are facilitating their integration into mainstream classrooms. However, the scarcity of LSEs limits the availability of individualised attention and specialised interventions that students require to succeed academically and socially. This shortage not only places additional strain on educators but also impedes the provision of quality education, where some students are also being denied the right to attend school.

Head of Inclusion 2: "At the moment, one major issue is the limited number of candidates applying for the post of LSEs. This results in statemented students not getting their due, let alone new statements being honoured. The perception of such a role is that it is very hard and that the pay is inadequate."

While the availability of LSEs was a prominent point of discussion, the lack of knowledgeable educators was also significantly highlighted.

Head of School 11, maintained a "Limited supply of effective LSEs," while Assistant Head 13, asserted, "Unfortunately, most LSEs are not well-trained. They are not knowledgeable enough about disabilities and proper interventions for them. They are underpaid, so people with good qualifications prefer to find jobs elsewhere."

The lack of human resources also extends to additional support staff; the participants asserted that the lack of specialists, "school psychological services are sporadic," "speech therapists should be available regularly, not occasionally," and "it would be ideal to have literacy specialists in the school, considering that we have so many students who are struggling and students with dyslexia or literacy difficulties cannot be supported by LSEs" "I haven't seen an autism support teacher for a very long time".

Lack of Resources. Several educators reported that the availability of physical resources has been on the increase throughout the past years. However, the lack of specific resources was particularly highlighted by the group of LSE respondents. A recurrent comment by the participants was the lack of multi-sensory rooms. Many deem this as essential to cater for students' needs, however very few reported the availability. Other participants also highlighted the importance of having 'calming rooms' or 'calming spaces'. The participants additionally often mentioned resources to support students with dyslexia.

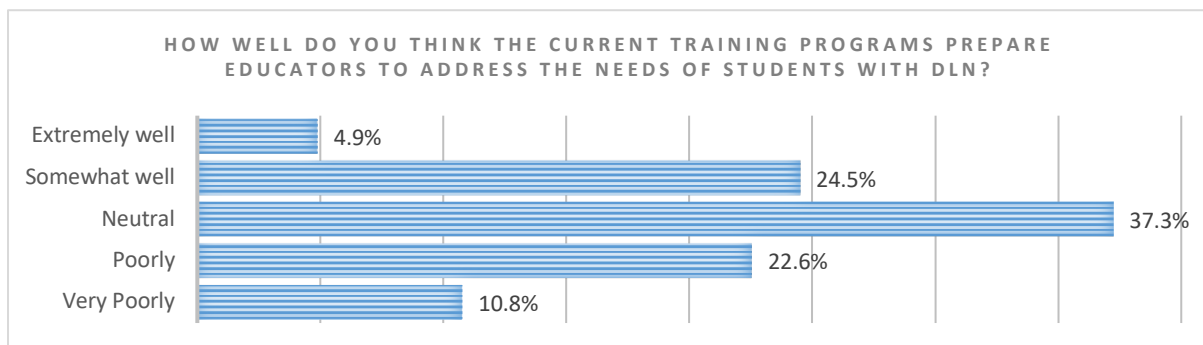
LSE 3: "The student is expected to fit in the traditional classroom for the whole day, where I am definitely sure that alternative settings such as multi-sensory rooms could help him have his needs met"

Head of School 2: "We have a room but cannot use it, as this is only accessible to specific staff. Everyone should use the multi-sensory room as all students could benefit from such settings, with and without difficulties. I know that some of my teachers could use this in an excellent manner."

Lack of Trained Staff. The reported lack of trained educators to cater for students with diverse needs has emerged as a concerning outcome. Educators equipped with specialised training and expertise are essential in providing effective support and accommodations tailored to the unique requirements of diverse learners. However, the shortage of such trained professionals holds back the delivery of inclusive education practices.

Participants were asked to rate from 1 to 5 how well current training programs prepare educators to address the needs of students with DLN. The majority (60%) rated the current training programs as either poorly or very poorly in preparing educators to address the needs of students with diverse needs. 37% of respondents were neutral, indicating a lack of strong opinion, while only 30% felt that the training programs were somewhat or extremely well-prepared educators (Figure 4). These results suggest that there is room for improvement in the training programs to equip educators better to meet the diverse needs of students. The high percentage of responses indicating poor or very poor ratings (34%) highlights the need for more comprehensive and effective training strategies that address the complexities of diverse student populations.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine differences between categories of the independent variable (school sector and role) and the dependent variable, "rating of training". The tests showed no significant differences between the categories: $p = .536$ and $p = .593$, respectively.

Figure 4*Distribution of responses rating training.*

Many participants voiced their concern that not all educators are knowledgeable about diversity and how to cater to students with specific difficulties. Many believed that a major priority for enhancing support should focus on educators' training. The challenges related to training for educators have been perceived both at the initial and ongoing training levels, where a lack of continuous development and mentoring is highly experienced.

Heads of School 10: "Lack of ongoing LSE and teacher training"; "We cannot just employ anyone to do the work ... educators have to be trained before commencing. If any LSE does not perform well they are still confirmed in the job to avoid complaints by parents due to lack of."

Inclusion Specialist 2: "Unfortunately, we are recruiting people who do not have the right skills, qualifications and attitude towards inclusion. "; "LSEs start work without any training at all... some LSEs take courses one after the other without giving time to practice and master certain skills and strategies. Mentoring and monitoring is lacking."

Assistant Head of School 20: Teachers should receive comprehensive training in Inclusive teaching practices, differentiation and UDL. I would also foster a school culture that promotes empathy, understanding and acceptance of differences.

The Curriculum. A significant theme emerging from the data collection is the challenge posed by highly academic syllabi coupled with competitive classroom environments and non-inclusive assessment practices. Teachers often prioritise completing the syllabus over ensuring that all learners achieve their educational goals, where, in some cases, this leads to a neglect of individualised support. Removing differentiated papers in some settings further exacerbates this issue, disadvantaging students with DLN. Although implementing continuous assessment was initially seen as a positive step, it has inadvertently resulted in constant testing in some settings, negatively impacting students, particularly those with diverse learning needs who frequently struggle to perform well on these assessments. This approach not only enhances stress and anxiety but also perpetuates a cycle of failure for these students, undermining the principles of inclusive education.

LSE 25: "Removing of alternative exam papers in primary and from CCP classes in middle /secondary"

HOD Inclusion 1: "The fact that there are no adapted exam papers in the primary school and that some parents refuse that their children are in Reach Units or CCP classes despite that these children would benefit from such settings."

HOD Inclusion 3: "Children with learning difficulties are not given complementary lessons at school, and adaptations during exams have been removed"

Assistant Head 20: "Same exams for everyone"

Assistant Head 5: "The exam mentality is still very strong ... more hands-on curricula with much less focus on fact memorising and more training for parents to show them that university and an academic pathway is not the only way in life."

LSE 26: "Inflexible syllabus and assessment practices"

Disconnected Decision-makers. A prominent theme from the data collection highlights the impact of disconnected decision-makers as a significant barrier to inclusive education. Participants reported that decision-makers are often detached from the realities of the classroom and design policies that fail to address the practical needs and challenges educators and students face. This disconnect results in ineffective strategies that hinder the implementation of inclusive practices. Participants have also reported that political agendas/decisions sometimes influence educational practices.

Assistant Head of School 4: "Decisions are often taken from outside the school setting without enough evaluation of the individual situation."

Head of School 1: "Ieps were not done this year due to issues with the collective agreement, and directives were created during that time. That impacts students as we didn't have the opportunity to discuss it with parents."

LSE 7: "Not even SMT and certain teachers are including us as LSEs, mind you, the children we support! Certain inclusive coordinators are hard to reach, and instead of giving support they tend to hinder our support promoting academics rather than the students' wellbeing."

Inclusion Coordinator 2: "I feel that some people work in the sector for their career and not for the rights of the children."

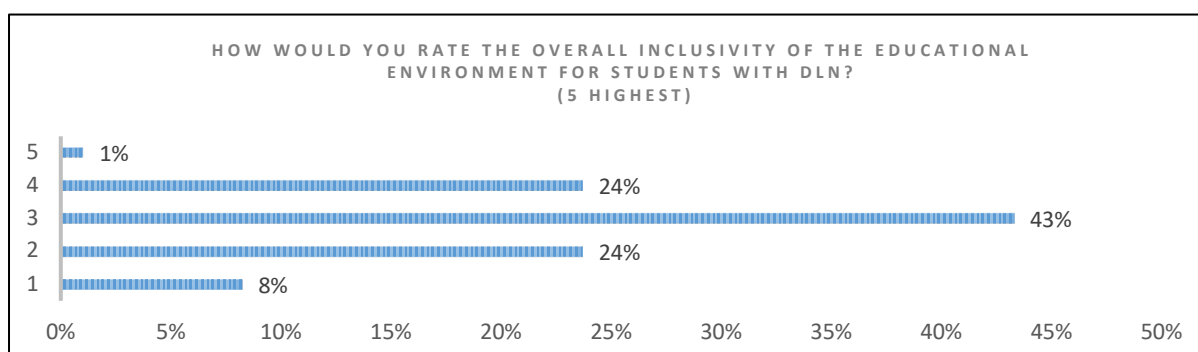
Section 3: The Effectiveness of Inclusive Education

The participants were asked to elaborate on what works in the Inclusive Educational system. They were first asked to rate the overall level of inclusivity. The majority (43%) rated inclusivity as a 3, indicating a neutral or average level of inclusivity. 24% rated it as a 4, suggesting a relatively high level of inclusivity, while another 24% rated it as a 2, indicating a low level of inclusivity. Only 1% of respondents rated the inclusivity as a 5, the highest level, while 8% rated it as a 1, the lowest level (refer to Figure 5). These findings suggest that while some progress has been made in creating inclusive educational environments for students with diverse needs, there is still significant room for improvement. The high percentage of responses indicating a neutral or below-average level of inclusivity (75%) highlights the need for more intensive efforts to ensure that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have access to a truly inclusive and supportive educational experience (see Figure 6 further below).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine differences between categories of the independent variable (school sector and role) and the dependent variable, "inclusivity of environments". The tests showed no significant differences between the categories: $p = .917$ and $p = .575$ respectively.

Figure 5

Distribution of responses rating the inclusivity of educational environments.



After a thematic evaluation of which aspects are considered successful for inclusive education, five themes have been identified: Positivity and awareness, Professionalism, Individualised Learning Experiences, Services, Collaboration, and Training.

Positivity and awareness. The thematic analysis revealed that a positive atmosphere within teaching teams significantly enhances the effectiveness of inclusive education. When educators feel supported and work collaboratively in a positive environment, they are better equipped to implement inclusive practices.

Inclusion specialist 5 remarked, "Patience, understanding, and empathy can make the whole difference." This positivity extends to students, fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging among all children. Participants highlighted the importance and impact of awareness campaigns in promoting inclusion. Initiatives such as "class preparation," "peer support," and a "calm and accepting environment in class" help educate and sensitise educators and students about the value of diversity and the need for inclusive practices.

Professionalism. A key theme that emerged from the data is the critical role of professionalism in fostering effective inclusive education. The dedication and professional conduct of LSEs significantly impact the success of students with diverse needs. When LSEs work with a high degree of professionalism, prioritising the specific requirements of each student, it can lead to remarkable improvements in the students' educational experiences and outcomes. "LSEs who do their job with dedication can make the whole difference".

This level of professionalism also extends to teachers; when teachers are committed to supporting every child and taking their role seriously, it enhances the overall quality of education. Such professionalism among educators creates an environment where inclusive practices are implemented and effective, ensuring that all students receive the support and resources they need to succeed. LSE 15 reported, "Success is when we work together with the teacher to find solutions together to support all students.". Head of School 9 remarked: "...when a teacher teaches for everyone using inclusive approaches, this can make a difference."

Individualised learning experiences. The data revealed the success of individualised learning experiences. When teaching teams collaborate to plan and tailor educational strategies to meet the specific needs of each student, the effectiveness of inclusive education is greatly enhanced.

Flexibility in teaching approaches allows educators to focus on helping students acquire the necessary skills rather than strictly adhering to a prescribed syllabus. This personalised approach supports students' diverse learning needs and promotes a more engaging and meaningful educational experience, fostering better academic and personal growth outcomes for all learners.

Assistant Head of School 13: "Tailor-made programs like CCP & a combination of pullouts and same class experience as the student needs can be very beneficial".

LSE 30: "Forced mainstreaming does not always work – flexibility is key."

School Specialist 1: "When teachers implement Universal Design for Learning or proper differentiated teaching".

Services. An important theme that emerged from the data is the increase and expansion of support services. Participants praised the National Student Support Services (NSSS) for its efforts to manage the high volume of applications and enhance the availability of essential services. However, they noted that the frequency and consistency of these services need improvement. Services such as speech-language therapy and occupational therapy are deemed fundamental when accessible, while autism support, early intervention, counselling, Reach Units and specialised learning zones significantly benefit students when properly implemented. Additionally, the involvement of external organisations, such as Inspire, has been highlighted as particularly helpful. Participants pointed out that the ideal setting for support services is within the school itself, as demonstrated by an independent school where integrated support services have proven to be highly effective in meeting students' needs.

Collaboration. A significant theme that emerged from the results is the critical role of collaboration in successful educational experiences. Participants noted that student support becomes more effective when educators and parents work together, leading to better educational outcomes. Furthermore, strong

collaboration among various educational stakeholders, including administrators, support staff, and external service providers, enhances the overall effectiveness of educational programs. This collective effort ensures that diverse perspectives and expertise are integrated into planning and implementing strategies tailored to meet students' needs, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Head of School 9: "Relationship building with parents which leads to trust and openness."

LSE 7: "Collaborating and finding synergy between the different strategies."

Training. The importance of training emerged as a final significant theme from the data. Many participants highlighted the positive impact of training initiatives, such as the COPE sessions focusing on inclusion. These sessions were viewed as valuable opportunities for educators to gain insights and strategies for promoting inclusive practices in their classrooms. Additionally, specialised courses tailored for LSEs were recognised as beneficial for enhancing continuous professional development in specific areas where ongoing learning is crucial. By providing targeted training and professional development opportunities, educators can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to effectively support students with diverse needs, ultimately contributing to the success of inclusive education efforts.

LSE 35: "Inservice courses were by speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and dyslexia specialists."

Section 4: Change in Inclusive Education

The researcher invited the participants to reflect on aspects that need change and to let themselves be restricted by any present barriers. Therefore, the researcher asked the participants to answer the question: "If you had a magic wand, what would you change in the education sector to better support students with DLN?" Four themes were identified: Resources, Training, Curriculum and Assessment, and Inclusive School Culture.

Resources. The most frequently mentioned change that participants would implement in supporting students with diverse needs is the improvement of both financial and human resources. Respondents emphasised the need for more LSEs and better compensation for their work. They also highlighted the importance of faster diagnoses and increased support for parents of students with identified needs. Additionally, participants called for the inclusion of multisensory rooms and specialised equipment in every school, as well as adapted learning materials and exams. Reducing class sizes was another suggestion to better cater to students with diverse needs. A school specialist expressed the need for a complete rethinking of the system, advocating for more outdoor spaces, greenery in schools, and specialised schools, and a reduction in textbooks to encourage educators to be more creative in their teaching approaches. Others echoed this sentiment and emphasised the importance of multisensory rooms, adapted learning materials, and more hands-on experiences for students with diverse needs.

Training. The participants mentioned the critical need for comprehensive and specialised training for educators, particularly LSEs, to effectively support students with diverse needs. Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing education and professional development for staff to enhance their understanding of inclusive practices, differentiation strategies, and the diverse needs of students. There were concerns raised about the current system where assistant heads are often tasked with inclusion responsibilities without adequate training, suggesting that the role of the person responsible for Inclusion should be filled by professionals with expertise in the field. Furthermore, the call for more qualified staff, better pay for educators, and increased opportunities for training could attract dedicated educators to the field.

Curriculum and Assessment: The curriculum and assessment reform theme, which was identified by many participants, highlights the urgent need for a significant overhaul of the education system to better cater to students with diverse needs. Participants desired a more student-centred, cross-curricular approach to the curriculum, focusing on critical thinking and reducing fact memorisation. Suggestions

included adopting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to make lessons accessible to all students, regardless of their needs. Additionally, there were calls for modifying exams and assessments to accommodate diverse needs, ensuring that students are assessed in a way that reflects their abilities and provides a fair evaluation of their learning progress.

Inclusive School Culture. The analysis identified a wish from the participants to foster an inclusive school culture to support students with diverse needs better. Participants emphasised the importance of promoting empathy, understanding, and acceptance of differences within the school environment. Suggestions included ensuring that all students feel included and valued, providing opportunities for inclusion beyond just the classroom, and shifting the mentality that schools should accommodate learners rather than vice versa.

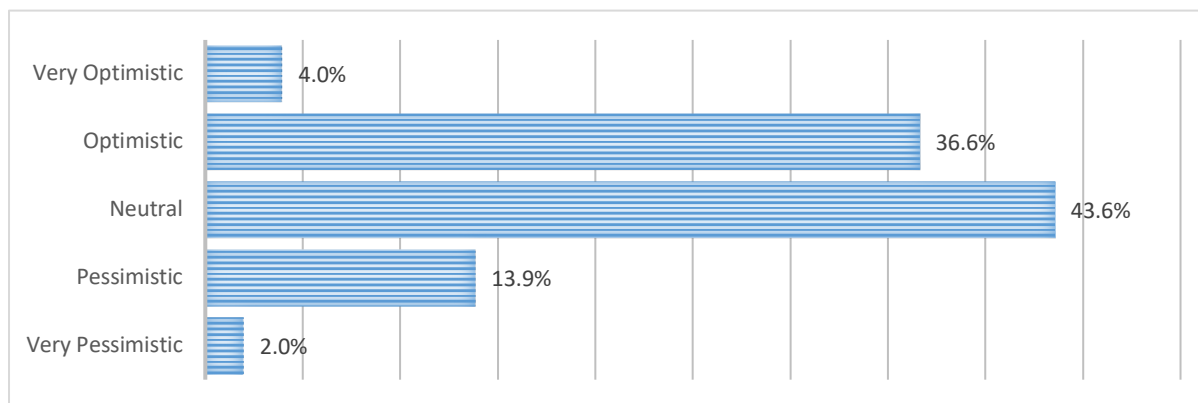
Inclusion Coordinator 4 stressed: "Changing the mentality that students must "fit in a box". Additionally, there were calls to create physically inclusive school premises, celebrate diversity, and empower all students to succeed. Suggestions were made to ensure that schools are equipped with multisensory rooms and independent living skills programs, emphasising the significance of providing an encouraging environment for all students to reach their potential.

Finally, the participants were also asked to rate their optimism about the future prospects of inclusivity in education (Figure 6). The majority (81%) are either neutral, optimistic or very optimistic about the future prospects of inclusivity and support for students with learning difficulties in the educational system. This indicates a significant level of hope and positivity towards the ongoing efforts and potential improvements in inclusivity and support for students with learning difficulties.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to examine differences between categories of the independent variable (school sector and role) and the dependent variable, "optimism for the future." The tests showed no significant differences between the categories: $p = .89$ and $p = .944$, respectively. This indicates that an agreement across groups about the findings is evident since no differences are identified.

Figure 6

Distribution of responses on the optimism of the future of inclusive education.



Discussion

An initial finding of this study highlights the uniformity of thoughts among participants across different roles and school sectors. Statistical analyses confirm a consensus among participants, regardless of their role or school sector, indicating strong agreement on the importance of collaboration and the need for effective support services in inclusive education. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as Jarvis et al. (2020), which found that educators, regardless of their role or school areas, consistently reported feeling underprepared to teach students with disabilities and emphasised the need for better support services.

This investigation also highlights that the status of inclusive services strongly impacts the identification and support of students with DLN. Participants noted that the efficacy of these services significantly influences the identification process. Challenges such as prolonged procedures and resource constraints can impede prompt identification. For instance, extensive assessment waiting periods may delay diagnoses, leading to missed opportunities for timely intervention. The National Inclusive Education Framework (2019) emphasises the importance of early identification and support services to ensure quality education for all learners. The framework also highlights the need for schools to manage resources effectively to ensure inclusive practices, which resource constraints can impact. However, findings from this study indicate that further efforts are needed to implement this policy. Such a sentiment echoes international research where the importance of timely early identification and intervention is often reported, and the potential for missed opportunities if identification and initial support services are delayed (Desforages & Lindsay, 2010).

Participants have appreciated efforts to promote inclusive services, yet significant gaps remain in the current approach. Effectiveness is most evident in settings where professionals maintain constant contact with students and educators. Schools with in-house specialists, such as an INCO or an inclusion specialist, who take the time to understand the students have been reported as extremely beneficial. These settings enable early identification and prompt referral for services. The availability of specialists in schools is also considered beneficial during intervention phases, with services like Occupational Therapy, Speech-Language Therapy, and literacy intervention essential for student progress. However, this is only reported minimally in this study. Such settings are mostly available in independent schools, not state or church schools. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) stresses the need for teacher education that integrates service-learning and inclusive practices, with inclusion specialists playing a key role in this process. Similarly, Kozik et al. (2009) and McMaster (2013) emphasise the need for whole-school re-culturing programs that involve inclusion specialists to ensure sustainable, inclusive change. The Maltese educational system's reliance on mostly external support rather than in-house specialists can lead to fragmentation in service delivery, making it difficult to foster a cohesive approach to inclusion (Graham, 2022). This contrasts with countries with more established frameworks for integrating specialised services within the school system, providing a more supportive environment for all learners.

The quality of support provided to students with DLN heavily relies on the effectiveness of collaboration between professionals. Insufficient collaboration among stakeholders, including educators, specialists, parents, and administrators, often leads to fragmented support systems, affecting the adequacy of assessment reports and the availability of suitable interventions. Participants also noted that decision-makers sometimes lack practical classroom understanding, resulting in ineffective policies, further hindered by poor stakeholder collaboration. The study emphasises the necessity for stronger collaboration and informed decision-making, alongside the critical need to restructure existing services to avoid fragmentation and address delays caused by a centralised approach. Unlike many European countries adopting more decentralised educational frameworks, Malta's centralised system may hinder the flexibility required for effective inclusion. Countries such as Finland and the Netherlands empower schools with greater autonomy, allowing them to tailor curricula and support services to meet local needs (Sahlberg, 2019). Malta could strategically leverage its small size to implement pilot programs that foster innovative practices in inclusive education, enabling rapid feedback and adaptation. By allowing schools more autonomy, educators can adopt a more student-centred approach, facilitating the integration of UDL principles and promoting critical thinking.

The shortage of human resources is evident, and participants believe this is a critical area requiring focused attention. Enhancing both the quantity and quality of educators is imperative. Key recommendations include offering better compensation to attract and retain qualified professionals. Comprehensive and specialised training for educators—teachers, LSEs, and management—is essential, incorporating ongoing professional development to improve understanding of inclusive practices and support strategies. The availability of mentorship and support from inclusion specialists is also essential for educators' continuous learning and support. Training educators to become specialists and offering incentives for specialisation, both in initial teacher training and ongoing professional development, are

crucial to creating a quality culture in inclusive education. Issues highlighted by local scholars (Bartolo, 2010; Galea, 2018) remain persistent within our educational system. There is a clear need for comprehensive and specialised training for educators, including ongoing professional development, to enhance understanding of inclusive practices and support strategies.

In Malta, the employment of LSEs who are not yet qualified but can obtain their qualifications on the job contrasts sharply with the approaches taken in many other European countries. This system allows for a more flexible and immediate response to school staffing needs. However, it raises concerns about the adequacy of training and the quality of support provided to students, as these educators may lack the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for effective intervention (Bartolo, 2010). In contrast, countries like Finland and Sweden have more stringent requirements for educational support staff. In Finland, for example, all special education teachers must hold a master's degree, ensuring high expertise in inclusive practices (Sahlberg, 2019). This contrasts with Malta's system, where educators can begin working with minimal qualifications. Similarly, in Sweden, the educational framework mandates that support staff receive comprehensive training before entering the classroom, which includes specialised courses in inclusive education and student support (Lundgren, 2020). The differences in these approaches highlight a broader trend in European education systems, where many countries prioritise the professionalisation of support roles to ensure that students receive high-quality assistance. Malta's reliance on unqualified staff may lead to inconsistencies in the support provided, potentially impacting student outcomes. This situation underscores the need to reevaluate employment practices and professional development opportunities for LSEs in Malta to align with best practices observed in other European nations.

Participants in this study consistently highlighted the need for flexibility within the support system and the curriculum. Training and implementing a UDL framework to make lessons accessible to all students has been featured as vital (Meyer et al., 2014). Revising assessment practices to be more inclusive has also been highlighted as important and necessary, and an evaluation of the impact of the newly adopted approach on students with diverse learning needs is warranted. These findings indicate a similarity between national needs, which corroborates international research.

Malta's educational system, characterised by a highly academic syllabus, contrasts with the more flexible and student-centred approaches observed in several other European countries. While participants voiced their priorities and emphasised that it was crucial to reform syllabi to allow educators to adopt a more student-centred, cross-curricular approach emphasising critical thinking, many European nations have already integrated such methodologies into their educational frameworks. For instance, Finland is renowned for its emphasis on holistic education, where curricula foster critical thinking and creativity, allowing for greater adaptability to student needs (Sahlberg, 2019). In countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, there is a strong focus on inclusive practices that prioritise flexibility and accessibility. These countries employ frameworks such as UDL more systematically, ensuring that lessons are tailored to accommodate diverse learning needs from the outset (Meyer et al., 2014). In contrast, Malta's reliance on a rigid academic syllabus may limit the effectiveness of such frameworks, as educators often find themselves constrained by the demands of standardised assessments and traditional subject boundaries. Promoting a school culture that values empathy, understanding, and genuine acceptance of differences is important. The participants have recurrently reported this finding. This ensures that lessons are designed for everyone, not just academically capable students (Bialystok et al., 2018; Meyer et al., 2014). The participants have celebrated the success of awareness campaigns, and many highlighted that these should be enhanced since such campaigns are needed to educate further and sensitise educational stakeholders and students about the value of diversity and inclusive practices (Sanagi, 2016).

The insights and recommendations derived from this study offer valuable guidance for fostering quality inclusive education in Malta. According to the participants, policymakers should prioritise streamlining bureaucracy, reducing assessment waiting times, and strengthening support systems for students with DLN within the school setting. Additionally, fostering a cultural shift towards empathy, understanding, and acceptance of differences within educational environments is crucial for cultivating a more inclusive and supportive school culture. Moreover, educators must attend continuous professional development programs to equip them with effective strategies for the diverse classroom. Finally, enhancing resources,

such as increasing the number of qualified educators and improving compensation, will ensure sustained support for students with DLN.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, inclusive educational stakeholders shared their insights regarding the Maltese inclusive educational system and practices. These participants are essential to the system, and their perspectives must be valued. Considering their suggestions will enable the educational system better to support students with DLN, ensuring they receive the necessary resources, training, and inclusive practices to thrive academically and personally. Additionally, reevaluating the centralised system could address bureaucratic complexities and streamline processes for hiring qualified staff, thereby enhancing the quality of support available to students with DLN. This shift could also promote ongoing professional development for educators, equipping them to meet the challenges of inclusive education effectively. By embracing these changes, Malta can enhance its educational framework, aligning more closely with successful practices observed in other European nations.

Conflict of Interest

The Author confirms no conflict of interest exists.

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