Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools in Malta

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Dedication

To my shining star,

my precious son Mikiel Ġużeppi...

You are my first-born…

my first blind love,

my continuous inspiration,

my greatest teacher!

I love you with all my being!

***

And to all the children

who are different from the rest yet so alike...

You deserve the best educators

who are able and willing

to show the world what you are truly capable of!

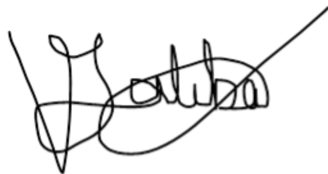
‘Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be’.
Rita Pierson, Educator

Abstract

The Maltese educational system embraces the principle of inclusion; however, despite the many benefits of inclusive education set out in theory and in policy, reality poses several challenges to this concept. Having students with various disabilities, such as autism, in mainstream classrooms can be challenging and, thus requires the creation of a supportive environment for all learners, as well as for the educators working in inclusive schools. This study therefore investigated the perceived needs of professional stakeholders when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools, namely school management team (SMT) members, teachers and learning support educators (LSEs). The qualitative research approach was employed to acquire depth of information. For the first stage of the study, questionnaires were delivered to SMT members, teachers and LSEs to gather their opinions about the current inclusive system of education for autistic students and also investigate their needs and suggestions vis-à-vis resources and services, training and support when teaching autistic students. Questionnaires were considered as an appropriate data collection method to acquire data from all the SMT members, teachers and LSEs of the primary schools of one college. In the second stage of the research, the first phase was complemented by face-to-face semi-structured interviews to obtain more in-depth qualitative information from a sample of each group of participants on the three themes addressed in the questionnaires. The triangulation amongst the three different sources and the two research methods revealed that educators, in many instances, are not satisfied with the resources and services, training and support available to them, also suggesting that these are noticeably lacking. The educators provided various suggestions on how these can be improved and described their respective perceived needs in the cases where these are lacking, which included more skilled human resources, better school environments and more support and training for educators.

Statement of Authenticity

I, the undersigned, declare that this is an original piece of work, carried out by me as a result of my own research and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been acknowledged.



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Abbreviations

Abbreviations	*Definition*
AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ACTU	Access to Communication and Technology Unit
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
APA	American Psychiatric Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASST	Autism Spectrum Support Team
AVB	Applied Verbal Behaviour
B.Ed	Bachelor of Education
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDS	Critical Disability Studies
CIEB	Centre on International Education Benchmarking
CoPE	Community of Professional Educators
CRPD	Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability
DES	Directorate for Educational Services
DIR	Developmental Individual-Difference Relationship-Based Model
DoED	US Department of Education
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
DTI	Discrete Trial Instruction
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
HOD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Educational Plan
IfE	Institute for Education
INCO	Inclusion Coordinator
ITP	Individual Transition Plan
ITS	Institute for Tourism Studies
IWB	Interactive Whiteboard
KGEs	Kindergarten Educators
LSA	Learning Support Assistant (former name for an LSE)
LSE	Learning Support Educator
LSE1	Learning Support Educator 1
LSE2	Learning Support Educator 2
LSE3	Learning Support Educator 3
MAP	Making Action Plan
MCAST	Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MCIE	Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
MTL	Master’s in Teaching and Learning
MUT	Malta Union of Teachers
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIEF	A National Inclusive Education Framework
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
NSSS	National School Support Services
ODT	Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OT	Occupational Therapy/Therapist
PBS	Positive Behaviour Supports
PD	Professional Development
PDA	Personal Digital Assistant
PECS	Picture Exchange Communication System
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PIES	A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRT	Pivotal Response Training
PSCD	Personal, Social and Career Development
RDI	Relationship Development Intervention
SCERTS	Social Communication/Emotional Regulation/Transactional Support
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SEBD	Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SIT	Sensory Integration Therapy
SLSE	Supply Learning Support Educator
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy/Therapist
SMT	Senior Management Team
TEACCH	Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
VET	Vocational and Educational Training

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction that outlines the foundation of the research. It begins with presenting definitions of the key terms as they will be understood in the context of this research. Next, it provides a brief overview of education in Malta, including mainstream education, resource centres and services offered to students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. It explains the academic journey of becoming a teacher or a learning support educator and the training in SEN that both groups of stakeholders receive. The chapter then moves on to discuss the statement of the research problem, the positioning of the researcher, the research aims and questions, the significance of the research and the structure of this thesis. The factual details in this chapter will help create background understanding for readers who might not be familiar with the system of education in Malta and will help them understand the outcomes of this study in the Maltese context.

1.1 Definitions

As explained above, in this section, I will present definitions of terms that will be used frequently in this thesis. Since these terms are often contested, this section will clarify how such terms are used within this thesis. Certain discourse throughout this thesis might sound demeaning with regard to autistic students and disabled students in general. This includes terms such 'normalise' and 'challenging behaviour'. Such discourse is considered problematic, as will be discussed in this research, because autism is an integral part of the autistic person, and there should be nothing about the autistic person that should be changed or normalised (Dwyer, 2018c; Sinclair, 1993). In fact, such attitudes could lead to mental health problems in autistic people (Dwyer, 2018c; Milton & Moon, 2012). I have limited such discourse as much as possible in this work. However, persons working in this field are so often exposed to this language that they become inured to it. I therefore attempt to address this in my own writing; nevertheless, in trying to portray the participants' shared experience as clearly as possible, such discourse at certain times has been included. This applies especially in the case when I quote the participants. It is of utmost importance to point out that this discourse is definitely not aimed at demeaning autistic individuals but is merely reported as it is commonly used within the Maltese educational context and the Maltese society in general. In fact, Chapter 7 is dedicated to discussing this discourse further through a thematic discourse analysis. Further to defining the common terms, this section also serves to introduce the reader to the context of education in Malta.

1.1.1 Autism.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), commonly referred to as autism, is an umbrella term for a range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours and difficulties in communication (Lai, Lombardo, & Baron-Cohen, 2014). Autism is understood very differently by different people, as will be discussed in the Literature Review. The term *autistic children* will be used in this research to refer to children on the spectrum (see Section 2.1.2).

1.1.2 Learning Support Educators (LSEs).

LSEs are assigned to students judged as having additional support needs, most often referred to by educators and society in general as students with SEN (see Section 1.1.9 below) to help them acquire the required learning skills to succeed. Also, they support students through their difficulties and collaborate with other professional stakeholders, when necessary, with the aim of helping students become as independent as possible. The level of training that LSEs have varies from one to another, as will be discussed in Sections 1.3.3 and 1.3.4.

1.1.3 Educators.

In this study, the term *educators* refers to senior management team (SMT) members, who are the ones in administration, teachers, who include all primary and kindergarten teachers and LSEs working in schools.

1.1.4 Primary education.

In Malta, primary education lasts six years, following two years in kindergarten. The students in primary education range from 5–11 years of age. It is normal practice in primary schools to have one teacher, who teaches all subjects, assigned to each class of students; however, there are primary schools around the country where core subjects (maths, English and Maltese) are taught by different teachers.

1.1.5 Mainstream education.

Mainstream education refers to the education received by all typically developing students. There are three different levels of schooling in mainstream education: kindergarten, primary and secondary. In state schools only, secondary schooling is divided into two years in a middle school and three years in a senior school.

1.1.6 Inclusion.

Inclusion refers to the grouping together of typically developing students and disabled students in order to provide them with equal opportunities to learn and play in general education classrooms (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

1.1.7 Resource centres.

Resource centres, formerly known as special schools[1], are schools where disabled students, for whom mainstream education is considered to be too challenging, are enrolled in a special educational programme targeting their individual needs.

1.1.8 Statemented students.

Statemented students are those students who, after being diagnosed by a medical professional, are referred to the statementing board, formally known as the statementing moderating panel, and receive a statement of needs. The system of the statementing board was introduced in 2000 (Bartolo, 2010). The statementing board is appointed by the minister of education and accountable to the director general of the directorate of education. The board is made up of a chairperson, who is preferably an educational psychologist, two officials of the Directorate of Education who preferably have experience in special and inclusive education, another professional who has experience in educating children with the disability of the particular child being statemented, and the head of school of the school the child attends (Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education [MCIE], 2000). The statementing board receives the application of the student, together with all the necessary documentation explaining the child's difficulties, and then meets with the child and his/her parents for an interview. Following the interview, the board issues a statementing report, which is a very concise report briefly stating the difficulties of the child and what support s/he should receive. The service of the statementing board is free of charge, as are all educational services in Malta.

1.1.9 Special educational needs (SEN).

A child is generally recognised as having SEN if s/he is not able to benefit from the general education provision available for children of the same age without additional support or adaptations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]), 2012). According to *The Education Act 1991*, 'a minor shall be deemed to have special educational

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[1] The term *resource centres* is nowadays used instead of the term *special schools*, as the latter is considered to have negative connotations. However, the reader will observe that at times the term *special schools* is used in this work, due to the context it is being used in.

needs when that minor has special difficulties of a physical, sensory, intellectual or psychological nature' (Law of Malta, Chapter 327, Article 45).

1.2 Education in Malta

This section explains the basic organisation of the educational system in Malta and covers mainstream education, special schools and the services offered to students with SEN in mainstream schools.

1.2.1 Mainstream education.

Mainstream education in Malta (for state schools) is comprised of the following levels:

- Two years of pre-primary education (known as Kinder 1 and Kinder 2) from ages 3–5;
- Six years of primary education from ages 5–11; and
- Five years of secondary education, which are divided into two phases: two years in middle school from ages 11–13 and three years in senior school from ages 13–16.

Education in Malta is compulsory from the ages of 5 to 16; however, students have the opportunity to further their education at post-secondary and tertiary schools. The Maltese government offers free childcare services for all children under three years of age whose parents both work. In Malta, there exist 10 colleges. Each college is comprised of a number of primary schools, a middle school and a senior school in a particular region of the Maltese Islands under the direction of a college principal. All primary, middle and senior schools form part of one of the 10 colleges that exist in Malta.

1.2.2 Resource centres.

Resource centres (previously known as special schools) are designed for disabled students who encounter difficulties in mainstream schools. There are five resource centres in Malta.

1.2.3 Services for students with SEN and autism in mainstream schools.

In Malta, autistic students and their families can make use of a number of different services. In this section, I will discuss a sample of these since various educators make reference to some of the services in their responses to the questionnaires and/or interviews. This will make it easier for readers to understand the context of the participants' responses. The choice of services the child receives normally depends on the parents' preference. Services offered by the government, such as that of the autism spectrum support team (ASST), are usually offered

to children who are not receiving any other services from private companies or non-governmental organisations (NGO), though such regulations may change from time to time. The following are some of the services available to autistic students:

- Autism Spectrum Support Team (ASST): This service is provided free of charge by the government through the National School Support Services (NSSS). The aim of the service is to support educators in meeting the individual educational needs of autistic children in schools, to facilitate learning, to support the social and behavioural development of children and help students maximise their abilities (For more information please visit http://education.gov.mt/en/education/student-services/Pages/Inclusive_Education/Autism-Spectrum-Support-Team.aspx);
- Autism Parents Association: This is an official non-profit organisation run by parents of autistic children and aimed at other parents whose children are on the autism spectrum. The association works to create awareness in the local society and support parents through the challenges posed by their children's difficulties (For more information please visit http://www.autismparentsassociation.com/);
- Hand in Hand Malta: This is an official organisation that offers therapeutic services, in return for payment, to students who have various forms of difficulties. The therapeutic services of Hand in Hand Malta are based on Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) therapy.[2] Amongst the services it offers, one can find early intervention services, psychological services, speech therapy, occupational therapy (OT) and services for challenging behaviour (For more information please visit http://www.handinhandmalta.com/);
- The Malta Autism Centre: This NGO provides specialised intervention for individuals on the autism spectrum throughout their lives. Amongst the services it offers are tailor-made programmes for every client that address the individual needs arising from their condition, help to improve clients' social communication skills, provide training to help clients become more flexible in their thinking and behaviour, offer regular contact with clients' schools to ensure continuity and consistency amongst various professionals and across settings, arrange job visits for adults on the spectrum to ensure that they are well-supported at their places of employment, and administer autism awareness programmes at schools and

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[2]ABA therapy is a type of therapy based on the science of learning and behaviour, that can help to improve social, communication and learning skills through positive reinforcement (Raypole, 2019).

workplaces to increase autism understanding amongst peers and colleagues (For more information please visit https://www.facebook.com/autismcentremalta/);

- Inspire: This not-for-profit organisation offers a variety of services to persons with various disabilities, including autism. Amongst the services it offers are educational services for clients with learning difficulties; education about independent living skills, such as employability skills training, job coaching and supported employment; therapies provided by occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language pathologists and psychologists; and leisure activities (For more information please visit https://inspire.org.mt/); and
- Equal Partners: This is a parent-run, non-profit foundation that supports families with children or adults with disabilities and learning difficulties. The support programmes that it offers are all individualised and are delivered in the community, including in homes, schools, workplaces and recreational spaces. The aim of this foundation is to help individuals enjoy independent and meaningful lives within an inclusive society (For more information please visit https://www.facebook.com/OfficialEqualPartnersFoundationPage/).

The availability and quality of the above-listed services vary but a fuller discussion of this lies outside the focus of this study.

1.3 Educators in Malta

In this section I will explain the requirements for becoming a teacher or an LSE in Malta and the training both of these stakeholders receive in SEN. This information is beneficial in the context of this research because the knowledge educators have and the amount and quality of training they receive can affect their perceived needs as regards working with autistic students and, therefore, will be helpful when analysing the outcomes of this study.

1.3.1 Teacher education and training.

Up until 2015, there were two educational options for becoming a teacher. The most popular was to obtain a four-year bachelor's degree at the University of Malta, known as the Bachelor of Education degree (B.Ed.). Students in the programme chose whether they wanted to specialise in primary or secondary education. Both options included field placements, known as teaching practices, and a dissertation. Those who specialised in primary education were prepared to teach each of the following subjects: English, mathematics, Maltese, religion/ethics, physical education, science, expressive arts and social studies. They were also trained and assessed in topics such as health education, disability issues, literacy difficulties, environmental

education, psychosocial and legal issues, pedagogy and interpersonal skills (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] & Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [PIRLS], 2016). Those who specialised in secondary education were allowed to choose one or two subjects in which to deepen their knowledge of both content and pedagogy. Those specialising in secondary education studied pedagogy and professional issues including assessment, language, diversity and sustainable development. Considerable importance was given to developing these future teachers to be reflective practitioners (TIMMS & PIRLS, 2016), a particularly positive aspect of the course of study, as being able to reflect is an essential part of the educator's work (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013; Groom, 2006).

Alternately, students could complete a bachelor's degree of their choice and then enrol in a one-year, full-time programme of study leading to a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Those who followed this track usually intended to teach secondary education. This course focused on pedagogy, emphasised school experience and field practices and included educational psychology, philosophy and sociology of education (TIMSS & PIRLS, 2016).

However, these two tracks to becoming teachers were abolished in October 2016 with the launch of a Master's in Teaching and Learning (MTL) programme at the University of Malta. The MTL programme consists of pedagogical content knowledge, educational context knowledge and educational research and inquiry, together with a related field placement during which prospective teachers are mentored. The introduction of mentorship is essential in a teaching course, as argued by Groom (2006), as mentors can provide valuable feedback to the student teacher. Prospective teachers will now need to obtain a bachelor's degree and then enrol in the MTL programme in order to graduate as a teacher (TIMSS & PIRLS, 2016). Thus, practicum components have been and continue to be an essential part of each of these three routes towards a qualification for teaching. Indeed, teaching practices are considered by students as one of the most important components of the course, and should be so, as practicums are essential and beneficial in such training (Busby et al., 2012; Shyman, 2012).

Unfortunately, as the situation currently stands, the Maltese education system is now experiencing a serious shortage of teachers. For this reason, Malta has a number of supply teachers working as teachers, especially in primary education. Though supply teachers have always been common in the Maltese education system, certain posts remain unfilled, and thus, the current Minister for Education and Employment has proposed the recruitment of foreign teachers to work in Maltese state schools, a decision which was highly disputed by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) (Pace, 2019).

Unlike regular teachers, supply teachers either have not graduated from university or have degrees in fields other than education. Some of them have graduated in the education field but not specifically in the area for which they are recruited to teach. For this reason, the importance of training becomes more noticeable. Indeed, the literature shows that training is needed for teachers because inclusive education, as is the case in Malta, is complex (Lewis, 2008), and it is only through appropriate education that inclusion can be reached (Gonzales-Gil et al., 2013). This is because training helps teachers in forming positive attitudes towards inclusion (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008). It is also through training that teachers learn about different approaches to use in inclusive settings to meet the needs of all students (Leach & Duffy, 2009). The literature also indicates that the lack of training, or rather, in this case, the absence of it, is one of the socio-cultural barriers that create challenges in inclusive settings (Lindsay et al., 2013). In addition, it is only through training that teachers feel confident teaching in inclusive settings (Glashan, Mackay, & Grieve, 2004), not to mention that training reduces anxiety and stress levels in teachers, as they feel able and prepared to teach in inclusive settings (Probst & Leppert, 2008; Sinz, 2004). Supply teachers have recently been offered the option of taking a 30-hour course in education that will be held outside school hours by the Institute for Education (IfE), an autonomous educational institution in Malta also offering courses to educators. Participants will be given the choice of following either the accredited or the non-accredited version; the former requires an assessment that can lead to a valued accreditation of six European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits at Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 6 (IfE, Ref IfE 31/2017). Such an initiative is, of course, a positive step towards more educated and trained teachers. In addition to the 30-week course, the IfE has launched a master's degree for professionals working in the educational field (IfE, Ref IfE 54/2018).

As detailed in the circular which calls for applications for the post of a teacher issued in 2017 by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) of Malta, eligibility criteria for teachers also include other pedagogical courses offered by private institutions apart from the programme of studies offered at the University of Malta (MEDE, Ref HR/20/2017).

1.3.2 Teacher training in SEN.

Once teachers are employed, they are required to attend professional development (PD) sessions during the school year. However, such training courses target different subjects in the area of education and do not specifically focus on SEN. Therefore, some teachers who graduate from university might never have received training in inclusive education and the various

related challenges they will encounter in their classes, as should be the case if we want to provide effective inclusive education. In fact, I was a case in point when I worked as a secondary school teacher teaching Maltese.

1.3.3 Education and training for LSEs.

Until recently, the Maltese education system had three types of LSEs: Supply Learning Support Educator (SLSE), Learning Support Educator 1 (LSE1) and Learning Support Educator 2 (LSE2). The difference amongst the three types lies in the level of education the LSE has achieved. A minimum qualification needed for an applicant to be eligible to work as an SLSE is to pass one subject at the advanced matriculation level at MQF level 4 and pass four subjects at the ordinary matriculation level at MQF level 3. The four subjects include mathematics, English, Maltese and another subject of the LSE's choice or a full Vocational and Educational Training (VET) qualification at MQF Level 3 (MEDE, Ref HR/30/2016). Recruiting SLSEs with absolutely no training in inclusive education whatsoever will pose more challenges. This is even more so the case when we consider that LSEs are the ones working most closely with the students who need the most support, and especially in view of my previously noted findings about the importance of appropriate training discussed in the literature.

Upon employment, SLSEs take an introductory 10-week course organised by the NSSS within the Directorate for Educational Services (DES) to acquire basic skills and knowledge about the special educational needs of the students they will be supporting in mainstream schools. The course includes a practicum component, during which SLSEs are monitored and supported at their place of work (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2017). However, it would make more sense if this 10-week course were made to be a requisite to apply for the post of an SLSE.

LSEs are also given educational opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills; however, all of these are optional and taken on a voluntary basis. Such opportunities include the Diploma in Facilitating Inclusive Education organised by the University of Malta (For more information please visit https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/news/features/2017/07/diplomainfacilitatinginclusiveeducation), the Certificate in Inclusive Education (a 20-week course), the Higher Certificate in Inclusive Education (a 30-week course) and equivalent courses organised by private institutions. In addition to these, the IfE, a fairly new institute within the DES in Malta, is offering short courses to LSEs who do not have a recognised teacher qualification (IfE, Ref IfE 31/2017). Promotion to LSE1 and LSE2 requires the completion of the above-mentioned

courses in addition to the compulsory 10-week course. Very recently, a bachelor's degree in inclusive education has been introduced, which allows an LSE to be promoted to LSE3. This degree is offered at both the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) (For more information, please visit http://mcast.edu.mt:8223/rfm/source/Prospectus/Prospectus_2018/index.html#p=179) and the University of Malta (For more information, please visit https://www.um.edu.mt/courses/overview/UBAHFIEIIIPTE-2018-9-O). LSEs are, in fact, given many opportunities to enhance their knowledge in the area, but all these opportunities are voluntary.

1.3.4 LSE training in SEN.

LSEs' training for working with students with SEN depends on their own motivation and interest in their work. As explained above, the eligibility criteria to apply for an SLSE do not include knowledge of SEN, and apart from the compulsory 10-week course organised by the NSSS, LSEs are not obliged to take any other courses.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Given Malta's limited natural resources, the Maltese government has principally invested in education because its economic growth depends on the population. The government has committed to promoting greater equity and active citizenship amongst the Maltese people by fostering inclusion in society and in education in particular (EASNIE, 2014). Because 'Malta has one of the highest proportions of learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs attending mainstream education' (EASNIE, 2014, p. 29), many of Malta's mainstream classrooms include children who frequently manifest the typical characteristics of autism. Despite the policies of inclusive education presented by the educational institutions, such situations can restrict students' opportunities at school (Odom et al., 2004), create tension in the classroom (Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011) and affect the relationships between autistic students and their teachers and peers (Barnard et al., 2000).

These challenges may act as a barrier to inclusive practices, but at the same time, should serve as an important reminder for all stakeholders in mainstream schools, especially school management team members, teachers and LSEs, to be prepared for such circumstances so that all students can learn effectively. Unfortunately, many SMTs, teachers and LSEs believe that they lack the training to work with disabled students and SEN. EASNIE had indicated that 'No stakeholder group considers that the initial or in-service training for SMTs, teachers, learning support assistants (the former name for LSEs) or other educational professionals fully meets

the demands that these professionals face in schools' (EASNIE, 2014, p. 49). In this statement lies the significance of this research, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

1.4.1 Significance of the research.

As noted in the previous section, Malta has few natural resources, and its economic growth depends on its human resources. As a result, the Maltese government has made considerable financial investments in education, the principal sector contributing to producing well-educated citizens who aspire to further education and well-paid careers. The Maltese government continues to work towards a more inclusive society (through, for example, an inclusive education system) and to provide all citizens with equal opportunities.

However, reality poses several challenges to this vision. Having students with various disabilities, such as autism, in mainstream classrooms can be challenging and, thus requires the creation of a supportive environment for all learners, as well as for the educators working in inclusive schools. The current situation in Malta suggests that educators working in inclusive settings are faced with various challenges. Indeed, the External Audit Report of EASNIE (EASNIE, 2014) emphasised that 'SMTs do not feel adequately supported in effectively implementing inclusive education within their schools' (p. 41), while there is 'limited professional development for teachers in meeting diverse learning needs' (p. 46), and there are 'limited support options for addressing individual learning needs' (p. 51). Additionally, it noted, 'LSAs are not seen as class teaching team members and therefore do not act as such' (p. 53). The report also highlighted the 'difficulties in role uncertainty' (p. 51), explaining that school stakeholders, namely SMT members, teachers and LSEs, often do not know which type of professional they should approach when they face difficulties in their work and the right time to do so. These factors do not reflect a healthy education system and may be one of the reasons underpinning the high rate of early school leavers (15%), as indicated in the EUROPE 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010).

The European Union (EU) 2020 strategy explains that 'the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree' (p. 5). However, realisation of this goal is a challenge and is not the case with the current educational situation in Malta because professional stakeholders in mainstream settings feel unprepared to handle certain situations common to an inclusive environment.

In view of the above findings and observations and the growing number of disabled students included in mainstream settings, this research has significant and beneficial implications for Malta. It includes a perceived needs analysis of all professional stakeholders

(SMT members, teachers and LSEs) with regard to resources, training and support for working with autistic children in mainstream state primary schools. The objective is to provide recommendations for a more inclusive system and eliminate barriers to achieving an effective education system.

The approach adopted in this study is aimed at evaluating the system of education in primary schools and highlighting amendments deemed necessary to the present inclusive system. It addresses concerns about an important sector in Malta, namely inclusive education (see Section 2.2), and thus, the findings are beneficial in identifying what needs to be improved in the Maltese inclusive system of education, ultimately contributing to the country's development. By focusing on improving teaching and learning, it can help in reducing the high rate of early school leavers, which is an aim of the EU 2020 strategy, as discussed above.

1.4.2 Research objectives and questions.

The objectives of this research were as follows:

1. Obtain an overview of the knowledge and attitudes about autism held by SMT members, teachers and LSEs and collect their opinions about the effectiveness of the inclusive system of education for autistic students in Malta;
2. Understand the thoughts of SMT members, teachers and LSEs concerning the current resources, training and support available to them;
3. Understand the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools;
4. Compare and contrast stakeholders' perceived needs; and
5. Highlight necessary improvements to the present inclusive system of education for autistic students, especially with regard to resources, training and support available for SMT members, teachers and LSEs.

This research intended to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How much do SMT members, teachers and LSEs know about autism, and what are their attitudes towards autism?

RQ2. What are the opinions of SMT members, teachers and LSEs regarding the effectiveness of an inclusive system of education for autistic students in Malta?

RQ3. What do SMT members, teachers and LSEs think about the current resources, training and support available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools?

RQ4. What are the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic children in mainstream primary schools?

1.5 Positioning of the Researcher

My relationship with this field of research as a researcher stems from my experience working as an autism support teacher. In this position, I visited various primary and secondary schools in Malta and Gozo to support autistic students in mainstream schools as well as their teachers, LSEs and the SMT. I was always under the impression that educators are not sufficiently trained to work with disabled students because, in my previous job as a Maltese language teacher, I felt that I had not received the requisite training and, thus, was not prepared to work with such students. This belief was strengthened when I began directly working with educators who worked with autistic students. I was therefore motivated to pursue my studies on educators' needs to work with autistic students in mainstream schooling at a doctoral level.

Having had various roles within the Maltese educational system, my positionality within this research has different facets. I started my career as a subject teacher, so I can completely relate to the perspective of the educators, since I have stood in their shoes – I received my teacher training at the same university as they did and worked within the same education system. On the other hand, when I became an autism support teacher, during the time I was considered as 'the specialist', my role changed significantly from the previous role of subject teacher. The role of autism support teacher made it possible for me to also relate to parents of autistic children as well as with the autistic children themselves. This is because I have observed and worked directly with autistic children in inclusive classrooms and attended IEP meetings where I listened to parents' concerns and wishes for their children. During the time I worked as an autism support teacher, I also developed close relationships with educators, who shared their private feelings and insights with me as they worked directly with autistic children in the Maltese inclusive system. Moreover, in my current job as a lecturer at a university college, I lecture to prospective LSEs in preparation for working in inclusive schools, and I work directly with disabled young people, where I prepare them for independent living and the world of work. My current job is an ongoing journey into the lives of disabled people and their families, where I continuously experience what disabled people aspire to achieve and what concerns and dreams the parents of autistic children have. My positionality is therefore an amalgamation of all these perspectives, which has helped me to be critical and reflective in relation to the findings of this research.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, this field of research is an extremely important one in the context of Malta. As a result, I succeeded in acquiring an Endeavour Scholarship, which financially supported this research. The fact that the Maltese government sponsored this research on one of its departments might arouse suspicion that the findings would comply with the government's expectations. However, I must clarify that this sponsorship has not, by any means, affected my analysis or interpretation of the results. At no point did my research have any interference from any of the participating schools or the Directorate of Education, and thus is completely autonomous in this sense.

Moreover, I am aware that my pre-existing belief that educators are not well-prepared to work with disabled students might have affected my interpretation of the results. Indeed, the researcher's values could have easily permeated the research, especially when the study adopted the interpretivist approach, as is the case here. I have therefore reviewed international and national literature on this research topic and presented other researchers' statements and perspectives, and I have followed a rigorous and transparent approach to the research. This will be made evident in the next chapter which presents the literature review of this study. This approach has helped me be more critical when preparing research instruments and analysing data.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Having presented the introductory chapter of this study, a literature review will now be presented. The literature review is split in two parts – in the first part (Chapter 2) I discuss autism, inclusive education and educators vis-à-vis the teaching of autistic students in inclusive settings. In the second part (Chapter 3) I discuss the educators' needs with regard to resources, training and support. The rationale for how I split the chapters was based on the content of the research questions – Chapter 2 discusses the contents of research questions 1 and 2, which focus on the educators' knowledge of and attitudes towards autism, and their opinions about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, whereas Chapter 3 discusses the contents of research questions 3 and 4, which focus on the educators' opinions about the current resources and services, training and support and their perceived needs regarding these.

Following that, Chapter 4 will focus on the methodology used in this study, including the development of the questionnaire and interview questions, selection of schools and participants, pilot study and the rationale underpinning the study's approach. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will present the data findings and analysis of both the questionnaires and interviews. In

Chapter 7, I will present a discussion through a thematic analysis drawing on discourse analysis. Finally, I will present my conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 8.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Part 1

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a discussion of ASD by defining it and discussing its characteristics. ASD is the term used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) and also in psychological reports of autistic children. However, as will be discussed later, this term is debatable, as there are other approaches to how autism is defined. Indeed, defining ASD is a challenge, as it is understood in many different ways, as will be seen in the discussion about the different views of autism below (see Section 2.1.2). For the purpose of this research, I will use the term *autism*, as it is the commonly used term amongst educators and people in general in the Maltese context.

In this chapter, I will also provide an overview of inclusive education, where I provide a brief background of it, leading to a definition of the concept, together with some typologies. I will also discuss the concept of inclusive education in practice with references to the Maltese context. Moreover, in this chapter, I will also discuss the educator vis-à-vis children with an autism diagnosis in the context of an inclusive setting, including the role of educators, educators' knowledge about autism and attitudes towards inclusive education and what factors affect these attitudes.

2.1 Autism

This section discusses the phenomenon of autism by giving a detailed definition, providing an overview of the development of such definition, and discussing autism's characteristics and the role of early intervention when it comes to helping autistic students.

2.1.1 Definition of autism.

The fifth edition of the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) states that a neurodevelopmental disorder manifests itself in developmental deficits producing personal, social, academic and occupational functioning impairments, the range of which varies from mere restraints in learning or control of executive function, which include 'the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully' (Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2020), to more complex impairments in intelligence or social skills. The DSM specifies that the signs of a neurodevelopmental disorder generally arise at the onset of development—that is, before a child begins attending school (APA, 2013). In light of this definition, autism can be understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder. Indeed, an individual with autism is described as having tenacious deficits in social communication and interaction, including reduced social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours used during social interactions and lack of other skills needed to develop, preserve and understand

relationships (APA, 2013). The DSM-5 further explains that, in addition to social communication deficits, autistic individuals exhibit repetitive patterns of behaviours and limited interests and activities. In his definition, Fombonne (2009) mentioned pervasive impairments in social reciprocity and communication, unusual behaviour and restricted interests. Lord (2011) also included strong preoccupations and repetitive behaviour amongst the characteristics of autism, explaining that autism is complex and difficult to understand due to the wide variation in characteristics through which it presents itself. Lai, Lombardo and Baron-Cohen (2014) have defined autism as:

> …a set of neurodevelopmental conditions, some of which can be attributed to distinct aetiological factors… Most are probably the result of complex interactions between genetic and non-genetic risk factors. The many types are collectively defined by specific behaviours, centring on atypical development in social communication and unusually restricted or repetitive behaviour and interests. (p. 896)

Silberman (2015) agreed with Lai, Lombardo and Baron-Cohen's (2014) view that autism is a developmental condition or a group of underlying conditions affecting the individual's communication and language skills. Wing (1979) and Gould (1996) (both cited in Martin, 2012) considered autism as a divergence from the behavioural expectations of society. Indeed, there are quite a number of varying perspectives on autism. Thus, in the next section, I will discuss the different views of autism.

2.1.2 Different views of autism.

Despite recent studies suggesting a strong belief that autism is mainly genetic (Furfaro, 2019; Mundell, 2019), there have been others who strongly argued against this. Timimi, Gardner and McCabe (2011), in fact, have noted that the idea of autism having biological and genetic basis is 'no more than vapid rhetoric' (p. 63). In addition, they have argued that they are not saying autism is caused by the environment, but they are simply stating that they are sceptical about the concept, emphasising that they are open to better accepting it if proof is provided, which they think is highly unlikely to happen (Timimi, Gardner, & McCabe, 2011).

Until recently, autism has been viewed as a disease, a disorder or a deficiency. Baron-Cohen (2017) argued that we still understand autism today as a disorder, as is indeed reflected in its name in the DSM-5: autism spectrum disorder. There is a plethora of critical discussion about this; some have argued that autism is a disorder which needs attention and, if possible, a cure (Larsen, 2018). Others suggested that autism is an identity which the individual should embrace (Krcek, 2013), and therefore resources should not be wasted in finding a cure but rather in providing interventions and support to help individuals explore their strengths (Pellicano &

Stears, 2011; Robertson, 2010). Others have even claimed that society should adapt to the individual's needs (Krcek, 2013; Larsen, 2018).

The view that autism is a disease, deficiency or disorder is underpinned by the medical model of autism. The medical model views autism as a set of impairments or deficits that should be fixed or cured (Larsen, 2018). This model aims to normalise the person with autism by reducing related symptoms and, if possible, eliminating the condition (APA, 2000; Baker, 2011). According to the medical model, autism is mostly ascertained psychiatrically on the basis of behavioural deviation from the average population (Anckarsäter, 2010). Chamak (2008) explained that many parents of autistic children tend to support the medical model because they wish to find a cure for autism or at least to have a more normalised child. In supporting this model, many parents and professionals categorise autism as a disease and believe that the cause lies in environmental factors (Hebert & Koulouglioti, 2010; Pellicano & Stears, 2011; Russell, Kelly, & Golding, 2010).

In contrast to the medical model, the neurodiversity movement promotes the social model of autism, which seeks ways that society can change and adapt itself to accommodate the autistic population (Larsen, 2018). In fact, Krcek (2013) explained that the social model of disability suggests that it is society that disables the individual. From the social model perspective, disability is seen as 'socially constructed, additional to impairment and created or exacerbated by environment' (Martin, 2008, as cited in Martin et al., 2019b, p. 8). Moreover, it has been argued that autistic self-advocates should be proud of their identity and oppose a possible treatment or cure (Bagatell, 2010; Brownlow, 2010; Clarke & Van Amerom, 2008; Hahn & Belt, 2004). Many autistic self-advocates fear that research for finding a cure might result in genetic prevention of autism (Baker, 2011; Orsini & Smith, 2010; Ortega, 2009; Pellicano & Stears, 2011). At the same time, if priority is given to researching the causes of autism, this might limit resources available for autistic individuals (Pellicano & Stears, 2011; Robertson, 2010).

Proponents of the neurodiversity movement view autism as part of the natural variation in humans and celebrate it (Armstrong, 2010; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Ortega, 2009). The movement seeks to instil a culture of pride in minority groups, such as people with autism, and to provide mutual support for self-advocacy through its community (Baker, 2011; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Jordan, 2010; Ortega, 2009). Since self-advocates view the differences, strengths and limitations of autism as part of one's identity (Robertson, 2010), they promote the use of identity-first (autistic person) rather than person-first (person with autism) language (Bagatell, 2010; Orsini & Smith, 2010; Ortega, 2009).

They also advocate for the well-being of the autistic persons through adaptive, rather than typical, functioning. For example, an autistic person who is non-verbal might still communicate well by other means of communication; as long as their well-being is not harmed and their communication is reliable, there would be no need to force the person to speak (Robertson, 2010). Moreover, self-advocates are also opposed to interventions that try to eliminate unusual behaviours which are otherwise harmless, such as avoidance of eye contact or repetitive body movements, regardless of what coping mechanisms they might be serving (Chamak, 2008; Orsini & Smith, 2010; Ortega, 2009).

It is worth mentioning here that there exist other autistic advocates who do not strongly identify with the neurodiversity movement. Autistic people, such as Jonathan Mitchell, Thomas McKean, Sue Rubin and Raun Kaufman, prefer the medical model of understanding autism and identify themselves amongst those who are in favour of searching for a cure (Krcek, 2013). In such views, the arguments presented by the neurodiversity movement are debated because the movement only considers people with autism who are high functioning and, thus, who do not have the same challenges as those who are low functioning[3] (Krcek, 2013).

Baron-Cohen (2017) has also referred to the relatively new concept of neurodiversity, as he agrees with its proponents debating the idea of disorder and disability in relation to autism. He believes that the notion of neurodiversity calls for the rights of minorities to be accepted with dignity and respect. The neurodiversity movement indeed promotes a belief that autism is merely a difference in how the person socialises and communicates (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). The neurodiversity framework is sometimes viewed critically by some who argue that having an accompanying condition, such as epilepsy or a language delay, reflects a disorder and not a mere difference. However, while agreeing with this, Baron-Cohen (2017) also argued that having epilepsy or a language delay that accompanies autism does not mean that autism is a disorder because, in such instances, autism cannot be viewed independently.

As discussed above, the use of language in regard to disability issues, including autism, makes a noticeable difference in how people view that disability. Just as autism self-advocates propose the use of identity-first rather than person-first language, Baron-Cohen (2017) further

[3]There are no official diagnoses for high-functioning or low-functioning autism, and such attribution of terms is normally given by a parent, practitioner or teacher, according to their perspective. Defining autism as high-functioning or low-functioning is normally based on what is considered by many as normal behaviours or strengths; however, this is very difficult to do, because persons who are considered as high functioning may have strengths in certain areas but challenges in others, and vice-versa. For example, a person who is able to communicate verbally, and is thus considered high-functioning, may still be unable to function well at an event due to his/her sensory challenges. On the other hand, a person who is considered to be low-functioning due to his/her lack of academic abilities may still be able to hold a job (Rudy, 2019).

discussed in detail the choice of language vis-à-vis autism by exploring the terms used when referring to it. He argued that the term *disorder* is defined as a lack of order or intelligible pattern or randomness, neither of which properly describes autism. Therefore, while the term disorder implies the absence of order and a dysfunction in the underlying cognition and neurobiology of the individual, an examination of the cognition and biology of autism shows evidence of difference rather than a dysfunction (Lai et al., 2014). Baron-Cohen (2017) explained that there is ample evidence that the autistic brain works differently than the typical brain due to different brain development, which is not necessarily a sign of a disorder.

The ways in which we use the terms *disorder*, *disease*, *disability* and *difference* should be distinct. As explained by Baron-Cohen (2017), a disorder should refer to a condition which has nothing positive about it and which renders the person unable to function irrespective of environmental modifications. On the other hand, disease should refer to something with a known biomedical cause. Disability should refer to the situation of a person who falls below an average level of functioning in one or more psychological or physical functions or for whom support or intervention is needed, while difference should be used for persons who are biologically atypical when compared with the majority of the population but who are not necessarily affected by this difference in their functioning and well-being (Baron-Cohen, 2017). Considering the above definitions, I would argue that autism is a difference. This is because, although autistic students might need a certain level of support or intervention to help them reach their full potential, this is not necessarily because their level of functioning falls below average. My experience proves that autistic students need lesser support or intervention the older they become, as they mature and become more independent, reaching milestones like their peers. Indeed, autistic students are biologically atypical from their peers, but this fact does not hinder them from ultimately reaching full functioning and a healthy well-being. Nevertheless, in my argument I am considering autistic students, and not autistic students who have other accompanying conditions, as the latter changes the perspective.

Apart from the use of language, advocacy groups also play a very important role in responding to stigmatisation, increasing awareness and improving education. Celebrations such as Autism Pride Day contribute significantly to awareness and the acceptance of differences. Another important factor contributing to this is the representation of autism in films such as *Rain Man* (1988), the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon (Barnett, 2016) and the book *NeuroTribes* (2015) by Steve Silberman. These and other works pay tribute to the contributions of people with autism who, although eccentric and socially awkward, have made a great impact on the technology and culture of today's society

(Happe, 2015). Despite this, however, Murray (2008) has stated that such depictions present autistic persons as the savant autistics 'allowing for autism to be "incredible" in this way' (p. 99), at the expense of ignoring the challenges related to autism.

An interesting point to note here is that the way individuals view autism also depends significantly on cultural disparities in different countries. Johansson (2014) conducted a study about stakeholders' perspectives on autism in an urban school in India. Although, on the whole, India has made significant improvements in education and there has been a growth in research on autism in India, Johansson (2014) found that, in general, research on the schooling of autistic children is still an unexplored field in this country. In her research, she found that the academic focus in Indian schools is extreme, and that teachers lack a sensitivity towards the needs of autistic children, especially within the social sphere, which affects the child's participation in the classroom. What Johansson found interesting was that teachers in India view autistic children as different from their peers and not as having special educational needs or a disability. Someki et al. (2018) conducted a study to investigate the stigma associated with autism in college students in Japan and the US. They found that this stigma was worse amongst Japanese students than US students, and they concluded that autism-related stigmas are closely associated with local cultural contexts.

It is significant to point out that, in many cultures, including the Maltese culture (see Section 2.3.5) autism is looked at from the perspective of the medical model, thus highlighting the limitations of being different. Nevertheless, autism has many positive aspects, and autistic students are an asset in inclusive schools if their potential and their abilities are recognised and embraced. Some positives of autism include the ability to give attention to detail, expertise in topics of personal interest (Bennie, 2019; Hughes, n.d.), the ability to focus deeply on an activity of interest, extremely good observation skills, excellent long-term memory, good visual skills, good methodical approaches, innovative thinking, creativity, determination and resilience, integrity (Bennie, 2019), and the ability to make others aware and accepting of difference (Hughes, n.d.).

Having provided the various differing views about autism, I will explore this a little further by discussing autistic people's views about this concept in the next section. Following this, I will present my choice of language in this regard, based on the discussion provided.

2.1.2.1 Autistic people's views about autism.

In the above section, I have very briefly referred to autistic people's preference of referring to themselves with identity-first language. In this section, I will further explore the

perceptions of autistic people in this regard, as this plays a significant role in my choice of language in this research study.

A 2016 study explored the perspectives of the UK autism community vis-à-vis their preference in regard to the choice of language used to refer to autistic people (Kenny et al., 2016). As argued above, there does not seem to be an agreement as to how autistic people should be referred to. Indeed, through their study, Kenny et al. (2016) once again confirmed that there is no one universally accepted term to describe autism. According to them, the terms 'autism' and 'on the autism spectrum' were preferred over 'autism spectrum disorder'; however, they argued, there were noticeable differences in the participants' (autistic people, parents and broader support networks) preferences when referring to the actual person who has autism. According to the study, professionals reported that they preferred the use of person-first language, that is, student or person with autism, whereas autistic adults and their parents favoured disability-first language, that is, autistic student or person. Kenny et al. (2016) stated that such findings came as no surprise. Person-first language was introduced to challenge medical and moral beliefs which define people by their disability, aiming at focusing on people's abilities and distinguishing them from their disability (Blaska, 1993; Feldman et al., 2002; Foreman, 2005). Nevertheless, in so doing, the positive characteristics of autism are undermined, and a belief is maintained that autism is 'an inherently "wrong" way of being' (Kenny et al., 2016, p. 457). Such arguments were also previously seen in other academic works (Bagatell, 2010; Davidson & Henderson, 2010; Hurlburt & Chalmers, 2002).

As one can observe from this section, autism is viewed in many different ways by various people. It is referred to using a wide variety of terms, making it rather difficult to decide what is the best term to use for it. However, I am confident about my beliefs that autism is a difference, rather than a disability, disorder or disease. On the other hand, deciding how persons on the spectrum should be referred to has been more perplexing because of this multiplicity of views. As an educator, I have always felt that person-first language was more appropriate, as this shifts the focus from the differences of the person to the person as an individual regardless of the dis/abilities they have. Indeed, these perceptions amongst educators were confirmed by Kenny et al.'s (2016) study noted above. However, since autistic people prefer the identity-first language, which they feel focuses on their abilities, I decided to make use of the identity-first language for the purpose of this research. Thus, I refer to persons on the spectrum as autistic children or autistic students, rather than children or students with autism. I do acknowledge that others might not agree with this.

2.1.3 Characteristics of autism.

Undoubtedly, the number of children diagnosed with autism has drastically increased (Lindsay et al., 2013; Mammoser, 2018; World Health Organisation, 2019). This increase can be attributed to the growing awareness of autism amongst educators, doctors and the public, not to mention the widening of the condition's definition (Fombonne, 2008; Mammoser, 2018; Wolff, 2004; World Health Organisation, 2019).

In terms of gender ratio, males are considered to be 4 times more prone to autism than females (Fombonne, 2003; Fombonne, Quirke, & Hagen, 2011; Worley et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2020); however, a recent study has shown that the true gender ratio of males to females is 3:1, since females tend to be clinically undiagnosed (Loomes, Hull, & Polmear Locke Mandy, 2017). Baron-Cohen et al. (2011) had already argued that females with autism might be under diagnosed. Other studies suggested that the smaller number of diagnosed females can be explained by late-stage diagnosis (Begeer et al., 2013; Giarelli et al., 2010) owing to the requirement of more concurrent behavioural or cognitive problems for the diagnosis of females (Dworzynski et al., 2012). Sipes et al. (2011) stated that there is little research that focuses on the differences in the symptoms and characteristics of autism between males and females, and the results of what little research there is are inconsistent. While Tsai and Beisler (1983) determined that girls exhibit more severe autistic symptoms than boys, McLennan, Lord and Schopler (1993) found that males have more severe deficits in socialisation. A more recent study reported that males demonstrate greater preoccupation with parts of objects and love of fixed routines and rituals (Nicholas et al., 2008). Recently, arguments in this regard have changed in that research shows that the main difference between males and females is that females are more likely to develop skills to learn how to mask their autistic behaviours (Gilmore, 2019). However, no significant differences between genders have been suggested in the literature, rendering characteristic dissimilarities by gender uncertain (Sipes et al., 2011).

Research on the causes of autism remains inconclusive (Cherney, 2019; Corrales & Herbert, 2011); however, studies have identified risk factors for autism, including advanced parental age (Hultman et al., 2011; Lampi et al., 2013; Sandin et al., 2012), complications during pregnancy (Brown et al., 2013; Gardener, Spiegelman, & Buka, 2009) and exposure to chemicals (Christensen et al., 2013; Rai et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2007; Rodier, 2011; Volk et al., 2013). Gardener, Spiegelman and Buka (2011) insisted that good care or the lack of it during the first few weeks of a child's life may decrease or increase the risk. An expectant mother can reduce the likelihood of autism in her child by taking folic acid supplements before conception and even during the early weeks of pregnancy (Suren et al., 2013).

The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) specifies that neurodevelopmental disorders tend to co-occur, that is, a person who has a neurodevelopmental disorder will most probably show signs of other disorders of the same type. A great number of individuals diagnosed with autism have parallel medical, developmental or psychiatric conditions (Hofvander et al., 2009; Lugnegard, Hallerback, & Gillberg, 2011, 2012; Mattila et al., 2010; Simonoff et al., 2008), such as epilepsy, attention deficit disorder and Down syndrome (Bogdashina, 2006). It is also not uncommon for autistic persons to have intellectual disabilities (Barger, Campbell, & McDonough, 2013). While some co-occurring conditions experienced in childhood generally persist as the child enters adolescence (Simonoff et al., 2013), others appear for the first time during adolescence or even adulthood, including depression and epilepsy. Understandably, these co-occurring conditions make it more evident that the individual has a disability (Mattila et al., 2010). Bilder et al. (2013) explained that co-occurring medical conditions put autistic individuals at a higher mortality risk.

Martin (2012) noted that it is fairly common for autistic individuals to experience social stigma due to the symptoms these individuals exhibit and the general public's lack of understanding of autism. However, activities arranged by parent organisations have contributed to greater awareness (Wolff, 2004). Lately, in Malta, there has been great improvement in providing more awareness about autism. Indeed, Maltese parent organisations, such as the Autism Parents Association (For more information please visit https://www.autismparentsassociation.com/), television programmes about autism (such as *Kuluri tal-Awtiżmu*, which means *Colours of Autism* in Maltese), activities organised by various NGOs, and particular blogs and pages on social media (such as the page "I am Diego" on Facebook) are increasing society's awareness of autism. Moreover, it is becoming very common in Malta for discriminations against people with autism to be aired on the national news; this also contributes to an increased awareness about the challenges encountered by people with autism. As a result, a number of new interventions for people with autism have recently been initiated, including better care and education for autistic students (Wolff, 2004). An example of this in Malta are the summer schools organised specifically for autistic children (Vella, 2015). Martin (2012) argued that increased understanding has helped change people's perceptions of those with autism; that is, instead of perceiving them as mentally ill, they are viewed as individuals with SEN. Fombonne (2008), Fombanne, Quirk and Hagen (2011) and Elsabbagh et al. (2012) added that changes in diagnosis and diagnosis at a younger age might also have contributed to the increased number of children diagnosed with autism. Kim et al. (2011) cited cultural variables as a possible reason for the increased prevalence of autism

diagnoses. Indeed, Western models of understanding disability and difference allow for more diagnoses, while there are other cultural contexts that have different understandings of disability and difference and for whom autism simply does not make any sense as a category.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is often especially difficult and challenging for autistic individuals given the decrease in school services and other support. This can hinder the pace of improvement for an individual (Taylor & Seltzer, 2010). However, the quality of life of autistic individuals depends significantly on the support they receive. Prior to the introduction of early intervention programmes, 58%–78% of adults diagnosed with autism had poor independent living skills, low levels of education, poor relationships and inadequate or no employment (Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2005; Howlin et al., 2004; Howlin et al., 2013). This is why early intervention programmes are considered a must for autistic children. This will be discussed further in the following section.

2.1.4 Early intervention.

Although autism is generally not detected at birth (Ozonoff et al., 2010), there have been claims that it can be identified in infants from the ages of 6 to 12 months (Ozonoff et al., 2010). Worley et al. (2011) stated that the symptoms of autism can be detected even at 17 months of age because unusual developmental characteristics, principally in social communication behaviours (Ozonoff et al., 2010), are already recognisable. Elsabbagh and Johnson (2010) and Zwaigenbaum et al. (2009) suggested a number of early indicators of autism in children, including deficits or delays in joint attention and pretend play, lack of proper understanding of perspectives, reduced affection, reduced response to one's own name, reduced imitation skills, delayed communication (both verbal and non-verbal), delayed development of motor skills, peculiar repetitive behaviours, inflexibility and extreme changes in temperament. However, Mandell, Novak and Zubritsky (2005) maintained that it is still difficult to identify the presence of autism in high-functioning individuals; therefore, they are likely to be diagnosed at a later age.

The majority of the literature on this subject has emphasised the importance of autism being detected as early as possible because an early diagnosis often results in earlier intervention and, thus, better outcomes. It is imperative for diagnosticians to conduct a multidisciplinary assessment when diagnosing autism. Once diagnosed, individuals should receive appropriate intervention and support that are individualised, multidimensional and multidisciplinary. Further, the individual's strengths should be exploited to facilitate functional independence and a good quality of life (Lai et al., 2014). A vast array of literature has shown

that early intervention has an extremely positive impact on the child's life. Gordon (2009) explained that, when children are very young, their brains are able to form new connections and change the ways in which they work. According to Gordon (2009), adolescents on the spectrum who received 20 or more hours of therapy in early childhood were more likely to achieve age-equivalent milestones than other adolescents who did not receive therapy. Hart and More (2013) also suggested that early intervention is associated with improvements in educational outcomes for autistic students while helping to reduce the long-term severity of the condition.

Despite the claims to the biological roots of autism, research has shown that behavioural and educational interventions are more effective than medication (Lai et al., 2014). There are various behavioural approaches one can adopt when working with autistic children (Dawson & Burner, 2011; Maglione & Gans, 2012; Vismara & Rogers, 2010), such as ABA, which originated in the Lovaas method (Smith & Eikeseth, 2011), the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH) approach and the picture exchange communication system (PECS), which could be helpful for non-verbal individuals (Maglione & Gans, 2012). In order for older children and adolescents to establish independence, the development of social skills and vocational intervention are important, as they contribute to a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood, and targeted behavioural intervention can reduce anxiety (Lai et al., 2014). Also, parent-mediated intervention is advantageous as children can be treated in their home environments and within their communities, giving them the opportunity to transfer their skills to real-life settings while improving their parents and caregivers' self-confidence (Dawson & Burner, 2011). Therefore, the US Health Resources and Services Administration (Maglione & Gans, 2012) and the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Pilling et al., 2012) have stressed the importance of supporting families with autistic children and creating autism-friendly environments.

Despite this emphasis in the literature on the importance of early intervention, there is also some literature which has argued against this or else puts forward questions for reflection about this. Russell (2016) in her chapter *Early diagnosis of autism – Is earlier always better?* insisted that 'in the medical literature, earlier diagnosis of autism and accompanied early intervention is uncritically equated with "better" than late diagnosis and no intervention' (p. 356). In this chapter, she provided various counterarguments to the benefits of early diagnosis and early intervention. She stated that the literature in favour of early diagnosis and intervention makes five major assumptions, which are:

1. That autism is a fixed disorder present at birth and that it can be identified immediately after birth;
2. That treating autism, and thus making its symptoms better, is desired;
3. That early intervention has effective results on the individual;
4. That without intervention, autistic children will not make improvement; and
5. That there are no negative effects from the diagnosis itself on the children and their families (Russell, 2016).

Russell shared her reservations about the last three assumptions listed above. She claimed that, although literature tends to frame intervention as necessary for improved outcomes, results on the effectiveness of such interventions are inconclusive. Such thoughts are also shared by Warren et al. (2011), who have argued that there is a lack of evidence about the improvements in autistic behaviour after intervention, and by Myers and Johnson (2007), who said that there is weak evidence for the effectiveness of early intervention. Russell (2016) further added that, above all this, it is often unacknowledged that there are high financial costs and time commitments related to early intervention which might result in exhaustion in both parents and children.

Another counterargument presented by Russell (2016) is that, in the very early years of a child's life, it is often difficult to distinguish between a child who presents with autism-like symptoms because s/he truly has autism and a child who presents with the same symptoms which will improve over time. She cited the example of Landa (2008), who found that a 2-year old who cannot speak may ultimately display autism-like symptoms later on, or simply cannot speak because s/he has a slower development pace. Indeed, Turner and Stone (2007) declared that 30% of children diagnosed with autism at age 2 will no longer meet the autism criteria at age 4. In fact, Stone et al. (1999) stated there is no clear evidence as to the best age at which a child can be clearly diagnosed with autism. For this reason, Russell (2016) argued in favour of the 'wait and see' approach, as children with serious autism-like symptoms could improve as they grow older without intervention.

Fogel and Nelson (1983) found that, when told about a particular diagnosis of a child, people tend to perceive the child's behaviour in the light of that diagnosis. Russell (2016) acknowledged, however, that the literature on whether the effects of an early diagnosis on the child, are positive or negative, is very limited. She did, however, provide examples of studies that showed the negative effects of labelling children with a diagnosis. This ultimately led her to conclude that labelling a child as autistic will result in different expectancies and attitudes of

those around him/her, will change the self-identity of the child and will serve as a reinforcement of the so-called abnormal autistic behaviour (Russell, 2016).

Mercieca and Mercieca (2014) also referred to the concept of early intervention, claiming that in early intervention, it is often forgotten that professionals are intruding in the lives of children, their families, their environment and their particular situations. They noted that such intrusion is sometimes invited and other times not and is seen as urgent (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014, 2018) because of the 'illusion that all problems can be solved or their negative effects at least lessened and that there are experts who know how to do that' (Smeyers, 2008, p. 728). Mercieca and Mercieca (2014) further argued that concerns regarding the issue of early intervention are also felt in Malta; they referred to a particular conference aired on Maltese television, where educational stakeholders 'repeatedly and emphatically sounded their voice on the need for efficient procedures and mechanisms to identify children in need as early as possible and help to solve their problems' (p. 846), with a seemingly general consensus that early intervention is capable of at least partially solving the problem.

However, Mercieca and Mercieca (2014) stated that they were 'very much concerned with the promises that early identification and intervention makes to children and their families, their teachers and the society at large' (p. 846). They further noted that a greater concern is the fact that experts and professionals are often seen as the ones who know what to do because of their training and experience, while the child and his/her parents and teachers are often seen as the ones needing guidance, an argument which will be again referred to later in Section 2.3.2, when discussing the effects of diagnostic labels. Contrary to this, Mercieca and Mercieca (2014) stressed that

> children, families and teachers [are] as capable of intelligence, having a voice that can be listened to (rather than sound), and having the ability to think and act in their own right, without the endless dependency on early intervention structures. (p. 857)

Undeniably, screening tests and the political implications they have, especially by labelling and requiring a vast selection of professionals to fix and cure such labels, carry the risk of coming between teachers and children. This means that screening tests can act as barriers to the engagement of the teacher with the autistic child and the attention s/he gives the child within a particular context (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018). During the early years, focus on 'being with the child' (p. 10) should be at its best; however, regrettably, it is during these early years, that most of the screening is carried out. It is for this reason that it is very important for educators to 'become engaged in practical judgements' (p. 10), instead of always depending on screening

tests and guidance by the so-called experts, as this will affect their 'good life' (as the authors put it), and that of the children in their class (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018).

In their 2018 paper, Mercieca and Mercieca acknowledged the existing assumption that specific learning difficulties and autism exist independently from the child, whereby the belief that it can be removed or lessened comes into play. Moreover, they put forward their concerns that what has been considered normal in the past has now 'earned the label of "requiring support"' (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018, p. 4). Using the metaphor of the 'haunted and hunted', they explained that 'all children are haunted by "specific learning difficulties" or autism and in return, we hunt it to get rid of it' (p. 4). While they admitted that their arguments did not arise from their opposition to screening, they nonetheless raised questions about the impact of checklists and tests on teachers and educators. This will be further discussed in Section 2.3.2.

2.1.5 Research on autism in Malta.

In recent years, research on autism in Malta has increased, partially because of the growing number of children diagnosed with the condition. The majority of such studies have focused on the experiences of students on the spectrum and the experiences of their families (e.g. Attard, 2014; Bonnici, 2000; Cassar, 2016; Gauci, 2016). Others have inquired about the inclusion of these students in mainstream classes and the experiences of their teachers (e.g. Attard, 2014; Curmi & Farrugia, 2016). However, little research has focused on the perceived needs of teachers who work with children on the spectrum, and no research has investigated the perceived needs of SMT members and LSEs. The limited research that does exist has been presented as bachelor's degree theses and does not delve deeply into the research questions proposed here (e.g. Attard, 2014; Curmi & Farrugia, 2016).

For this reason, I have chosen to research the perceived needs of all professional stakeholders concerned with the education of primary school autistic children at the doctoral level to comprehensively analyse their experiences.

In Section 2.1, I have focused my discussion on autism per se, presenting a definition and discussing the different views on autism, its characteristics and the debate on early intervention for autistic children. Autistic children are now being educated more often in inclusive settings; for this reason, I will now move on to discuss the concept of inclusive education. Having already discussed autism, the reader will then be able to picture autistic children in an inclusive environment. Moreover, this discussion about autism and the following discussion about inclusive education form the basis of the discussion presented in Section 2.3 where I discuss the educator in the light of working with autistic students in an inclusive

environment, where I aim to understand their perceptions of and attitudes towards autism and inclusive education.

2.2 Inclusive Education

This section starts off by tracing back to the beginning of inclusive education mainly in the Western world, followed by definitions of the concept. Then, I will present a number of typologies of inclusive education presented in literature. Finally, a discussion of inclusive practices will be provided with examples from the Maltese context.

2.2.1 The beginning of inclusive education.

The concept of the classroom has changed, and a growing number of classrooms now include students with different strengths and needs (Talmore, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005). However, the development from special education to what we now know as inclusive education has moved through a number of stages, during which education systems explored different methods of responding to disabled children and difficulties in learning (Ainscow & César, 2006). Writing from the UK, Ainscow and César (2006) specify that, in some cases, special education was provided as a supplement to general education provision, while in others, it was provided totally separate from general education (Ainscow & César, 2006). Mittler (2000) explained that, initially, special education was frequently offered in special schools which were set up by religious or philanthropic organisations. Such arrangements were then adopted as part of the national education arrangements, which often led to these systems for pupils with special educational needs working separately and in parallel with the general education system. The concept of having a separate school system has, however, been challenged, as its appropriateness is now highly questioned (Ainscow & César, 2006) from both the perspective of human rights, and from the point of view of effectiveness (Ainscow et al., 2006). Dyson, Howes and Roberts (2002) found that environmental influences on learning are ignored by those whose perspectives assume that the sources of difficulties in learning are within the learner. They furthered this argument, saying that there is strong research evidence that the quality of learning is influenced by the home and school environment and that educational difficulties can also be the result of factors other than impairments. This links back to what was discussed in Section 2.1.2, where it was argued that certain challenges in autism are a result of viewing disabilities from the medical model perspective, rather than from the social model perspective. The medical model has a greater likelihood of supporting the idea of special schools, while the social model would much rather support inclusive ones.

Following separate education provision for students with SEN, integrated placement came into being. Integration programmes took the form of special classes within the ordinary schools (Ainscow & César, 2006); therefore, this new method of educating students with SEN did not involve many changes in the organisation of the ordinary school, the curriculum or the teaching and learning strategies, which in turn proved to be one major barrier to the implementation of inclusive practices in education (Dyson & Millward, 2000; Freire & César, 2003). Indeed, Trent, Artiles and Englert (1998) had argued that such a method often results from the perspective of seeing children with SEN from the medical model view, often assuming that the educational difficulties experienced by the child are produced solely because of the child's deficits. On the other hand, Ainscow (1999) claimed that progress towards inclusive education would much more likely be seen if we recognised that educational difficulties could result from the way schools are organised and from the teaching methods used. In view of this, Ainscow and César (2006) contended that 'the development of inclusive practices is seen as involving those within a particular context in working together to address barriers to education experienced by some learners' (p. 233).

Similar trends have been seen in the development of inclusive practices in Malta. In its brief overview of the Maltese historical context of education provided at the beginning of the external audit report about the Maltese inclusive education system, the EASNIE (2014) stated that Malta's 'economic growth is dependent on the skills of its population and Malta spends over 5.9% of GDP on education' (p. 24). This is because 'the Maltese Government views public expenditure on education as a way to foster economic growth, enhance productivity, contribute to citizens' personal and social development and as a means to reduce social inequalities' (p. 24). Apart from that, the principle of inclusive education is currently valued as a human right for all children, including for disabled children, as is specified in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (United Nations, 2007).

In the past decade, Malta has seen many changes in all its sectors, including the education sector, due to the influx of asylum seekers, creating the need for a change in the society's mindset, which was then expected to be more open to diversity (EASNIE, 2014). Malta was also amongst the first of the United Nations members to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability in 2007, which was then ratified in 2013. In addition, there have been efforts over the years 'to increase the understanding of the concept of inclusion to all marginalised groups and to introduce more respectful terminology' (EASNIE, 2014, p. 24). However, the education system has for a long time been characterised by formal structures made up of selection, competition and banding/streaming, together with traditional teaching

methods, high stakes examinations, and a 'firm belief that homogenous groups provide the best learning environment' (p. 25). Attempts by the government to introduce comprehensive education from 1972 to 1981 have led to more parents enrolling their children in church and independent schools since the latter had retained selection (EASNIE, 2014). Zammit Marmara (2008) argues that the failure of this reform is mainly due to the lack of planning behind its introduction. Nonetheless, recent changes in the education system have led to the move towards co-educational schooling in state schools, and the discontinuation of the 11-plus examination (EASNIE, 2014). This, however, does not underestimate the '"backlash" against mixed-ability teaching' (p. 25), which led to the temporary introduction of banding in 2014.

The EASNIE (2014) has stated that Malta does have 'one of the highest proportions of learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs attending mainstream education among the EU Member States' (p. 29). Public special education services saw their beginning in the 1950s with continued expansion until the 1980s (EASNIE, 2014). According to the report, the early integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schooling was influenced by the Warnock report (1978). A British-style statementing process was introduced in 2000 (Bartolo, 2010), with the aim of identifying and assessing children who are facing difficulties in the education system (EASNIE, 2014). The then Student Services Department (now known as NSSS) was established in 2007 within the DES.

Until 2005, a small number of students with special needs attended secondary or upper-secondary education; however, this is no longer the case since 'many learners now join lower-secondary schools while some also move into tertiary education' (EASNIE, 2014, p. 30). Moreover, the special schools in Malta and Gozo were changed into resource centres, following the proposals for a special school reform by the Student Services Department in 2009 (EASNIE, 2014).

2.2.2 Definitions of inclusive education.

Before working on the development of inclusive practices, it is essential for educators to have a basic definition of inclusive education. The *Guidelines for Inclusion* (UNESCO, 2005) provides a definition of inclusion whereby it divides it into four main elements (Acedo, Ferrer, & Pàmies, 2009):

> Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all

> children. Inclusion is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims towards enabling teachers and learners both to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment of the learning environment, rather than a problem. (pp. 13–15)

In this definition, inclusion is presented as:

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

Ainscow (2005) has also supported this definition, while providing a further explanation to each of the elements. According to Ainscow, the element of inclusion as a process presents inclusion as a 'never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity' (p. 118), so much so that differences become a natural part of our lives and thus start being seen as 'stimuli for fostering learning' (p. 118). Where the removal of barriers is concerned, Ainscow has further argued that this is dependent on the planning for improvements in policy and practicing on the basis of a wide variety of literature sources, so that evidence can be used to stimulate creativity and problem-solving. Then come the concerns of where children are educated, how reliable and punctual their attendance is (attendance), the quality of their experience which must incorporate their own views (participation), and lastly, the outcomes of students across the curriculum (quality learning). Finally, as regards the emphasis put on groups who are at risk of exclusion, Ainscow (2005) explained that this is an indication of our moral responsibility to ensure that such groups are carefully monitored and that measures are taken 'to ensure their presence, participation and achievement in the education system' (p. 119). In addition to this, Booth and Ainscow (2002) argued that inclusive education is 'a process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of mainstream schools' (p. 696).

Based on such a definition, one can conclude that inclusion is a rather demanding concept to implement, as it requires work on various aspects. Indeed, inclusive education is one of the most challenging concepts in today's educational systems the world over (Acedo et al., 2009). It might be for this reason that inclusive education has become an intensely researched concept

in the decades since the issuance of the Salamanca Statement after the World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca in 1994 (Krischler, Powell, & Pit-Ten Cate, 2019). Indeed, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was the introduction of the promising concept of inclusive education (Krischler et al., 2019). It is often used as a departure point in research about inclusive education (Magnússon, 2019), since it is 'the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education' (Ainscow & César, 2006, p. 231). This significance might have its source in the fact that, according to Florian (2019):

> the achievement of Salamanca has been three-fold. It challenged the idea that some children do not belong in regular or mainstream schools, it called into question the structures of schooling that rely on different forms of provision for different types of learners; and it introduced the idea of inclusive education to the wider education. (p. 692)

Nevertheless, despite the intensive focus on inclusive education, the concept does not seem to have acquired one universally accepted definition; in contrast, inclusive education has been defined differently by different scholars (Ainscow, Farrell, & Tweddle, 2000; Amor et al., 2018; Artiles et al., 2006; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017), which has proven to be problematic and confusing in the field of education research, reforms and implementation of practices (Ainscow et al., 2000; Krischler et al., 2019). Specifically, as Krischler et al. (2019) put it, 'challenges of definition are a key reason why inclusive education has been implemented inconsistently' (pp. 633–634). Such difference in interpretations of inclusive education may be the result of the varying understandings in the different contexts as well as the fact that international policies need to be adapted according to the existing policies of each specific country (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019; Miles & Singal, 2010; Mitchell, 2005). In this regard, Ainscow (2020) noted that certain countries still view inclusion as a way to educate all disabled children within general education settings. On the international level, however, it is becoming more the norm to view inclusion as a principle that embraces diversity amongst all learners, starting with the belief that education is a basic human right and the basis for a more just society (Ainscow, 2020).

This diversification in definitions of inclusive education has resulted in differences amongst educational stakeholders in how they view inclusive education. Krischler et al. (2019) found that different professionals in the education field perceived inclusion differently. Inclusion was all about the school placement of students with SEN for the general population of the school, whereas for pre- and in-service teachers, inclusion was seen as something which necessitated changes in teaching practices to accommodate a greater student population.

Magnússon (2019) discussed a number of fields of tension associated with inclusive education, the first of which concerned 'the question of *who* is in focus', meaning what groups are considered to be the ones that should be included or that are seen as the excluded. Here, Magnússon explained the contrasting views of different researchers. On one hand, there is the group of researchers who argue that identifying educational difficulties and labelling pupils is only another way of excluding. On the other hand, there are researchers who believe that inclusive education should focus specifically on students with SEN, as in this way these groups are not invisible within political projects. The second field of tension as presented by Magnússon is the organisation of inclusion, with many researchers arguing that inclusive education should not be the mere placement of pupils with SEN in regular classrooms, as this would simply be a replica of exclusion, unless it is accompanied by other pedagogical and organisational measures. Magnússon referred to the four typologies of Göransson and Nilholm (2014), discussed below (see Section 2.2.3), to argue that the idea of organisation of inclusive education has been given different interpretations. According to Magnússon (2019), both of these tensions are visible in the Salamanca Statement, despite the fact that the aim of the Salamanca Statement was to discuss specifically the access of disabled children. Indeed, the dilemma in defining inclusive education is even seen in official documents such as the Salamanca Statement, where

> the notion of inclusion… encompasses a range of ideals and generally formulated decrees for educational practice. These range from specific definitions and focus on the placement of pupils with special needs or disabilities in regular classrooms, to broader ideals of 'creating communities' for all pupils (p. 687),

indeed allowing 'for a multitude of interpretations of what inclusion can mean' (p. 687).

A brief review of the main policies and frameworks for inclusion in Malta shows that, in theory, the authorities responsible for education and inclusive education in Malta are basically on the same wavelength where the basic understandings of inclusive education are concerned, and one can observe various aspects which support the above-discussed definition of inclusion. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012) hints at the idea of inclusion being a never-ending process when stating that inclusion requires 'ongoing' (p. 32) self-evaluation, monitoring and reviewing to ensure quality.

The idea of inclusion requiring the identification and removal of barriers is also seen in Maltese policies and frameworks. Indeed, the National Inclusive Education Framework (NIEF) (2019) specifically mentions the need for the removal of curricular, social and physical barriers to inclusion in one of its themes in the framework. Moreover, the NCF states that it promotes

an inclusive environment by 'acknowledg[ing] and respect[ing] individual differences of age, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, personal development, socio-cultural background, geographical location and ethnicity' (p. 32), whereas principle 3 states that 'the NCF embraces a developmental approach to education whereby within and across all learning areas and subjects, the curriculum meets the needs of learners according to their stage of development' (p. 32). While these two principles do not directly refer to the removal of barriers, they imply the promotion of an inclusive environment and meeting the needs of all learners, whatever their abilities. As Bezzina (2019) rightly explained, this principle allows the learner to follow the best education pathway considering his/her abilities in order to be able to reach his/her best potential, irrespective of whether the student has a disability or not. However, as Bezzina (2019) also argued, although the NCF is, in principle, in favour of inclusive education, 'it fails to give concrete targets on how this can be achieved' (p. 49).

Inclusive education in Malta is also understood as the achievement of all students, in regard to attendance, participation and quality learning, as discussed above. Principle 1 and principle 4 in the NCF discuss the importance of quality learning, with principle 1 focusing on the right of every child 'to a quality education experience and therefore all learners need to be supported to develop their potential and achieve personal excellence' (p. 32). Principle 4, then, focuses on learner-centred learning, where active and personalised learning takes place with the engagement of all learners, which in turn promotes the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for self-directed and lifelong learning. The NIEF (2019) also makes reference to quality learning whereby it acknowledges the importance of meaningful, active, and appropriately challenging learning and differentiated teaching.

Apart from quality learning, the NIEF (2019) also emphasises the need for learner participation in the creation of a community of learners. Nonetheless, the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) believes that student participation is not emphasised enough in the framework, further suggesting that the formulation of individual education plans (IEPs) should include the student him/herself. Moreover, according to the CRPD, in addition to collaborating with parents, the framework should emphasise collaboration with the student him/herself (Bezzina, 2019). The Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (PIES) (2019) also refers to the importance of student participation, with its first benchmark stating that 'all learners [should] have access to opportunities for participation in educational systems and structures' (p. 16).

In addition to the above, one can also observe that Maltese policies also acknowledge educators' and policymakers' responsibility to ensure that inclusion is taking place, with the

NCF (2012) suggesting 'ongoing self-evaluation, monitoring and review within schools complemented by an external review system' (p. 32), while the NIEF (2019) encourages 'a shared responsibility to put said priority targets to practice' (p. 9).

2.2.3 Typologies of inclusive education.

Based on their analysis of international literature, Ainscow et al. (2006) suggested a typology of five ways of viewing inclusion. The first type of inclusion is that which is focused on disability and SEN. This type, they argued, attempts at increasing the participation of disabled students or SEN students; however, in doing so, the focus lies on their disability or special need, while ignoring any other ways in which the student's participation can be increased or hindered. Nevertheless, Ainscow et al. also claimed that rejecting this view of inclusion might endanger the attention disabled students or SEN students receive through their disability, and thus segregation will continue.

The second type of inclusion is one focused on inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions, whereby inclusion is connected to behaviour difficulties. Ainscow et al. explained that certain schools become fearful at the mention of the word inclusion because, for them, this word means that they will be asked to take students with behaviour difficulties into their school. The third type, according to Ainscow et al., refers to inclusion as focusing on groups vulnerable to exclusion. Here, inclusion is viewed in terms of overcoming disadvantages and discrimination of any groups which are vulnerable to exclusionary pressures.

The fourth type is associated with inclusion as the promotion of a school for all, whereby inclusion is related to having a common school for all children, where approaches of teaching and learning are constructed within it. The fifth type presented by Ainscow et al. refers to inclusion as education for all. Here, inclusion is seen as 'the possibilities for an education system inclusive of all children, specifically including disabled children' (p. 235).

Another typology of inclusion is that of Göransson and Nilholm (2014), who presented four different understandings of inclusion, the first being the placement of pupils with disabilities or pupils who need special support in mainstream classrooms. Variations within this category of definitions take into consideration the extent to which a child is included, that is, whether the child is included full-time or part-time only (Cawley et al., 2002). Such an understanding focuses only on the physical placement of the student in the general education classroom, and Göransson and Nilholm (2014) argued that such an understanding leads to questions about the quality of the educational environment in respect to the social and academic outcomes of the students.

The second category of definitions describes inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of pupils with disabilities and pupils who need special support. Here, inclusion is still defined in the context of disabled students and students who need special support; however, this acknowledges the social and academic needs of the students. Mitchell (2008) emphasised that inclusion is much more than the mere placement of disabled students in regular classrooms; rather, it is a formula composed of vision, placement, adapted curriculum, adapted assessment, adapted teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources and leadership. Although the formula he presented targeted disabled students, Mitchell insisted that it could also contribute to a better educational environment for all students. This is included in the third category, which presents inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all pupils. The focus in this category is on all pupils rather than just those pupils with disabilities or special educational needs (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

The fourth category depicts inclusion as the creation of communities. The characteristics of the group as a whole are included in this definition, rather than the individual situations of students. Naraian (2011) suggested that the notion of community is vital to the definition of inclusion, as it is a construct with which inclusive education has become strongly affiliated. Disabled students can only participate successfully in a mainstream classroom if there is a sense of classroom community which encourages the values of equity and care (Erwin & Guintini, 2000; Kluth, 2003).

Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson (2005) posited that inclusion is highly dependent on the harmonisation reached between the individual and other members of the group that person is trying to join. They stated that, the more similar these are, the easier it is to enter the group. Conversely, Hooghe et al. (2008) explained that modern societies are valuing minorities more than ever, resulting in homogeneous groups becoming the exception rather than the norm. Because of these changes in modern society, scholars have taken a special interest in exploring the situations in which people feel included in their respective groups (Lirio et al., 2008; Roberson, 2006). Despite this growing pool of literature, Jansen et al. (2014) have cautioned that these issues are still unclear, and that different scholars make different arguments.

For example, a definition by Shore et al. (2011) presented inclusion as ‘the degree to which individuals experience treatment from the group that satisfies their need for belongingness and uniqueness’ (p. 1265). Jansen et al. (2014) explain that this definition implies three important things about inclusion; firstly, it contends that inclusion is about how satisfied the individual is with the group. Secondly, inclusion is made up of two important concepts,

which are belongingness and uniqueness. Thirdly, it is the group that chooses to include or exclude the individual, rather than the other way around.

In contrast to Shore (2011), Jansen et al. (2014) took an interest in exploring the two concepts of belongingness and uniqueness in their definitions by referring to two theories: the optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) and the self-determination theory (SDT). The ODT claims that people have two opposing needs which are both fundamental to their well-being: the need for belongingness and the need for uniqueness (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Roccas, 2001). People are motivated to form strong relationships with other individuals and maintain them because this satisfies their need for belongingness, where they can interact pleasantly and affectively in a stable group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In addition to this, people also have the need to be distinctive and unique. Such a need can only be satisfied when people purposely distance themselves from significant others by de-emphasising one's similarities with others and promoting one's distinctive traits and beliefs (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Turner et al., 1987). Brewer and Roccas (2001) theorised that these two components of the ODT are only in opposition if the individual attempts to have them both at the same level. Indeed, the ODT suggests that there is a tendency that, when people start feeling more related to others, they will also start feeling less distinctive. However, other scholars have tended to support the definition put forward by Shore et al. (2011) that a sense of belonging and the need for uniqueness can still coexist simultaneously, and that an increased sense of belonging does not necessarily result in a weakened sense of individual uniqueness (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Homsey & Jetten, 2004).

Jansen et al. (2014) argued that valuing uniqueness might have different effects on different people depending on whether their status within the group is of a majority or minority type. Indeed, Plaut et al. (2011) stated that it is probable that majority group members feel excluded in groups which value uniqueness. This is where the SDT can come into play. The SDT posits that individuals have essential needs that can be fulfilled within a group (Jansen et al., 2014), which are very similar to the needs proposed by the ODT: relatedness and autonomy. The need for relatedness refers to one's yearning to feel linked to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the other hand, the need for autonomy refers to one's wish to make choices and behave in a way that is in accordance with one's sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). What makes the value of uniqueness and the value of authenticity similar is the fact that both values allow individuals to be different from one another; however, authenticity also allows individuals to be similar to each other, unlike uniqueness (Jansen et al., 2014). Therefore, according to the SDT, individuals

can respect their individuality while also enjoying a sense of belonging within a group (Jansen et al., 2014).

Thus, a key component of inclusion should be the value of authenticity rather than that of uniqueness. The value of authenticity here is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as part of the group and are allowed to be themselves. The values of authenticity and belongingness form the two important concepts of inclusion (Jansen et al., 2014).

2.2.4 Inclusive education in practice.

Besides being beneficial to students with disabilities or with SEN, inclusive education has been proven to have a number of other benefits, as stated by the Salamanca Statement:

> Regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (p. ix)

Ainscow (2020) explained this key passage, stressing that inclusive education is justified on a number of different grounds: an educational justification, a social justification and an economic justification. By an educational justification, Ainscow is referring to the requirement of schools to develop different ways of teaching in order to be able to respond to the individual differences of all the students. The social justification refers to the ability of inclusive schools to change attitudes towards difference through educating all children together, as they are the basis of a just future society. Finally, Ainscow (2020) explained economic justification, by which he refers to the fact that it is less costly to have schools which educate all children, rather than having to establish and maintain different schools specialising for different groups of children.

In spite of its benefits, however, Florian (2019) argued that, while inclusive education challenges the concept of special needs education and considers it as different from or additional to the education provided for the majority of learners, there are uncertainties as to whether it tends to replicate rather than replace special needs education in many situations. This has led to the argument that inclusive education is at risk of becoming another name for special education (Slee & Allan, 2001), and to the question of whether the concept of inclusive education has outpaced practice (Artiles et al., 2006). Responding to the latter argument, Florian (2017) stated that there is a practice gap between inclusive practices that result in positive outcomes for everyone, and others that are a mere reproduction of exclusion within schools for some.

Tanti Burlo' (2010) drew on examples from the Maltese context to highlight the greater gain of students with intellectual disability when educated in ordinary settings. She argued that

inclusion, 'when implemented in a "good-enough" way… may have positive effects on the cognitive, social, emotional, aids to daily living, level of self-determination and quality of life' (p. 204). She also added that, although up to a few years prior to the writing of her paper, she was convinced that the Maltese educational system was moving towards the embracement of more inclusive practices, she has changed her opinion after the more recent publication of ministerial documents such as: *For All Children to Succeed: A New Network Organisation for Quality Education in Malta* (2005), and *Special Schools Reforms* (2009), which, according to her, 'shifted toward a more segregated education through the use of resource centres (formerly known as special schools), and learning zones' (p. 205).

At the time of this writing, Tanti Burlo' (2010) had argued that, in spite of the principles in the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) (1999) that promote inclusive education, in the Maltese education system inclusion was still often viewed as the integration of disabled children rather than a philosophical foundation of all educational practices. Following this writing, the new official document *A National Curriculum Framework for All* (NCF) (2012) followed, again promoting a number of principles in regard to inclusive education, specifically principle 2 about diversity, principle 5 about quality assurance and principle 6 about teacher professional support. In principle 2, the NCF 'affirms that all children can learn, grow and experience success by respecting diversity in all its forms, promoting an inclusive environment, ensuring policies and practices that address the individual and specific needs of the learners and learning community' (p. 32).

In addition, principle 5 puts emphasis on the need to '[facilitate] the effective implementation of the curriculum…, [encourage] the adaptation of the curriculum according to the particular contexts and needs in schools and colleges, [promote] reflective practice, mentoring and professional development for teachers, [and advocate] the effective and efficient use of resources within and across schools and colleges' (p. 32). Principle 6, then, stresses the importance of teacher PD, where it requires that:

> stimulating and supportive environments and resources are available and accessible for all, appropriate internal structures are available to provide support to meet the needs of learners, teachers, school administrators, families and other stakeholders in schools and colleges, continuous professional development programmes are organised for all practitioners within Colleges and Schools as well as on-going professional development to address national and strategic issues (p. 32).

Mercieca and Mercieca (2019) claimed that all Maltese policy documents regarding inclusion following the Salamanca Statement recognise its importance and declare it as the main

contributor to the process of inclusion in Malta. They also insisted that the document was one on which educators, policymakers and parents based their arguments, and it indeed 'started a debate on a national level' (p. 851). However, the Salamanca Statement was seen by others as a limitation to the inclusive system in Malta as it implies that the permissible special schools or units within inclusive schools could provide 'the most suitable education for the relatively small number of children with disabilities who cannot be adequately served in regular classrooms or schools' (The Salamanca Statement, p. 12). Such 'small openings', according to Mercieca and Mercieca (2019), have allowed for possibilities of segregation within the Maltese education system. This relates to the beliefs of Tanti Burlo' (2010) presented earlier, where she claimed that the Maltese education system was shifting towards a more segregated education. In fact, Tanti Burlo' (2010) has also argued that 'there is, however, today, a growing trend to encourage parents of children with physical and/or multiple disabilities either to send their children to special schools for the whole week or to divide their week between "normal" school and the resource centre' (p. 211), further explaining that parents tend to be attracted to such options due to the specialised equipment in these centres, such as the multisensory room, hydrotherapy pool and health care staff in the school.

In view of these arguments, it appears that, despite the emphasis in both the NMC (1999) and the NCF (2012), inclusive practices still do not seem to be achieving their intended purpose, as was argued earlier by Tanti Burlo' in view of the NMC (1999) and as later resulted in the external audit report about special needs and inclusive education in Malta by the EASNIE (2014), following the publication of the NCF (2012). In fact, the external audit report (EASNIE, 2014) highlighted several areas for improvement within the Maltese education system, including 'the over-use of private psychologists to secure access arrangement dispensations' (p. 45), due to the fact that 'the educational system in Malta is essentially characterised by competition' (p. 45); 'school professionals who feel unprepared for inclusive education' (p. 49), because none of the SMTs, teachers, LSEs or other educational professionals felt that the initial or pre-service training they received met the demands of the day-to-day challenges they meet and failed to prepare them to work collaboratively with others, including working with parents; 'the continuing rise in numbers of learners referred for statementing' (p. 59); and, the 'over-reliance on statementing procedures as a means of securing support' (p. 60).

Mercieca and Mercieca (2019), in a paper published later, presented several questions in respect to this contrasting situation within the Maltese education system, whereby an inclusive education system is declared in official documents, while, at the same time, ties with segregated education seem to continue surfacing. Indeed, they questioned the co-existence of

inclusive education structures and exclusionary structures, asking whether one can be inclusive and segregating at the same time. They also attempted an explanation: they stated that inclusion in Malta works through a system of statementing, whereby disabled children are assigned an LSE, either on a one-to-one basis or shared with other students. They noted that there are also the additional services of other professionals, such as teachers of the hearing impaired, teachers of the visually impaired, dyslexia specialist teachers and teachers of the ASST, amongst others, who offer additional support to particular students. While this support is a positive thing, they voiced their concern because, in order to provide such support, there is often a search for children's deficits, as only children with a statement are allowed receive such support. A very recent example of this is the new Maltese government initiative to screen all children at 1 year and 8 months for autism (see Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018). Such an initiative is justified through the belief 'that early identification and early intervention will help autistic children cope better in life and will better enable parents to support them' (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019, p. 853), as was in fact already discussed in Section 2.1.4.

Apart from the above-mentioned encounters, a number of other challenges in inclusive education in Malta have been revealed by Galea's (2018) doctoral study in which she investigated the experiences of heads of schools, inclusion coordinators (INCOs) and teachers in implementing inclusive practices in a sample of Maltese secondary schools. Galea stated that, although many educators agree with the principle of inclusion in theory, many have serious doubts and confused feelings with regard to the inclusion of students with complex needs and thus find inclusion difficult to implement. The study revealed that there is a need for an increase in human resources and training for educators, amongst other issues. This is very insightful, as it relates to the findings of this research, in a slightly different context. This will be referred to in the discussion of findings in Chapters 5 and 6.

Very recently, *A National Inclusive Education Framework* (2019) and *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route for Quality Education* (2019) were published. The framework's aim is 'to provide a clear direction to schools on their journey towards inclusion' (p. 11), whereas the goal of the policy 'is to ensure that all learners have access to quality instruction, intervention and support to experience success in learning within a high quality Inclusive Education system' (p. 13). The policy further states that, in order to be able to reach this goal, 'it is necessary to clearly define and reshape all educational services to respond to the diversity of needs of all learners in our school community' (p. 13). In fact, the framework lists a number of barriers to inclusion which currently exist in Malta and proposes what the situation should look like instead. For example, the framework states that we should be moving from

viewing the learner as someone that should be diagnosed and labelled towards supporting the learner to overcome his/her challenges by providing learning opportunities according to his/her strengths and interests. The policy, which is built on the framework, is divided into four benchmarks, with each benchmark proposing a number of changes that should be done to the system in order to help remove or minimise the stated barriers. One such example in the policy is the suggestion that 'enough complementary support services are available to efficiently and effectively assess and provide strategies according to the needs' (p. 18).

These two documents (both published in 2019) were published after the data collection period of this current study (academic year 2018–2019). They also address inclusion in general, vis-à-vis the inclusion of autistic students, as is the case in this research. Moreover, in the documents, one encounters the views of various contributors, who come from different sectors, such as those coming from the NSSS, including assistant directors and education officers, together with a number of academics, amongst others; contrary to this, the contributors to this study are SMTs, teachers and LSEs, who give a bottom-up perspective of the realities of autism in schools. However, what is significant about them is that, although the time frames, the areas they explore and their respective contributors differ, some of the barriers to the inclusion of autistic students explored in this study also emerge in these documents in relation to inclusion in general. This further validates the findings of this study and highlights the importance of tackling the issues that arise from this study, as doing so will not only help autistic students and their educators, but all students in inclusive settings, irrespective of their dis/abilities, and all the educators concerned. This will be referred to in the discussion of the findings.

In this section, I have discussed the concept of inclusive education, including a review of the beginning of inclusive education, definitions and typologies of inclusive education, and the concept of inclusion in practice, with examples from the Maltese context. As discussed earlier, this overview of inclusive education is beneficial because more autistic students are now being educated in inclusive schools. In the following section, I will move on to discuss the educator in view of the above concepts, that is, in respect to actually teaching autistic students in inclusive environments.

2.3 Educators, Autistic Students and Inclusive Education

One goal of this study was to explore the perceived needs of educators when working with autistic students in mainstream classrooms. Therefore, having presented a discussion of autism, as well as a discussion of the concept of inclusive education, I will now move on to discuss the educator in the context of working with autistic students in inclusive environments.

Indeed, in this section, I discuss the role of the different educators working in mainstream schools to help the reader understand the educators' respective roles in the educational setting and discuss the importance of educators being knowledgeable about education, especially SEN education. The following sections discuss educators' knowledge of autism, their attitudes about inclusive education and factors that affect their attitudes.

2.3.1 Role of the educator in a primary mainstream school.

Educators play a very important role in the success of inclusive education (Acedo et al., 2009; Smelova et al., 2016). They are the ones who work in the inclusive environment of the schools and thus have a main responsibility in implementing inclusive practices (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018). Their work, knowledge and attitudes significantly influence the students. There are various educators in our schools, but this research will focus on SMT members, teachers and LSEs, as explained earlier in Section 2.1.5.

SMT members are entrusted with a heavy responsibility, especially in inclusive schools. In fact, Hoopey and McLeskey (2013) have argued that they play a crucial role by providing leadership in inclusive education. Villa et al. (1996) stated that the support the school leaders give the teachers is important because it affects the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. The support they give to other educators working in inclusive environments is equally important (Day, 2005). Lindqvist and Nilholm (2014) listed a number of responsibilities SMT members have, including organising work, proposing solutions to any challenging situations that may arise and leading and supporting staff. SMT members are responsible for gathering information about goal achievements and national examinations and collecting important documentation such as IEP documents. The job description for the post of head teacher (a member of the SMT) in Malta specifies that head teachers are responsible for the 'compilation and upkeep of school statistics, as well as student and staff records' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 39).

Although one might think that it is the teachers' job to be aware of the various teaching methods one can employ, Lindqvist and Nilholm (2014) stressed that it is also the duty of a head teacher to possess a vast knowledge of the different teaching methods an educator can employ in order to be able to support staff in their teaching. The job description for a head teacher in Malta also states that head teachers are responsible for determining strategies for effective teaching and learning, including the use of educational resources and services and the selection of textbooks (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). More importantly, head teachers should be willing and able to provide opportunities for these

strategies to be implemented. Another important job that head teachers perform is helping the educators in their school evaluate what happens in their classes, make decisions and find solutions to challenging situations they might encounter (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2014). This is also clearly stated in the job description of the head teachers' role in Malta, which specifies that head teachers should nurture 'the development and maintenance of a professional school team [by promoting] participation in decision-making and taking timely follow-up action and facilitating school self-evaluation exercises' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 38). Head teachers in Malta are expected to motivate, support, monitor and act as mentors to educators in their schools. Above all, head teachers are responsible for implementing 'an effective referral policy and procedures for students requiring specialised services' to ultimately 'promote an inclusive school policy' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 38).

Teachers are the ones who have to include students in their classes and work directly with them, whatever their abilities. The teacher's role is to acknowledge individual children with diverse needs (Utley & Obiakor, 2001). The job description for a teaching post in Malta clearly states that teachers are responsible for 'teach[ing] and educat[ing] students according to the educational needs, abilities and attainment potentials of individual students' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 10). General education teachers are expected to have the knowledge and skills needed to address the different needs and abilities of their students (Johnson, 2016). Teachers also have the responsibility to communicate with family members, special educators and other professionals and to plan for diverse needs (Utley & Obiakor, 2001). Teachers are responsible for planning the IEP through consultations with family members and professional colleagues and providing adaptations and modifications aimed at fully including students in their classroom (Johnson, 2016; Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007; Vakil et al., 2009). The job description of teachers in Malta also mentions this, specifying that teachers are expected to work with LSEs to develop and implement IEPs, making action plan (MAP) documents and individual transition plans (ITPs) for students transitioning to other schools (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). It further specifies that teachers need to collaborate with SMTs and INCOs when working on such plans and participate in the actual meetings. The role of teachers in the IEP process is of the utmost importance because they have the most contact with students, and it is likely that they are the ones who notice deficits in children's development in cases where students have not yet been diagnosed (Johnson, 2016). Johnson explained that teachers are able to provide information about students' strengths and weaknesses and insights into the classroom

environment and students' learning styles. It is the role of teachers to 'assess, record and report on the development, progress, attainment and behaviour of one's students' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 11).

To work with other professionals and students' families, teachers need to be collaborators. Teachers are expected to demonstrate cooperation, trust and mutual respect while sharing responsibilities (Johnson, 2016). It is a teacher's duty to arrange classrooms to support students with difficulties, review and interpret assessment results in order to better plan lessons, prepare accommodations, identify problems within classrooms and have the necessary problem-solving skills to address those problems (Johnson, 2016). In the preparation of lessons and resources, teachers need to liaise with specialist teachers and other professionals working with statemented students (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). Johnson (2016) stated that other skills teachers should have include the ability to integrate technology into their lessons and make use of available resources.

Teachers are in charge of delivering content and managing students' challenging behaviours, and as with head teachers, teachers are responsible for promoting and modelling social acceptance of people with disabilities (Johnson, 2016).

LSEs are the ones who work the most closely with students with SEN because they provide students with direct pedagogical instruction (Blatchford et al., 2009; MacBeath et al., 2006), and it is their responsibility to teach and support the students assigned to them (MacBeath et al., 2006). It is often the case that LSEs take full responsibility for the student assigned to them, with the teacher having little or no contact whatsoever with the student and his/her parents. LSEs modify schoolwork presented by teachers and support students so that they can become as independent as possible (Wren, 2017). They are responsible for helping students acquire as many skills as possible so that they can function well in society. Such skills include conversational skills, turn-taking, politeness and social confidence (Wren, 2017).

Another important responsibility of LSEs is to support students with their behavioural challenges. Wren (2017) stated that LSEs often need to stop students from disrupting the class and instead help them stay on task. MacVittie (2005) also mentioned behaviour management as one of the roles of the LSE.

LSEs are expected to provide their students with physical support when necessary (Logan, 2006; Wren, 2017). The job description of an LSE in Malta specifies that LSEs should offer personal support to students, including toileting and mobility assistance (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). Sometimes, LSEs are expected to help different students in the class rather than working with one particular student (Logan, 2006; Wren, 2017).

This function is also specified in the LSEs' job description in Malta (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). Logan (2006) added that LSEs can be asked to assist with non-teaching duties, offer supervision to students withdrawn from class and prepare and tidy up classrooms. The job description of LSEs in Maltese schools requires LSEs to 'support and collaborate with the class teacher and other colleagues' (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 7) by helping out with the preparation of educational resources and participating actively in instructional and educational activities in class.

In addition to the above-mentioned duties, Logan (2006) also pointed out that LSEs need to encourage their students by showing interest in what they do and by providing them with the necessary attention. This could be accomplished by praising students (MacVittie, 2005) when they accomplish something and helping students interpret their mistakes in a positive way. Above all, as with the other professionals, LSEs are required to work with teachers to develop and implement IEPs for their students by adapting lesson plans and taking advantage of resources, and they are expected to participate fully in MAP sessions and IEP and ITP meetings (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007).

Wren (2017) found that students who work with LSEs often view their LSEs as the ones who help them and often describe LSEs as friends. Indeed, Cable (2003) found that students often look to the LSE when they need support and guidance. Moreover, students view LSEs as the ones who offer guidance in pastoral and social needs, while also being involved in the discipline and management of behaviour in the classroom (Neil, 2002). LSEs are expected to help students during breaks and lunchtime (Wren, 2017) and protect them from harm (Logan, 2006; Wren, 2017). The job description of LSEs in Malta recommends that LSEs support students during out-of-school activities (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). Fraser and Meadows (2008) also determined that students believe that an LSE should be 'caring, happy and friendly' with 'comparable intelligence to a teacher, helpful, kind, with a good personality and importantly, [someone] who is good at listening (p. 355).

Parents believe it is the LSE's role to provide feedback on the child to both the teacher and parents and to modify lessons and materials (Ebersold, 2003). Parents also consider LSEs to be the ones promoting inclusion for their child within the classroom and school, supporting social interaction with peers and managing behavioural issues. At the same time, a certain level of worry arises amongst parents that the child might end up relying too heavily on the LSE, leading to social isolation (Farrell et al., 1999).

On the other hand, LSEs often consider themselves to be a liaison between school and home (Shaw, 2001), often being looked at as a point of reference by parents when they require

information and advice (Cable, 2003). In addition, they are often the ones who seek clarification from the teacher on the students' behalf, act as an advocate for parents and offer support to parents (Cable, 2003; Shaw, 2001).

As outlined above, the LSE is expected to perform a wide range of duties, often taking full responsibility for the student. The literature shows, however, that the role of the LSE is quite debatable, as seen in Tucker's (2009) paper, where he investigated this role from the perspectives of the different people, including teachers, parents and children, as presented in the literature. Various researchers have also discussed this. In fact, Ebersold (2003) found that LSEs tend to face a significant number of challenging situations whereby they are expected to be subordinate to the teacher or obliged to define their role for themselves. Collins and Simco (2006) further argued that LSEs tend to feel that they are treated like 'spare parts', only used as and when needed (pp. 204–205). Moreover, Rhodes (2006) found that LSEs often suffer because of poor management, lack of direction and guidance and role overlap, thus creating confusion and conflict when it comes to describing and analysing specific tasks. Even the contributions that LSEs make to inclusion are sometimes viewed negatively (Hemmingsson et al., 2003), as their presence is seen to act as a shield preventing students from facing challenges and interacting with peers (Abbott, 2002; Moyles & Suschitsky, 1997; Shaw, 2001). Hemmingsson et al. (2003) further added that the presence of an LSE can affect students' interactions with teachers in the classroom because it limits their quality and frequency. For this reason, it is argued that there needs to be a highly cooperative system that brings all educational stakeholders together. There also needs to be a lot of preparatory work by educators if inclusion is to be successful (Tucker, 2009). Effective collaboration between teachers and LSEs can be done in various ways, including schools valuing the LSEs' work, teachers involving LSEs in planning and holding regular meetings with them, and schools allowing LSEs to have PD opportunities and providing them with opportunities for collaboration and sharing of good practice (Butt & Lance, 2005; Groom & Rose, 2005).

Despite these negative views of the LSE, research has also revealed that there exists a general recognition of the valued support LSEs offer to teachers. Wilson et al. (2002) emphasised that teachers feel that LSEs allow them more time for planning and teaching, as they have to spend less time on preparing resources and other routine tasks. They often carry out other tasks which are non-pedagogical, such as photocopying, distributing materials to students, tidying up and displaying work (Jarvis, 2003; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003; Wilson et al., 2002). Because of this, some teachers view LSEs as needing similar skills to teachers (Bedford et al., 2008). At the same time, however, this development in the role of the LSE is looked at

with a certain amount of concern because, although LSEs are seen to be of great support to teachers, there are also others who see their role to be co-educators with teachers (Cajkler et al., 2006).

2.3.2 Educators' knowledge of autism.

How much knowledge educators have of autism is a debated subject. On the one hand, it is argued that having knowledge of autism is important for educators as they need to understand the behaviour of autistic students at school and in classrooms (Tobias, 2009). In such views, it is seen that a lack of such knowledge can easily lead to misinterpretation of behaviour, and autistic students might be seen as rebellious, disobedient or emotionally disturbed (Attwood, 2012; Ho, 2004). For example, Martin et al. (2019a) stated that being expressive about their feelings, which is often referred to as having a meltdown, can lead autistic students to acquire the label of exhibiting challenging behaviour. Most often, the reason behind a student's meltdown is, however, a sensory overload (Martin et al., 2019a). In such cases, labelling the child as behaviourally challenging is unhelpful; what is more beneficial is to get to the root of what is causing the so-called challenging behaviour (Martin & Milton, 2017; Martin et al., 2019a). However, while having knowledge of autism is considered important by some, others argue that it can also lead to a number of negative effects. In this section, I will therefore present the different arguments about having knowledge of autism.

According to Hodge (2016), 'labels are exposed as agents of "disabilism" and not the essential enablers of children that many teachers assume them to be' (p. 242). Hardman et al. (1999) defined labelling as the process that leads a society to come up with descriptors to classify individuals whose behaviour differs from the norm. Samkange (2015) explained that, in such a definition, there are two elements worth reflecting on: the role of society in creating such descriptors that indicate certain behaviours within the society, and the significance of norms and their role in assessing behaviour. Samkange also noted that, according to the labelling theory created by Howard Becker in 1963, society indeed plays a major role in defining behaviour through labels, with behaviours being considered as deviant when they do not conform to the norm. In light of the labelling theory, there are a number of issues related to behaviour that require careful consideration, one of which is the view that people tend to behave the way they are labelled. Another consideration is that labelling leads to stigmatisation (Samkange, 2015). Crossman (2014) also argued that negative labels contribute to low self-esteem and rejection.

Further to the above, Hodge (2016) also explained that labels have various 'disabling effects' (p. 244) and refers to three disabling effects presented by Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000). The first disabling effect is one where professionals use labels as a justification for the therapy autistic children receive, which is most often invasive, very costly and sometimes painful, all aiming at normalising the child as much as possible (Nadesan, 2005; Shyman, 2015). A second disabling effect of labels is the disempowerment of parents and other not medically involved professionals, where the knowledge parents and other professionals have of the child is rejected and disregarded (Gillman et al., 2000). Hodge (2016) cited an example from his own study where a mother of an autistic child stopped helping her son academically the minute she was told he had autism, as she thought she could no longer help him. A similar example of this is that given by Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) where a pre-grade teacher who noticed certain differences in one particular child in her class relied on other professionals to help the child, rather than first trying to help the child herself. In addition, having knowledge of autism can lead educators to misinterpret children's behaviour as being the result of autism if their behaviour does not conform to the stereotype, which is, in fact, the third disabling effect of labels. In other words, if a child is showing autistic behaviour, the cause of it may stem from an education system that does not accommodate their particular differences and needs, instead of the child actually being autistic (Cheng, n.d.). Indeed, the fact that the child has a diagnosis can then result in the behaviour being automatically attributed to the diagnostic label (Cheng, n.d,; Gillman et. al, 2000). Gillman et al. (2000) and Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) found that labels lower others' expectations of the labelled child, which is what Goodley (2001) referred to as 'relational construction'. This means that the individual's behaviour is interpreted in the light of the diagnostic label which, in turn, results in lower expectations for the child in respect to educational attainments and life in general. This means that educators could be reluctant to challenge the student, therefore limiting his/her opportunities to learn (Cheng, n.d.). This is seen very obviously once again in Hodge's (2016) example from his own study, where he explained that a father of an autistic child saw a drastic change in his son's teacher's behaviour as soon as the child was diagnostically labelled: prior to labelling the child, the teacher did her utmost to educate the child, but once the child was labelled as autistic, she stopped doing so. As a result of this, the autistic child could truly perform less well at school, which would ironically confirm the diagnostic label (Cheng, n.d.). In addition to this, diagnostic labels carry the risk of raising negative attitudes amongst the autistic child's peers, which can lead to negative actions, such as name calling and bullying (Cheng, n.d.). In fact, Mogensen and Mason (2015) found that, while some autistic individuals feel comfortable disclosing their diagnosis, others are very

reluctant to do so, as they feel that there are many negative connotations associated with it amongst society.

Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) determined that the child as a whole is seen in the light of the label, and therefore 'the focus is no longer on the child but on a collection of specific impairment behaviours and characteristics that are associated with the particular label' (Hodge, 2016, p. 247). Specifically, children stop having a special need and instead become the special need itself (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009). In such cases, the diagnostic label would negatively define the individual by focusing solely on the particular problem and, at the same time, shifting the focus away from the many positive personal characteristics of the individual, in a way that information is selectively chosen, thus confirming the label and neglecting any other facts about the child (Cheng, n.d.). This could be the reason why certain autistic individuals consider their diagnosis as 'oppressive', bringing a 'sudden focus' on the individual 'as an effort to change [them] and frame [their] identity, in ways that, at that time, [they] did not understand' (Mogensen & Mason, 2015, p. 258), thus causing them to struggle with a personal sense of identity of being different (Mogensen & Mason, 2015). In addition to this, diagnostic labels are often accompanied with prescriptions for medications with adverse side effects, which promise a treatment for the autistic behaviours, but instead add other debilitating effects (Cheng, n.d.).

However, as noted in the beginning of this section, diagnostic labels are sometimes seen as having benefits. In fact, Hodge (2016) claimed that his experience of working with educators and carers of autistic children proved that it is very difficult for educators and parents to relinquish the label. Labels are associated with the high status of doctors and thus considered as given by authority to the individual (Lipworth et al., 2013; Thomas, 2007). In addition, labels provide more knowledge about the individual's condition and thus a better understanding of his/her needs, while also providing a service to the child (Jodrell, 2010). Another important function of labels is that they provide parents with an explanation of the otherwise non-understandable symptoms of their child (Cheng, n.d.; Gillman et al., 2000) and validate their distress by attributing it to something medical (Correia, 2017), thus serving as an explanatory tool of the child's behaviour in public (Gray, 2002). Furthermore, labels sometimes also serve to confirm the parents' concerns (Avdi et al., 2000) and, at the same time, relieve the pressure put on their parenting skills by putting it on the condition, which is indeed responsible for the child's difficulties (Ong-Dean, 2005). Sometimes, labels also help labelled children themselves to safeguard their self-image by enabling them to attribute their difficulties to the diagnosis instead of blaming themselves (Cheng, n.d.). Mogensen and Mason (2015) found that labels are

sometimes considered liberating in the sense that they help individuals understand their identity, reframe their problems and validate their experiences of being different, which in turn helps them gain a sense of control over their lives. However, what I believe to be the most important reason of all is that a label seems to be the only way parents can access services for their child, as well as additional financial support (Hodge, 2006; Kelly, 2005), and 'the ability to access resources can therefore make a label a desired commodity' (Hodge, 2016, p. 254). Mercieca, Mercieca and Bugeja (2018) agreed with this latter reason, further stating that processes of labelling and diagnosing children have developed significantly and have become more child- and family-friendly in appearance. They also added that this aids in early identification of developmental disorders 'in the hope of gaining funding for intervention with the promise by the state to support these children and their families' (p. 543). An example from the Maltese context of when a 'label' is necessary is when one applies for the services of the ASST, which will only provide the service to children who have a diagnosis of autism (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019). A justification for this was provided to the researchers upon request, stating that it is one way to ensure that the service is not requested by more individuals than it can currently provide to (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019). However, Mercieca, Mercieca and Bugeja (2018) also stressed that labelling does not come without consequences and cited Allen Frances (2012) who was involved in the formulation of the DSM-IV and who argued that 'once you go public, your best intentions may not predict or prevent harmful unintended consequences' (p. 695).

In view of the above discussion, I would argue that it is almost impossible to avoid a diagnostic label, as this would mean a total absence of resources and services. At the same time, as noted, a diagnosis also puts the educator in a position where s/he could be more alert to the particular challenges the child may face. Moreover, being aware of the diagnosis or otherwise having knowledge of autism could help the educator to be able to refer the child for expert guidance if need be. However, I do agree with Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2012) who insisted that educators should make use of the 'use and refuse' concept when dealing with labels. Hodge (2016) explained the concept, stating that when it is beneficial for the child, such as when accessing resources, labels should be used; but, in circumstances where the label is going to restrict the child's opportunities, the label should be rejected.

A point which I want to make clear in this regard is that I firmly believe that, for a child to receive support services, there should not be the need for a diagnostic label. Support services should be offered to any child who needs them regardless of whether they have a diagnosis or not. The argument about a label being necessary in order to access support does not change the effects of the label, and it remains a disabling factor with regard to autistic children. Indeed,

considering the many disabling factors of labels, 'it does not seem so easy to label someone, and yet people do find it too easy to label someone unnecessarily' according to Richards (2016, p. 1303). Richards also argued against the use of a label, the effects of which he has experienced himself in his interactions with those around him, despite having no formal diagnosis. He claimed that there is nothing wrong with certain people celebrating their diagnosis, if this makes them feel good; however, he further noted that:

> the simplicity and ease of labelling by professionals, or by people who simply need a justification for seemingly odd behaviour, does not account for the complex, messy and complicated people we are, in how we interpret ourselves or how people interpret us (p. 1303).

Therefore, in light of the above discussion about the effects of labels, I would also argue that there is a difference between educators having knowledge of autism and the difficulties it presents, and educators having knowledge of a particular child's diagnostic label of autism. The first would mean that educators are well-informed of the possible challenges children in their class might be facing, while the latter would mean that they see the child in the light of those particular challenges. While the latter could easily lead to the disabling effects described by Hodge (2016), the first could mean that educators are well-informed about, and thus well-prepared for, the various challenges and difficulties existing amongst their students. Thus, I strongly believe that the strategies educators choose to adopt for their students make a difference on whether or not an autistic child is supported in class, which again makes it important for educators to have knowledge of autism and its challenges. There are many different strategies that educators can adopt in class, which would not only support autistic students, but would be beneficial to all the students in class. Martin et al. (2019a) noted that they are particularly in favour of such approaches, insisting that strategies used to help autistic children are useful to everyone else. Such beliefs find their roots in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. Martin et al. (2019a) provided various examples of how this can be done, including the introduction of brain breaks between lessons for all students, the idea of Clever Classrooms (Barrett et al., 2015), making use of the children's interests to keep all students motivated, and providing the students with alternative places where they can go during the break, instead of the playground, for those who prefer a quiet place, without labelling the alternative places as the places for autistic children. This is, therefore, why I will now be focusing my discussion on the importance of educators having knowledge of autism.

Research has shown a positive relationship between the quality of educational programmes for teachers and students' success (Brownell et al., 2005). Also, studies have found that teachers' training affects their confidence level and the strategies they use to address

challenging behaviour in class (Segall & Campbell, 2012; Westling, 2010), and a positive relationship between teachers and students reduces behavioural problems in class (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003).

It is very worrying that the literature has revealed that educators in general lack knowledge of autism. According to Al-Sharbati et al. (2015) and Rakap et al. (2016), many teachers have poor knowledge of and misconceptions about autism, while Haimour and Obaidat (2013) found that educators have a low to intermediate level of knowledge. Adequate general knowledge of autism amongst educators was found by Mavropoulou and Padeliadu (2000), although they also indicated that educators are confused about the causes of the disorder. Such confusion and lack of knowledge could be the result of the minimal training in working with autistic students that educators receive (McGregor & Campbell, 2001), which results in educators feeling a lack of confidence when working with autistic students (Schwartz & Drager, 2008). Research has shown that teachers' education includes little or no training in evidence-based practices for teaching autistic students (Hart & More, 2013; Hendricks, 2011). Yasar and Cronin (2014) also emphasised the importance of educators receiving more training and preparation in order to effectively serve students with autism if their current knowledge of autism is very limited.

The situation is even more worrying because of the possibility that children are entering formal schooling without a diagnosis (Freeth et al., 2014), leaving educators responsible for identifying symptoms of the condition and referring students for professional help (Rakap et al., 2016). It is worth stressing here that a diagnosis of autism might leave a negative impact on the child by labelling him/her, ultimately leading to educators perceiving each of the child's behaviours in light of the diagnosis (Fogel & Nelson, 1983); however, despite this, a diagnosis is still necessary for the child to be eligible for available services (Russell & Norwich, 2012). Unfortunately, as Hodge (2016) explained, 'the loss of a label will also result in the loss of entitlement to additional services' (p. 249). Lane et al. (2012) argued that educators' expectations of autistic students can negatively affect their teaching methods, educational practices and goals for students because they may not be appropriately suited to the students' needs. The ability to understand students' strengths and weaknesses is another reason why educators should have a good understanding of autism. While educators do this for each of their students, being aware of a child's autism will help educators understand that particular child's strengths and needs even better, as autism might present particular strengths and needs arising from the condition.

Having discussed the perceived benefits of diagnostic labels and the importance of educators having knowledge of autism, I will now move on to discuss the attitudes of educators towards inclusive education. I believe this is an important subject to be discussed here, as attitudes also play a significant role in the successful inclusion of autistic students in inclusive settings.

2.3.3 Educators' attitudes towards inclusive education.

Inclusive education starts with the attitudes of the educators (Acedo et al., 2009) because 'attitudes add a complex dimension to inclusive education policies that go beyond amending the system' (p. 232). The international literature has revealed that attitudes amongst educators towards inclusive education vary from one study to the next. While Khochen and Radford (2012) reported generally positive attitudes amongst both teachers and head teachers, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Poon et al. (2016) suggested that school personnel have neutral attitudes towards inclusion. However, considerable research has shown a discrepancy between how educators view the idea of inclusion and their attitudes towards it in practice (Damore & Murray, 2009; Leach & Duffy, 2009). Monahan, Marino and Miller's (2001) study revealed that general education teachers tend to support the philosophy of inclusion but do not want to teach in inclusive settings. These findings are also supported by Farrell (2000), Santoli et al. (2008) and Usher and Pajares (2008). Emam and Farrell (2009) claimed that teachers are key to autistic students having successful experiences in mainstream classes. The fact that even teachers who are optimistic about teaching disabled students in inclusive settings tend to question their ability to teach children with special educational needs is a serious concern (Damore & Murray, 2009; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Usher & Pajares, 2008). Educators' attitudes towards inclusion are vital contributing factors to students' success (Messemer, 2010). Bandura, in his self-efficacy theory, described this concisely: 'What people think, believe and feel affects how they behave' (1986, p. 25). To this effect, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) stated that an increase in self-efficacy can help change the negative attitudes of educators towards inclusion, which will then affect the success of students in learning, self-esteem and social interactions (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Rubie-Davis, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006). In addition, Avramidis and Norwich insisted that 'teachers' acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it' (2002, p. 130). In their study, Humphrey and Symes (2013) reported that teachers tend to have lower self-efficacy than SMT members and inclusion specialists, especially in terms of managing challenging behaviours associated

with autism. They also found that the behaviour that educators find the most difficult to cope with is inappropriate emotional displays by autistic students.

Research also indicated that educators believe that inclusion provides numerous benefits for autistic students, such as more awareness, acceptance of diversity and reduced stigma amongst typically developing peers, and opportunities for autistic students to experience new social situations and develop social skills (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). Inclusive education positively presents autistic students with more challenging academic tasks (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). However, educators also feel that the lack of awareness of autism amongst peers often leads to misunderstanding the behaviours exhibited by autistic students and to educators having unrealistic expectations of autistic students (Brewin, Renwick, & Schormans, 2008). These misunderstandings amongst peers and unrealistic expectations of educators are often exacerbated when parents choose not to have their children formally diagnosed, resulting in the children's ineligibility for resources and making it more difficult for peers to understand and accept autistic students (Lindsay et al., 2013).

Emam and Farrell (2009) discussed how many teachers consider the modifications and adaptations needed by autistic students to be time-consuming, which frustrates them. Soto-Chodiman, Pooley and Taylor (2012) found that teachers feel the need to facilitate interactions between autistic students and the other students in the class. Teachers understand that student-peer relationships are not easy and that the difficulties presented by autism often lead to isolation, teasing and bullying (Hedges et al., 2014; Johansson, 2014).

Johansson (2014) stated that teachers view challenging behaviour as inappropriate and a cause of class disruptions. Typical behaviours identified as challenging or disruptive by educators include stereotypic utterances, fidgeting, off-task behaviour and task refusal (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). Teachers consider self-injury, tantrums and physical aggression unacceptable (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012), while it seems that the most difficult behaviour for them to handle is the way autistic children display emotions (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Sansosti and Sansosti (2012) explained that educators are concerned that such challenging behaviour affects both the students' academic achievement and the safety of others.

Lindsay et al. (2013) added that educators find it difficult to explain the situation to typically developing students, especially when peers exhibit frustration over autistic students being treated differently. While it may seem unnecessary or perhaps unethical for educators to explain a child's condition to the rest of the class, it would be very beneficial if educators make all students aware of each of their own particular differences. People are all unique and have

their own different needs, and it is very important that children understand this so that they become more tolerant of other students' differences.

In view of this, educators cite their lack of knowledge about autism as a limitation to understanding students' behavioural challenges and feel that they are unaware of appropriate strategies and approaches to managing such behaviour (Johansson, 2014). Segall and Campbell (2012) and Humphrey and Symes's (2013) findings that principals and special education teachers feel that they are more capable of adapting strategies for autistic students than are general education teachers are noteworthy here. Lindsay et al. (2013) found that general education teachers feel they have limited knowledge of autism, resulting in reactive approaches rather than proactive ones. As a result, they highlighted the need for professional training.

2.3.4 Factors affecting educators' perceptions and attitudes.

As previously noted, educators often believe in the concept of inclusion, but are reluctant to teach in inclusive environments (Damore & Murray, 2009; Gordon, 2006). Research has indicated that numerous factors contribute to this reluctance, including lack of training (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Daanem Beirne-Smith & Latham, 2000; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007; Poon et al., 2016). De Boer et al. (2011) and Forlin et al. (2008) supported findings that indicated the importance of training. They noted that teachers' perceptions about inclusion depend considerably on their degree of training and PD. This is mainly because inclusion requires teachers to work with a diverse group of students, and this in itself presents a level of complexity (Acedo et al., 2009). Training positively impacts educators' attitudes towards inclusion because they feel more prepared to work with autistic students. Khochen and Radford (2012) supported this assertion, stating that mainstream teachers receive insufficient training, considering the great amount of training needed for inclusive teaching to be effective. On the other hand, Wilkins (2004) stated that training improves LSEs' knowledge and understanding of the child's difficulties, which makes it even more worrying to know that LSEs tend to lack sufficient training (Tucker, 2009). In addition to this, Acedo et al. (2009) suggested that training 'should also involve special education training, so that teachers not specialised in this field are capable, with the help of specialists, of dealing with students who require special needs education' (p. 232).

Teachers' perceptions also tend to be affected by their previous experiences with inclusion (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Rubie-Davis et al., 2006). De Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2011) agreed that teachers' perceptions are influenced by the number of years of teaching experience they have. They found that teachers

with less teaching experience tend to have more positive attitudes than teachers with more years of teaching experience. Vermeulen, Denessen and Knoors (2012) and De Boer et al. (2011) supported these findings by stating that educators' attitudes are also affected by the experiences they have had supporting students with SEN. Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) insisted that the quality of educators' experiences with inclusion also plays a significant role in the attitudes they have towards inclusion. Tournaki (2003) claimed that educators' experiences affect their attitudes, while arguing that the amount and type of training in different teaching styles and the teachers' perception of their own efficacy are also major factors which affect educators' attitudes towards inclusion.

Other factors affecting educators' perceptions of inclusivity include lack of knowledge about disabilities, perceived loss of time dedicated to general education students and insufficient support in dealing with challenging students (Daanem et al., 2000; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007). Educators' understanding of what a disability is, in terms of the medical or social model of disability discussed earlier, might also be a key factor affecting their attitudes. Khochen and Radford (2012) determined that disabled students need more time dedicated to them than do students without disabilities. Thus, teachers' perceptions towards inclusion also tend to be influenced by students' level of difficulty with their respective challenges and the type of classroom setting (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Rubie-Davis et al., 2006).

Following Tournaki (2003), research has highlighted confidence and self-efficacy amongst teachers as important characteristics for developing positive attitudes towards inclusion (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Boer et al., 2011; Poon et al., 2016; Vermeulen et al., 2012). These studies explained that such characteristics evolve through the accumulation of experience and the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Although Avramidis and Norwich (2002) stated that research on gender as a factor affecting educators' perceptions about inclusion is inconclusive, more recent research by De Boer et al. (2011) have suggested that the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education is affected by the teacher's gender. In a study in which they explored various studies on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, they found two studies that showed that female teachers were more supportive of inclusion; however, the other studies they explored revealed no gender differences. In contrast, Ernst and Rogers (2009) found that male high school teachers are more receptive to inclusion than female teachers. However, De Boer et al. (2011) acknowledged that research on the issue is inconsistent.

Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) discussed personal perceptions as being formed out of cognitive, affective and behavioural components. The affective component is based on one's understanding of a disability through feelings, moods and emotions, which may then affect one's desire to work with disabled children. The behavioural component refers to the way one behaves or responds when in contact with disabled children. Finally, the cognitive element comprises a person's thoughts and attitudes towards disabled children. These three components form one's perception about disabled children.

Educators' perceptions of inclusion are also affected by the type of disabilities of the students in their classroom. Khochen and Radford (2012) reported a common certainty amongst head teachers that inclusion is not ideal for everyone. The researchers also argued that the type and severity of the disability a student has affects educators' attitudes towards inclusive education, suggesting that educators believe that students with severe disabilities are more difficult to handle than students with less severe disabilities. Levins, Bornholt and Lennon (2005) suggested that students with social and physical needs tend to be negatively perceived, while students with cognitive needs tend to be positively perceived. However, Khochen and Radford (2012) argued that educators tend to have more positive relationships with students who have minor disabilities than with those who have more severe limitations. They further contended that disabled students tend to be accepted in class but still have fewer friends. On the other hand, De Boer et al. (2011) noted that negative attitudes towards inclusive education amongst educators are mostly reported in cases of students with learning, behavioural and cognitive disabilities, while teachers tend to feel more positive towards students with physical and sensory impairments. According to Robertson et al. (2003), in general, teachers exhibit positive attitudes towards autistic students, but this positivity decreases if students develop an increase in negative behaviours, possibly due to the difficulties the autistic students might be facing when trying to adjust to inclusive environments. Thus, PD and support for educators are imperative.

Van Reusen, Shoho and Barker (2001) presented certain areas of concern indicated by teachers who express negative feelings towards inclusion. These included the manner in which instructions are delivered, the classroom's learning environment and the extent to which both instructions and environment are favourable to students with SEN. Gartin and Murdick (2005) and Goodman and Williams (2007) presented similar findings. In addition, Khochen and Radford (2012) indicated that educators' attitudes tend to be affected by the lack of funding dedicated for resources, human resources and training. Thus, while the concept of inclusion is

well-supported in theory, enacting it is complicated (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006; Van Reusen et al., 2001).

2.3.5 Educational culture and dominant ways of viewing disability, difference and inclusion in Malta.

In Malta, disabled people have only very recently started their journey towards inclusion in mainstream economic and social life. From 1945 through the mid-1980s, the medical model was the dominant model of viewing disability (Camilleri, 2006). At this point, disabled people in Malta must still struggle daily to survive (Camilleri, 2006), and segregation remains a reality in everyday life for many disabled people even in the present day, especially in education, service accessibility and employment (Depares, 2019). Maltese Disabilities Commissioner Oliver Scicluna, a disabled person himself, in a recent interview with Ramona Depares (2019) explained that disabled people now want more in all aspects of their lives, and the CRPD has had a spike in the number of complaints reported about various acts of discrimination (Depares, 2019). In regard to inclusive education, Scicluna has insisted that the system is not working. He mentioned a number of factors contributing to this: first, the recent split of the educators' union into two different unions led to joint efforts being also split; secondly, the curriculum is outdated and does not promote inclusion; and thirdly, the issue that the LSEs are not functioning well (Depares, 2019). Scicluna added that, lately however, disabled people are being looked at more as people who have something to offer; indeed, the present social media has reflected such improvements (Curmi, 2020; Depares, 2019), but he insisted that there are still people out there who look at disabled people as a charity case, or otherwise as superhuman or an inspiration (Curmi, 2020; Depares, 2019). This idea of disabled persons seen as a charity case is shared by various academics (Bezzina & Camilleri, 2018; Camilleri & Callus, 2001; Cremona, 2019), with Cremona (2019) arguing that, at times, non-disabled students at school befriend disabled students simply because they pity them or because they feel that is socially appropriate.

Disabled people are aware that research in the field of disability studies in Malta is most often not targeted at improving disabled people's lives, but rather to obtain personal academic success and career achievement on the part of the researcher. Thus, disabled people are ending up fatigued from excessive interview requests, while gaining nothing in return (Camilleri, 2006); a point also noted by Milton (2014b), where he argued that disabled people are becoming distrustful of researchers' aim when doing a research. Indeed, Camilleri (2006) stated that disabled people in Malta are concerned that the research agenda in Malta is still controlled by non-disabled academics, most of whom still retain a medical model perspective.

Bajada (2019) argued that, despite the substantial efforts being made towards inclusive education in schools, many disabled students remain marginalised. This links back to the concerns of Mercieca and Mercieca (2019) discussed in Section 2.2.4, where they argued that inclusive education is declared in official documents, but segregation is still seen in practice. Bajada (2019) also confirmed Tanti Burlo's (2010) statement regarding a preference amongst adults to send their children to a special school. Furthering Scicluna's argument noted above (Depares, 2019), Bajada (2019) added that, amongst the several barriers to inclusive education, one finds that many school administrators and educators still perceive disability from the medical model view, which is often reflected in their discourses, further arguing that, despite the wording used in school philosophies affirming the social model perspectives, many students she encounters have to strive to be recognised by society, again confirming Mercieca and Mercieca's (2019) arguments referred to above. Moreover, despite the authorities declaring that we embrace inclusive education, policies often still reflect the medical model in that they are designed in a way that fits and, to a certain extent, normalises the disabled person within the educational system (Bajada, 2019). Indeed, it is determined whether or not a student qualifies for inclusive education by medical and psychological evaluations, continuously portraying the idea that disability stems from the individual (Bajada, 2019; EASNIE, 2014). For example, this is clearly portrayed in the need of an educational psychologist's report for teachers to adapt lessons according to the student's needs, and the need for a student to appear before an assessment board to determine whether or not they are eligible for an LSE (Bajada, 2019; EASNIE, 2014; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019). Despite that such practices are considered essential for objective criteria to reflect transparency and good governance, they nonetheless attribute students' lack of success in mainstream education to their personal difficulties (Bajada, 2019).

Recent studies within the Maltese educational context clearly indicate that inclusive education in Malta still has a long way to go in order for it to be truly inclusive (see, for example, Bajada, 2019; Calleja, 2019; Cremona, 2019). For instance, in her study, Bajada (2019) identified several key themes indicating that disabled students in Malta are not given a voice. The importance of giving disabled students the opportunity to voice their perspectives will be discussed in greater length in Section 3.1.4. For example, Bajada (2019) argued that disabled students are not given an opportunity to talk about their feelings and thoughts, but their LSEs and parents normally speak on their behalf. Moreover, she noted that there exists a great stigma about disability, so much so that the participants in her study, who were adolescent students with various disabilities, did not want to identify themselves as disabled. Interestingly, Bajada

(2019) also noted that characteristics normally seen in typical adolescents were seen as characteristics of the disability in such cases. Examples of this included one student's decision not to attend college, which was seen as stubbornness arising from his condition, and another student's obsession about a particular book series as being related to his disability. Such characteristics, claimed Bajada (2019), are both typical of adolescence. Other observations were that LSEs normally chose friends for their disabled students and that parents often do not trust their disabled children. Cremona (2019) also found that parents tend to be overprotective of their disabled children; this overprotection then lowers others' expectations of the disabled individual (Sanders, 2006), which in turn lowers the individual's self-esteem and hinders them from fully developing their potential and independence (Callus et al., 2019). In addition, Bajada (2019) found that LSEs are often considered responsible for the disabled student, which confirms what was discussed in Section 2.3.1 that LSEs often take full responsibility of the disabled student, and that the teachers' expectations for disabled students are often lower than those for other students. The latter corroborates what was discussed in Sections 2.3.2 concerning what Gillman et al. (2000) and Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) determined about the disabling effects of labels. Above all, the IEP document, which supposedly serves as the official document which targets the disabled student's individual needs in order to facilitate his/her inclusive education, most often ends up becoming a translation of examination targets, where most decisions are taken by the professionals, educators and parents, leaving little or no say to the students themselves. Moreover, the IEP document is, in reality, embedded in a medical professional's diagnoses, with their suggestions and recommendations ultimately and discreetly illustrating how a student deviates from the norm, and how this should be fixed (Bajada, 2019).

In light of the above discussion about the educational culture and dominant ways of viewing disability, difference and inclusion in Malta, it could be argued that self-advocacy and parental advocacy are crucial in the Maltese context. In fact, Callus (2020) has maintained that intellectually disabled persons are 'conspicuous and absent at the same time' and 'working with persons with intellectual disability therefore entails striving towards the removal of disabling barriers and towards enabling them to be accepted for who they are' (p. 27), hence the importance of self-advocacy as stated above. Self-advocacy refers to the right of disabled people to speak for themselves and make their own decisions without feeling pressured by those around them (Callus, 2020; Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Persuni b'Diżabiltà (KNPD), 2012). Callus (2020) insisted that disabled persons might need support in order for them to become self-advocates; nevertheless, this does not diminish their abilities of becoming so. It is for this reason that Callus and Bonello (2017) argued against the tendency amongst Maltese parents to

be overprotective of their intellectually disabled children (Callus, 2013). Callus and Bonello (2017) explained that, while it is necessary to ensure that disabled people are safe, we also need to be aware of any unnecessary restrictions we put on them. They further explained that disabled people should not accept demeaning attitudes from those around them and instead should look at themselves as capable adults. Thus, this is where self-advocacy comes into play.

Apart from self-advocacy on the part of disabled individuals, parental advocacy from parents of disabled individuals is also a highly significant factor. As will be observed later in this research, in Malta there is some degree of tension between education professionals and parents, as parents are sometimes considered as the ones who are 'mak[ing] life "difficult" for professionals because they ask, expect answers and demand quality assurance', according to Azzopardi (2000, p. 1066). Azzopardi also claimed that, due to this, parents at times become sceptical about representation and self-advocacy, as they see themselves continuously struggling with professionals. As Azzopardi further noted, self-advocacy should be looked at as a process of adjusting society to the requirements of minorities and not the other way round, which takes us back to our discussion about the medical model view of disability dominant within the Maltese culture of disability (see Section 2.1.2). Indeed, Maltese parents often tend to feel stigmatised due to the medical understandings of disability amongst professionals, which further enhance disabling barriers instead of providing parents with the required support (Azzopardi, 2000). Self-advocacy and parental advocacy therefore have an important role in developing discourse around disability to politically enable and equip the individual (Mitchell, 1997). What too often happens, however, is that parents are too tired and stressed to be concerned about self-advocacy (Mitchell, 1997); hence, this is one reason why many Maltese parents of disabled children tend to revert to intensive behavioural intervention aiming at transforming the child in order for him/her to fit into the Maltese society described above. One very popular behavioural intervention amongst parents in Malta is ABA (Vella, 2019), which has also been widely promoted in the media (see The Malta Independent, 2018; The Times of Malta, 2015a, 2015b).

2.4 Summary

This chapter began with a specific discussion of the concepts of autism and inclusive education. It then examined the educator in the light of these two concepts, that is, the educator who works with autistic children in inclusive education settings.

In the first section about autism, I presented a definition of autism, followed by a discussion of the differing views concerning autism, where I explained the various arguments

in this regard. This section was especially important because different people view autism in different ways, and therefore this section will help the reader make sense of the different perspectives of autism amongst educators presented later in this study. I also included a section with the characteristics of autism, where I discussed some of its aspects that are considered as part and parcel of autism, including prevalence, causes and co-occurrences with other conditions, amongst others. A section on early intervention was also included in which I discussed the contrasting arguments in this regard, whereby some academics promote early intervention as a measure which can eliminate or correct autism, whereas others focus on the damaging effects of early intervention. This section was essential, as once again it presents the different arguments about early intervention, and enlightens the reader about the negative aspects of early intervention which one might never have thought about, as will indeed be seen in the discussion of findings later on. Finally, I also presented a small section about research on autism in Malta, which explains the significance of this particular study.

Next, I discussed the beginning of inclusive education, followed by an attempt at a definition. I argued about the lack of one universally accepted definition of the concept and the repercussions of this. I also presented a number of typologies of the concept, followed by a discussion of the concept of inclusive education in practice, including references to the Maltese context. This section was very important for this study, as the research focuses on the needs of educators who are working with autistic students in an inclusive environment, and thus complements the previous section, and helps the reader understand what is meant by inclusive education.

Lastly, the section about the educator put forward various aspects about the educator presented in light of the concepts of autism and inclusive education. I therefore included a section about the role of the educators in a primary mainstream school, together with a section about the knowledge educators have about autism, whereby the various arguments about this issue were explained. Following this, I presented an overview of literature about educators' attitudes towards inclusive education, together with a discussion of the numerous factors that affect educators' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive education. The scope of this section was to help the reader picture the educator in his/her setting, that is, teaching autistic students in a mainstream school, and thus helps in understanding certain perceptions and attitudes discussed in the analysis of findings later on.

The following chapter is the second part of the literature review, which focuses on the concept of educating autistic students in inclusive settings in practice.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Part 2

3.0 Introduction

This chapter is the second part of the literature review. In this chapter, I focus on the practical side of educating autistic students in inclusive settings. I discuss the challenges faced by educators when working with autistic students. I also include a section on effective inclusive education, whereby I present a number of critical components needed for successful inclusive education. This is followed by a section about the successful interventions and strategies used with autistic students in inclusive settings.

In respect to the above, I discuss each of the following: the resources needed to help educate autistic students, the necessary training for educators to educate autistic students and the support needed to educate autistic students. These sections highlight a number of resources which are essential in inclusive settings, various types of training deemed necessary for educators in inclusive settings and the different forms of support required by educators in inclusive settings, respectively.

3.1 Educating Autistic Students in Inclusive Settings

In reality, inclusion presents a number of challenges to educators. However, inclusive education can be successful in helping autistic students accomplish their respective individual goals, and the following sections discuss a number of critical components for effective inclusive education together with successful interventions and strategies. Later in the chapter, I also discuss the necessary resources, training and support that can help educators overcome the challenges discussed below.

3.1.1 Challenges for educators working with autistic students.

Educators are expected to include the growing number of autistic students in their classrooms, but they are given little or no support for doing so (Horrocks et al., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013). Humphrey and Lewis (2008) stated that inclusion is extremely complex and one of the least understood areas of education. Schools face numerous struggles in keeping up to date with the recent changes in education, including inclusion. Undoubtedly, mainstream schooling benefits autistic children both in terms of curriculum access and social inclusion; however, research has shown that schools often struggle to meet the demands of autistic students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010), and not enough is being done to create inclusive environments in classrooms (Hinton, Sofronoff, & Sheffield, 2008; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Smith & Brown, 2000).

A well-implemented, inclusive education can improve students’ engagement and social support and raise education goals for autistic students (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Eldar,

Talmor, & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010; Vakil et al., 2009). However, implementing inclusion is challenging. Research on autistic students highlighted appropriately managing students' needs (Lindsay et al., 2013; Wilmhurst & Brue, 2010), insufficient knowledge of autism and lack of support and assistance (De Boer & Simpson, 2009) as some of the key issues educators face. A lack of training in autism may leave teachers ill-equipped, and consequently, autistic students may be unable to demonstrate their best abilities (Allen & Cowdery, 2005; Warnock, 2005).

Lindsay et al. (2013) listed the following as challenges educators face when working with autistic children in mainstream classes: understanding and managing behaviour, socio-cultural barriers and creating an inclusive environment. Emam and Farrell (2009) found that the teachers of students on the autism spectrum are often anxious and tense when dealing with the students' difficulties, especially those related to social and emotional understanding. Understanding and managing student behaviour can be difficult for teachers because they may lack sufficient knowledge about the support an autistic child needs, especially knowledge of the various ways to work with such children in an inclusive environment (Lindsay et al., 2013). For example, some autistic students find it difficult to handle unstructured events that are not part of their regular routine, and educators find it difficult to explain the behaviour of autistic students to the other students in the class and to engage autistic students, who have limited interests and dislike being presented with something in which they are not interested. In addition, teachers and peers find it difficult to build relationships with autistic children because autism usually presents itself with difficulties in socialisation. While Robertson et al. (2003) referenced the benefits of positive social relationships between autistic students and their teachers, Humphrey and Symes (2013) argued that autistic students present a challenge in socialisation. De Boer et al. (2011) analysed the attitudes of regular primary school teachers towards inclusive education and found that many teachers have negative beliefs about inclusive education, possibly because they perceive themselves as lacking sufficient knowledge of how to educate students with SEN and, thus, have low confidence. Lozic (2014) explored teachers' perspectives on teaching autistic students in a special school and determined that mainstream schools tend to be unsuccessful for the following reasons: failure to understand the behaviours of students on the spectrum and their challenges with social skills, both of which could affect academic performance; failure to recognise students' difficulties and help them overcome those difficulties; and students' anxiety, which interferes with their performance at school.

Lack of training, unavailability of resources and school policies about inclusion were found to be amongst the socio-cultural barriers that create challenges for educators working with autistic students in mainstream classes (Lindsay et al., 2013). Emam and Farrell (2009)

noted that teachers occasionally experience anxiety because they feel unable to simultaneously meet the needs of autistic students and those of other students. These feelings may affect the quality of teacher-student relationships. Moreover, Symes and Humphrey (2011) determined that autism awareness training helps develop empathy amongst staff and facilitates the understanding and adaptation of teaching techniques.

The Ministry of Education has stipulated that teachers should meet the standards for inclusive learning for autistic students; however, this can be difficult owing to a classroom comprised of students with diverse needs (Lindsay et al., 2013). Symes and Humphrey (2011) mentioned the importance of leadership support for educators who work with autistic children. This was also emphasised by Bond and Hebron (2016). A factor that contributes significantly to the success of such support is having a member of the senior leadership team who is an expert in the field of inclusive education (Morewood, Humphrey, & Symes, 2011), which ensures the prioritisation of the needs of autistic students.

Educators' lack of time to dedicate to autistic students is also an obstacle, especially in classes with a large number of students. In such classes, autistic children are often disturbed by the noise produced by other students (Lindsay et al., 2013).

Lindsay et al. (2013) noted that teachers find it difficult to create an inclusive environment for autistic children due to the lack of awareness and understanding of autism amongst other staff members, students and parents. Parents are often unwilling to communicate openly with educators about their children's condition, and some even deny their child's condition. Glashan et al. (2004) found that it is important for educators to develop working relationships with each other before the autistic child actually arrives at the mainstream school. This helps create a shared commitment amongst educators to include autistic children in all sorts of activities happening in the school (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Regular sharing of information between families and school staff facilitates students' inclusion in mainstream schools and is crucial in eliminating inclusion challenges (Robertson et al., 2003). Lindsay et al. (2013) also reported that teachers face difficulties when other children in the class notice unusual traits in autistic children and do not understand them. In such cases, autistic children are often excluded from peer activities. According to Robertson et al. (2003), the degree of peer understanding and acceptance also depends on the student-teacher relationship: the more negative the relationship, the less likely the child will be socially accepted. Symes and Humphrey (2010) stressed the importance of addressing the risk of social exclusion and bullying, and Campbell and Barger (2014) expressed the significance of supporting the development of friendships, both of which can be accomplished by developing peer awareness

(Frederickson, Jones, & Lang, 2010; Morewood et al., 2011). Despite all these challenges, inclusive education is possible, and Lindsay et al. (2013) have argued that greater resources, training and support are warranted in order to minimise these challenges.

3.1.2 Effective[4] inclusive education.

As stated above, inclusive education can be demanding and presents a number of challenges to educators. All children that educators encounter in inclusive environments present their own challenges; this includes autism, which can present particular difficulties in an inclusive school. In Malta, we have a system of education that embraces the ideal of inclusion; however, the reality in schools seems to be quite different from this ideal. I have seen this discrepancy in reports about inclusive education in Malta (EASNIE, 2014) and experienced this reality in my own job as an autism support teacher.

For educators who believe in inclusive education, such a reality might be very disappointing; however, many countries around the world are successful in implementing inclusive practices. For example, the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests showed the high rankings of Canada, Estonia, Finland and Germany, ranking first through fourth, respectively, and an examination of the education system of these countries revealed a great effort being made in implementing effective inclusive education (Centre on International Education Benchmarking [CIEB], 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d). Though rankings are not to be considered as the ultimate benchmark of success, I believe they do indicate that these countries have a functioning inclusive education system, particularly because they do also adopt some of the criteria considered as essential for successful inclusion. For this reason, I will now briefly talk about some of these criteria.

According to Alquraini and Gut (2012), some of the critical components of successful inclusion are effective instruction practices to ease access to the core general curriculum, peer support, assistive technology, administrative support, PD training for educators, effective involvement and the support of parents and families.

Effective instruction practices might include various practices, one of which is the availability of adaptations and accommodations. Adaptations and accommodations are important to help students with various difficulties to be able to access the general curriculum and thus create successful inclusion (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Moreover, various types of

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[4] The Oxford Language dictionary defines the term *effective* as 'successful in producing a desired or intended result', hence in this research, the term *effective inclusive education* refers to how successful inclusive education is in regards of students with autism, i.e. how much this system is tailoring for these students in order for them to reach their respective individual goals.

instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning, inquiry learning, UDL, response prompting and embedded instruction, are all effective strategies in promoting a more successful inclusive environment in schools (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Peer support is an essential criterion in a successful inclusive system, as typically developing peers can have many roles, including those of a tutor, helper, reader and guide. They can be particularly helpful when acting as role models and guiding disabled students in developing coordination and social and communication skills (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007).

Assistive technology is a useful way to encourage students with different difficulties to participate more effectively in the activities held in class or in school (Langone, Malone, & Kinsley, 1999; Mistrett, Lane, & Ruffino, 2005). This takes various forms, including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), switches, alternative keyboard and touch screen (John, Azar, & Jean, 1999; Sigafoos, 2010).

Administrative support is required in creating a successful inclusive environment, together with collaboration with other staff members. Administrative support could be provided by being flexible in scheduling and allowing time for educators to collaborate (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

PD training for educators is essential for all professionals who provide a variety of services to children with various needs to improve the quality of education they receive (Giangerco et al., 2001). Through PD, professionals acquire the skills necessary to provide appropriate and effective services for disabled students in general education settings. Such training can be provided in various forms, including seminars, traditional class work, workshops and online courses. Courses should be ongoing and delivered by experts (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Moreover, Rainforth (2000) argued that university courses should include specific courses focusing on the education of disabled students in general education settings, and such courses should aim at equipping educators with the appropriate skills in teaching methods for disabled students.

Support of parents and families is crucial for a successful inclusive system (Childre, 2004) for a variety of reasons. Childre argued that educators need to understand how families of disabled students view and understand the need for educational approaches suitable for their children. Moreover, Defur, Todd-Allen and Getzel (2001) added that educators must have the necessary skills to communicate well with the families of autistic students. Lastly, Childre (2004) stressed that families should involve themselves in the IEPs of their children and be familiar with the IEP team.

3.1.3 Successful interventions and strategies for autistic students.

In addition to the criteria regarded as important for successful inclusive education, which I discussed above, there are various interventions and strategies which are considered successful for using with all students, but are particularly beneficial for autistic students. In this section, a number of these interventions and strategies will be discussed. Each of the discussed interventions or strategies might be useful for one student but not for another, as they target different aspects of the challenges of autism. Certain interventions are ideal for students who have behavioural challenges, others for those who struggle with communication difficulties and still others for students with socialisation difficulties. All interventions and strategies discussed are evidence-based and demonstrate that inclusive education is possible for autistic students if educators are aware of and trained to use such interventions.

It is also important to note that, although some of the referenced literature may seem outdated, it remains valuable because the interventions and strategies proposed remain applicable to today's classrooms. Therefore, I still believe it should be discussed here.

As discussed earlier in this literature review, inclusive settings can be challenging for autistic students (Barnes, 2009; Eldar et al., 2010; Humphrey, 2008) as well as SMT members, teachers, LSEs and typically developing peers. Such challenges often result from the students' deficits in social communication and interaction as well as other social situations they are likely to encounter in such an environment (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Lynch & Irvine, 2009).

Because autistic students often struggle with cooperation, self-control, assertion and hyperactivity (Macintosh & Dissanayake, 2006), they often retreat from certain activities they are expected to complete in class, such as group work, unstructured activities and child-directed play activities (Bowe, 2004). Horrocks et al. (2008) and Vakil et al. (2009) further explained that autistic students are less likely to participate in in-class presentations or respond to questions aloud. They find it challenging to deal with changes in schedules and to participate in unstructured times such as free play and lunch breaks (Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). Also, autistic students commonly have fewer friends at school than other typically developing peers (Maich & Belcher, 2012) because they often encounter difficulties in developing friendships (Hinton et al., 2008; Jones & Frederickson, 2010).

Such difficulties often affect the academic performance of autistic students (Park et al., 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). A discussion of the different strategies, interventions and approaches which are most appropriate to use when teaching autistic students in inclusive schools will be discussed below. Using effective practices is crucial in supporting the social

and academic growth of autistic students in general education settings (DeBruin et al., 2013; Southall & Gast, 2011).

Facilitating the inclusion of autistic students should begin with providing all stakeholders with an informed awareness of autism. Such awareness should be provided by the education department and should not only be directed to educators but also to typically developing peers, who are important participants in the school lives of autistic students (Majoko, 2016). Inclusion works best where there is acceptance, and stakeholders involved in the inclusion of autistic students need to be tolerant of certain behaviours, attitudes and difficulties. Ideally, they should be advocates for autistic children (Majoko, 2016) and believe that inclusion itself will ultimately help autistic students overcome their challenges.

Sanahuja, Gavalda and Qinyi (2012) looked at the prerequisites for an effective inclusive education for autistic students. They explained that two requisites which are very important are teachers and schools' management. Training for both teachers and other school staff is important in order for everyone to understand the needs of autistic students (Crisman, 2008). Inclusive schools need principals who are in favour of inclusion and who are willing to encourage this value amongst others (Horicks, White, & Roberts, 2008). Moreover, support and family collaboration are essential to inclusive education. Parents should be offered training about autism; they should be introduced to various therapists, taught how to access resources and provided with emotional support (Marcus, Kunce, & Schopler, 2005). Educators, families and children should engage in ongoing communication so that the needs of all stakeholders are known and addressed (Lynch & Irvine, 2009).

Majoko (2016) emphasised the importance of teachers' professional preparation and development. She argued that preparation facilitates the inclusion of autistic children. Individualised instruction also facilitates inclusion, as autistic children are individuals just like their typically developing peers and have their own unique needs.

Crosland and Dunlap (2012) agreed with Majoko (2016) that autistic children require individualised strategies in order to learn. They explored a number of strategies that Harrower and Dunlap (2001) suggested should be used with autistic children in inclusive settings to help them settle into the environment and the educational system, one of which is individualised strategies. They argued that such strategies help students fulfil the particular needs that arise from their condition. They specifically referred to antecedent procedures, such as priming, prompting and creating visual schedules. Antecedent procedures manipulate the environment to encourage or discourage a particular behaviour or response, such as challenging behaviour (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). These procedures help prepare the students for what they will be

doing throughout the day and are especially helpful considering the fears of the unknown associated with autism.

When using priming, autistic students are allowed to preview information and activities before being asked to engage in them (Wilde, Koegel, & Koegel, 1992). Activities previewed might be fire drills, the presence of a substitute teacher, field trips or schedule changes on a rainy day. Priming provides autistic students with predictability (Schreibman & Whalen, 2000) without separating them from the rest of the class. For this reason, priming is seen as a strategy that increases social interaction with peers (Koegel, L.K. et al., 2003; Zanolli, Daggett, & Adams, 1996).

This thinking is in line with Grenier and Yeaton's (2011) belief in the importance of previewing when working with autistic students. They determined that talking to the child about what will happen in class, previewing the lesson beforehand and breaking down the lesson into manageable tasks all help autistic students feel better prepared for the day ahead. They also suggested the use of a short question-and-answer period where students can ask questions about things they did not understand, together with posting lessons on noticeboards for everyone to see. The advantage of such measures is that children feel more relaxed and more able to participate in lessons and are likely to enjoy the school experience more. Grenier and Yeaton also argued that students who feel in control of their day will not feel the need to interrupt the class, and classmates will be more willing to accept them and offer support.

Grenier and Yeaton also pointed out a number of procedures educators can use to deliver previews. They specified that, for previews to be possible, educators need to establish a positive relationship with each other, as they will need to offer each other information that will help them address the specific needs of autistic students. They will also need to identify students' abilities in order to determine which previewing tool will be the most effective. Additionally, educators will need to identify outcomes for each lesson and create a visual lesson plan with step-by-step instructions, graphics and cues. Providing previews of lessons will require educators to identify a time and location to do so, and schedules will need to be posted in a visible location. Further, they suggested collaboration with all related service providers, including occupational therapists and physical therapists, and they also recommended the assessment of teacher practices. Similarly, Majoko (2016) highlighted collaboration as a requirement to facilitate the inclusion of autistic students.

Prompting strategies are ways in which autistic students are provided with additional individual help while remaining part of the general education classroom activities. They supplement the general instructional routine and help educators elicit a response to academic

or behavioural activities from autistic students (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). Prompting can be provided by a peer or a teacher (Sainato et al., 1987). Teacher prompting is often seen as superior in all settings; however, peer prompting can help autistic students increase their interactions with their peers, not only in the classroom environment but also on the playground, in the canteen and outside school (Handlan & Bloom, 1993).

Milley and Machalicek (2012) referred to tactile prompting as another type of prompting that can be used with autistic children. Alberto and Troutman (2009) explained that, in tactile prompting, a discreet tactile device is used, such as a vibrating beeper, to replace verbal, physical or gestural cues. Tactile prompting has been successfully used to increase adaptive behaviours amongst autistic students, such as reducing rapid eating (Anglesea, Hoch, & Taylor, 2008), increasing verbal initiations (Taylor & Levin, 1998), encouraging appropriate socialisation with peers (Shabani et al., 2002) and increasing on-task behaviour in the classroom (Anson, Todd, & Cassaretto, 2008).

Visual schedules are a great way to increase predictability for autistic students. They can be used to visually communicate upcoming events, to facilitate transitions from one activity to the other and to increase students' independence, as students will not need to refer to educators each time they are required to prepare for the next event or activity (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). Grenier and Yeaton (2011) also stressed the importance of visual representations, such as pictures, figures and graphics. Visual schedules give autistic students a sense of structure, an important requirement for facilitating their inclusion (Majoko, 2016).

Social stories are another means of offering autistic children support in inclusive settings. Social stories help autistic students understand the meaning behind the elements of situations that might not make sense to them, such as social cues and reactions from others (Gray, 2000a), and social stories often address classroom behaviour which students exhibit when they experience a particular anxiety (Grenier & Yeaton, 2011).

Crosland and Dunlap (2012) suggested that educators make use of delayed contingencies when working with autistic students in inclusive settings. Working in general education settings requires giving autistic students a certain degree of independence. Removing supervision altogether might not be a good idea, but the use of delayed or unpredictable contingencies can facilitate generalisation of behaviours in case direct supervision by an adult is ever absent (Dunlap et al., 1987; Dunlap, Plienis, & Williams, 1987).

Machalicek et al. (2007) posited that differential reinforcement is another effective and simple intervention that can help with challenging behaviour. Cooper, Heron and Heward

(2007) also explained that differential reinforcement simply consists of rewarding desirable behaviours and withholding rewards after challenging behaviour is exhibited.

Koegel et al. (2012) mentioned modified assignments as an intervention for autistic students in mainstream schools. Modifying assignments may mean shortening tasks, making demands simpler and instructions clearer and providing additional instruction in prerequisite skills. Janney and Snell (2000) found that this strategy is especially helpful in cases where students engage in challenging behaviour in order to escape from task demands, as it may reduce their motivation to do so.

Autistic students need to develop self-management strategies. These strategies are a series of steps that students follow in order to help them change their own behaviours (Cooper et al., 2007). Such strategies might include students' selection of goals, students' self-observation and recording of their behaviour, and students administering their own reinforcement. Self-management strategies promote independence by transferring the responsibility for behaviour management from the teacher to the student (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). They also promote competence, self-reliance and self-awareness (Briesch, Briesch, & Mahoney, 2014; Menzies, Lane, & Lee, 2009). These strategies provide autistic students with more opportunities to interact with other students and involve themselves more in classroom activities (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012), while increasing on-task behaviour and independent academic functioning (Callahan & Rademacher, 1999). Self-management strategies are best used to increase positive behaviour rather than to decrease challenging behaviour (Wilkinson, 2008). For self-management strategies to be effective, educators need to clearly identify and describe the behaviour that requires change and then choose a data collection system to monitor changes in behaviour (Busick & Neitzel, 2009).

Script fading or social scripting can also be used to teach targeted social behaviours. In this case, autistic students are given written or pictorial scripts with prompts on how to behave during particular social situations or interactions (Boutot, 2009). The script can be altered as students' social behaviour improves and ultimately omitted completely, while the interactions continue.

Students who exhibit severely challenging behaviour and communication will probably be best helped by being taught communication skills with which to replace their challenging behaviours (Koegel et al., 2012). This can be done by providing more opportunities for autistic children to communicate, and these opportunities should be offered when the children are motivated to communicate. In addition, students can be offered choices and required to respond (Koegel et al., 2012). In cases of more severe communication impairments, the PECS and the

pivotal response training (PRT) method are used. These two communication interventions are both based on the ABA approach and emphasise the importance of children's motivation to speak. While the PECS involves the teaching of communication via pictures or symbol cards depicting a child's desires or needs (Bondy & Frost, 2003), PRT is targeted more towards verbal behaviour. In PRT, a therapist first models a child's desires verbally and gives the child a chance to ask verbally for what he or she wants; if the child is unable to do so, the therapist prompts the child and reinforces the child's request with a verbal approximation (Koegel et al., 2012).

Peer-mediated interventions typically involve teaching peers to facilitate and promote appropriate communication and social behaviours (Chan et al., 2009). Peer intervention is beneficial because it provides additional interventions for autistic students while limiting the demands on educators who would have to serve as interventionists themselves in the absence of peer-mediated intervention (Chan et al., 2009). In addition, it gives autistic students the opportunity to interact and practise social skills with different peers, which could ultimately help them generalise skills in different settings and with different individuals (Carr & Darcy, 1990; Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; Strain & Kohler, 1998). Peer-mediated intervention is particularly appropriate for autistic students attending mainstream schools because it can be well incorporated into the normal daily schedule of the classroom (Hemmeter, 2000; Trembath et al., 2009). This can be done through peer-tutoring or class-wide tutoring (Strain, Kohler, & Goldstein, 1996).

There are various types of peer-mediated interventions. Merrill (2017) listed a number of examples of this intervention, including integrated playgroups, peer buddies and peer tutors, group-oriented contingencies, peer networks and peer initiation training. Integrated play groups involve the intervention of an adult who guides typical children and autistic children through activities to encourage their interaction within a supportive and structured environment. A consistent schedule is used, and peers are coached through play sessions familiar to the autistic child (Merrill, 2017). Koegel and Koegel (2006) suggested using games and activities that involve students' perseverative interests. In this way, autistic students are encouraged to develop peer relationships by taking part in the games and activities being done in class.

Peer buddies or peer tutors are typically developing peers who are given the responsibility of looking after autistic children by talking to them, playing with them and staying by their sides. This approach is more individual and aims at creating opportunities for natural interaction amongst all children while learning through incidental social behaviours (Merrill, 2017). Contrary to the peer buddy system, the group-oriented contingency aims at

training the whole class in social skills and practices to promote behaviours that are supportive to the autistic children who are in the classroom (Merrill, 2017).

Peer networks also aim at training groups of peers to provide support for autistic students. By developing social networks, peers can learn about communication systems used by autistic children, how to initiate and maintain conversations with them and how to provide instructions to them (Merrill, 2017).

Initiation training is targeted at helping autistic children learn to initiate social behaviours such as requesting turns, asking questions and commenting, instead of expecting an adult to do this for them (Koegel et al., 1999; Merrill, 2017).

A strategy referred to by Majoko (2016) is aimed at attending to children's academic and social development. In her research, she found that educators feel it is important to 'let the child with ASD continue with his/her work when concentrating but making noise such as humming' (p. 1434) because, if that noise is helping them concentrate rather than interfering with their work, there is no reason to intervene. She insisted on varying teaching and learning strategies to adapt to the unique needs of autistic students (Majoko, 2016).

Having provided an overview of the different interventions and strategies for autistic students, I will now discuss the views of autistic students about interventions and inclusive education and how this latter experience could be improved for them to feel more included.

3.1.4 Autistic people's views about intervention and inclusive education.

According to Mason (2005), disabled people's perspective is often 'the missing piece in the puzzle, the bit that reveals the whole picture' (p. 120). Generally, it is understood that disabled students' perspectives contribute significantly to the planning of inclusive education (Moore, 2000). Rioux and Pinto (2012) have insisted that inclusive education takes place when students are active participants in their plans for learning and when they are looked at as important contributors to society as well as when their best interests supersede those of their stakeholders. On a similar note, Barton (2012) stated that genuine inclusive education happens when the students learn to speak for themselves, above all, when expressing their views freely on what rights disabled people are entitled to (United Nations, 2007).

The participation of disabled persons in research is an opportunity for them to express their views and opinions on their educational experience, which then helps policy makers to direct the necessary improvements towards the students' best interests (Callus & Farrugia, 2016). Indeed, as Mariċ (2017) pointed out, listening to the voices of disabled persons may lead to a culture of quality practices, and an experience of teaching and learning that upholds the

values of a genuine inclusive education. Cefai and Cooper (2010) agreed with the importance of giving disabled people a voice, as their research revealed critical differences between students and teachers' views on their education experience. In this section, I will therefore be referring to literature by autistic scholars as well as literature about autistic students as I discuss their views about intervention and inclusive education.

Damian Milton (2014a), an autistic scholar himself and father of an autistic child, has written about the role of intervention. He argued that, soon after receiving a diagnosis, the next question that comes up is often about what the person should do next. The problem with an answer to such a question, he emphasised, is that most often it comes from a non-autistic individual and therefore fails to consider the perception of autistic people. According to Milton, this is because professionals, parents and autistic children all have different views depending on their own respective experiences, training and personal preferences, which in turn affect what is offered or suggested. Patrick Dwyer (2018b), who is also an autistic scholar, agreed with Milton and stated that parents, professionals and researchers tend to believe that early intervention is essential, and the earlier it is provided, the better. On the other hand, however, autistic individuals can have a completely different perspective and believe that intervention, such as ABA, is deeply harmful, according to Dwyer; hence, this leads to the problem about non-autistic individuals providing advice about intervention, as identified by Milton (2014a). Dwyer (2018b) claimed that being a member of both the autistic community as well as the researchers' community, he can see both sides of the argument with regard to early intervention. In an overview of a variety of interventions, Milton (2014a) argued that the most critical fact about intervention, in general, is that therapists often have specific knowledge in the particular intervention being provided and lack knowledge about other existing interventions. This makes them inflexible, he claimed. In addition to this, he further posited that the behaviours that are worked on during the intervention therapy that are deemed as negative or positive are also decided upon by non-autistic individuals. Milton went on to suggest that one should avoid favouring one intervention over the other, as there is no evidence which proves one intervention is better than the others. What would be ideal, he argued, is to consider autistic individuals and their families' views regarding what they wish to use as an intervention. Dwyer (2018b) further argued that intervention is essentially seen negatively as it changes people; however, he stated, changing people is not necessarily a negative thing. For example, if an intervention's aim is to help a child acquire spoken language, then that will change him, but it is not bad thing because, according to Dwyer, spoken language is an asset in society, and therefore, we should be open

to the different interventions that can be provided and not commit ourselves to the idea that all interventions that change people are bad.

On a related issue, Dwyer (2018a) argued against the idea that inclusion is always beneficial and should be considered for everyone and that it 'only count[s] when the people doing the including are able, neurotypical students'. He explained this with an example from the deaf community, where he claimed that a deaf child would much rather feel included in a school for deaf children where everyone knows sign language, than in a mainstream school where no one knows sign language. Such a perception, he reasoned, stems from the ableist ideas we have, where 'we are so convinced of the superiority of the able and neurotypical students that we cannot conceive of a situation in which the disabled students might prefer to associate with one another' (Dwyer, 2018a). Most often, our aims of prioritising inclusion are a result of our desires to help disabled people have as normal a life as possible; however, we sometimes end up in 'the empty trappings of normality, by placing them alongside able peers and isolating them from disabled peers, without ensuring that they will meaningfully participate in these environments' (Dwyer, 2018a).

Further to the above, a study by Saggers (2015) about the perceptions of autistic students about inclusive education, found that, according to autistic students, the inclusive educational experience could be improved in four different areas. First of all, autistic students identified that the relationship they have with peers significantly affects their educational experience, with positive relationships leading to successful inclusion. Earlier in this literature review (see Sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3), I discussed the role peers play in the inclusion of autistic students, including acting as role models (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007), helping with peer-mediated intervention (Chan et al., 2009), and acting as buddies for the autistic student (Merrill, 2017). In addition, Saggers (2015) further identified that reluctance to socialise on the part of autistic students often results from the difficulties they have in engaging in conversations. Saggers (2015) additionally found that sport played a significant role in helping autistic students connect better with friends, as it provided them with more structured opportunities for socialisation and conversation. Relations, indeed, seem to be very important for autistic people, despite the reluctance for socialisation that might be observed on their part. Benevides et al. (2020) found that the concepts of belongingness and feeling part of a community were amongst the important aspects that autistic people believe contribute to good mental health. This links back to the discussion about inclusion presented in Section 2.2.3, where I detailed the arguments that belongingness is an important value in inclusion (Jansen et al., 2014) and that inclusion requires the creation of a community (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Cage et al. (2018) and

Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) additionally found that there are negative mental effects related to one's efforts to camouflage and mask autistic behaviour in society, thus supporting the need for greater promotion of autistic identity. Autistic people, in fact, desire an increase in awareness amongst society of the differences of autistic people and a greater promotion of inclusion and respect towards neurodiversity (Benevides et al. 2020; Gotham et al., 2015).

The second factor which affects the educational experience for autistic students is the amount of anxiety and stress they encounter in school (Saggers, 2015). Humphrey and Lewis (2008) have claimed that the school environment is a 'considerable source of anxiety' (p. 37). Similarly, Wood and Gadow (2010) found that the noisy and chaotic environment which normally exists in schools incites extreme levels of anxiety which can impair the ability of autistic students to function. Saggers (2015) further explained that autistic students are particularly disturbed by the noise in the classroom, the yelling of the teachers and the crowds that are often found in a school environment. Indeed, autistic students often prefer quiet classrooms and environments to work in (Saggers, 2015). Apart from the environment, another source of anxiety and stress for autistic students is the curriculum. Saggers further found that stressors related to curriculum include the workload, homework and handwriting as well as too much summative assessment and tight work schedules. Another factor causing much anxiety and stress is the need to mask autistic behaviour throughout the school day, which often results in chronic exhaustion, loss of skills and reduced ability to tolerate certain stimuli, such as light or sound (Willingham, 2020). This links back to the concept of the negative effects of camouflaging and masking autistic behaviours in society.

The third factor influencing the inclusion experience of autistic students is the teachers and the staff at school as teachers' role is considered crucial by autistic students in relation to their perceived success in school, according to Saggers (2015). Saggers also noted that autistic students appreciate teachers who are active listeners, firm but fair, flexible, and able to provide a structured and calm classroom. Moreover, according to autistic students, teachers should also be able to make learning easier and more enjoyable. Another important issue identified by Saggers is additional specialist support, which she found is appreciated by autistic students; however, in her study, autistic students suggested that additional support should be provided in subtle ways within the inclusive environment. Autistic students specified that they desired such support to be provided in a way where the teacher goes around the classroom helping all students, not just the autistic student. Additionally, they argued, support should be provided not only in academic matters, but also in personal matters as well as in matters related to social skills. Furthermore, Benevides et al. (2020) found that autistic individuals often feel that support

and service providers have little or no training in addressing autistic needs, which somewhat confirms Milton's (2014a) arguments noted above concerning therapists having knowledge only about the therapy they are providing but none about other available interventions. Benevides et al. (2020) therefore claimed more research is required on approaches and interventions that could be self-initiated or self-managed and that are accessible within their communities, such as animal-assisted therapy and exercise. Moreover, they also recommended more research on social-behaviour interventions during childhood, which are often seen as traumatic, so that their adverse effects could be reported by autistic individuals themselves.

The fourth factor identified by autistic students as crucial in their inclusive educational experience is related to the constant need within the inclusive school environment to negotiate their difference, Saggers (2015) has claimed. While their differences result in benefits for them, such as specialist support, extra time during exams and a quiet place with fewer people, at the same time, Saggers added, they do not like to be treated differently in such a way that they are singled out, and for this reason, this negotiation of difference leads to some difficult choices on the part of the school in how they shall organise the provision of support for autistic students.

In this section, I have provided a short overview of the views of autistic people about intervention and inclusive education. It is by no means an exhaustive, but it allows the reader some space for critical reflection about autistic people's ideas of intervention and their views of inclusive education. In the following sections, I will discuss the resources, training and support needed by educators to enable them to work with autistic students in mainstream settings.

3.2 Resources Needed to Help Educate Autistic Students

As discussed above, inclusion of autistic students is not impossible. Different approaches, strategies and interventions can help educators reach this valuable goal. However, for inclusion to be possible, educators need access to a number of resources.

Busby et al. (2012) discussed important resources that should be made available to educators in order to help them work better with autistic students. They explained that, prior to entering the profession, educators should take an introductory course in which the inclusion of autistic children is presented as something achievable. Changing educators' negative beliefs to positive ones is extremely important if we want inclusion to be possible. Busby et al. further explained that educators should be equipped with practice strategies and procedures that promote the positive results of inclusion and benefit autistic children. These should consist of case-based instructions and successful applications. They also found that granting educators

access to current research and best practice teaching strategies needed for teaching autistic students would be beneficial. This, they argued, will keep educators up-to-date with the latest findings about autism.

In addition, educators believe that communication between themselves and parents is a requisite for effective inclusion (Waddington & Reed, 2006), as is collaboration. In fact, collaboration with colleagues and students' family members is crucial to the inclusion of autistic students. However, Bhatnagar and Das (2014) found that when parents put pressure on educators, this acts as a barrier to inclusion. Such pressure results from parents' desire to get their own way and their difficulty in understanding that rules must be adhered to by everyone. Busby et al. (2012) explained that, in order for collaboration to be effective, educators need information about the procedures and practices that should be adopted when collaborating with colleagues.

Messemer (2010) insisted that educators need adequate time to develop lesson plans and resources and attend meetings with professionals, administrative staff and colleagues. Thus, educators should be provided with time in their schedules for such activities. If not, such work has to be done in educators' free time, which is unfair. In respect to continuity services and autism-specific services, Campbell et al. (2007) insisted that educators must be informed of services available to autistic students so that they can direct parents and students to those resources.

Financial resources are another important resource with which all educators should be provided. Frederickson et al. (2010) discussed the need for increased funding to help autistic students. They explained that the lack of funding results in shortages of education assistants, resources and necessary equipment, which, according to them, are the key causes of failure of inclusion. Financial resources were also mentioned by Berzina (2010), who found that an increase in salaries for teachers working with disabled students serves as an incentive.

Berzina also stated that additional staff in inclusive schools would serve as important resources. Busby et al. (2012) noted extra assistance as an important resource needed by educators which allows them to work effectively with autistic students, in part because of the challenging behaviour arising from autism and the time constraints of the inclusive classroom. Also, Bhatnagar and Das (2014) found that one barrier to inclusion is the lack of trained teachers, and they suggested that all teachers must be given training in SEN.

Rose (2001) discussed a whole-school approach that focuses on practices and learning styles to help autistic students rather than focusing on pupils' limitations. Hedges et al. (2014) argued that inconsistencies in the use of strategies between school and home environments are

deficiencies in structural support; thus, another important support for educators is improved structure and consistency in school policies and the consistent use of strategies at school and at home.

According to Glashan et al. (2004) and Morewood, Humphrey and Symes (2011), therapeutic services, including speech and language therapy and occupational therapy should be provided on school premises, instead of students having to leave the school premises to receive such services. This would make it possible for teachers to ask for help from other professionals whenever needed. In addition to that, Humphrey and Symes (2011) argued that the physical environment of the school plays an important role in promoting or demoting the idea of inclusive education. Teachers feel more secure and encouraged if they are provided with safe and thoughtfully arranged schools and classrooms (Berzina, 2010) to help them feel more comfortable in their work environment. Martin et al. (2019a) agreed that by improving the school environment, autistic students benefit, as do all other students.

Besides the aforementioned resources and supports, research has also shown that teachers need equipment such as computer software, assistive technology and fidget toys (Lindsay et al., 2013). In addition, educators should be asked for their input on what they believe is necessary to ensure the success of inclusive classrooms (Messemer, 2010).

Last, but not least, educators working with autistic students should have personality characteristics or qualities that serve as resources. These include flexibility, responsibility, patience, responsiveness and a willingness to adapt curriculum and modify activities according to the needs of autistic students because, as Bhatnagar and Das (2014) found, the lack of differentiated instruction was one barrier to inclusion. On the other hand, educators also need to stick to a schedule to accommodate autistic students' needs for routine and predictability (Busby et al., 2012). More importantly, teachers should have respect and professional love for each of their students, irrespective of the student's abilities and difficulties, according to Berzina (2010).

Berzina also mentioned the professional characteristics of teachers as an important resource, including their willingness to learn about their students' disabilities and the special methods used to teach them and their ability to observe every detail in the development of disabled children. Additionally, teachers should have a thirst for professional 'renewal' from time to time, which will allow them to develop new perspectives on their teaching, especially in the case of special education and inclusion. As Bhatnagar and Das (2013) explained, teacher positivity contributes to successful inclusion.

Bhatnagar and Das (2014) also mentioned the importance of having an inclusion policy in schools. Such a policy would eliminate the huge differences in school management from one school to another by providing schools with a basic guideline which they can follow.

Another important resource for teachers in inclusive schools is a school psychologist. Anderson, Klassen and Georgiou (2007) described the many services psychologists can offer, including providing training and disseminating research that shows the benefits of inclusion, both socially and educationally, for students with and without disabilities. They also noted that psychologists can assist in the development of behavioural and educational plans by providing effective behavioural interventions for the classroom while reviewing schools' behaviour policies and can provide emotional and psychological support to educators by advocating for their needs to school administrators and education department officers.

3.3 Necessary Training for Educators to Educate Autistic Students

Teaching is a very important profession because it shapes the minds of those involved in all other professions. However, inclusive education requires the educators to be more extensively trained in many different disabilities. For this reason, teachers need adequate training both before and during their careers. Such training should cover various disabilities, especially autism, diagnoses of which are continuously increasing (Blair, 2016; Wright, 2017). Gonzales-Gil et al. (2013) argued that adequate training helps professionals make their schools inclusive, and this training needs to focus on methodological and curricular elements that can be used to make schools more inclusive.

According to Jindal-Snape et al. (2005), parents view teacher training as the most empowering tool in providing for their children in mainstream settings. More specifically, training helps teachers learn about teaching approaches (Leach & Duffy, 2009) that are considered beneficial for students on the autism spectrum (Lian et al., 2008). The more strategies with which teachers are equipped, the better they can meet students' needs, particularly because appropriate strategies vary according to a pupil's age, their disability, and the classroom setting (Hess et al., 2008). Providing teachers with adequate training will make them more confident when working with students on the autism spectrum (Glashan et al., 2004) because training increases awareness of autism (Leblanc, Richardson, & Burns, 2009) and reduces teachers' anxiety and stress levels related to teaching these students (Probst & Leppert, 2008; Sinz, 2004). Thus, educators will form positive attitudes towards inclusion (Horrocks et al., 2008). A consistent training process for teachers, one that presents specific teaching methods and strategies for working with autistic students, is essential for teachers who need

additional support to fully include children with ASD in their classrooms (Bond & Hebron, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2013). Martin et al. (2019a) specified the importance of ongoing training and development for all stakeholders concerned to continuously refresh autism awareness, as they believe greater awareness of the triggers behind certain behaviour of autistic children is needed to help educators understand autistic students. No intervention will be effective without understanding the reasons behind a child's behaviour (Martin & Milton, 2017).

The training must also include strategies which target individual needs (Glashan et al., 2004). Probst and Leppert (2008) noted that this type of training helps to reduce teacher stress and increases strategy use. Moreover, Shyman (2012) argued that many teacher preparation programmes place too much importance on reactive strategies where autism training is concerned. University courses are targeted towards general certification to reach local education standards, and they tend to lack specialisation in particular areas, including autism.

Mizell (2010) explained why PD is important. Being trained for many types of educational situations related to teaching helps educators deal with 'classroom management, instruction, curriculum, school culture and operations, test preparation and administration, state standards, parent relations, and interactions with other teachers' (p. 6). Through PD, educators learn effective ways to overcome challenges that arise during the school day (Mizell, 2010). Being able to use different methods leads to greater student achievement (Strong, Feltcher, & Villar, 2004). PD is the only way in which educators can gain knowledge of how students learn, what can impede their learning and how teacher instruction can increase learning; thus, students' learning increases if their teachers engage in frequent PD (Mizell, 2010).

PD is important for schools' head teachers and assistant head teachers, as they also need ongoing training to help them fulfil their respective roles, according to Mizell (2010). He also noted that what they learn might be different from what teachers learn and could include policies and laws related to disabilities, support available for persons with disabilities and how to obtain this support and procedures related to educational interventions. Thus, he argued, school leaders' learning can affect both teachers and students' learning, and the school can become an environment where learning is prioritised for everyone: leaders, teachers and students.

In her research, Messemer (2010) found that educators' perceptions of inclusion improve if they have access to PD opportunities. Messemer suggested that PD should be based on teachers' needs and target issues raised by educators, including knowledge of autism, behaviour management, accommodations, modifications and understanding of students' IEPs.

PD should also include occasions for teachers to reflect critically upon their practices (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013).

PD can be acquired in various ways, including individual reading and research, study groups, observation and coaching, team meetings, online courses, university courses, workshops, conferences and whole-school programmes (Mizell, 2010). Mizell noted that online PD is helpful when it comes to learning content and observing video demonstrations; however, it is also limited by its inability to relate to educators' specific challenges. Learning in isolation, rather than as part of a team, prevents educators from learning from others' expertise, experience and thoughts. It also prevents the impact that collective educational growth, that is learning from one another, can have on student learning. In addition, educators are not checked on whether or not and how well they apply the new learning in their classrooms.

Simpson (2007) and Hess et al. (2008) argued that working with autistic students requires specific skills, the development of which requires specific training and knowledge. Scheurmann et al. (2003) highlighted a number of competency areas that should be part of a teacher education programme specialising in autism:

1. Knowledge of autism;
2. The role of parental involvement and its importance;
3. Knowledge of various teaching approaches;
4. Knowledge of teaching communication, social skills, adaptive behaviours and transitions;
5. Classroom structure; and
6. Behaviour management.

Shyman (2012) listed other areas that should be targeted in preparation programmes for teaching autistic students. These included the foundations of the disability, which refer to theories; laws and policies; history; definitions; current trends; the development and characteristics of learners with autism, including the challenges related to the disability; and individual differences that may exist in students. Instructional strategies such as evidence-based practices, specialised curricula and behavioural supports should also be included, as should knowledge of ideal learning environments for autistic students and tips for social interaction. The author insisted on the importance of educators knowing about language issues amongst autistic students, instructional planning, assessment and professional and ethical practice.

Learning the most effective and most promising educational methodologies for working with autistic students is one of the most important parts of teacher training. Although there might be a certain degree of disagreement about this issue (Simpson, 2008), various

methodologies based on different approaches should be part of teacher training programmes (Hess et al., 2008) so that teachers can see the pros and cons of each methodology and adopt the best practices according to each student's needs. Scheurmann et al. (2003) explained that training teachers in one methodology only is not useful because teachers are not able to decide which methodology will best suit different autistic students.

Behaviour-based approaches should feature prominently in teacher training programmes, especially given that behaviour issues are part of autism. There are many different behaviour-based approaches, including positive behaviour support (PBS) (Carr et al., 2002), PRT (Koegel, L., Carter, & Koegel, 2003), discrete trial instruction (DTI) (Smith, 2001) and incidental teaching (Charlop-Kristy & Carpenter, 2000).

Teacher programmes should also include relationship/emotion-based approaches. These target the difficulties of autistic students in initiating and maintaining emotional relationships with others. These approaches do not aim to eliminate stereotypical behaviour but to encourage appropriate social interactions by creating a nurturing environment in order to help students' brains develop (Shyman, 2012). Examples of such approaches include: Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) (Gutstein & Sheely, 2004), Son Rise (Kaufman, 1994), the Developmental Individual-Difference Relationship-Based model (DIR) (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006) and Social Communication/Emotional Regulation/Transactional Support (SCERTS) (Wetherby & Prizant, 2000).

Another important element of teacher preparation programmes is language/communication-based approaches. These target the language and communication challenges and potential differences that could exist in the development of language in autistic children to help them with natural and typical language development. Such approaches include: applied verbal behaviour (AVB) (Sundberg & Michael, 2001), scripting (Krantz & McClanahan, 1998), incidental teaching (Charlop-Kristy & Carpenter, 2000), social stories (Gray, 2000b) and AAC (Mirenda, 2003).

Also, technology-, sensory- and medical-based approaches should be discussed in teacher training programmes. Technology-based approaches are important due to modern advancements in technology, which are increasingly incorporated into teaching. Such approaches include video-modelling (Bellini & Akuillan, 2007; Shukla-Mehta, Miller, & Callahan, 2010), AAC (Mirenda, 2003), personal digital assistant (PDA) applications and interactive whiteboards (IWBs) (Goldsmith & LeBlanc, 2005).

Sensory-based approaches are important because they help educators understand the behaviour and treatment of autistic children with regard to sensory problems. Such approaches

include Sensory Integration Therapy (SIT; Snider & Rodriguez, 1993) and Higashi/Daily Life Therapy (Quill, Gurry, & Larkin, 1989). Medical-based approaches such as brain mapping (McAlonan et al., 2005), chelation therapy (Sinha, Silove, & Williams, 2006), secretin therapy (Chez et al., 2000) and vitamin therapy (Wong & Smith, 2006) should also be taught in training programmes. Although they might not appeal to educators due to the medical nature of such approaches, they might be helpful to parents now and in the future.

Busby et al. (2012) suggested that educators not only need appropriate training in and knowledge of autism but also that such training should include clinical experiences. Appropriate training would improve educators' preparedness to work with autistic students in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, Shyman (2012) argued that the course content of autism teacher preparation programmes should be based on the latest available research, so that educators are equipped with updated findings on autism and cutting-edge resources. Current research is very important for educators to determine evidence-based practices and accurately evaluate the best methodologies (Shyman, 2012).

Busby et al. (2012) also stressed practical training for dealing with autistic children. As mentioned above, they insisted that more case-based and field-based experiences should be part of the training course for educators. They also mentioned the possibility of educators being provided with case-based tutorials showing actual events that have taken place in inclusive classrooms where autistic students are learning. Such tutorials could be provided by the faculty of education at universities and would help educators model best practice in different situations.

Educators in training need opportunities to observe and engage in successful inclusive education for disabled children. This could include observation of inclusive classrooms, field-based assignments and supervised practicums (Busby et al., 2012). Shyman (2012) also insisted that a practicum should be an essential part of teacher training. A practicum could either be an opportunity for students to observe autistic individuals in classroom settings or else opportunities to work directly with the students, including writing reports on their observations and clinical experiences. They should also have opportunities to meet and interact with families of disabled children, including autistic children (Busby et al., 2012); in this way, they can better understand the family lives of the children and their challenges and expectations, while helping build a strong relationship that allows both educators and parents to feel comfortable discussing any issues that might arise.

As previously noted, inclusive teaching requires volumes of paperwork, including the preparation of IEP documents and other attendant record-keeping. At times, educators find this paperwork challenging. Busby et al. (2012) suggested that educators should be trained in how

to write good reports about autistic students. They argued that one cannot expect a teacher or an LSA to write an effective IEP report if they do not feel confident in doing so. Moreover, it is essential that training includes opportunities for reflection and sharing of ideas with others (Groom, 2006).

Teacher training could be provided through different delivery methods. Gibson et al. (2010) referenced distance techniques, such as video conferencing, as one way to provide training to teachers. Koegel et al. (2012) discussed receiving feedback as an important part of teachers' training, and they explained that feedback can be given directly after short practice sessions or through video feedback sessions. However, because such training is both time-consuming and expensive, Scheuermann et al. (2003) emphasised that, ideally, prospective educators will receive their training through preprofessional programmes and autism-specific courses at university prior to going into schools.

Winn and Blanton (2005) explained that pre-service training tends to focus on teaching methods, strategies and accommodations to be used with disabled students. Effective teacher training should include a variety of practices that have evidence-based effectiveness for use with autistic students. Effective teacher training and support would guarantee that teachers have knowledge of multiple approaches to use with autistic students and ensure that all students have access to inclusive education (Scheuermann et al., 2003; Simspon, 2004).

Morrier, Hess and Heflin (2011) discussed additional teacher training delivery methods. Their study identified methods that are popular amongst educators, which included attendance at workshops, hands-on training with autistic students and self-taught methods. Groom (2006) also included shadowing as an effective method of providing training to new educators, while insisting that a mentor should be assigned to the new member of staff for support. Modelling is also considered to be an effective training method, as the observer can pinpoint effective strategies and approaches and use them in his/her own practice, according to Groom. In addition, Groom noted, planned classroom observations, where a colleague observes the LSE in class, can also serve as training, as they can include feedback on the LSE's performance in class and thus identify further professional needs. He added that training should be provided through short, focused sessions that are built on practice and allow time for group discussions and reflections.

Strategy learning can be taught by peer teachers or therapists, according to Morrier et al. (2011). They suggested that educators can choose which method of training they want to use according to what they would like to learn. For example, those educators who would like to strengthen their interpersonal relationship strategies often choose self-teaching and hands-on

training methods, while those who want to learn more about skill-based strategies often choose self-teaching methods or full-day workshops.

Shyman (2012) stressed the importance of continuous monitoring and assessment of educators' job performance and student outcomes. This can be done through direct evaluation (Lerman et al., 2004), self-assessment (Grey et al., 2005) or eco-behavioural assessment (Roberson et al., 2004).

3.4 Support Needed to Educate Autistic Students

Educators need support in order to effectively work with autistic students in inclusive classrooms. Educators cannot work efficiently in environments where there is no support. This section discusses this issue in relation to educating autistic students in inclusive schools.

Berzina (2010) explained that the first type of support that educators need is support from society in general. Indeed, successful inclusion needs a tolerant society, including parents of normally developing children who have positive attitudes towards inclusion. Additionally, personnel support helps educators to meet the needs associated with inclusion and, thus, to implement and maintain inclusion programmes (Lindsay et al., 2013; Messemer, 2010). Gersten, Keating and Yovanoff (2001) and Berzina (2010) emphasised that collegial relationships are important when working in inclusive schools. Cooperation from colleagues and positive attitudes and relationships amongst staff members are important to educators because, as Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) explained, educators face various emotional challenges in inclusive classrooms, which can result in fatigue and a sense of isolation. In such circumstances, educators need personal and emotional support from colleagues who can share information and support each other (Berzina, 2010). Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) found that such support does little to improve teaching performance, but does improve the well-being of the teachers and makes them feel less isolated, which encourages them to remain in the teaching profession.

Poon et al. (2016) mentioned the importance of a mentorship structure which ensures that educators receive the necessary support when working with students with SEN; this helps them develop a positive inclusion experience. Mentorship serves as a problem-focused support and is especially beneficial when educators are facing uncertainties about how to approach new tasks or solve problems in their classrooms. Mentors can serve as guides to younger teachers and can offer advice on how to plan tasks and achieve results (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). Mentors can also teach younger teachers the customs of the broader school community, making them feel more at ease in their school environment. New teachers sometimes feel unsure

when faced with teaching challenges, and in such cases, mentors can help them decide how to overcome such challenges (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). Westling et al. (2005) also posited that on-site consultation after observation sessions in class are one valuable type of classroom support. Such feedback could easily be given by mentors.

Mentors could also model self-reflection and help teachers critically reflect on their teaching practice, and such reflection helps teachers improve their instructional delivery, assess their classroom management and learn to identify problems and analyse possible solutions (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). Teachers could also organise problem-solving sessions in which they discuss common challenges (Westling et al., 2005). Such sessions would serve to improve instruction strategies for students with SEN (Bryant et al., 2001).

Glashan et al. (2004) argued that teachers need additional support from specialists who work in mainstream schools. These might include therapists, social workers, teaching assistants and special education teachers. Meetings with these specialists will help teachers better understand their students' needs and how to address them (Werts et al., 1996). Other specialists, such as physiotherapists, behavioural therapists, language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, nurses and IT specialists, could serve as sources of support (Yan et al., 2015). Teachers could ask for these specialists' advice during meetings held throughout the year. Also, support could be provided through in-class modelling, which would show teachers how to implement research-based practices in their classrooms and what type of teaching instructions they should give to students with SEN (Bryant et al., 2001; Yan et al., 2015). In addition, mentors or colleagues can demonstrate effective communication strategies to teachers that can be used with students with sensory and physical disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Mastropieri and Scruggs also found that support from experts helps teachers plan, adapt and teach. Yan et al. (2015) determined that educators request support from specialists more often than any other type of support.

Rose (2001) also noted that teachers appreciate the additional support provided by teaching assistants. Special education teachers can work collaboratively with teaching assistants to provide suggestions and help with adaptation and individualisation of materials for students with SEN (Stanviloff, 1996). Paraprofessionals can also support teachers (Giangreco et al., 2005; Rose & O'Neill, 2009) by performing clerical tasks, giving follow-up instructions, tutoring, providing support plans for positive behaviour strategies, supervising group activities and providing assistance with the personal care of students with SEN (Giangreco et al., 2005).

Schools and the education departments can provide support for educators, too. The education department can fund and organise support programmes (Stansbury & Zimmermann,

2000), preparation programmes and PD sessions in order to prepare educators to work in inclusive classrooms (United States Department of Education [DoED], 2010). Individual schools can offer formal orientations to new teachers and avoid assigning educators too many extra duties or roles, such as extracurricular responsibilities (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). This would especially benefit teachers who have disabled students in their classes. Research has shown that formal orientations help educators gain an overview of their curricular responsibilities and provide an opportunity to get advice from experienced teachers about setting up classrooms and managing them (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000).

Schools can support teachers by adjusting their working conditions. Such adjustments could include reducing class sizes, especially in classes that include disabled students; equipping classrooms with adequate textbooks, desks, supplementary materials and other basic supplies; and requiring teachers to change classrooms as infrequently as possible, which will also benefit autistic students (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000).

Improving teachers' working conditions indicates that they are being treated as professionals. An increase in funding for teachers is one means of support. This has been an issue in Malta lately; the MUT has recently negotiated for new collective agreements, as the latest collective agreements had expired. The new collective agreements include the Sectoral Agreement for all educators within the government and church schools, MCAST and the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS). One aspect of the negotiations was a better financial package because educators in Malta feel that their salaries do not reflect how hard they work.

Annual surveys made by education authorities could also serve as a means of support to teachers because these help the authorities determine teachers' needs and how to respond to those needs (DoED, 2010). The sharing of responsibilities between school leaders and teachers is also a sign of support in inclusive schools (DoE, 2010).

Administrative support is very important in inclusive schools (Berzina, 2010; Werts et al., 1996). Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) noted that school leaders play an important part in educators' experience of inclusion, so much so that education departments should hold school leaders to the same high standards as teachers and require them to attend frequent development sessions (DoE, 2010). School leaders should be the first to promote an inclusive classroom atmosphere and curriculum, which are both important features of a successful inclusive school (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). School leaders can help teachers prioritise their time between PD and school activities and promote collegial collaboration (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000), which is an important source of support for teachers, as discussed previously. Some examples of support that leaders can offer include pairing new

teachers with veteran teachers to provide them with professional support and guidance (Yan et al., 2015) and arranging study groups for teachers dealing with particular challenges where the teachers can discuss problems and brainstorm solutions (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). Pairing could also help new teachers learn to collect evidence of their own practice and analyse it to identify their strengths and weaknesses. However, Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) argued that whoever provides support to educators should be trained effectively. For example, they could be successful teachers who can provide advice based on their own experiences. Support providers should also be temperamentally suited to perform such a job.

School leaders can support educators by providing them with release time, which they could use to attend seminars, reflect on their practice, observe other teachers or confer with their mentors (DoED, 2010; Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). School leaders could also provide short courses addressing common challenges (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). Teachers could be grouped to reflect on their practice together. They might be asked to deliver a lesson for their colleagues, who would critique them and give them advice.

Nothing supports educators better than being understood and being given realistic goals, according to Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000). They also pointed to the importance of educators joining a union, which will participate in the planning of support programmes and discussions about teachers' challenges and difficulties. A union itself is a means of support for educators.

Educational authorities should support teachers by rewarding them for their successes, offering them advancement opportunities, giving them credit for their students' improvements, taking more than examination results into consideration during evaluations and being understanding if a teacher's students do not meet their goals. More importantly, educational authorities should give educators the flexibility to decide how to best improve their students' abilities (DoED, 2010).

Provision of the required physical resources by educational authorities is, in itself, a kind of support. As discussed earlier, physical resources include the contents in the classroom, professional journals and resources for adaptations (Werts et al., 1996), together with printed and multimedia materials on inclusive teaching practices (Westling et al., 2005). Having a well-equipped classroom makes it easier for teachers to address students' particular challenges, especially the challenges of students with SEN (Yan et al., 2015). Flexibility to structure the classroom to a teacher's liking provides the teacher with a practical and creative way to define learning areas and improve accessibility for all students (Bullard, 2013). Yan et al. (2015)

argued that teachers value physical facilities, resources and their ability to arrange their own classrooms.

Parental support is also essential support for educators working in inclusive settings. Parents should be the first people to advocate for their children's rights to inclusive education, and they are the most important members of their children's educational team. Parents provide educators with medical information and facts about their children's conditions and the difficulties those conditions cause. They can make educators aware of their children's likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges (Stanviloff, 1996). Parents' contributions to their children's inclusive education supports teachers and helps them increase inclusive practices in class (Yan et al., 2015). Inclusion in itself

> implies encouraging schools to promote community dialogue and to establish networks of mutual support amongst families, schools, and other members of the community… In the inclusive system, families must collaborate and share responsibility with teachers by supporting education-related initiatives… [Moreover,] the success of the inclusive model depends not only on parents' involvement with the schools, but also on their own interaction with their children at home. (Acedo et al., 2009, p. 233)

3.5 Summary

This second part of the literature review has provided the reader with insight into the practical side of inclusive education. It has discussed the challenges educators face when working with autistic students in inclusive settings, including lack of awareness about autism and socio-cultural barriers and their lack of time to dedicate for autistic students. These helped the reader understand the perspectives of educators better, as they could picture the struggles educators encounter, hence understand certain arguments discussed in the analysis of the data later on. However, I also presented the reader with the critical components of effective inclusive education, such as effective instruction practices, peer support, assistive technology, administrative support, PD training for educators, effective involvement and the support of parents and families. Moreover, I have also discussed various interventions and strategies to use with autistic students, for example, prompting, visual schedules, social stories and self-management strategies, some of which are referred to by the participants of this study in the analysis section later on, and therefore this section helps the reader understand what the participant educators are referring to. This section also served to present inclusive education as something which can be done, despite its challenges.

The final three sections of this chapter discussed the resources, training and support educators need in order to provide effective inclusive education to autistic students. Examples

of resources needed include adequate time for planning, financial resources, human resources, and a suitable physical school environment, while examples of necessary training include training that is consistent and field-based and that targets different teaching approaches. Examples of support needed include a tolerant society, a mentorship structure, support from specialists and teaching assistants, administrative support and parental support. These three sections were imperative to include, considering the purpose of this research, as they are a point of reference when I will be discussing the perceived needs of educators in the analysis chapter later on.

This literature review (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) has provided me with an informed understanding of the knowledge and attitudes educators have of and about autism, as well as the perceived needs vis-à-vis resources and services, training and support when working with autistic students in mainstream schools. Therefore, this literature review served as a foundation for this study, where I investigated the above from the Maltese context perspective. Moreover, this detailed literature review also served to provide the reader with a background to this study. In the next chapter, I will now move on to discuss the methods of this research.

Chapter 4

Research Design and Methodology

4.0 Introduction

This study primarily analysed the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic students in mainstream schools, while also investigating their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the Maltese inclusive system of education for autistic students. This research warranted a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives and, therefore, was guided by the interpretative paradigm and adopted qualitative research methods. In this chapter I will discuss the research methodology and methods chosen for this study, the process of constructing and piloting the research instruments, the data collection process and the analysis of the data. I will also describe the process of identifying, approaching and recruiting participants and the sampling criteria used. Finally, I will discuss the reliability and validity of the research and the ethical issues concerned.

4.1 Research Paradigms and Theoretical Framework

Paradigms are 'patterns of beliefs and practices that regulate inquiry within [a] discipline by providing lenses, frames and processes through which investigation is accomplished' (Weaver & Olson, 2006, p. 460). McGregor and Murnane (2010) defined the term paradigm as 'a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality' (p. 419). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) preferred the term philosophy instead of paradigm, and they defined it as the researcher's world view or the researcher's assumptions guiding the research. In other words, paradigms are ways of perceiving the world. The research paradigm provides a theoretical framework to the research by providing assumptions about ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (Rehman and Altharthi, 2016); thus, every paradigm has its own research designs. Indeed, depending on the paradigm, answers to ontological questions (i.e. what is the nature of reality) and epistemological assumptions (i.e. the researcher has a relationship to the issue being researched) vary. These terms will be defined and discussed in detail later in this section and in the following section.

Many different research paradigms exist. Okesina (2020) stated that 'a number of paradigms have been discussed in the literature with no agreement among researchers and authors as to an acceptable amount of standards in social science research' (p. 59). Okesina further argued that no one paradigm could be held as superior to the others, as each paradigm 'is based on the author's motivation, orientation, and worldview of knowledge or research' (p. 60). It seems, however, that amongst the most familiar paradigms are the positivist paradigm, the interpretivist paradigm and the critical theory paradigm. These paradigms are commonly

discussed by many scholars (Al Riyami, 2015; Kivunya & Kuyini, 2017; Mack, 2010; Okesina, 2020; Rehman & Altharti, 2016; Scotland, 2012; Taylor & Medina, 2013). A brief overview of these three paradigms shows how they differ.

The positivist paradigm is also known as the scientific paradigm, as it strives 'to investigate, confirm and predict law-like patterns of behaviour' (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p. 2). Taylor and Medina also note that it is useful in studies about natural science, physical science and, at times, social science and that, most often, the positivist paradigm uses quantitative methodology, and the researcher is an external part of the research but the one who controls the research process. In the positivist paradigm, it is assumed that there is one single reality that is 'objective, quantifiable and measurable through processes independent of the researcher and his/her instruments' (Okesina, 2020, p. 60). It is also assumed that 'the knower and the object to be known are different entities, and neither of them exerts influence on the other' (p. 60). Taylor and Medina (2013) explained the positivist paradigm through the metaphor of the fisherman, explaining that 'a positivist fisherman standing on a river bank describes (without getting his/her feet wet) the social properties of a species of fish by observing the general tendency of their group behaviour as they swim around' (p. 2).

Contrary to the positivist paradigm, the interpretative paradigm strives to 'understand the culturally different "other" by learning to "stand in their shoes", "look through their eyes" and "feel their pleasure or pain"' (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p. 4). Taylor and Medina argued that in the interpretative paradigm, knowledge is constructed after a prolonged process of interaction between the researcher and the participants. They further explained that in an educational context, this paradigm provides the researcher with the opportunity of acquiring rich understanding of 'the life-world experiences of teachers and students and of the cultures of classrooms, schools and the communities they serve' (p. 4). Okesina (2020) also described this, stating that through the interpretative paradigm lens, 'the reality is interpreted through the meanings that people give to their lives and this meaning can be discovered through language and dialogue (p. 60). Therefore, the interpretative paradigm supports the idea that any phenomenon has multiple realities and 'all knowledge is relative to the knower and can be understood from the point of view of the individual who is directly involved' (p. 60). Rehman and Altharti (2016) also stated that the interpretative paradigm supports the idea of socially-constructed multiple realities, in that it assumes that persons with disparate needs and perceptions provide researchers with a variety of truths and realities. Rehman and Altharthi further explained that in the interpretative paradigm 'one interpretation is not chosen or preferred over others as the "correct" one but the existence of multiple knowledges is accepted

with the acknowledgment that different researchers bring different perspectives to the same issue' (p. 55). Moreover, Tracy (2013) noted that, for interpretivists, 'reality is not something "out there", which a researcher can clearly explain, describe, or translate into a research report. Rather, both reality and knowledge are constructed…' (p. 40). Scotland (2012) argued that there are indeed as many realities as there are individuals. According to this paradigm, knowledge is subjective as both the researcher and the research participant are interacting and contributing to the process of knowing and because reality is highly influenced by the context (Okesina, 2020). Scotland (2012) stated that interpretive methods of research seek to gain an insight into and understand behaviour and to explain actions from the participant's viewpoint, while refraining from dominating the participants. Metaphorically, 'the interpretative fisherman enters the water, establishes rapport with the fish, and swims with them, striving to understand their experience of being in the water' (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p. 4). The metaphor continues that 'the interpretative fisherman questions his/her methods of interacting with the fish, remains doubtful about his/her ability to fully commune with them, and reflects on his/her own experience of being fish-like in the water' (p. 5). The latter part of the metaphor refers to the recent developments in the interpretative paradigm highlighting the importance of the researcher's subjectivity when interpreting the data. Therefore, the interpretative researcher needs to constantly ask him/herself about the influence of his/her own beliefs and values on the interpretation of the thoughts and feelings of others. In the context of education, interpretive inquiry helps educators become reflective practitioners and enhance their understanding of the lives of their students (Taylor & Medina, 2020).

Differing from the first two paradigms, the critical paradigm focuses on challenging beliefs that restrict human freedom and thus seeks to bring about social change and freedom (Okesina, 2020). Critical researchers 'desire to expose taken-for-granted beliefs, values, norms and social structures by highlighting the problems and the structures behind them, encouraging self-conscious criticism, and by developing emancipatory consciousness in researchers and social members in general' (Okesina, 2020, p. 61). Similar to interpretivism, critical theory supports the view that there is no one single reality, but instead multiple realities that can be explored through the interaction between the knower and the known (Okesina, 2020). From the metaphor perspective presented by Taylor and Medina (2013), 'the critical fisherman enables the fish to perceive the pollution in the water in which they live, to find its source, and to identify its harmful effect on their being in the water… empowers the fish to organise themselves as a lobby group and protest to the Fisheries' Department, and s/he advocates on their behalf to have the river cleaned up' (p. 6). In the educational context, the critical paradigm focuses first on

raising awareness amongst educators about established values and beliefs, and then introduces to them critical theory to stimulate their creative thinking about the numerous areas related to their profession (Taylor & Medina, 2013).

This research was guided by the interpretative paradigm. Since the aim of this research was to investigate the educators' perceived needs vis-à-vis the resources, training and support needed when working with autistic students in mainstream settings, this paradigm was considered as the most appropriate for this study because of the multiple perspectives people have on autism, inclusive education and the practice of educators.

Having adopted the interpretative paradigm, the ontological and epistemological questions I explored were built on the interpretative approach. Ontology refers to the view that every researcher has assumptions about reality, that is, 'how it exists and what can be known about it' (Rehman and Altharthi, 2016, p. 51), and it is therefore the ontological question that 'leads the researcher to inquire what kind of reality exists' (p. 51). The ontological question associated with the interpretative paradigm is a relativist one, in that it supports the view that the situation studied by a researcher has multiple realities, which can be explored and given meaning through the interactions amongst humans (Kivunya and Kuyini, 2017).

Epistemology, on the other hand, refers to the study of the nature of knowledge and the process of acquiring and validating knowledge (Rehman and Altharthi, 2016). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2009) explained that epistemology is concerned with 'the nature and forms [of knowledge], how it can be acquired and communicated to other human beings' (p. 7). The epistemological question, therefore, helps the researcher to debate 'the possibility and desirability of objectivity, subjectivity, causality, validity, generalisability' (Patton, 2002, p. 134). The epistemological question associated with the interpretative paradigm is a subjectivist one (Kivunya & Kuyini, 2017), where the meaning of data is gathered through the thinking and processing of the researcher. Kivunya and Kuyini (2017) stated that in the interpretative paradigm, the researcher constructs knowledge socially and the researcher and the subjects of the study engage in various interactive processes. Since, in the interpretative paradigm, the researcher has a major role in constructing meaning from the data gathered, it is important to note that the position of the researcher within the research can affect the meanings s/he constructs. My position as a researcher was previously discussed in Chapter 1.

The interpretative paradigm proved to be the most suitable for this research, since my aim was to delve deeply into the experiences of the participants. In the following three subsections, I will move on to discuss the theory which framed this research, social constructionism, and how this theoretical lens links to the interpretive paradigm and thus fits

this study. Following that, I will also provide a brief discussion of critical disability studies (CDS), which interconnect with the social constructionism theory, and which also provide a framework for this research. I will then discuss the critical discourse analysis approach as it links to both social constructionism and CDS, and how it has been used as part of the analysis of the findings of this research.

4.1.1 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism refers to a theoretical approach whereby it is believed that 'our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality' (Burr, 2015b, p. 222). In social constructionism, the idea that what we call knowledge is derived from objective and unbiased observations of events is problematised, as it is claimed that 'what exists is what we perceive to exist' (Burr, 2015b, p. 223). Social constructionism and interpretivism share some common philosophical roots; indeed, both approaches present the idea that the world we live in is understood from the perspective of the people living in it (Andrews, 2012). Galbin (2014) explained this very clearly using the metaphor of maps, where she stated that, in social constructionism, every individual is considered as having his/her own map of the same world, which the individual creates from his/her own perceptions of the actual world. As in the case of the interpretative paradigm, social constructionism's epistemological position is that of relativism, where it is believed that no one objective, final and true account of phenomena exists (Burr, 2015b). Rather, there exist multiple perspectives, each coexisting in parallel, with none of them considered to be better or truer than the other. Because of this, social constructionism proposes that a critical attitude should be taken towards our understanding of the world, instead of a search for an objective truth (Burr, 2015b).

Social constructionists further claim that an individual's understanding of the world depends significantly on the social network they form part of (Burr, 2015b; Gergen, 1985), that is, their relationship with things, people and events (Wisker, 2008), as this would affect the language, norms and customs they have, which in turn construct them as recognisable individuals capable of significant comportment (Burr, 2015b). Burr (2003) stated that persons are indeed produced through all kinds of social interactions that they have with others, hence putting language, a key constituent of interaction, as a major factor in this constructive work. Galbin (2014) agreed with this, describing social constructionism as an approach that puts emphasis on 'the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation' (p. 90). Burr (2003) further claimed that discourse

is thus at the heart of social constructionism. Critical discourse analysis is therefore an approach commonly found paired with the social constructionism theoretical approach (see Section 4.2.3). Having discussed the social constructionism theory and how this links to the interpretative paradigm guiding this research, I will now move on to discuss CDS in the following section, where I will talk about the standpoint of CDS vis-à-vis disability and how this ties into social constructionism and interpretivism.

4.1.2 CDS

Disability studies emerged from the social sciences and their standpoint is that disabilities are socially constructed (Tremain, 2005). Disability studies present three important key points: first, disability is socially constructed; second, our culture is one that favours what is considered normative; and third, people with disabilities should be given the opportunity to share their voices and viewpoints in order for us to be able to learn about their perspectives on any disability issue (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008).

4.1.2.1 Disability as socially constructed.

In the field of CDS, disability is understood in the context of the restrictions that society imposes on the individual, which most often serve to pathologise, restrain and exclude the individual (Reaume, 2014). Many CDS academics adopt the social model of disability (see Section 2.1.2) which links to the social constructionism theory discussed above (see Section 4.1.1). CDS confront ideas that pathologise physical, sensory and cognitive differences which portray these differences as needing correction (Crane, 2015). Instead, CDS locate the problem within society and the environment (Siebers, 2008). CDS advocate for the provision of accommodations and equality for disabled people in all aspects of life, by seeking to alter conservative notions of disability which present people with disabilities as pitiful who need to adjust to the environment around them (Reaume, 2014).

4.1.2.2 A culture which favours normative.

Goodley et al. (2019) argued that 'hegemonic framings of disability individualise, pathologise, medicalise, psychologise, essentialise and depoliticise the phenomenon of disability' (p. 973). The term disability is often used to transmit messages of failure and abnormality and is endlessly evoked in the reproduction of discourses that contrast with the normative non-disabled society (Garland Thomson, 2011). Even worse, disability is at times reduced to a metaphor, where the motive of discourse becomes the need to denote a lack, deficit or malfunction, for example crippled with anxiety or blind to the truth (Goodley et al., 2019).

In Maltese culture, disability is often seen through the medical deficit model of disability (see Section 2.1.2) which implies that disability is wrong and should be fixed (Hughes, 2005). In Maltese culture, ability is, in contrast, considered a 'central marker of successful human accomplishment and progression' (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 985). Ableism, indeed, cherishes mobility, intelligence, flexibility and accomplishment (Goodley, 2014). In this regard, CDS hesitate at such notions arising from ableism and instead value concepts such as interdependence, distributed competence, opportunities of possibility and human capabilities (Goodley et al., 2019). In a culture which favours the normative, institutions, such as family, work and schools, are 'built upon highly regulated principles and policy discourses of individual achievement and progression' (p. 987), where disability and impairments are created by the institutions themselves. In such cases, regardless of the disability being real or merely perceived, normative culture rejects diversity and seeks conformity instead (Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000). However, in CDS, it is argued that disability also offers the potential to change pedagogies, reorganise classroom settings, redesign playgrounds, and re-engage parents with the SMT. In other words, disability provides the opportunity to stop, think and reorientate education (Goodley et al., 2019).

4.1.2.3 Disabled people's voices and viewpoints.

CDS give particular attention to the perspective of the person experiencing the disability (Reaume, 2014). In CDS, it is argued that voices of disabled people provide a narrative counter to what is otherwise socially accepted as the truth (Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, 2006; Goodley, 2001; Nind, 2011; Polvere, 2010). Goodley et al. (2019) have expressed their fear that the more theories of disability that are generated, the more this might be positioning disability as an object of curiosity for theoreticians in such a way that they become 'the driving subjects and articulators of theory' (p. 980). Indeed, the influence of CDS on various fields could lead to the consequence that disabled people are pictured as 'interesting objects of inquiry rather than as arbiters of knowledge production' (p. 981). For this reason, the mantra of the Disabled People's Movement comes into play: Nothing about us, Without us (Charlton, 2006), which maintains the importance of listening to disabled people's voices and viewpoints to learn about disability issues from their perspectives.

In summary, CDS is in accordance with the interpretative paradigm, where it is argued that reality and truth are two factors that are fluid and thus continuously changing, depending on who is speaking, the background knowledge and experience of the speaker, and who is powerful in that particular situation (de Beaugrande, 1997; Rabinow, 1984).

Having discussed CDS and its ties with social constructionism and the interpretative paradigm, I will now move on to discuss critical discourse analysis, and again link this with the theoretical framework and research paradigms of this study.

4.1.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Van Dijk (2006), the major interest of CDA is to understand a particular social issue. Discourse analysis originated from sociology and is described as a method of 'examining the way knowledge is produced within different discourses and the performances, linguistic styles and rhetorical devices used in particular accounts' (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 200). It is underpinned by the social constructionist epistemology (Dick, 2004; Fulcher, 2010), which was discussed in the previous section. CDA is an approach to analysing qualitative data, where the focus lies in understanding the implicit meaning within a text or image, rather than the explicit content (Denscombe, 2010), since it is believed that people use language to explain themselves, their relationships and, more generally, the world they live in (Dick, 2004; McGregor, 2010). In doing that, CDA is about combining the internal study of language with the external study of its context, thus observing how that language is affected by social practices and relations (Cheng, 2009). The idea behind discourse analysis stems from the principle that words and pictures are used as a way of creating and supporting reality, rather than just portraying reality (Denscombe, 2010).

Discourse analysis is concerned with how individuals make use of language in particular social contexts (Dick, 2004). Locke (2004) has further argued that discourse is an articulate way of making sense of the world as reflected in human communication sign systems, one of which is verbal language. CDA considers the language of discourse as a two-way mirror, where the language both reflects and contributes to the social world, and the knowledge systems and social relationships found in it (Adolphus, n.d.). Wodak (1997) stated that '[CDA] studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form' (p. 173). Mc Gregor (2010) further explained that CDA dares the researcher to move from looking at language as something abstract to seeing language as meaningful, in particular, in the context of historical, social and political conditions.

In their discussion about discourse, Grant et al. (2005) cited Fairclough and Wodak (1997), who stated that 'discourse is not produced without a context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration. Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently' (p. 277). This statement highlights the fact that language is neither fixed nor

objective, but instead shaped by a whole range of situational factors, including the author's belief system, the particular economic, political and social context, and any professional community the person belongs to. Moreover, language is also influenced by the immediate situation in which a particular set of words were uttered (Adolphus, n.d.). St Pierre (2000) explains that 'once a discourse becomes "normal" or "natural", it is difficult to think and act outside it' (p. 485). Similarly, Raby (2002) argued that 'privileging one set of representations over another, discourses tend to claim the status of truth… As such, and as discourses work as truth statements, it is difficult to "see through" them to identify how our reality is shaped' (p. 430). Murphy (2011) claimed that this understanding owes a debt to Foucault, who presented the assumption that discourses which are powerful and dominant will reappear as naturalised and hegemonic. Schaaban-Magaña (2017) therefore proposed that, as a result, discourses have a significant effect on practice which often becomes invisible if not examined with scrutiny.

It is believed that CDA is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Wodak, 2009), in that it has the power of attributing meaning to a discourse depending on the culture of the respective society. In discourse analysis, it is believed that discourses are used to produce subjectivity (Burr, 2015a) and that 'words are chosen… with the purpose of having some effect on those who read them' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 287); therefore, the aim of this approach is to unpack the text to be able to understand what is said by people and the background assumptions for this to be possible (Denscombe, 2010). Lucke (1996) stated that the function of CDA is to disarticulate and critique text in such a way that common sense is disrupted. The data are then analysed to reveal how meaning is created, how the data contain hidden messages, how the data reflect, create and highlight cultural messages, and how they require the reader to become an active interpreter of the content of the text (Denscombe, 2010).

CDA is said to have three levels of analysis: the actual text, which refers to the linguistic features and organisation of the discourse; the discursive practice, which refers to how the discourse is produced, circulated and consumed within a society; and the social practice, which refers to the conceptual effects and dominant processes in which discourse takes place (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; McGregor, 2010).

Discourse analysis differs from other approaches, as in attempting to reveal the cultural assumptions that need to come into play when trying to understand the data, the researcher tends to rely on theories and concepts generated separately from the specific text that is being analysed. This is almost unavoidable in discourse analysis, as the researcher is required to look at what is missing from the text as well as what is contained, more specifically, to look at what

implicit messages are being communicated, in addition to what is being made explicit (Denscombe, 2010). For this reason, researchers using a critical discourse approach are required to use existing knowledge about society and its culture and hence analyse the data with the necessary preconceptions about the meanings contained in the data (Denscombe, 2010).

Morgan (2010) identified a number of advantages of CDA. One such advantage is that CDA enables positive individual and social change, thereby presenting a critical challenge to traditional theory, policy and practice in different contexts. Moreover, CDA requires the researcher to be reflective instead of remaining a neutral observer. On the other hand, Morgan (2010) also pointed out some disadvantages of CDA, including that, in CDA, meaning remains open to interpretation by the researcher. Moreover, there is the possibility that CDA disrupts notions that have been established for many years, and thus can be disturbing. The general lack of explicit techniques provided for researchers to follow is another disadvantage mentioned by Morgan (2010). Wodak (2008) acknowledged another critique of CDA, wherein CDA is associated with 'cherry picking' (p. 11), since the researcher can pick the examples that suit his/her assumptions. This is in line with the criticism pointed out by Hammersely (1997) who stated that CDA can lead to speculative results because of this. Widdowson (2004), cited in Tenorio (2011), adds that CDA can result in biased analysis if texts are removed from their contexts in order to fit into the argument and/or assumption of the researcher. Haig (2004) further described another critique – CDA over-relies on textual analysis, despite claiming that the social nature of CDA makes it a good tool to address discriminations. One major shortcoming of CDA indicated by Martin (1992) is that CDA tends to pinpoint areas for concern in society without suggesting or applying a tangible plan for how these could be remedied or at least improved.

Having discussed the research paradigms and the theoretical framework of this research, I will now move on to the next section, where I will discuss the research methodology and methods chosen for this study, in the light of the interpretative paradigm guiding this research and its theoretical framework.

4.2 Research Methodology and Methods

Methodology refers to the approach the researcher chooses to produce the data for his/her study, which should be clearly articulated and theoretically-informed, according to Rehman and Altharthi (2016). They also noted that it involves studying and critically analysing data production techniques, in order to plan a strategy for the process and design of a research

project, including the choice of research method, adding that the question of methodological approach thus helps the researcher decide how the topic should be studied.

Social research can use either qualitative or quantitative methods. As Patton (2002) explained, while qualitative methods examine details and explore issues in depth, quantitative methods utilise standardised measures 'to fit varying perspectives and experiences of people into a limited number of predetermined response categories, to which numbers are assigned' (p. 40). In addition, quantitative methods have a higher number of participants and have more structured questions, 'thus facilitating comparison and aggregation of data, [which]... gives a broad, generalizable set of findings presented succinctly and parsimoniously' (p. 14). By contrast, Patten noted, results obtained with qualitative methods focus on a smaller number of people, but they provide the researcher with more detailed information and, thus, a more profound understanding of the participants' experiences or situations under examination. Wimmer and Dominick (1994) briefly explained the difference between qualitative and quantitative researchers: 'whereas quantitative researchers strive for breadth, qualitative researchers strive for depth' (p. 140). Quantitative research is more controlled and is claimed to be more objective and outcome-oriented, assuming the existence of facts that are independent from the researcher, whereas qualitative research proposes that 'there is a subjective element to all knowledge and research, and that holistic, ungeneralizable studies, are justifiable' (Nunan, 1992, p. 3).

In light of the interpretative paradigm adopted in this research, and having considered the nature of qualitative methodology, this methodology was chosen for this study. Various studies in the literature have shown the link between the use of qualitative methods and the interpretative paradigm. Indeed, Rehman and Altharthi (2016) stated that interpretivists employ methods that generate qualitative data. In addition, Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) suggested that the interpretivist paradigm adopts naturalist methodology, such as interviews, further explaining that, in this type of methodology, the researcher usually acts as participant observer. Tracy (2013) cited a number of strengths that qualitative research offers, one of which is that 'good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their society and its institutions. Qualitative methodology can provide knowledge that targets societal issues, questions, or problems and therefore serves humankind' (p. 5). This strength mentioned by Tracy (2013) indeed reflects my goal as a researcher to understand the perceived needs of educators vis-à-vis the resources and services, training, and support when working with autistic students in Maltese state primary schools; it therefore provides a sound reason why qualitative methods were the ideal approach to utilise in this research. Hammarberg et al. (2016) noted that

'qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant. These data are usually not amenable to counting or measuring' (p. 499), again providing another sound reason for using qualitative methods for this study. Tracy (2013) further noted that the nature of qualitative research is based on emerging from situated problems in the field and focusing on the thick description of context, as is indeed the case with this research. Rehman and Altharthi (2016) stated that qualitative methodology usually uses an inductive pattern of analysing data, meaning that 'the researcher tries to discover patterns in the data which are collapsed under broad themes to understand a phenomenon and generate theory' (p. 56). Tracy (2013) also made reference to the inductive approach employed in qualitative methodology. She claimed that inductive approaches, which are usually contextual, help researchers understand local meanings and rules for behaviour. These benefits of qualitative methods discussed here indicated qualitative methodology as the best approach for this study.

As seen in Nunan's statement above, traditionally, qualitative methods were seen as having one disadvantage that quantitative methods did not, mainly that they were considered as ungeneralisable. Smith (2018), however, insisted that 'qualitative research does lack generalizability *when* it is understood *only* through one particular type of generalizability, that is, *statistical-probabilistical generalizability'* (p. 138). Indeed, applying this type of generalisability to qualitative research is problematic for various reasons. Smith (2018) explained that given the nature of qualitative research, that is, the tendency of it being subjective and dependent on the multiple realities as understood by the researcher and provided by the participants, statistical-probabilistical generalisability does not fit much with qualitative research. In addition, the goal of qualitative research is to provide rich knowledge and purposefully-chosen small samples, which are its major strengths rather than weaknesses (Smith, 2018). Therefore, generalisability in qualitative research is to be understood differently, but should still be considered and discussed in qualitative studies. Indeed, Shaw and Hoeber (2016) argued that engaging with the issue of generalisability in qualitative research will decrease the likelihood of researchers, journal editors and reviewers continuing to believe that qualitative methods have a limitation where generalisability is concerned and thus continue using this to criticise, demean and reject qualitative research.

Contrary to these traditional beliefs about generalisability in qualitative research, Smith (2018) asserted that 'qualitative research *can be* and *is* at times generalizable' (p. 140). He went on to provide a number of different generalisations one can apply from a qualitative research. One such generalisation is what is referred to as naturalistic or representational generalisation,

which occurs when the results from the research echo the reader's personal experiences in the field (Smith, 2018; Tracy, 2010). Another generalisation that could be sought from qualitative research is transferability, also known as inferential generalisation or case-to-case generalisation. Transferability is understood as the ability to adopt something, which was identified through the research, to another setting or context (Smith, 2018). Analytical or vertical generalisation is another type of generalisation that can be adopted in qualitative research. In this type of generalisation, the researcher either generalises the results of the research by attributing them to an already-existing theory or concept, or else comes up with a set of findings that are later attributed to a theory or concept which arises from a future research (Smith, 2018).

While generalisability in qualitative research is in fact possible, as discussed above, Smith (2018) also acknowledged that there still exist a number of challenges associated with it, one of which is related to reader generalisability. This means that in qualitative research, it is often the reader who needs to come up with generalisations from the research, contrary to what is the case in quantitative research, where the researcher points out the generalisations him/herself. For this reason, researchers using qualitative research cannot predict whether the research will, in fact, be generalisable (Smith, 2018). So, while the findings of this study could be generalisable, it will most often have to be the reader who would decide on whether and how s/he will be generalising the data.

As explained above, having adopted the interpretative paradigm, the qualitative approach was the ideal methodology for this research. Qualitative methodology provides the researcher with a vast choice of qualitative methods to choose from, such as focus groups, interviews, questionnaires and observations. For the purpose of this research, I used qualitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were delivered in the initial stage to the entire population of educators at one specific college: 27 SMTs, 137 teachers and 102 LSEs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a random stratified sample of the same educators at a later stage.

I chose these two qualitative methods in order to acquire detailed descriptions of the SMT members, teachers and LSEs' perceived needs and perceptions regarding autistic students. While the former gave me an insight into the entire population of the college, the latter gave me deeper and richer data, as 'the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective' (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Moreover,

> interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view… enabling multi-sensory

> channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard. (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 349)

In addition, the qualitative questionnaire (mainly comprised of open-ended questions) allowed me to develop interview questions based on the various responses given by participants, which would not have been possible if the questionnaires had been of a quantitative nature. Reasons for choosing each of these methods will be discussed in more detail in the coming sections (Sections 3.3 and 3.4), dedicated to each instrument.

I opted to begin with the dissemination of the qualitative questionnaires to the entire population because I wanted to get a general overview of the educators' perceived needs and perceptions. The interviews conducted at a later stage allowed me to investigate further important issues arising from the questionnaire data. In this way, the questionnaires also served as a means to identify any issues which needed further discussion, and so they helped me in developing the interview questions.

4.3 The Questionnaires

Questionnaires are popular amongst researchers as a method of data collection, mainly because they enable 'the researcher to collect data in field settings, and the data themselves are more amenable to quantification than discursive data such as free-form field notes, participant observers' journals, the transcripts of oral language' (Nunan, 2009, p. 143). In addition, questionnaires are popular for the anonymity they provide (Cohen et al., 2009; Munn & Drever, 1990), which few other research methods offer (Munn & Drever, 1990). Therefore, they are ideal to use when 'gathering original data about people, their behaviour, experiences and social interactions, attitudes and opinions, and awareness of events' (McGuirck & O'Neill, 2016, p. 3).

Questionnaires are also more economical in terms of time (Cohen et al., 2009; Menter et al. 2011; Munn & Drever, 1990) and money (Cohen et al., 2009; McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), and are also flexible (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016; Menter et al., 2011). Munn and Drever (1990) noted a number of ways in which questionnaires can save time, including that the researcher can draft the questionnaire at his/her own home, the questionnaire can be completed by the participants on their own time and questionnaires offer the opportunity of collecting information from a large number of participants at the same time (for example, during an allocated time period [see Section 3.3.3]). McGuirk and O'Neill (2016) further argued that questionnaires are ideal because they 'can be combined effectively with complementary, more intensive forms of qualitative research, such as interviews and focus groups, to provide more in-depth perspectives on social process and context' (pp. 3–4).

Additionally, questionnaires do not necessarily require the presence of a researcher (Cohen et al., 2009). Moreover, questionnaires present the participants with standardised and structured questions (Denscombe, 2010; McGuirck & O'Neill, 2016; Munn & Drever, 1990). Due to having an identical set of questions for each participant, they allow for 'consistency and precision in terms of the wording' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 155). Munn and Drever (1990) added that the standardised questions posed in questionnaires mean that 'there is no interviewer coming between the respondent and the question and so there is no scope for negotiating or clarifying the meaning of the question' (p. 4). They also emphasised that while the researcher cannot control how the respondent interprets the questions, s/he does know that respondents have been presented with the same questions, in the same order, which is something that cannot usually be claimed for interviews.

In addition, they stressed that questionnaires tend to have a high return rate; traditionally, this was not a claim made about questionnaires because, due to the fact that researchers tended to be distant from their participants and most often asked about issues that were irrelevant to their respondents, return rates tended to be low. This, however, they added, was not usually the case when researchers have the opportunity to remind respondents about the questionnaire and when making wise decisions on how to administer the questionnaire, one of which could be setting an allocated time to complete the questionnaire (see Section 4.3.3).

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, I considered questionnaires the appropriate research method for this research because they are ideal to use when the researcher aims at a large number of participants situated in many different locations (Denscombe, 2010; McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), as was the case in this research. Furthermore, since the target participants all had a higher level of education, questionnaires were suitable to use, since all participants were able to read and understand the questions presented (Denscombe, 2010). Lastly, it was expected that the '*social climate of the participants [would be] open* enough to allow full and honest answers' (p. 156), since the questionnaires were completely anonymous and the topic investigated was of direct interest to the participants. This was indeed the case. Moreover, although it is difficult for a researcher to check how truthful the participants responses in a questionnaire are (Denscombe, 2010), in this research, this drawback was limited, as questionnaires were accompanied by interviews, which weighed against this disadvantage.

Nunan (2009) pointed out that 'the construction of valid and reliable questionnaires is a highly specialised business' (p. 143) and largely depends on the type of questions asked and the wording of each question by the researcher. Since this research delved deeply into participants' perceptions, I constructed open-ended questions that 'often obtain more useful

information' and 'more accurately reflect what the participant wants to say' (Nunan, 2009, p. 143). Further, open-ended questions 'capture the specificity of a particular situation… where rich and personal data are sought' (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 321). Construction of questionnaires will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

4.3.1 Constructing the questionnaires.

Constructing questions for a questionnaire requires special care, as the way questions are posed affects whether and how participants will respond. Indeed, McGuirk and O'Neill (2016) argued that 'the design stage is where a great deal of researcher skill is vested, and it is a critical stage in ensuring the worth of the data collected' (p. 249). Munn and Drever (1990) suggested various ways to construct appropriate questions for a questionnaire. They started off by stating that the researcher should, first of all, think about which questions are essential to be asked in the questionnaire, specifying that 'you need to decide on how many questions you *need* to ask. Needing to ask is different from wanting to ask' (p. 19). When planning the questionnaire, the researcher should make sure the wording used is totally unambiguous, technical jargon is limited and wording is suitable to the specific target group (Denscombe, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Munn & Drever, 1990). In addition, questions should not be vague; instead, they should be short, straightforward and logically numbered (Denscombe, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2012), and leading questions are to be avoided (Denscombe, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Munn & Drever, 1990). These suggestions were all considered when planning the questionnaire.

In the case of this research, a questionnaire for each stakeholder group (i.e. SMTs, teachers, LSEs) was prepared and delivered at the beginning of the scholastic year (Appendices A, B and C). The questionnaire was comprised of relatively generic questions informed by the literature review to gain a brief overview of the current situation in Maltese schools. It was divided into three sections: Section A – Background Information, Section B – Knowledge and Attitudes about Autism and Section C – Resources, Training and Support for Educators Working with Autistic Students. Munn and Drever (1990) suggested dividing questionnaires into sections, each with its own heading, to improve the appearance of the questionnaire and thus encourage the participants to see the overall logic of the questionnaire.

Section A – Background Information consisted of only two questions, which asked for factual information (Denscombe, 2010) and were both of the checklist type. The first question asked about the gender of the participant, while the second question asked about how long the participant had been in his/her current role. Such questions served to set the atmosphere for the

questionnaire, as Munn and Drever (1990) suggested that a questionnaire should start with the more straightforward questions, gradually moving on to the more complicated questions.

Section B – Knowledge and Attitudes about Autism consisted of four questions, all of which required opinion-related replies (Denscombe, 2010) and varied in their type. Some were open-ended, and some offered dichotomous choices (yes/no), while others were of the checklist type. In the latter, participants were asked to give reasons to support their choice. The questions in this section focused more on how much knowledge the participants had about autism and on their experiences, attitudes and feelings towards autism, inclusion and the Maltese inclusive system of education.

Section C – Resources, Training and Support for Educators Working with Autistic Students consisted of eight questions, all of which were again opinion-related questions and also varied in type. The majority of the questions required an open-ended answer; however, there were some which were of the checklist type. Open-ended questions were important for this kind of research, as they are

> flexible, they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge, they encourage cooperation and help establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 357)

Denscombe (2010) also explained that the advantages of open questions are that they are more likely to provide the researcher with a rich picture of the complex perspectives held by the participants. He further argued that open questions allow the participants the space needed to express themselves in their own words.

The questions in this section were subdivided into subsections: Resources and Services and Training and Support. The subsection's questions asked about the resources and services, training and support, respectively, that the educators were currently receiving, if any, and what resources and services, training and support they actually needed. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they wanted to add any other comments. Thus, the questionnaire consisted of a number of questions asking participants about their opinions on the issues being investigated. According to researchers, such questions are very important as these opinion and value questions aim at 'understanding the cognitive and interpretative processes of people… Answers to these questions tell us what people think about some experience or issue… about people's goals, intentions, desires, and expectations' (Patton, 2002, p. 350). Overall, the absolute majority of the questions in the questionnaire were open-ended questions, which had greater potential to provide in-depth information by giving more voice to respondents and

inviting them to 'recount understandings, experiences and opinions in their own style' (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016, p. 251).

These three main sections of the questionnaire corresponded to the research questions, which guided the analysis and discussion. McGuirk and O'Neill (2016) advised that 'the content of a questionnaire must relate to the broader research question as well as to your critical examination and understanding of critical processes, concepts and relationships' (p. 249). Indeed, familiarisation with the international and national literature about the particular research topic is important for the researcher to ensure clarity of research objectives, proper identification of prospective research participants and key questions (McGuirck & O'Neill, 2016). Moreover, it is of utmost importance that the intended purpose of each question is clear and that the researcher knows who will be answering each of the questions and how each will be analysed (McGuirck & O'Neill, 2016). Due consideration was also given to the ordering of the questions in the questionnaire, as Denscombe (2010) insisted that the ordering of the questions 'can entice or deter the respondent from continuing with the exercise of providing answers' (p. 164). Administration of this questionnaire helped develop interview questions, which were also categorised into the same sections as the questionnaire (apart from Section A – Background Information), and thus also corresponded to the research questions.

Each questionnaire included the instructions at the beginning of each section, as suggested by Denscombe (2010), to guide the participants. Furthermore, attention was given to the visual design of the questionnaire, as an uncluttered design, which is easy to follow, was suggested (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Spacing is also important; therefore, attention was given to allowing enough space for participants' responses to open questions, but this was not overdone in a way that would discourage participants from offering a response (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016).

There were three questionnaires, one each for the SMT members, the teachers and the LSEs; however, the questions in each were almost identical to each other, as all participants were asked the same questions using the same wording, apart from some small differences, such as using the verb 'teaching' for teachers vis-à-vis the term 'working with' for the LSEs. This enabled triangulation (see Section 3.8) and made comparing and contrasting the findings easier.

4.3.2 Piloting of the questionnaires.

According to Nunan (1992), pilot testing of research methods is essential to avoid pitfalls. Cohen et al. (2009) argued that the key objective of pilot testing is to increase the

reliability, validity and practicality of the research method. Further, pilot testing eliminates any ambiguous questions and ensures that the questions yield the required data (Nunan, 2009). Munn and Drever (1990) insisted that it would be a waste of time and energy if the researcher eliminates the important stage of piloting. Thus, the questionnaires (Appendix D) were pilot tested with two SMT members, two teachers and two LSEs, after obtaining ethical approval from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee (Appendix E).

The pilot participants were chosen from amongst my close past colleagues whom I trusted to be critical of my work and honest in their feedback, as Munn and Drever (1990) suggested that piloting participants should 'be sympathetic to your work but willing to give forthright comments and sharp criticism' (p. 31). I made sure that all of the participants were qualified in their fields to ensure that the testing was professional. Before the actual pilot testing was performed, the study's aim was explained, and each participant was briefed on the procedure. Each pilot participant was also given a consent form to sign. For each pilot test, I asked the participants to answer the questions in the questionnaires, indicate any ambiguous questions and offer comments for improvement.

The LSE questionnaire was the first to be pilot tested. An invitation to participate in the pilot testing was sent to two LSEs by email. Both agreed to pilot test the questionnaire, and a separate appointment was scheduled with each. The pilot testing of these questionnaires was conducted on 13 July 2018, each run conducted separately from the other. Munn and Drever (1990) advised that pilot tests should be run separately and individually, allowing ample time for doing the exercise.

Both LSEs filled in the questionnaire meticulously and provided detailed responses to the questions asked. Regarding deficits in the clarity of the questionnaire, the first LSE noted that there should be more space for answers, as it proved almost impossible to complete the responses in the few lines provided. While filling in the questionnaire, this participant asked me to explain one of the questions in Section B of the questionnaire. This indicated that the question was ambiguous and needed to be amended. The second LSE also provided detailed responses. This participant, however, found that the number of lines provided was sufficient for her to give a response. This participant noted that the title in some of the sections said 'please tick' indicating a box and a ✓ sign in it, but the actual options did not have the box next to them which the participants could tick. This participant also indicated that some of the questions where the participants were required to tick an option did not provide all possible options; for instance, they only provided 'yes', 'no' and 'I don't know', whereas the answer was not any of these.

The teachers’ questionnaire was the next to be pilot tested. Both teachers were also sent an invitation to participate in the pilot testing by email, and both agreed to participate. Both pilot tests were conducted separately on 14 July 2018. Similar to the LSE pilot, both teachers noted that the questions needed to have more lines so that participants could have more space to write their responses. Both noted the need for a text box where participants could tick their answer. The first teacher gave very detailed answers and pointed out a number of questions which were ambiguous and might perplex other participants. This included the ambiguous question indicated by the first LSE. Some of these questions did not specify what I was after as an answer, while others needed rewording to be clearer. The questions pointed out as ambiguous by the first teacher were also seen as ambiguous by the second teacher. Moreover, the second teacher noted that some questions consisted of more than one question which could lead to the participants answering only one part of the question.

The last questionnaire to be pilot tested was the one for the SMT members. Both participants were invited to participate by email and both agreed to participate. Both pilot tests were conducted separately on 16 July 2018. The SMT members both noted the need of a text box to tick responses and also the need for more options to choose from, apart from ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘I don’t know’ in some of the questions. The second SMT member also noted that questions made up of more than one question should be divided into separate questions to eliminate the possibility of participants answering only part of the question. Moreover, the participant also pointed out one question which was not clear and suggested how it could be reworded.

After each pilot test, I dedicated some time to discussing the feedback they provided. After the pilot tests, I analysed the responses to check whether the data given were what I needed and whether the research questions were answered. All the feedback I received was considered. Suggestions for better layout, such as adding a textbox for ticking, were implemented immediately. I also thought about what phrases would be best to add (apart from ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘I don’t know’) in the questions where participants needed to tick an answer. I decided to add the term ‘both’, since that would be suitable for eventualities where participants felt that, in some instances, their answer would be yes and, in others, it would be no, as was the case in the pilot tests. Moreover, questions consisting of more than one question were divided into more questions, and ambiguous questions were amended for clarity. However, in one instance, though the feedback was considered, the suggestion was not implemented for reasons of practicality, since subdividing the question would have made the question more complex rather than simpler.

4.3.3 Disseminating and collecting the questionnaires.

After the necessary permissions and approvals were acquired (see Section 4.6), I started working on the dissemination and collection of the questionnaires. First, I began by sending an email to all the heads of schools of the primary schools of the college in which I chose to conduct my research. The purpose of the email was to introduce myself, explain what my research was about and invite them to participate in the research. Fortunately, all heads of schools answered positively to my email, meaning I had 11 schools in all. Most of the heads responded immediately to my email, claiming their interest to participate, provided that their participation would interrupt the school days' routine as little as possible. A small number of the heads replied positively to my email after I sent a gentle reminder a few days later.

Following the email reply from the heads of schools, I called at each school and discussed with the head of school the best way forward. Since I was aware of the 'relatively efficient' (Brown, 2007, p. 5) method of group administration, I first asked all heads of schools whether it would be possible to address the group of educators at their school as a group, such as during staff meetings, Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions or curriculum time. The aim was to minimise disruptions of lessons, increase practicality and address all the educators at once, ensuring that they would receive the exact same information about the research and the researcher. Indeed, Munn and Drever (1990) suggested the latter, insisting that it is a way to ensure standardised responses, as all participants would have received the same information about the research and/or questionnaire. Moreover, McGuirk and O'Neill (2016) emphasised that distributing the questionnaires face-to-face makes qualitative research efficient, as the researcher's presence allows for possible complex questions to be discussed on the spot, allowing the researcher to encourage participation. Some of the heads of schools immediately liked the idea of group administration, and these gave me the date and time of their respective meetings. After the call, I sent an email to the heads of schools confirming the date and time of the appointments. Other heads of schools did not like the idea of group administration and, instead, offered me an opportunity to go to their respective schools and disseminate the questionnaires to each educator individually.

In the case of group administration, I had two different formats. Some heads of school offered me the opportunity not only to address the group of educators as a whole group, but also to give the interested participants time to complete the questionnaire so I could collect them as soon as they were done. This method is called *captive audience* and has the advantage of collecting data quickly, obtaining a very high response rate and saving money on postage (Kumar, 2011). Others offered me enough time to introduce myself and explain what the

research was about, disseminate the questionnaires and then collect the completed questionnaires on a later day. Completed questionnaires were also collected on another day in the cases where I disseminated them individually to educators. Together with the questionnaire, each educator was given an information sheet to keep (Appendix F) and two consent forms to sign (Appendix H), one of which was to be kept by the participant and the other was to be handed in with the questionnaire. Both Denscombe (2010) and McGuirk and O'Neill (2016) highlighted the importance of giving the participants some background information about the research. According to them, such information should include information about the purpose of the research and who is sponsoring it, information about confidentiality of participants and voluntary participation and a thank you note at the end to express the researcher's appreciation to the participants' for their contribution to the research.

4.3.4 Plotting the questionnaire data.

Analysis of questionnaire data is generally divided into three main stages, and the first is data preparation, according to Munn and Drever (1990). They noted that although this stage is time-consuming, it is time well spent, as this stage increases the researcher's confidence in the overall analysis and reduces risks of errors. Also, they stressed that the aim of data preparation is to make sense of the raw data and make it more manageable. To be able to analyse the questionnaire data, I opted to input all the data into Excel sheets. An Excel sheet is one method used by researchers to help them code the data collected (Tracy, 2013), as 'although spreadsheet programs are designed for numeric data, qualitative researchers can also use them to store and count bits of data' (p. 188). I set up an Excel sheet for each of the participant stakeholder groups: SMT members, teachers and LSEs. There were also two sheets which presented the statistics on how many questionnaires I had disseminated and how many I actually collected. Indeed, I disseminated a total of 27 questionnaires to SMT members of which 25 were returned, a total of 137 questionnaires to teachers of which 87 were returned and a total of 102 questionnaires to LSEs of which 60 were returned. Therefore, I had 172 questionnaires in all.

Each school was assigned a colour and a letter of the alphabet, for ease of reference, and each participant was assigned a code made up of the letter of the school s/he worked in, another letter which reflected his/her role at school (S – SMT, T – Teacher, L - LSE) and a number. For example, participant A.S1 would be the first SMT member from school A, while participant C.T3 would be the third teacher from school C, and participant K.L8 would be the eighth LSE from school K. These codes assured total anonymity of the participants, while also providing

me with structure and organisation while analysing my data. Indeed, Denscombe (2010) suggested that coding is important 'so that [the questionnaire] can be distinguished from others and located if necessary' (p. 161). I opted not to give pseudonyms to my participants, since I had quite a large number of participants, and I felt it would have been complicated to assign a pseudonym to each one.

Once this coding process was done, it was time to develop the Excel sheets. In the first two columns of the Excel sheet were the question number and the question itself. At the top of the other columns, the participant codes were entered. The textboxes with the codes were also given a colour which corresponded to the colour attributed to the particular school. For the dichotomous and the checklist type questions, a number was given to each option which was available to tick. For example, the first question asked the participants to tick their gender; therefore, on the Excel sheet, I entered the number 1 if the participant had marked that he was a male and the number 2 if the participant had marked that she was a female. On the other hand, if the participant had not ticked any of the answers, I entered the number 0. For the second question, a number was given to each option available for the participants to tick; the number 0 was entered if no reply was given.

For the open-ended questions, a slightly different approach was used. For each open-ended question, I identified responses, which emerged from the questionnaire and which I wrote in the boxes under the respective questions. Munn and Drever (1990) referred to this as categories deriving from the data and suggested that a batch of responses should be identified and then summarised in a few simple statements. This is what I did in this research. For example, for question 3 (What do you understand by the term autism spectrum disorder?), a number of different responses emerged, such as developmental disorder/disability, difficulties in communication and difficulties in behaviour, amongst others. These were all listed on the sheet. Then, in the row of the question, the number 0 was entered if the participant did not give a reply to the question, and the number 1 was entered if the participant gave a reply. In the latter case, a number 1 was also entered in the row of the response/s the participant provided. For example, if the participant said that autism is a developmental disorder and the person has difficulties in communication and behaviour, a number 1 was listed in the row of each of these responses under the column corresponding to that participant's code.

Apart from the options *Yes*, *No* and *No reply*, the option *NA* (not applicable) was provided on the Excel sheet for some of the questions. This was particularly important for question 4, which had two parts. In that case, the participant had to fill in the part which was applicable to him/her; therefore, in the part which was not applicable and which should have

been left empty, I entered NA on my Excel sheet. For certain questions, I also included the option *Not relevant*, since some participants gave answers which were absolutely not relevant to the question asked. At the end of each row, a total was calculated, which showed how many participants had ticked that particular answer.

During this process of analysing the questionnaire data, I encountered certain issues. As already noted, some participants' replies to certain questions were not relevant to the question asked; thus, these were plotted as *Not relevant* on the Excel sheet. Another issue was that some participants filled in both sections of question 4 (this question required participants to fill in either the *Yes* part or the *No* part). In these instances, I checked what answer they had ticked in the question prior to this and if, for example, they had ticked *Yes*, I then plotted the answers for the *Yes* part, and the others were plotted as a *Not applicable*. It was important that such problem responses were still recorded, as suggested by Munn and Drever (1990).

Moreover, I also had situations where the participant filled in the questionnaire but did not sign the consent form, or conversely, had signed the consent form but did not tick the boxes or only ticked some of them. These participants were not included in the statistics, as their questionnaire was considered invalid.

A point worth mentioning here is that, in the instances when questionnaires were filled in during a captive audience, there was a high return of questionnaires; however, the replies were rather brief and to the point. On the other hand, in those instances where I disseminated questionnaires to educators individually or where I disseminated the questionnaires to educators as a group and collected them on another day, the number of questionnaires returned was lower, but the replies were much more detailed and provided richer data.

This method of presenting the questionnaire data was very time-consuming, but it provided me with an effective and transparent way of presenting the data in a logical manner for better analysis. Thus, it was easier for me to analyse and write about the data I had obtained. Moreover, it provided me with the opportunity to go back to the Excel sheets if I needed to clarify anything while analysing the data.

The second and third stages of analysing questionnaire data, which are data description and data interpretation, as presented by Munn and Drever (1990), will be discussed in Section 4.5, as these were done after conducting the interviews (See Section 4.5 for more detail).

4.4 The Interviews

Interviews are a popular method used to collect data in qualitative research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). There are various reasons why interviews have acquired such popularity.

Previous literature has highlighted the numerous advantages of interviews. Cohen et al. (2009) discussed the use of multisensory channels in interviews, namely verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard. Atkins and Wallace (2012) suggested that they are a means by which researchers and research participants can interact face to face 'in a way that questionnaires or focus groups, for example, do not' (p. 2). Cohen et al. (2009) added that interviews leave space for spontaneity, but also allow control by the interviewer, and enable responses to complex, deep issues. Moreover, they enable the interviewer 'to probe and clarify and to check that they have understood correctly what is being said' (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 2). Ritchie and Lewis (2003) also agreed with this, stating that probing techniques allow the researcher to achieve depth from the answers given by the interviewee where penetration, exploration and explanation are concerned. Interviews also produce 'direct quotes from people about their experience, opinions, feelings, and knowledge' (Patton, 2002, p. 4).

For this reason, Fontana and Frey (2005) have argued that interviews are not simple interactions between the researcher and participant where the participant offers answers to questions raised by the researcher; instead, they are active processes allowing the researcher to learn more about him/herself and others. Further, according to Cohen et al. (2009), interviews provide participants with the opportunity to offer their own interpretations and viewpoints. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) also agreed about the interactive nature of interviews, insisting that interviewee questions encourage the interviewee to talk freely about what s/he is being asked.

In addition, 'interviews are especially valuable for providing information and background on issues that cannot be observed or efficiently accessed' (Tracy, 2013, p. 132) and are 'especially helpful for acquiring information that is left out of formal documents or omitted from sanitized histories' (pp. 132–133), thus making them an ideal research method for this study. As opposed to other research methods, interviews are valuable to use when wanting to strengthen other data, such as bringing up researcher's observations or hearsay and asking interviewees to 'verify, refute, defend, or expand' (p. 133), thus allowing the opportunity to 'test hunches and interpretations about the scene' (p. 133).

Interviews are also relatively flexible and personal, and they produce a wealth of data (Brown, 2005; Cohen et al., 2009). Atkins and Wallace (2012) noted that interviews are a 'flexible research tool which can be used to gather a range of different types of information, including factual data, views and opinions, personal narratives and histories' (p. 2), while Ritchie and Lewis (2003) asserted that interviews are structured and flexible at the same time, as their structure

> is sufficiently flexible to permit topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee, to allow responses to be fully probed and explored and to allow the researcher to be responsive to relevant issues raised spontaneously by the interviewee. (p. 141)

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) mentioned another advantage of interviews, which is their ability to generate new knowledge because 'it is likely that the participant will at some point direct themselves, or be directed by the researcher, down avenues of thought they have not explored before' (p. 142). They also added that in interviews, participants could also be given the opportunity to add comments to ideas or propose solutions to challenges raised. Interviews also feature a high response rate, fewer incomplete answers and a more controlled order of answering (Cohen et al., 2009).

Of the three main types of interviews – unstructured, semi-structured and structured – I adopted the semi-structured type. Nunan (2009) explained that, in semi-structured interviews, 'the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions. Topics and issues rather than questions determine the course of the interview' (p. 149), and therefore they 'ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed' while remaining 'free to build a conversation' (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Moreover, another advantage of the semi-structured interview is that 'it makes sure that the interviewer… has carefully decided how to best use the limited time available in an interview situation… delimiting in advance the issues to be explored' (p. 343). Semi-structured interviews also reduce the chance of bias that may arise from the asymmetrical relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Nunan, 2009). Considering these benefits, I conducted semi-structured interviews to complement the questionnaires delivered at the beginning of the scholastic year. The interviews enabled deeper investigation into the recurrent themes in participants' responses to the questionnaires and offered a clearer view of the attitudes and perceived needs of educators working with students on the autism spectrum in inclusive educational settings. The semi-structured interviews were administered towards the end of the scholastic year so that I would have sufficient time to analyse the questionnaire responses and develop interview questions accordingly.

4.4.1 Constructing the interview questions.

As soon as I finished plotting the questionnaire data, I began working on the construction of the interview questions (Appendix D). As noted in Section 4.3.4, while plotting the questionnaire data, I found that certain responses were emerging from the participants'

replies to the questions, which were written down under their respective question. I analysed these responses and thought about what questions could possibly be asked during the interview to further allow the participants to discuss their views. The process of constructing the interview questions was time-consuming because I wanted to ensure that the questions I asked were straightforward, clear and as open as possible, so as to avoid leading questions, while at the same time directing the participant to express what I needed to know. This was very important, as 'how a question is worded and asked affects how the interviewee responds' (Patton, 2002, p. 353). Moreover, 'in qualitative inquiry, "good" questions should, at a minimum, be open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear' (Payne, 1951, as cited in Patton, p. 353). In fact, up to four drafts of the interview questions were prepared until I achieved a satisfactory result. The interview questions were the same for all stakeholder groups. It is important to note that there was a reason behind each and every question asked during the interview, which will be discussed below.

The actual interview consisted of eight questions. The questions were divided into sections, which were all linked to the sections in the questionnaires as well as to the specific research questions. Furthermore, they were also linked to the issues discussed in the various sections of the literature review. The sections of the interview were: The Inclusive System in Regard to Autism, Resources and Services, Training, Support and Others.

The first section consisted of one question which asked the participants what they thought needed to be improved in the education system for inclusion to be more effective for working with autistic students. This question was asked because the questionnaire responses clearly revealed that there are certain issues in the education system that need to be improved. Therefore, I wanted to further investigate these issues.

The second section consisted of three questions: one asking about the resources they needed and which they currently did not have to help them work better with autistic students, and another asking the same about the services, and why these resources and services were important for them. Both questions were asked because I wanted to know not only what resources and services they needed, but also why they were important for them. The last question in this section asked what they thought needed to be improved in the currently provided services. This question was considered important because it was evident from the questionnaire responses that participants were more aware of or interested in services rather than resources. Therefore, I wanted to investigate their opinions on what could be improved in the services currently provided.

The third section consisted of one question about how the training on autism could be more efficient or, if they had never received training, what they thought it should include. The questionnaire responses revealed that these educators did not seem satisfied with previous training; therefore, I wanted the participants to further elaborate on how this training could be improved. Efficiency in this regard referred to how the training could be more adapted to their particular needs – how it could fill the 'gaps' they had in the knowledge and experience they had with autism.

The fourth section consisted of two questions: one asking about the support they needed to help teach autistic students, and the other asking about what support they expected from parents of autistic students. These questions were asked because it seemed that a significant number of the participants did not feel supported in their job, and thus, I wanted them to elaborate on what support they needed and why they needed it. Moreover, since many participants made reference to the lack of support from parents, I also asked about what support they expected from parents. The last section consisted of one question which asked the participants if they would like to add any comments or suggestions. This question gave the participants the opportunity to discuss any issues they wanted to discuss which might not have been addressed during the interview.

It should be noted that, at times, presupposition questions were used, such as when interviewees were asked about what improvements could be made to the inclusive system, or when they were asked how the training could be more efficient. The first question assumed there were improvements to be made, while the other assumed that training could be improved to be more efficient. Of course, these assumptions were based on the responses obtained from the questionnaire. These presupposition questions were important, as 'used in interviewing, presuppositions communicate that the respondent has something to say, thereby increasing the likelihood that the person being interviewed will, indeed have something to say' and in this way 'the quality of the descriptions received may be enhanced' (Patton, 2002, p. 369).

4.4.2 Piloting the interview questions.

The pilot testing procedure used for the questionnaires was again used for the interview questions. The participants of the interview pilot were the same as those of the questionnaire pilot. I wanted them to be the same participants to be able to see the logic behind my data collection methods and, thus, be in a better position to give me feedback.

As previously, the participants were contacted by email and were asked to participate in an interview, during which they were expected to mark any ambiguous questions and record

any comments about possible improvements. I was planning to do two pilot tests with each of the stakeholder groups. I did two pilot tests with SMT members and two with teachers; however, with the LSEs, only one pilot test was done as the second LSE never responded. However, five pilot tests were sufficient, since the interview questions were the same for the three stakeholder groups.

Each pilot test was run separately. Pilot test 1 was with an LSE and took place on 17 February 2019. Pilot test 2 was with a teacher and took place on 19 February 2019, while pilot test 3 was done with a teacher on 20 February 2019. The last two pilot tests, both with SMT members, took place on 21 and 22 February 2019, respectively. The feedback was discussed with the participants after each pilot test. However, unlike in the case of the questionnaires, the interview questions seemed to be clear and direct, as during the piloting interview I received clear and direct replies which answered my research questions. Therefore, no amendments to the interview questions were required.

4.4.3 Conducting the interviews.

After constructing the interview questions, I began planning the actual interviews. I went through the reply slips, which had been separated according to the school, and checked the number of interested participants. Initially, I planned to conduct an interview with an SMT member, a teacher and an LSE from each of the schools. However, although there was high return of questionnaires, interest in interviews was lower, as was expected, since interviews lack anonymity and are also more time-consuming (Brown, 2005). At the outset, there were five schools with an interested participant from each of the stakeholder groups: an SMT member, a teacher and an LSE. There were another five schools which had only one or two participants interested in conducting an interview (some of whom were SMTs, others teachers and others LSEs). There was only one school which had no interested participants whatsoever.

Next, I contacted the interested participants by email to schedule an appointment with them for an interview. In some cases, I also had to send a text message as a reminder since they took some time to get back to me. The majority of the interested participants replied positively, and we scheduled an appointment for the interview. However, two participants, both from the same school, withdrew their interest, so no interview was conducted with them. A total of 19 interviews were conducted.

The majority of the interviews were conducted during school hours on the school premises after obtaining permission from the head of the school. A few interviews were conducted outside of school hours with the participants who preferred that. In these cases, the

interviews were conducted either at my home or at the participant's home, again as per the participant's preference.

Before each interview was conducted, the same ethical procedure as in the case of the questionnaire was adopted. An information sheet was given to each participant (Appendix G) who was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix I), and a copy of which was given to the participant. The majority of the interviews conducted in schools were done in a quiet space, generally an empty classroom or office; however, in two instances, the environment was not ideal for conducting an interview because there was a lot of noise in the background. Such instances were inevitable due to the particular demands of the educators' roles and the schools concerned. Moreover, on two occasions, the interview was interrupted by someone who needed to speak to the participant, and then the interview resumed.

The interviews lasted for an average of 30 minutes – some a little less, others a little more. It is interesting to note that certain participants expressed their views directly and concisely; others felt the need to elaborate with many examples and to share experiences and details. The interview questions were sent to all of the interview participants well in advance of the interview, so that they knew beforehand what they were going to be asked. This was done to reduce the participants' feelings of anxiety about the interview, '[striving] to put the participant at ease' (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 361), while also increasing the likelihood of the participants being well-prepared for the interview, thus, allowing for the collection of richer data. Overall, the majority of the participants were very well prepared for the interviews. They had already made notes of what they wanted to share with me, went into great detail and provided very rich data. On the other hand, some participants had only just read the questions or had not read them. Here, the participants needed to be prompted and guided, since at times they seemed to go blank. Indeed, Patton (2002) argued that probes are sometimes necessary 'to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired' (p. 372). Moreover, Patton (2002) also noted that '…any interviewer faces the challenge of making it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world. The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer' (p. 341).

All measures were taken to ensure that participants felt comfortable during the interview. In addition, measures suggested by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) were taken. These included maintaining eye contact with the interviewee and asking occasional follow-up questions to show my interest in and attention to what they were saying. Moreover, I clearly established that there were no right or wrong answers by behaving in a non-judgemental

manner. I modulated my tone of voice and body language, so as not to affect the way they replied. Participants were allowed sufficient time to reply, and the pace of the interviewee allowed for all topics to be covered.

All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed once the interview was over. Recording of interviews can be done in different ways. For the purpose of this research, I chose to audio-record the interviews. Audio-recording captures the entire interview and allows a careful review of data (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It also makes it possible for the researcher to transcribe the entire interview, gives better chances for accuracy and allows the researcher to evaluate his or her interviewing skills (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Audio-recording the interviewee also allows the researcher 'to devote his or her full attention to listening to the interviewee and probing in-depth' (Ricthie & Lewis, 2003, p. 166). The transcribing process was very time-consuming, but it allowed me to thoroughly analyse the interview data.

Since the majority of the interviews were done in Maltese, English translation was done when I needed to quote verbatim in the writing of my analysis. Translation proved to be a thought-provoking task due to the nature of the two different languages involved, and it was at times challenging to provide the best interpretation of the data, while retaining the original text as much as possible. Van Nes et al. (2010) asserted that 'language differences may have consequences, because concepts in one language may be understood differently in another language. This is in particular relevant for qualitative research because it works with words' (p. 313). Simultaneously, the validity and reliability of qualitative research lies in part in the ability of the researcher to keep his or her interpretation of the findings as close as possible to the experiences as provided by the participants (Al-Amer, 2016; Polkinghorne, 2007; Twinn, 1997), therefore highlighting the importance of this task.

A number of preventive measures were therefore taken, so as to limit the drawbacks related to translations as much as possible. One such measure was to stay in the original language as long as possible, as was suggested by Al-Amer et al. (2016) and Van Nes et al. (2010). This meant that the interviews were first transcribed in the source language and the data were also analysed in the source language, and then translation was used only when verbatim quotes were necessary. This helped me to stay as close to the original data as much as possible. Thick descriptions through translated verbatim statements increase the validity and reliability of a qualitative study (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Temple, 2008); however, this in itself presents a challenge (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Temple, 2008), as participants may feel they are not fairly represented, again due to the language differences (Temple, 2008). A preventive

measure suggested by Al-Amer et al. (2016) is to give the translations to the respective participants so that they can confirm or not whether the translation represents their intended meaning; however, this measure was not taken in this research. Due to time constraints, it would have taken too long to get back to every interviewee and then for them to get back to me.

As in the case of the questionnaires, interview participants were given a code to ensure complete anonymity. This time, the codes were different from the ones given to the questionnaire participants. In this case, the codes all started with a capital I, symbolising the word interview, followed by the label SMT, TEACHERS or LSE and ending with the school letter assigned to the school by the researcher. Thus, I.TEACHER-A was the interview done with the teacher from School A, while I.SMT-D was the interview done with the SMT from School D. I opted not to use the same codes as in the questionnaire because I wanted to differentiate between what was said by a participant in the questionnaire and in the interview.

4.5 Analysing the Data

Analysing qualitative data can be challenging as 'no formula exists for that transformation' (Patton, 2002, p. 432). As Nunan (2009) stated, 'free-form responses from open questions, although they may result in more useful/insightful data, are much more difficult to quantify, although there are ways of quantifying the data' (p. 145). Neuman (2011) confirmed this, arguing that there is no established format and style of a research report based on qualitative research, unlike in the case of quantitative research. Since the questionnaires for this research were mainly comprised of open-ended questions, I had to develop a plan for how I was going to analyse the data. The first step in doing so was to record and organise the data I had obtained from the questionnaires, as I wanted this data to be the basis on which I built my interview questions. As I explained in Section 4.3.4, I did this by plotting the data in an Excel sheet. Plotting the Excel sheet was a very important step for the analysis that was to be conducted later. It provided me with a variety of responses amongst the participants, and it indicated which were the most common responses and which were less common. With the help of the Excel sheet, I developed ideas as to what interview questions I should pose to the interviewees. Indeed, after I had entered all the data from the questionnaire into an Excel sheet, I was then able to develop my interview questions. Thus, the interview questions reflected issues identified by participants which were worth considering as important enough to be investigated further. The interviews gave me the opportunity to delve deeper into their lived experiences in regard to such issues.

After the second stage of the data collection, that is, after I conducted and transcribed all the interviews, I began working on the data analysis. I decided to organise my data analysis by research question. Analysing research findings by research question is one method of data analysis when working with qualitative research methods (Akinyoade, 2013; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Park, 2016). Cohen (2009) argued that

> this is a useful way of organising data as it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher, and preserves the coherence of the material. It returns the reader to the driving concerns of the research, thereby "closing the loop" on the research questions that typically were raised in the early part of the inquiry. (p. 468)

This method also satisfies Tracy's (2013) advice, who suggested that 'throughout the analysis, revisiting research questions and other sensitising concepts helps you to ensure they are still relevant and interesting' (p. 191), as by using this method, the researcher is automatically addressing the research questions.

Therefore, in the analysis chapters, I present each of the four research questions of this research. For each research question, I then present the questions asked in the questionnaire and/or the interview which addressed that particular research question, as Cohen et al. (2009) suggested that in using this method, 'all the relevant data from various data streams (interviews, observations, questionnaires etc.) are collated to provide a collective answer to a research question' (p. 468). They further argued that 'there is usually a degree of systematisation here, in that, for example, the numerical data for a particular research question will be presented, followed by the qualitative data, or vice versa' (p. 468). Indeed, for each area investigated, I begin by analysing the questionnaire data obtained, including any numerical data, as this represents the whole population of participants in this research; then, I present the data obtained from the interviews to further deepen the discussion. In the case of questions from the questionnaire, a table is plotted presenting all the findings, and then the most common responses are discussed. The question as it was asked in the questionnaire appears at the top of the table, after which the table is divided into four columns. If the question is a closed-ended question, the column on the left contains the options available for the questionnaire participants (for example, *yes*, *no*, *both*, *I don't know*). For open-ended questions, the information in the column on the left lists a number of responses as they appear in the participants' actual responses. The other three columns detail the total number of participants (SMTs, teachers, LSEs) who replied in that way. The tables presented in the discussion help to provide the reader with all the data, thus leaving the data 'open to evaluative interpretation' (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 16). Most often, the interview data serve to strengthen the questionnaire data by giving deeper insights into the

issues being discussed. At other times, interview data even explores other issues which were not necessarily revealed through the questionnaire responses.

During the analysis of the data, I refer to the literature to strengthen my discussion and compare and contrast my findings to the current literature. I also quote the participants verbatim, as this strengthens the issues being discussed. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) suggest that the 'quotes that you use are representative of what has been said by some others as well' (p. 110) and not by one individual only. Therefore, despite the urge to use as many quotes as possible to transmit the participants' voice, I had to 'be selective in [the] choice of quotes' as their aim was mainly 'to demonstrate and give examples of patterns that have emerged from the research' (p. 110).

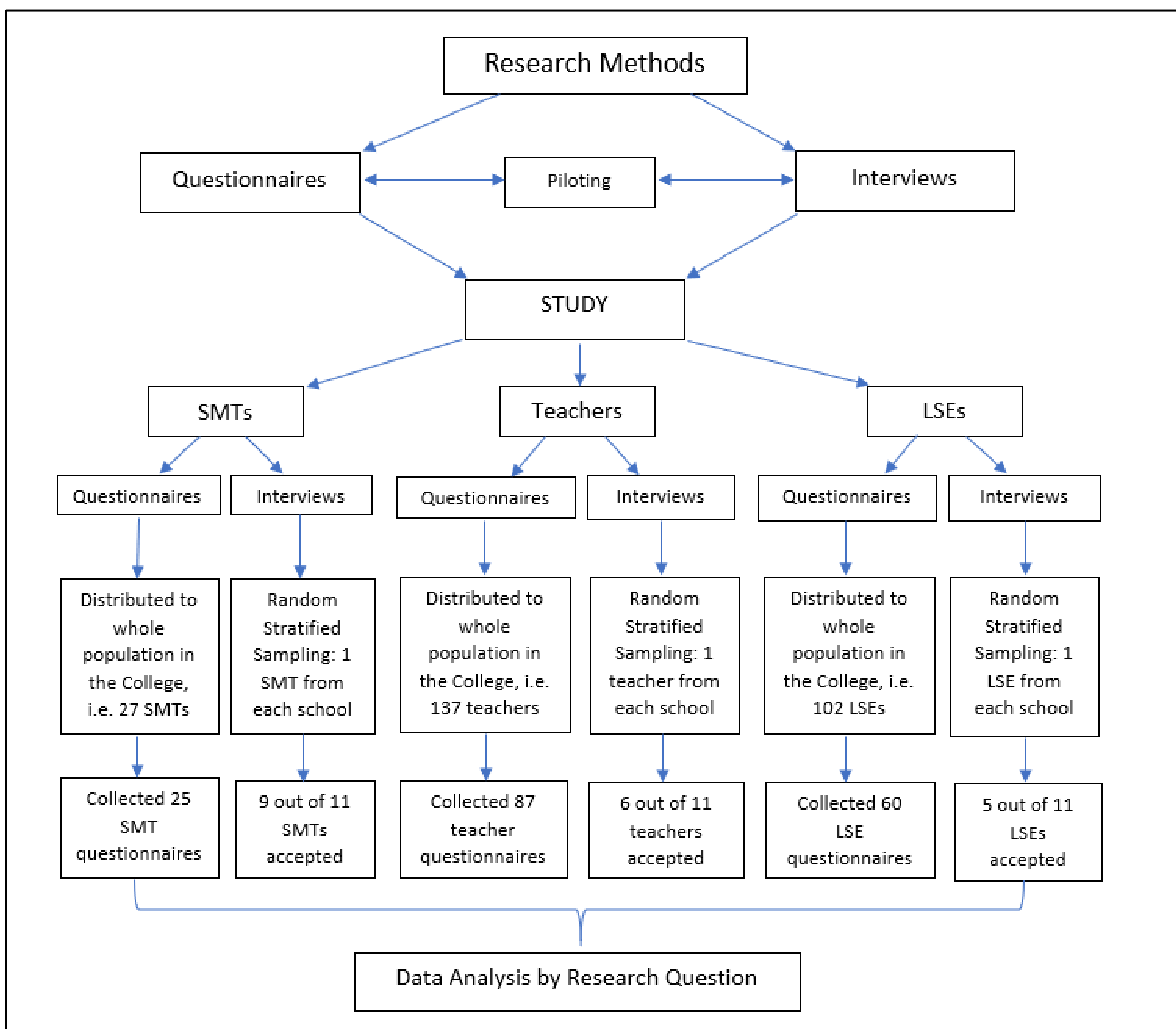

Figure 1. Data analysis by research question.

Following the research findings and analysis chapters, I present another chapter entitled Discussion. The scope of this chapter was determined after I observed recurring sets of discourse during the analysis of the data, which revolved mainly around the knowledge

educators have of and their attitudes towards autism, autistic students and inclusive education. Such discourses reflect the culture amongst Maltese educators with regard to disability and inclusive education and therefore alter the perspective of the perceived needs that educators shared. Thus, in this chapter, I present a thematic analysis drawing on a discourse analysis. Mogashoa (2014) argued that one way of doing a discourse analysis is by analysing the data through a thematic analysis, where the researcher tries to identify meaningful themes in a body of data (Fulcher, 2010). Howitt and Cramer (2010) specified that, in a thematic analysis, the researcher has the responsibility of choosing a limited number of themes which best reflect the text. As was discussed in Section 4.1.3, a number of criticisms have been made concerning CDA, including that meaning of discourse is subject to interpretation by the researcher (Morgan, 2010), there is greater chance of 'cherry picking' data (Hammersley, 1997; Wodak, 2008) and that there is the chance of bias if texts are removed from context (Widdowson, 2004, as cited in Tenario, 2011). However, I have been very clear in the data presentation and analysis chapters. I also accept that other interpretations are possible. This discourse analysis will serve as an overview of the entire language and cultural context in which the perceived needs of educators, vis-à-vis resources and services, training, and support, were shared, and thus will help me in providing recommendations which are more just and realistic with regard to what Maltese educators need, and which better suit the Maltese context.

4.6 Participants Identified, Approached and Recruited

In Malta, there exist 10 different colleges. Each college is comprised of a senior school, a middle school and various primary schools. For the purpose of this study, I chose a particular college at which to conduct my research. The name of the college where I conducted my research will not be mentioned to ensure total anonymity of both the individual participants and the schools.

After choosing the college where I wanted to conduct my research, I sent an email to the college principal, requesting a meeting with him/her to explain the nature and objective of my research. The principal replied immediately to my email copying another person in the email (whose position will not be mentioned to ensure total anonymity), asking me to contact this person to schedule a meeting with him/her, which I did.

During the meeting, I requested permission to deliver a brief presentation about my research at a meeting of the college's school heads at the beginning of the scholastic year. This method would have made it easier for me to approach all the heads of the schools regarding the research. In the presentation, I planned to include the necessary information about the research

and explain that participation in the research would be voluntary. Attendees would also have the opportunity to ask questions about the research. Initially, my request was accepted, and the next date for a meeting of the college's school heads was noted, contingent upon the principal's approval, which was granted. In the meantime, an email was sent to all heads of schools by this person, informing them that I would be addressing them during their meeting about my research and that I had all the necessary permissions to conduct research in the schools. Unfortunately, after a couple of days, I received an email informing me that my appointment at the meeting had been cancelled and that it would be better to send an email to the heads of schools and make individual appointments with them instead.

Therefore, as soon as the scholastic year started, I sent an email to all the heads of schools concerned, followed by a telephone call, if they had expressed interest in participating in the research, to discuss the way forward, as was discussed in Section 4.3.3.

Each head of school was informed in detail about the nature and aims of the research. I also answered any questions they had and explained their right to refuse to participate. As explained earlier, with each head of school, I determined the possibility of holding the introductory sessions with educators during a staff meeting, a CoPE session or curriculum time to save time and ensure that every participant would be given exactly the same information about the research. However, as explained earlier, this was possible with some of the schools but not with others.

Information about the research was provided in an information sheet appended to the questionnaire. Before the participants completed the questionnaire, every participant was required to sign a consent form specifically designed for the research, which included my contact details and those of my supervisor, the research aims and a declaration stating that the participants' names would not be used in the study, they were free to withdraw from the research at any stage, their responses would be treated with confidentiality and the data would be presented in a manner that their identities would not be linked to specific published data. Every participant was given a copy of the same consent form to keep. All questionnaires, whether disseminated to a group during a meeting or individually, were handed out to participants face to face so as to maximise participation.

Participants who wished to participate in an interview were asked to fill out a form, attached to the end of the questionnaire, with their details and to note their desire to participate in the interview. This aided the random stratified sampling of interview participants. The slip form was separated from the questionnaire and submitted to the researcher separately so that the questionnaires remained anonymous. At this stage, the participants were informed that their

participation in the interviews would be determined by the study's exigencies and that not all those who volunteered would necessarily be included. The interested participants were then contacted by email to schedule appointments for interviews later on in the scholastic year, as explained in detail in Section 4.4.3.

Prior to the interviews, the participants were briefed a second time about the nature and aims of this stage of the research and notified that the interviews would be recorded. I reiterated their right to ask questions or refuse to participate. Written consent was obtained again through another specifically designed form with the same content as the one used for the questionnaire, but with an addendum to the declaration stating that the interview recordings would be stored in a safe place and destroyed once the study was completed. An assurance that the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of their personal data would be maintained during analysis and discussion of the interview data was also added to the consent form to further put participants' minds at ease.

4.7 Data Sources: Sampling and Criteria

Most studies require sampling as it is practically impossible to include an entire population: 'in those instances in which it is not feasible to collect data from the entire population, the researcher must resort to sampling' (Nunan, 2009, p. 141). The present research conducted two types of sampling. First, I performed cluster sampling. That is, I chose one of the ten colleges around Malta. As previously explained, a college is made up of a number of primary and secondary schools and represents a sample of the Maltese education system. Therefore, a college served as a good sample for my research.

For the purpose of this research, I focused on primary schools. The primary years are the most crucial in children's educational journey, especially for autistic students (Lipsett, 2008). Therefore, I believe that we first need to address the needs of educators in primary schools to provide a good educational basis to autistic students before we start addressing difficulties at the secondary level.

Once the questionnaires were collected and analysed, I had planned to subject the respondents to a random stratified sampling (Cohen et al., 2009) to identify participants for the interview. I had planned to first divide the participants into homogenous groups by school and position at school (i.e. SMT, teacher or LSE) and then randomly choose one participant from each group. This way, the study would have included participants representing each stakeholder group (i.e. one SMT member, one teacher and one LSE) from each school. However, some slight changes were required, since as I explained earlier, the number of participants who were

interested in conducting an interview was lower than the total number. In fact, from the majority of the schools, there was only one member of each stakeholder group who was interested in conducting an interview, while from other schools there was not even one member of each group. In these cases, I interviewed all the interested participants. There was only one school which had more than one participant from each stakeholder group, and a few others which had more than one participant from a particular stakeholder group who were interested in conducting an interview, in which case I used the random stratified sampling system.

4.8 Reliability and Validity

No research method is perfect; each has some disadvantages. However, a researcher must take appropriate measures to ensure, as much as possible, that the research being conducted is reliable and valid. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) explained, 'reliability is generally understood to concern the replicability of research findings and whether or not they would be repeated if another study, using the same or similar methods, was undertaken' (p. 270). However, the idea of seeking reliability and validity in a qualitative study is often avoided; instead, researchers often discuss substitute terms which are more applicable to a qualitative research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Healy and Perry (2000) also noted this, stating that the quality of a study should be asserted by the terms attributed to the paradigm the study is following. Such terms include confirmability, trustworthiness and dependability, according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003). On the other hand, they added, validity is often concerned with the 'correctness or precision of a research reading' (p. 273), often divided into two separate parts, namely internal validity and external validity. They further explained that validity refers to the investigation of whether the researcher is actually studying what s/he claims to be studying, while external validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of the research are applicable to other contexts, settings or other groups within the same population. Golafshani (2003) summarised the concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative studies as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in the qualitative paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) came up with a number of terms which translate the reliability and validity concepts in quantitative studies to qualitative studies. They referred to the concepts as trustworthiness in qualitative research, further dividing them into four aspects: credibility which replaces the internal validity in quantitative studies, transferability which replaces the external validity in quantitative

studies, dependability which replaces reliability in quantitative studies and confirmability which replaces objectivity in quantitative studies.

Morse et al. (2002) suggested that the researcher should focus on the trustworthiness of a study while the study is being done, instead of thinking about the verification processes towards the end of the study. By doing the latter, Morse explained, the researcher would risk making mistakes related to the reliability and validity of the study being done. There are a number of verification strategies that a researcher can employ to test whether his/her study is trustworthy, which include methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, concurrent data collection and analysis, theoretical thinking (Morse et al., 2002), triangulation (Golafshani, 2003), prolonged engagement and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), amongst others.

To ensure that the present research is trustworthy, I adopted these verification strategies, which I will discuss below. First of all, attention was given to methodological coherence, ensuring 'congruence between the research question and the components of the method' (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18), therefore making sure that 'the question match[es] the method, which matches the data and the analytical procedure' (p. 18). Caution was exercised when sampling respondents for this study (see Section 4.7), as it is important 'to ensure that the sample is representative of the whole population' (Nunan, 2009, p. 141). Thus, the sample chosen was appropriate for this specific research, as the participants were directly experiencing the issues being investigated as well as providing a good representation of all the educators in Malta (Morse et. al, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Moreover, the data collection and analysis were being done simultaneously, which allowed 'a mutual interaction between what is known and what one needs to know' (Morse et. al, 2002, p. 18); indeed, the analysis of the questionnaire data allowed me to construct the interview questions which were aimed at delving deeper into issues that were considered important as emerged from the questionnaires. As Morse et al. also suggested, the importance of thinking theoretically was also highlighted in this research, as new data which emerged in the data analysis was linked to already known data discussed in the literature review. Moreover, the interpretation of the data, as presented in the data analysis, was supported by evidence from the actual data obtained from the participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

In addition to the above-mentioned strategies, this research also used triangulation as a measure to ensure trustworthiness. In fact, Golafshani (2003) explained that 'engaging multiple methods… will lead to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities' (p. 604). Flick (2009) considered the concept of triangulation and explained that triangulation can take many different forms as discussed by Denzin (1989), including data triangulation, investigator

triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. This research adopted two types of triangulation: data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation refers to having different data sources (in this research, these were the SMT members, the teachers and the LSEs), while methodological triangulation refers to adopting different methods to acquire data (in this research, these were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews).

Patton (2002) emphasised the importance of triangulation of methods, arguing that 'studies that use only one method are more vulnerable to errors linked to that particular method than studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks' (p. 248). The use of interviews helps to eliminate the disadvantages of questionnaires and vice versa. For example, while questionnaires are anonymous and ideal for administering to a large group of participants, as in this study, they are relatively impersonal and provide restricted data and no other observations apart from the written data (Brown, 2005). However, interviews conducted at a later stage eliminate these disadvantages, as interviews are personal and give the interviewee the opportunity to clarify any statements for the researcher. Moreover, the researcher can note any other observations besides the spoken statements made by the interviewee. Thus, although they are time-consuming, interviews provide the researcher with very rich data (Brown, 2005). In addition, conducting research with three different stakeholders and in various school settings allowed me to perform triangulation by source because I could compare the results for different stakeholders in single and multiple settings. While Denscombe (2010) acknowledged a number of drawbacks of using triangulation, such as the complexity of analysing data when using more than one method, and the 'implicit assumption underlying the use of triangulation that the alternative perspectives will indeed support one another' (p. 350), he did note a number of advantages of using triangulation. These include the improved accuracy of data, having a fuller picture of the issues being investigated, and providing the researcher with added confidence in his or her research data and findings.

To further increase reliability and validity, particular attention was given to the choice of questions and wording in both the questionnaires and interviews. Nunan (2009) explained that 'it is particularly important that the researchers not reveal their own attitudes through leading questions' (p. 143). In developing the questions, the researcher must account for aspects of the topic the interviewee might be unwilling to talk about, such as critical statements, personal topics, political and social issues and shared values and attitudes, and thus avoid asking such questions. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) further added that the design of the research should 'allow equal opportunity for all perspectives to be identified' (p. 272). I therefore ensured that, during the data collection process, participants were given 'sufficient opportunities to cover

relevant ground, to portray their experiences' (p. 272), by adding a question at the end of both the questionnaire and interview, where participants were invited to add any other comments and/or suggestions they might have had and which might not have been raised in the other questions.

In addition to the above, and as was discussed earlier, prolonged engagement was adopted when translation of verbatim statements was needed in the analysis of the interview data. Furthermore, both the questionnaires and interview questions were pilot tested to eliminate any ambiguous or unclear questions.

4.9 Ethical Issues and Effect on Participants

Every research undertaking involves many ethical considerations that the researcher needs to address (Northway, 2002), which start from the minute the researcher '[decides] upon the topic through to identifying a sample, conducting the research and disseminating the findings' (p. 3). To ensure an ethical approach to participants' identification and recruitment in terms of the questionnaires and interview questions, I made several choices throughout the research, which will be discussed below. Moreover, before starting the research, I obtained clearance from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee. In addition, I requested permission from the Directorate for Education in Malta to conduct the research since the study was performed in various government schools.

4.9.1 Informed consent.

Some participants may perceive the researcher as an intruder and be reluctant to participate in the research. Cohen et al. (2009) explained that research that involves human beings entails 'an intrusion into the life of the participant, be it in terms of time taken to complete the instrument, the level of threat or sensitivity of the question' (p. 317). Thus, I ensured that the participants in this study fully understood that their participation would be voluntary and that they could opt out of the research if they wished to do so. Moreover, I clearly stated that their participation would involve completing a questionnaire and, for some, participating in an interview. To achieve this, I provided the participants with information sheets explaining their role in the study together with other necessary background information (Denscombe, 2010), and asked them for informed written consent. Atkins and Wallace (2005) insisted that, although many researchers declare that they have obtained informed consent from their participants, it is in fact very difficult for the researcher to actually decide how informed

the participants are. This is because 'very few participants have the same level of understanding of research as the researcher' (p. 4). This increases the researcher's responsibility towards his or her participants 'to anticipate any possible harm, distress or change which might be experienced by the participant since the participant cannot be expected either to anticipate these, or to be aware of their possible implications' (p. 4). Therefore, I made sure that the information sheet given to the participants included as much information as possible for them, including any possible harm or distress they might encounter. Giving the participants the possibility to withdraw from the research was also very important in this regard, as this put the participants' minds at rest, knowing that, if they felt uncomfortable at any point throughout the researcher, they could opt out.

4.9.2 Confidentiality.

As it is with every research project, participants have the right for privacy when it comes to their responses, both in the questionnaires and interviews. However, as Flick (2009) argued, keeping confidentiality of participants can sometimes become problematic, especially when the participants are members of a specific setting. Atkins and Wallace (2005) noted that most researchers address the issue of confidentiality by anonymising the participants, which was done in this research. Each participant was given a code and whenever reference to a particular participant was made, the participant was referred to by his or her assigned code. Moreover, participating schools were not mentioned by their actual name, but were also given a code. Further, the name of the college which the participating schools belong to was not mentioned by name. Despite Malta and Gozo being very small and therefore the risks of identification being greater, these measures which I took significantly decreased the possibility of any participants being identified, as there are 10 colleges in Malta in all, which are all made up of a number of primary schools.

4.9.3 Power relationships.

Power relationships could have significantly influenced the willingness of the participants to participate in the research (Atkins & Wallace, 2005). Having worked in various government primary schools as an autism support teacher in the past might have influenced certain participants' willingness to participate. However, I believed that these instances would be limited, as at the time of this research, I was no longer working in government schools. In fact, I am currently a lecturer at a university college in Malta which is autonomous and has nothing to do with government schools. I also do not have any positions of authority that could

in some way have made the participants feel threatened to participate. To further make the participants feel at ease, I gave the questionnaires out to the participants personally at their place of employment. This made them feel more at ease for two reasons; firstly, they had the opportunity to meet the researcher, thus increasing the possibility of a better relationship between the researcher and the participant; secondly, meeting them at their place of work made them feel more at ease because I was the guest there, and therefore they felt more confident. For similar reasons, the interviews were held at a place and time preferred by the participant.

I also planned that, after the completion of the study, an article or a research paper about the findings would be published and sent to all concerned schools, which would, in turn, be asked to forward it to all the academic staff in their respective schools so that they would be informed about the results of the research in which they had participated. This was an ethical decision, considering that the participants were asked to give their time to participate in the research. Moreover, this was planned as a way to benefit them since some of the suggestions presented might be applicable in their own schools and thus improve their work.

4.10 Summary

This chapter has provided a very detailed overview of the methodology used in this study. The methods adopted in this research were presented and discussed in light of the research paradigm guiding the study. Two separate sections went into further detail on each of the two research methods used, that is, questionnaires and interviews, each explaining meticulously the steps of designing, using and analysing each of the research methods. The chapter went on to explain the process of participants' selection and recruitment, together with the sampling methods used. A section on the reliability and validity of the research was also included to ensure the transparency and trustworthiness of the research. A final section about the ethical issues surrounding the research was also added to clearly establish that the research was not only ethical but also trustworthy. I will now move on to the presentation and analysis of the research findings in the following chapters.

Chapter 5

Research Findings and Analysis

Part 1

5.0 Introduction

This study consists of a needs' analysis of SMT members, teachers and LSEs when working with autistic students in mainstream state primary schools during the 2018–2019 scholastic year. This chapter presents the first part of the data obtained, that is, the data obtained for research questions 1 and 2, quoting verbatim where necessary, while referring to the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The following chapter (Chapter 6) is the second part of the analysis, which presents the data obtained for research questions 3 and 4, again supported by verbatim quotes and references to the literature. The rationale for how I split the chapters was based on the content of the research questions: research questions 1 and 2 focused on the educators' knowledge of and attitudes towards autism, and their opinions about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, whereas research questions 3 and 4 focused on the educators' opinions about the current resources and services, training and support and their perceived needs regarding these.

Two methods were used in this study: questionnaires and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In the first phase of the study, questionnaires were distributed to all educators – SMT members, teachers and LSEs – at the college where I conducted the research. Except for some minor wording changes, the questionnaires for the three different stakeholder groups were nearly identical, allowing for easier comparing and contrasting of responses when analysing the data. A total of 172 questionnaires were collected: 25 questionnaires from SMTs, 87 questionnaires from teachers and 60 from LSEs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at a later stage with a sample of the participant population (see Methodology, Section 4.4.3) in order to acquire more in-depth data concerning the educators' needs. The interview questions were designed after an analysis of the questionnaire data so attention could be paid to any specific issues that emerged from the questionnaires. Interview questions were identical for all three stakeholder groups. In total, I conducted 19 interviews: 8 with SMTs, 6 with teachers and 5 with LSEs.

In this and the following chapter, I present and analyse the findings obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews conducted with educators from the three different groups. I chose to analyse the data by research question; thus, I will present the research questions proposed for this research, and for each research question, I will discuss the questions and findings pertaining to it, whether they were questions from the questionnaire or interview questions. This method of analysis is one method for analysing qualitative data, as was discussed in detail in the Methodology chapter, Section 4.5 (Akinyoade, 2013; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Park, 2016).

All the findings obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews are discussed alongside the literature, and participants' verbatim quotes are included where necessary to support the discussion. In the case of questions from the questionnaire, tables that were plotted presenting all the findings are included, and the most common responses are discussed (see Methodology, Section 4.5). For closed questions, the total number of participants in the table is equal to the total number of participants who replied to that particular question. In the case of open-ended questions, the total number of participants in the table is not equal to the total of participants who replied to the question since the participants could give more than one answer.

As regards the discussion of findings from interview questions, the data from all interviews, those of the SMTs, teachers and LSEs, are discussed simultaneously, referring to the literature and quoting the participants verbatim where necessary.

In this chapter, the reader will notice the use of codes, which were explained in detail in the Methodology chapter (see Methodology, Sections 4.3.4 and 4.4.3). However, for ease of reference, these will be briefly explained again here. The capital letter Q followed by a number signifies a question from the questionnaire, e.g. Q6 means Question 6 from the questionnaire. The capital letters IQ followed by a number signify an interview question, e.g. IQ4 means Interview Question 4. Moreover, since the questionnaires were distributed to the entire population of the college and whereas interviews were done with a much smaller sample (see Methodology, Section 4.7), participant codes differ between questionnaire participants and interview participants. For questionnaire participants, the codes represent the participant's school (represented by a letter attributed to the school by the researcher), his/her role within the school (represented by the letter S – SMT, T – Teacher or L – LSE), and the number of the participant (given by the researcher), e.g. A.S1, C.T3, E.L1. On the other hand, for interview participants, the codes start with the capital letter I (meaning interview), followed by the label SMT, TEACHER or LSE, and by the school letter as attributed to the school by the researcher.

5.1 Background Information about the Participants

Q1 and Q2 in the questionnaire were designed to collect background information about the participants, mainly gender and the number of years they have been in their current role (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: *Gender of Educators*

Q1: What is your gender?			
	Total of SMTs [out of 25]	Total of teachers [out of 87]	Total of LSEs [out of 60]
Male	10	11	1
Female	15	75	59
No reply	0	1	0

Table 2: *Educators' Years in Current Role*

Q2: How long have you been in your current role?			
	Total of SMTs [out of 25]	Total of teachers [out of 87]	Total of LSEs [out of 60]
1 year or less	3	0	0
2–5 years	8	4	1
6–10 years	9	7	7
11–15 years	4	9	27
16–20 years	0	23	17
21–25 years	0	21	2
26 years or more	0	22	6
No reply	1	1	0

5.2 Research Question 1

How much do SMT members, teachers and LSEs know about autism, and what are their attitudes towards autism?

This research question aimed to explore the kind and level of knowledge educators have about autism and their attitudes towards it. Several questions (Q3, Q4 and Q5) from the questionnaire answered this question. These will be discussed and analysed here using the approach outlined in Chapter 4, that is, specifically by research question (see Section 4.5).

Question 3 (Q3) asked participants what they thought of the term 'autism spectrum disorder' (Table 3). Since this was an open-ended question, a variety of responses were given. All three groups seemed to have some general knowledge about autism. One can observe that the definitions they gave are in line with biomedical definitions, such as that given by the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Indeed, the most common responses amongst the three groups indicated that autism presented difficulties in communication; difficulties in behaviour or different behaviour; and difficulties in social interaction, relationships, social skills, expression, emotion management and eye contact. These definitions given by the educators are in accordance with the characteristics of autism as presented by the DSM-5 (2013) and discussed by Fombonne (2009), Lord (2011), and Lai et al. (2014) in Section 2.1.1. One SMT (A.S3) explained that the difficulties with communication, interaction and behaviour 'may become a problem [for] the

child in that the child's ability to function in school or any public place might create a problem, especially if there is lack of understanding from those present'. A number of educators stated that they believed that autism is a broad spectrum of conditions, thus making it complex. The belief that autism is a developmental disorder or disability was commonly expressed. As argued above, this knowledge agrees with the definition of autism found in the DSM-5 (2013), where autism is described as a neurodevelopmental disorder presenting itself with deficits in social communication and interaction, repetitive patterns of behaviour and limited interests. It is important to note that the knowledge about autism that these educators revealed reflects the common view that autism is a disorder, and scarcely identified varying views, such as that of the neurodiversity movement, discussed in Section 2.1.2, where the challenges of autism are seen as caused by society (Krcek, 2013; Larsen, 2018). Terms such as *disorder* and *disability* clearly reflected that educators view autism in the light of the medical model, discussed by Larsen (2018), and thus locate the problems in the child, rather than in the environment. This is especially so in the verbatim statement above, where this SMT clearly argued that the difficulties of autism will pose problems for the child to function in school or any other public place, picturing the autistic child as the odd one out. It is worth noting that a common response amongst LSEs, which was not as evident amongst other groups, was that autistic children have difficulty adapting to change and like schedules. These more detailed observations may have an obvious explanation, which is that LSEs are the ones who work closely with autistic students and, thus, note certain common characteristics more readily than other educators. It is also worth pointing out that educators seem to view autism in light of a very general definition of autism, almost assuming that every autistic child has all the mentioned difficulties, with very few acknowledging that each case is different and absolutely no one acknowledging that autism could be a mere difference, as discussed by Baron-Cohen (2017) which should be celebrated (Armstrong, 2010; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Ortega, 2009). Unfortunately, such views of autism amongst educators do not augur well for a successful inclusive system of education, as was discussed in Section 2.3.3, where it was noted that the first step towards inclusive education is the attitudes of educators (Acedo et al., 2009; Smelova et al., 2016). Such attitudes were listed amongst the attitudinal barriers in the NIEF (2019) that need to be removed, further confirming the damage they are imposing on the inclusive system of education.

Table 3: *Educators' Understanding of ASD*

Q3: What do you understand is meant by the term 'autism spectrum disorder'?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Developmental disorder/disability	6	16	12
Becoming more common	0	1	0
Broad spectrum/Range of conditions/Complex disorder	11	28	15
Each case is different	1	2	6
Difficulties in communication	15	60	43
Can be non-verbal/Uses other means of communication/Can be difficult to understand/ Has no communication	2	2	4
Difficulties in behaviour/Different behaviour	12	35	20
Restricted/repetitive patterns of behaviour	3	9	7
Difficulties in social interaction, relationships, social skills, expression and emotion management/eye contact	10	39	38
Needs help in daily life/Delay in acquiring basic needs	0	2	0
Isolates the person in a world of their own/Sees the world differently than others	1	7	7
Affects the way the individuals relate to their environment/Not aware of their surroundings/ Difficulties in integrating into society	0	2	2
Difficulties with imagination/play skills	0	2	4
Difficulties with sensory integration	0	2	6
Difficulties adapting to change/Likes schedules/routine	1	3	10
Difficulties in attention/Into detail/Not always engaged	0	1	2
Learning barrier/The more severe, the more difficult it is to educate and motivate the child/ Affects education performance	1	1	3
Learns differently/Needs more attention/Learns through visuals and other communication aids/ Has individual needs	1	1	4
Brain does not function to its full ability or the norm	0	0	1
Could pose problems for child's function in school/public place	1	1	1
Lasts a lifetime	0	1	0
Child can make significant improvement	0	1	0
Cognitive disorder	0	2	0
Engages in solitary play	0	0	1

Impairment	0	0	1
High IQ	0	0	1
Special abilities	0	1	1
Different/Has different abilities	0	2	0
Symptoms appear in the first two years of life/at a young age	3	3	0
Tantrums/Frustration	0	0	3
More common in boys	0	0	1
Processes feelings/thoughts differently/ Difficulty in processing feelings and fears	0	0	4
Chemicals in the brain	0	0	1
Pervasive developmental difference	0	0	1
Stubborn/Has his or her own way of doing things	0	0	1
No reply	0	2	0

Q4 asked the participants whether they had ever worked with an autistic student (Table 4). Within the three groups, the majority indicated that they had some experience.

Table 4: *Educators' Experience with ASD Students*

Q4: Have you ever worked with an autistic student?			
	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Yes	23	63	57
No	2	24	3

Those participants who answered *Yes* to Q4 were then asked to answer the four questions in Section 4a, while those who answered *No* were asked to answer the two questions in Section 4b.

Q4ai asked about the participants' initial feelings when they learned that they would be working with an autistic child (Table 5). All participants from the three groups who answered *Yes* to Q4 replied to this open-ended sub-question. While there was no universal response amongst the three groups, there were common responses within each group. The most common response amongst the SMTs was a positive feeling of wanting to do their utmost to help and include the student while offering love and showing interest. It is interesting to note here that there is a general trend towards positivity amongst SMTs who are showing a willingness to give their best to autistic students, honouring their obligations to promote an inclusive school policy (Ministry for Education, Youth & Employment, 2007). However, it is equally important to note that negative feelings were also very evident in the SMT group. Indeed, as presented in Table 5, there were feelings of helplessness, frustration, discouragement, fear, anxiety, tension, worry and shock. Such feelings might not come as a surprise, considering the many responsibilities

SMT members have, discussed in Section 2.3.1, such as supporting and leading the school staff, keeping important documentation up-to-date, becoming knowledgeable about the different teaching methods available (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2014), and motivating, supporting and mentoring educators (Ministry for Education, Youth & Employment, 2007), while at the same time considering the way autism is viewed amongst educators, that is, as a challenging disability/disorder (see Q3 above). One SMT (H.S1) described 'thinking about the severity of case, disruption[s in the] class, complaints from [the] teacher, LSE, and parents…' while another SMT (I.S2) argued that:

> …at times I felt/feel helpless when trying to support [the] LSE and teacher when dealing with cases where [the] child could/cannot communicate verbally and feeling frustrated/agitated, etc. Feelings of helplessness and frustration when thoughts of not doing enough enter my mind.

These statements, coming from two different SMTs, both bring out the negative feelings of SMTs in view of what was asked in the question. However, one could reason that the source of concern of the two SMTs involves different aspects. Whereas the first SMT was more concerned about the difficulties s/he would be facing due to disruptions in class and complaints from the teacher, the LSE and the other parents, the second SMT was more concerned about the challenges faced by the teacher and LSE, the frustration of the child, and his/her helplessness in such situations; hence, this suggests self-centred concerns in the first SMT and altruistic concerns in the second SMT.

As for the teachers, a variety of negative feelings were reported. Anxiety, shock, tension and panic were the most frequent, followed by the feeling of not knowing what to do. Indeed, one teacher (K.T5) reported feeling 'confused because in Kinder 1[5], usually the child will not come to school and have an LSE immediately. Obviously, [they] find it difficult to cope', while another teacher (F.T8) reported feeling 'a little bit confused because I know that children with autism could be a bit difficult. I was also frustrated because I wanted the child to benefit from learning in a sound way like the other children'. Here, one can see once again the idea of viewing the child in the light of a mere definition, not acknowledging the fact that each autistic child is different (see Q3). At the same time, one can also recognise the desire of certain educators who want the best for the child, but simply do not know how to give him/her the best. Others felt challenged, afraid and worried as well as helpless and frustrated. One teacher (G.T2) explained that 'it was a bit of a hard challenge for me, as no LSE was assisting [the] student'.

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[5] In Malta, prior to starting primary education at the age of 5, children attend two years of pre-primary education known as Kinder 1 and Kinder 2 (see Section 1.2 for more information about the Maltese education system).

Another teacher (G.T1) said, 'I always feel discouraged because in Kinder 1, they never have an LSE and Kinder 1 teachers are always the ones to notice that something is wrong with the child'. This supports Freeth et al.'s (2014) argument that children are often undiagnosed when they start formal schooling, where it becomes the job of educators to identify the symptoms of autism and refer the child for professional help (Johnson, 2016; Rakap et al., 2016).

However, more noteworthy is that such statements by teachers confirm even further their understanding of autism from the medical model perspective, where the problem is seen within the child rather than in the environment (see Q3 above). Such views were reflected in the teachers' emphasis on the importance of the autistic child being assigned an LSE, arising from their beliefs that autistic children could not cope with the daily go-abouts of the normal school day, without having the individual help of the LSE, thus hinting that the problem lies within the child. Another aspect which reflected the teachers' views of the medical model of autism is the importance they give to diagnosing autistic children prior to entering formal schooling, which happens at the age of 3.

As considered by many, early diagnosis of autism leads to earlier intervention and to services being provided earlier to the child, thus facilitating not only the life of the child, but also that of their educators, thus the insistence of early diagnosis amongst teachers. This links back to the arguments presented in Section 2.1.4, where it was argued that early diagnosis is important because it leads to earlier intervention and thus to a greater chance of improvement in the autistic child (Gordon, 2009; Hart & More, 2013). Such views, of course, refrain from considering the negative effects that an early diagnosis could have on the child and their families (Fogel & Nelson, 1983; Russell, 2016; Stone et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2011), and totally eliminates the disabling effects of labels put on the child through a diagnosis (Hodge, 2016), as was discussed in great detail in Section 2.3.2. Indeed, as a general observation about this, one could conclude that teachers see the child as the one different from them, without seeing his/her very own potential; in their views, the child becomes a mere definition of autism (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007), which they seem to know very little about, considering the definitions given in Q3. This also confirms the examples of Hodge (2016) and Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) where educators started seeing the child differently as soon as there was a diagnosis (in the example of Hodge) or as soon as difficulties of autism were being observed (in the case of Mercieca and Mercieca), as they sometimes feel they are incapable of helping such children.

As already described above, the teachers' answers highlighted the importance of LSEs supporting autistic children. This contradicts the EASNIE (2014) report, which commented that

‘LSAs are not seen as class teaching team members and therefore do not act as such’ (p. 53), as the teachers seemed to appreciate the role of the LSE very much. In fact, although some researchers found that LSEs sometimes do not feel respected (Collins & Simco, 2006; Ebersold, 2003; Rhodes, 2006), in the case of this research, it appeared that the teachers appreciated the LSEs’ work. On the other hand, this does confirm what Wilson et al. (2002) found, that LSEs’ work facilitates that of the teacher. In view of both arguments, it could indeed be that LSEs are considered an important asset in the classroom, not because they are seen as class teaching team members, but rather because they are ‘burdened’ with the responsibility of the autistic child, whereas the responsibility of the autistic child should be that of the class teacher – another relevant issue which was identified in the NIEF (2019) as one of the curricular barriers to inclusion.

Further to the argument referred to above about the tendency amongst teachers to see the problem as being within the child, rather than in the environment, it is worth noting the following statement from one teacher (D.T8), who was particularly frustrated about the situation in the classroom: ‘It’s impossible to handle. He is disruptive. I don’t think he is capable of learning’. While this quote transmits a clear message of frustration for this particular teacher, it also reflects a very negative attitude towards autistic children, together with a number of other issues, such as that the teacher is oblivious to the possibility that the problem could be either the environment (as was already argued above) or, even worse, the problem could be within him/herself, for example, in his/her attitudes, possibly in his/her lack of knowledge or training, or possibly in his/her lack of skills to work with autistic children. So, it is hard to interpret this as anything but a very demeaning way of thinking about autistic children.

Another relevant observation from a teacher (H.T1) to note is the following:

> At first, I was a little bit worried, as I was told that he throws tantrums regularly, but it turned out to be the opposite. He was such a lovely boy, and he was so intelligent. His tantrums decreased, and his echolalia stopped, and [he] started responding to simple questions.

Here one can see the teacher being influenced by the general discourse about autism and by what other educators think about a particular autistic child. This was previously seen when one particular teacher (F.T8) reported that she knew that autistic children could be a bit difficult. Although this was not something discussed in the literature review, it was interesting to observe here. On the other hand, it could also be argued that such a comment could indeed be a confirmation that the problem of challenging behaviour in autistic children does not lie within the child but rather comes from the environment – it is a possibility that the child changed positively when in this teacher’s class, as the environment was more adapted to the child.

As for the LSEs, when asked about their initial feelings when being told they would be working with an autistic child, negative feelings were predominant. While some did indicate an eagerness to do their utmost to help and include the child, others reported feelings of anxiety, fear and difficulty. One LSE (I.L11) said:

> The first time [I worked with a child with autism] was very difficult because I had started working without any training and didn't know much about the disorder. After 15 years in this job, by experience and studying and research, I can now work and try to understand my student better.

Here, one can note the importance of LSEs having the necessary knowledge about the condition, as this makes them better equipped to work with autistic children, as was argued in Section 2.3.2. However, another LSE (F.L1), who talked about feeling worried, hinted at the fact that each autistic child is different and therefore having information about the condition is not enough: 'It was a new experience. Although I have had information about the condition, it was new. I had to learn the student through observation because I know that each student is unique'. The reasons for such negative feelings could be many, as will be seen in the analysis of the next question.

Amongst those who were more positive, there was one LSE (D.L1) who commented:

> I always wanted to work with students with autism. I never felt they were disadvantaged in any way. People who feel they are a burden should quit their job because they deserve the very best school experience like all the students.

Another LSE (G.L2) stated:

> In my first years, I didn't feel very confident, but in time, the education system also provided more information and staff (INCO, SMT, etc.) that were a good point of reference when needed, and with time you gain more experience in this field even though the spectrum is wide.

As seen from these responses, educators' attitudes about autism vary widely, not only amongst educators but also within a single educator. This again supports the literature, in that different research is incompatible when presenting results on educators' attitudes about autism, some saying that educators have positive attitudes (Khochen & Radford, 2012), and others reporting neutral attitudes (Norwich, 2002; Poon et al., 2016), while others have argued that there is a discrepancy between how educators view inclusion and their actual attitudes in practice (Damore & Murray, 2009; Gordon, 2006; Leach & Duffy, 2009). Nevertheless, it could be stated that attitudes similar to the ones found in this study were also found by Galea (2018) in her study about inclusion in its widest form in Maltese state secondary schools, where she found that heads of schools and teachers tend to agree with the principle of inclusion, but most feel frustrated, confused and helpless when trying to put the principle into practice. A reason

for this might be that educators' attitudes vary depending on various factors, as will be seen in the analysis of the next question, and as was discussed in the literature review in Section 2.3.4.

Table 5: *Educators' Initial Feelings*

Q4ai: What were your feelings when you found out that you would be working with an autistic student?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 23]	Total Teachers [out of 63]	Total LSEs [out of 57]
Helplessness/Frustration/Loss/Unhappiness/ Discouragement	4	5	0
Challenging /Was hard	3	7	9
Eager to do my utmost to help/include the student/Felt confident that I could help them/I was there to offer help/Realised they needed help/Eager to show student love and interest/Confident/ Excited	7	8	10
Needed to understand their difficulties/needs/ Prepared myself by researching the condition	3	5	4
Sought support of other professionals/Cooperated with LSE	0	2	1
Fine/Normal	1	1	3
Neutral/Indifferent	2	4	1
Fear of not being able to understand their needs, settle them in class, not doing enough/Fear of the unknown, that peers would not accept them, that change will affect them	4	7	11
Did not know what to do/Felt unknowledgeable and inexperienced /Confused/Not confident	2	10	6
Anxious/Shocked/Scared/Worried/Will I cope?/ Tense/Thought about what it would be like/ Panicked	4	13	18
Worried about the physical environment of the class/Worried that the child will disturb class/ Aware that there might be disturbance in class/ Dealing with tantrums	0	6	3
Difficulties in helping the child relate to the world around them/Child needed special attention/ Was difficult because of no LSE/help	0	4	0
Cautious	0	2	0
Learned to embrace their differences/Adapted work and environment to their needs	0	1	0
Mixed feelings	0	2	1
I need training	1	0	0
Used to work at a resource centre	1	1	0
Did not know how to communicate with student/ Communication was biggest challenge	1	3	2
Each child has their own needs	3	1	0

Hoped to create a memorable experience for the student/Hoped that I could help them	1	1	0
Impossible to handle/Disruptive	0	1	0
Previous experience and training helped me understand the child	0	0	1
Curious/Surprised	0	2	1
The child's autism was not severe and was treated like the other students	0	1	0
Did not know the child was autistic/I noted autistic behaviour myself	0	1	0
Dependent on severity	0	1	0
Having to work in a multidisciplinary team	0	0	1
No reply	0	0	0

Q4aii asked the participants why they experienced their reported feelings (Table 6). The most frequent answer had to do with the fact that they were not trained in autism care and, thus, lacked the needed knowledge and experience. This is in line with the literature, which has identified that one of the factors affecting educators' attitudes about autism is a lack of training (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Daanem et al., 2000; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007; Poon et al., 2016). The EASNIE (2014) report also stated (about the Maltese situation) that SMTs, teachers and LSEs lack the training to work with disabled students and have 'limited professional development… in meeting diverse learning needs' (p. 46), as was also found by Galea (2018). Poor, low or intermediate levels of knowledge about autism were also reported by Rakap et al. (2016), Al-Sharbati et al. (2015), Lindsay et al. (2013) and Haimour and Obaidat (2013), while Mavropoulou and Padeliadu (2000) found adequate general knowledge, though it was lacking in certain aspects of knowledge about the condition. Moreover, the NIEF (2019) also acknowledged deficiencies in training opportunities for educators, stating that these are sporadic, do not address educators' needs, realities and challenges, and fail to address teaching methodologies which support inclusive classrooms. As was argued in Section 2.3.2 of the literature review, having knowledge of autism is a debated subject, as while it is argued that knowledge of autism is important for understanding autistic students (Tobias, 2009), at the same time, knowledge of autism can lead to a number of negative effects associated with labels (Hodge, 2016). However, it was concluded that educators need not have knowledge of a particular child's diagnostic label of autism, but instead knowledge of the various challenges presented by autism, so as to be well-informed about the possible challenges their students could be facing in their class, as well as knowledge of the accommodations that can be made to include diverse student populations.

Other reasons for the educators' feelings of unease included the idea that autism is a difficult and challenging disorder, requiring much time and energy from educators: 'It can get overwhelming when a child is having a meltdown/tantrum and manifesting behaviours that literally drain energy from LSE…' (I.S2). Though not directly mentioned by the SMTs, teachers or LSEs, all stakeholders seemed preoccupied with the fact that autistic children could present challenging behaviour, especially if they have severe autism. This supports the findings of Khochen and Radford (2012), Rubie-Davis et al. (2006) and Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) that a student's severity of challenges affects educators' attitudes towards autism. One LSE (I.L3) detailed an experience with such a case:

> the child had severe autism. His mother was a teacher in the same school. She was in denial and constantly observing her child. She was constantly saying that he can cope as other students and that at home he cooperates.

Another LSE (K.L4) stated that 'the child I had to support had been with an LSE for five years of the primary years, and I was her LSE for the secondary school. Her first communication was by hitting me'. Furthermore, some teachers (but not SMTs nor LSEs) mentioned that autistic children are disruptive: '…the child was severely autistic and had disrupted his class, without showing any improvement' (E.T2), confirming Johansson's (2014) findings that teachers can view the challenging behaviour of autistic children as disruptive to the classroom's flow.

In addition, it was noted that it could also be difficult to connect with autistic children, especially when they have communication problems: 'It is frustrating when you try to communicate with someone and they cannot understand what you're trying to say. It is frustrating when autistic children struggle to communicate with the teacher and they cannot understand them' (I.T4). The preoccupations of educators in relation to the disruptive behaviour arising from autism and the problems with communication could be the result of the lack of training about autism as such training would positively impact educators' attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic students (Khochen & Radford, 2012) and improve their understanding of the child's difficulties (Wilkins, 2004). It could also be that the communication difficulties arise from the educators' own lack of communication skills and his/her lack of knowledge about diverse ways of communicating with children.

A few educators did have a more positive attitude towards autistic children and their inclusion in mainstream schools. One teacher (I.T10) commented that 'children have every right to be in class like all the rest. So I have accepted their differences', while an LSE (D.L1) argued that 'these students should not be discriminated in any way'. Another LSE (E.L4) said that working with autistic children was 'quite satisfying, although there were moments when I felt

that I was not doing the right thing with him'. Another (I.L11) said that '[s/he] like[s] challenges in life and at work and like[s] to learn about each different student and not their disability'. One LSE (E.L3) also noted that 'being hypersensitive [him/herself] and a [parent] too, [s/he]…treat[s] others the way [s/he]'d like to be treated'. These positive attitudes are truly encouraging, especially in the case of I.L11, who said s/he likes to learn about the student and not his/her disability. This was discussed in detail in Section 2.3.2, where it was argued that the child should be seen in his/her own light rather than in the light of a diagnostic label.

Table 6: *Educators' Reasons for Initial Feelings*

Q4aii: Could you explain why you experienced these feelings?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 23]	Total Teachers [out of 63]	Total LSEs [out of 57]
I have experience with autistic children / Previous experience as an LSE	1	2	0
I am a positive person/Self-discipline/Positivity	0	0	2
Wanted to know how to make the student feel comfortable/Wanted the child to learn like the others/Wanted to be prepared	0	4	4
A difficult/challenging disorder/Can be overwhelming/energy-draining/Thought I would find it hard to tackle	4	6	2
Difficulty in connecting with/understanding these students/I am not used to children being unresponsive towards me/Frustration	2	2	5
No one right way	1	0	1
Many degrees of autism/Every case is different	0	4	4
Was not trained/Had lack of knowledge/experience/But understood the importance of training and supervision	7	13	16
The child did not communicate/ Autistic children have communication/interaction problems	1	4	8
Did not know what to expect/Fear of the unknown/Did not know the child before	2	3	7
Child had difficulties in adapting to new situations/Child came to a new environment	0	1	1
Autistic students require a lot of energy and time	1	0	0
Autistic children need special attention/have specific needs	0	2	1
Autistic children cause disruption in class	0	5	0
Different behaviour	0	1	0

Viewed autistic children as challenging/Knew the child was challenging/Child was severely autistic	0	4	6
Afraid of doing something wrong/Afraid of not being able to understand them	0	3	0
Not knowing how they would react	0	1	0
Every child has their own needs	1	2	2
I feel emotional when dealing with autistic students	1	0	0
It is a good feeling when you see a child making progress/ Autistic children have a lot to offer	1	1	0
Lack of understanding	0	2	0
Child is like other students but my approach is different/I have acceptance of their differences/ They have every right to be in class	2	1	1
I take part in several IEPs	1	0	0
Want to help them but feel helpless	1	0	0
Difficult process	1	0	0
Hoping for a good relationship with all educators and the parents	0	0	1
I get disturbed easily when teaching	0	2	0
Did not know if I was able to handle the child/ parents/Pressure from parents	0	3	1
Had/sought help from LSE	0	1	0
Caring for the autistic child and the other children at the same time is difficult	0	3	0
Did not have any negative feelings	0	1	0
Had no resources	0	1	0
I feel I can work with them better than with other students	0	0	1
I can relate with their difficulties	0	0	1
Autistic children have difficulties blocking external stimuli	0	0	1
I like to learn about each student	0	0	1
Did not know what autism is	0	0	1
No reply	0	2	1

Q4aiii asked participants about their actual experiences in dealing with autistic students (Table 7), and all participants replied to this question. Negative experiences seemed to be more frequent amongst SMTs, as they indicated many challenges and feelings of helplessness, frustration and a sense of loss, uncertainty and disappointment. One SMT (I.S2) explained that ‘it is a very sad, helpless feeling, when you see the child frustrated and unhappy and not knowing how to turn the situation around’. Here, one can once again refer to what was discussed

in Section 2.3.2 about the necessity of educators having knowledge of autism, in order to be better equipped to work with autistic children, by adapting to the difficulties the students experience.

Although feelings of difficulty, helplessness and frustration were also common amongst teachers and LSEs, positive experiences were more frequent, as many found their experiences to be rewarding, satisfying, fruitful and positive. A teacher (H.T1) explained that 'it turned out to be one of the best teaching years. My niece was a student in this class too, and through her, this boy started interacting with his peers', while another (I.T4) said that 'It was a positive experience as gradually I developed a relationship with this child. Moreover, seeing the other children learning to accept human diversity gave me great satisfaction'. Another teacher (I.T10) also described having a positive experience and stated that it was 'a pleasure. They are loving individuals who need to be loved and understood', while another (E.T6) said that it was 'a positive experience in the end; [I] tried to keep calm and understand why the child acted in such a way, tried to find the cause'. This confirms Avramidis and Kalyva's (2007) findings that the kind of experience educators have with inclusion will affect their attitudes towards it. Furthermore, the first two comments (H.T1 and I.T4) highlight some of the benefits of inclusive education, namely the increase in the autistic student's interaction with his peers and the increase in tolerance and acceptance amongst other peers towards autistic students, and confirm that educators are in fact aware of these benefits (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012).

It is worth noting that several teachers stressed the importance of the LSE once again: 'The student who I am currently teaching does not have severe autism [and] thus is not disrupting the classroom with the help of the LSE' (E.T8); 'Always positive when I had an LSE… LSA helping. Quite difficult with undiagnosed cases because such children need more attention than I could give as a class teacher' (I.T8); and

> …I was still confident that he could change, as the LSE working with him had been at a [resource centre] for many years. I know her from there. By the end of the year, he was like a lamb, and he is doing very well at school. (E.T2)

Such comments are a cause for reflection because they transmit a separate message which reflects the whole system of education in Malta. The comment made by I.T8 indicates that one of the reasons teachers encounter certain difficulties when the child is not assigned an LSE is because the teacher is not able to provide the autistic child the required attention. While this is surely a cause for concern, it also confirms that, where autistic children are concerned, the problem lies in the environment and not within the child. Although this particular teacher did not specify why s/he could not give the child the required attention, the reasons could be many,

including the large number of children in class (also identified as a barrier to inclusion by Galea, 2018) or the too vast curriculum (identified as a barrier by Galea, 2018, and listed as a curricular barrier in the NIEF, 2019). These reasons are later reviewed and discussed in the responses to Q5 and Q6.

On a separate note, the comment made by E.T2 brings the findings of the EASNIE (2014) report into question, particularly where it stated that LSEs do not feel part of the in-class team, while at the same time confirming Wilson et al.'s (2002) findings about the usefulness of LSEs in easing the teachers' work. However, it also hints at the idea that it is the job of the LSE to work with the autistic child, thus again putting all the responsibility on the LSE, as was already noted in Q4ai.

Other teachers and LSEs stated that it was stressful at first but got easier over time, while others commented that it was a learning experience. Certain educators' experiences were mixed, generating both positive and negative feelings: '[Working with these children was] Challenging but also fulfilling in the sense that the student settled in class and was included' (K.T3); 'Being non-verbal at that age and having a teacher that didn't accept the student… succeeded in building a strong bond [between the child and me as an LSE]. Priceless' (E.L3); and 'It is very positive when you realise more how they see the world around them and you walk in their shoes. [However,] Negative experiences occurred when parents (not often) are less/not cooperative or in denial' (G.L2), reflecting the realities of inclusive education, as was discussed in Section 3.1.1, where it was argued that inclusive education improves students' engagement and social support (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Eldar et al., 2010; Vakil et al., 2009), but at the same time, inclusive practices bring along a number of challenges, such as understanding and managing students' behaviour and creating an inclusive environment for autistic children (Lindsay et al., 2013), amongst others.

Educators also had negative experiences: '[Autistic children] Mak[e] little or inconsistent eye contact. [This] Frustrated [me] a little bit. Even more, he rarely shared enjoyment' (J.T2); 'It was difficult [for the child] to communicate, interact and to follow with the daily schedules. It was difficult to make the student engage in the class activities [Kindergarten class]' (F.L1); 'I was frustrated because I couldn't deal with his odd and disruptive behaviour. As this student couldn't express himself in words, it was difficult to communicate with him' (D.T8); and 'It was a negative experience. I was very stressed. He was doing ABA therapy, and I felt very pressured from the programme and the child's mother' (I.L3). Such sentiments again confirm Avramidis and Kalyva's (2007) findings that the educators' experience with inclusion will ultimately affect their attitudes towards it. In this case,

it seems that the educators' negative experiences affected their attitudes towards autistic children negatively. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring the possible reasons behind such negative attitudes. While the fact remains that autistic children present a number of challenges, one should note that the preceding statements focus solely on such challenges, specifically the difficulties with communication (e.g. little or inconsistent eye contact, difficult to communicate with him) and the difficulties with behaviour (e.g. odd and disruptive behaviour). This gives room for two arguments, the first being that once again the autistic child is seen in light of the condition and the focus is solely on the impairments of the child instead of on the child him/herself (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007), as was discussed in Section 2.3.2. Moreover, it is again being assumed that the problem is within the child rather than in the environment; none of these educators identified any reasons behind these challenges, which could, for example, include their lack of skills and/or training to work with autistic students, the environment of the class not being suitable for autistic children and/or the curriculum being too vast or not adapted for the autistic child. This continues to confirm that educators tend to view autism from the medical model perspective, in contrast to the social model perspective, as was discussed in Section 2.1.2.

Table 7: *Educators' Description of the Experience*

Q4aiii: Could you describe your experiences of working with an autistic student?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 23]	Total Teachers [out of 63]	Total LSEs [out of 57]
Rewarding/Satisfying/Fruitful/Positive	3	24	22
Affection from student towards educator/Emotional experience	2	1	1
An opportunity to understand these children	2	4	1
Seeing a difference through support, hard work and collaboration with parents/Child made significant progress by the end of year	0	5	3
Learning to adapt to their needs/Learning through trial and error	0	3	3
Learning to use their strengths to access curriculum	0	0	1
A very positive relationship between student and educator	0	3	2
Love	2	3	2
Challenges/Helplessness/Frustration/Bad experience/Tantrums and hurting oneself/ Difficulties/Tiredness	5	11	15
A learning experience	1	5	7
Loss/Uncertainty/A sense of disappointment	4	0	0
Not knowing how to deal effectively and efficiently	3	1	0

A search for a communication method	0	0	1
Trying to walk in their shoes/Helped me understand what it must be like being autistic	1	2	2
Each case is very different	1	4	0
In some cases, you can see improvement, but in others, improvement is difficult to measure/In cases where you see improvement, it is satisfying	1	1	0
Problems in communication	2	2	2
At first, it was very difficult/stressful/Got easier with time	1	8	12
Love them and understand them/Provide individual help	1	2	1
Did my best to meet student's needs	0	2	1
Parent appreciation/Good communication with parents	0	1	1
Sought help from other professionals	0	2	0
Parental denial is the most difficult	1	0	0
Child does not show emotions	1	0	0
We had to overcome their difficulties (tantrums, screaming etc.)	1	0	0
Peers were very disturbed with their tantrums/Class routines are always disturbed	0	3	0
Child needed special attention/patience/love	0	1	2
Different behaviour	0	1	0
Peer acceptance after getting used to their behaviour	0	1	0
A journey	0	0	1
I could handle him better because he was very young	0	0	1
A feeling of pity	0	0	0
No reply	0	0	0
Reply not relevant	1	0	0

Q4aiv asked the participants how this experience affected the way they felt about autistic students (Table 8). Four SMTs, one teacher and one LSE did not answer this question. The most common response amongst the three groups of participants was that, after the experience, they were more knowledgeable about the subject and, thus, more able to help and understand autistic students. As will be seen in the following statements, most of the educators acquired their knowledge through the experience they gained when working with autistic children. Their responses support the contention that educators feel more confident in working with autistic students when they gain more knowledge, confirming the beliefs of Segall and Campbell (2012) and Westling (2010). This therefore emphasises the importance of educators being more

knowledgeable about autism so that they are equipped with the necessary skills to work effectively with autistic students, as was discussed in Section 2.3.2.

One teacher (I.T8) commented that ‘every case teaches me more about autism. I do not feel so lost or afraid of not getting through as before’. However, one SMT (I.S2) noted that although s/he keeps a positive attitude, ‘situations like these [encourage him/her] to question professionals in the area by asking them, “What can we do more or differently?”’. Another teacher (I.T10) said that s/he has ‘great respect for the challenges [the child] face[s] every day. I became more compassionate’. Some educators shared their beliefs regarding inclusion: ‘All children are able to learn even if [it is] in different ways’ (I.T7); ‘They always have something good [whether it is their personality or talents]. One does not have to look at those bad things, as it makes you feel unworthy. So I always try to be positive’ (E.L5); ‘Everybody has a “good side” even though it’s hidden sometimes’ (E.L9); and ‘Everyone should be treated the same. Everyone has different experiences in life that can help you grow and learn’ (G.L1). Other responses, which were quite common amongst teachers and LSEs, were that autistic children can succeed too, and they have a lot to offer, though they might need to learn in a different way. This was clearly explained by one teacher (E.T7), who said that if the child has ‘a dedicated LSE and understanding parents, the child will learn a lot’. Others said that they developed a positive attitude towards autistic students, and others argued that autistic children are just like any other child and could be integrated into the school: ‘I see these children as children with needs [similar to] all others, and most often it [is we] who need to adapt’ (G.L2) and ‘They are just children, who, like other children, need to be appreciated and encouraged and supported in the best way possible’ (H.L3).

Despite this, it is important to note that some teachers pointed out that autistic children can be very tiring and challenging and that nature of one’s experience of working with an autistic student depends on the severity of autism the child has. One teacher (D.T6) explained: ‘I love [autistic students], but sometimes it is tiring. [The student I had] used to run away, hit and put things in his mouth. You have to be always on the alert’, while another (H.T1) noted that ‘working with them is different than hearing about them. The experience in itself sheds a light on the real situation’. One teacher (H.T1) expressed his/her concerns as: ‘…I’ve seen other students with severe autism, and I fear that one day they will be in my class’. This sense of fear and challenge amongst educators, reflected in these statements, could be unveiling other hidden factors which lead to these feelings, such as a lack of knowledge amongst educators and thus unprepared educators. Moreover, Avramidis and Kalyva’s (2007) findings on educators’ attitudes and how they are influenced by the effects of inclusion experiences and the students’

severity are confirmed by these findings (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Rubie-Davis et al., 2006).

Table 8: *Effects of Educators' Experience on Their Feelings about ASD*

Q4aiv: How did this experience affect the way you feel about autistic students?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 23]	Total Teachers [out of 63]	Total LSEs [out of 57]
There is a need for staff to have necessary skills/Need for more training	2	2	0
They have a lot to offer/They can succeed too/You can learn from them/They can learn in different ways/Progress is slow but there	2	8	6
I feel it's my duty to help them/I want to help them and include them/I did my best to make their life easier	2	1	2
An experience of reciprocated love/satisfaction	1	4	2
Feeling positive/Doing my/our best I developed a positive attitude towards autistic students	2	5	4
I am more knowledgeable about the subject/I am more able to help them/I can understand them more/I did a lot of research/I feel confident	9	11	15
Started on the right foot/With help from the LSE, the student is doing/will do well	0	2	1
I am willing to work with other autistic students/I don't feel scared of working with autistic students in the future	0	1	4
They find it hard to communicate and express feelings/LSE does not always understand them	1	0	1
Still worried about teaching autistic students because each case is different	0	2	0
They are like any other child/Can be integrated into class/ Autistic children are part of the school	1	5	5
I feel pity for them	0	0	2
They live in their own world	1	0	1
I am not judgemental anymore towards their parents/I show empathy towards parents	0	1	3
Accept them/Treat all students the same/Love them/These children need to be more included	0	5	3
I don't look at it as a bigger challenge than any other challenge/There is nothing to fear	0	1	1
I am willing to learn more about autism	0	3	2

I empathise with them	1	1	1
In the first years, it is difficult for them to interact	0	0	3
Need for more awareness	0	0	0
Students with severe autism find it difficult to cope in mainstream schools/Students with severe autism should follow programmes in special schools	0	1	1
Need for one-on-one attention/Need to be more patient	0	3	2
As the school year progressed, things got easier	0	2	0
Sometimes, they can be tiring/challenging/Need lots of patience/If they have other conditions, they are more difficult to handle	0	4	1
Each case is different/Dependent on how severe their autism is/Autism can vary within the spectrum	0	4	3
Difference between hearing about them and working with them/People are not aware of what autism is	0	1	1
A sense of loss/Negative experience/Not knowing if I am doing the right thing or not	0	1	2
Need for more resources	0	1	0
If you prepare beforehand, you will be fine	0	0	1
Don't lose hope/If you feel positive, it helps in your work with students	0	0	2
If educator finds a good way to communicate with them, there will be good results	0	0	1
Surprised	0	0	1
No reply	4	1	1

The questions in Section 4b were addressed to those participants who replied *No* to Q4, which asked the participants whether they had ever worked with an autistic student. Q4bi asked these participants how they felt about the possibility of working with an autistic child in the future (Table 9), and all participants answering this section replied to these questions. All responses in all three groups were negative towards the thought of having to work with an autistic student in the future. One teacher (F.T7) explained: 'Without wanting to, I feel some anxiety and fear. If the parents find it difficult to accept the situation, anxiety is greater because there will be no cooperation to give the child all the (needed) attention'. Another teacher (G.T4) said, 'It doesn't scare me but I am aware that I need more information'. Here again, one can reflect on the sense of fear and anxiety amongst educators and wonder whether such feelings

are a result of other hidden factors, such as lack of knowledge, as was discussed above (Q4aiv). Indeed, G.T4 did acknowledge his/her need for more knowledge.

Table 9: *Educators' Feelings about the Possibility of Dealing with ASD*

Q4bi: What are your feelings about the possibility of working with an autistic student in the future?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 2]	Total Teachers [out of 24]	Total LSEs [out of 3]
Negative feelings: scared, anxious, confused, concerned, uncertain	0	8	2
Class disruption	0	1	1
Would be a challenge/Will be hard	1	7	1
Difficult to understand their needs	0	1	0
Anticipate difficulties in dealing with child's behaviour	1	2	1
I would ask for help/I need more information	0	4	0
Difficulties in communication	0	3	0
I would try to include them	0	2	0
Hope for the help of an LSE	0	1	0
No reply	0	0	0

In Q4bii, the participants were asked to explain their feelings (Table 10). Four teachers did not answer this question. It seems that lack of training and knowledge was a cause for concern for educators who had never worked with autistic students, confirming what was discussed above (Q4aiv, Q4bi), originating from the belief that autistic children will exhibit challenging behaviours. This confirms the understanding that training improves teachers' confidence in teaching autistic students (Segall & Campbell, 2012; Westling, 2010), and thus, this absence or lack generates negative feelings amongst educators who have never worked with autistic students. Moreover, the idea of autistic students having challenging behaviours also worries educators for various reasons (Johansson, 2014; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). One teacher (D.T1) explained: 'It will be a bit hard for me to [include] the child, as [the] teacher needs to learn about the disorder and to educate other kids to accept him and understand that their [peer] is different', confirming Lindsay et al.'s (2013) assertion that educators find it difficult to explain why a classmate is different to more typically developing peers.

Table 10: *Reasons for Educators' Feelings about the Possibility of Dealing with ASD*

Q4bii: Could you explain why you have these feelings?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 2]	Total Teachers [out of 24]	Total LSEs [out of 3]
Difficult beginning	0	0	1
Not everything works with these students	0	0	1
Lack of training/knowledge	0	8	1
Have not been a class teacher for a while	1	0	0
Heard/know that some have very challenging behaviour/Their repetitive behaviour is difficult to work with	1	4	1
Not being able to satisfy their needs	0	1	0
Difficult to cater to students with different abilities in same class	0	2	0
Difficulties in developing their skills/Difficulties in interaction/They are easily distracted/confused	0	3	0
I want the child to feel comfortable	0	1	0
I understand that autistic children have difficulties communicating/It is hard to improve their communication	0	4	0
No reply	0	4	0

Q5 asked the participants whether they agreed with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools (Table 11). All participants, except two teachers, answered this question. The majority of educators seemed to have mixed feelings about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, as they ticked *Both* as an answer to this question. Almost all the others were in favour and ticked *Yes*. The reasons for having such mixed feelings amongst a number of educators are interesting to note and will be discussed in the second part of this question (Table 12).

Table 11: *Educators' Opinions about the Inclusion of Autistic Students*

Q5: Do you agree with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools?			
	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Yes	7	21	27
No	0	4	2
Both	18	60	31
No reply	0	2	0

The participants were also asked to give reasons for their answers (Table 12). A substantial number of participants from the three groups indicated that their opinion of whether autistic students should be included in mainstream education or not depends on the nature or severity of the particular case, confirming Khochen and Radford's (2012) findings that the type and severity of the disability affect educators' attitudes towards inclusion. Many educators explained this further. One SMT (K.S2) argued that it all depends

> …on the autistic child. Is he ready to be included? Will it help him? How will this affect the teaching and learning in the classroom? I am in favour of inclusion, but unfortunately, it is not always possible for the well-being of all students.

An LSE (I.L3) explained:

> I agree with the inclusion of students with autism, but it depends on how severe the autism is. Students with severe autism are very frustrated in the mainstream, which makes it impossible for the LSE to work and cope in class.

A teacher (E.T2) also explained that, in severe cases, the mainstream environment is not ideal for autistic students, as it affects their peers' learning:

> The children in my class were so disturbed that it took me a whole term to get their attention. They had been used to the commotion and had blocked all the screams and noise by living in a world of their own.

At the same time, a substantial number of SMTs also argued that autistic students in resource centres should be kept to a minimum, a unique response that was not mentioned by any of the teachers nor LSEs. It is important to keep in mind here that teachers and LSEs work more closely with the children, and therefore, SMTs may not be as in touch with the everyday challenges autistic children might pose and face. Indeed, some teachers and LSEs explained that, in certain cases, autistic children would be better off in a resource centre, with one LSE (J.L10) arguing:

> …especially if they can be of any [danger] to themselves, peers, or teaching staff. Both the child with autism and even his peers have the right to education, but there are situations [where] the classes may be too overwhelming for the child. Let's be practical.

Others supported this belief, saying: 'Some cases/children are more able to fit in mainstream, especially those on the lower spectrum. Other cases… [those who are] non-verbal or severe suffer in a regular class! They get frustrated and are not happy' (I.T8), and 'At times, the environment in big classes, [with] too much stimulation, does not help children with autism spectrum disorder' (G.L4). One LSE's (K.L12) comment is especially worth noting, as this LSE strongly disagreed with inclusive education for autistic students, arguing that:

> …the class environment is not ideal for these students. They need… calmer environments where they can move freely, make noises; therefore, let them be

> free instead of trying to keep them quiet. On the other hand, the other students are being interrupted by students with autism and find it more difficult to concentrate.

The above comments suggest the idea that it is the environment of inclusive schools which is not appropriate for autistic children, rather than the child him/herself being the problem. The comment by K.L12 strengthens the idea that mainstream classroom environments have in fact not been appropriately adapted for autistic children. This was also one of the environmental barriers identified by the NIEF (2019), where it is claimed that schools are not adequately equipped to respond to the diversity amongst students in inclusive schools. As was discussed in the literature review, the physical environment of the school is a crucial aspect in promoting or demoting inclusive education (Humphrey & Symes, 2011), and thus, its absence renders inclusive education difficult to implement.

Other educators with mixed opinions agreed with inclusion as long as there would be enough support for educators and parents, as well as adequate resources, possibly implying once again that the problem does not actually lie within the child but rather in the environment (available support, available resources): ‘I agree that they should be included, but sometimes there isn’t enough support for LSEs and parents. Sometimes, students find it harder to adapt in mainstream schools than in a resource centre’ (E.L4); ‘I agree that they should be included, but sometimes the environment at school is not resourceful. LSEs and teachers need support’ (E.L5); and ‘As long as there are resources available and the appropriate programme, they should be in mainstream [school] because they learn a lot through modelling and repetition’ (H.L2). The issues of an adequate environment and support for educators were also discussed in the literature review, as the classroom environment plays a very important role in promoting or demoting inclusive education (Humphrey & Symes, 2011), and is one of the primary factors affecting educators’ attitudes towards inclusion (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Rubie-Davis et al., 2006). However, classrooms still do not have the adequate environment required for inclusion (Hinton et al., 2008; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Smith & Brown, 2000). With regard to support, there is a lack of it for all educators concerned (EASNIE, 2014), which is worrying because support is another factor affecting educators’ attitudes towards inclusion (Daanem et al., 2000; Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Goodman & Williams, 2007).

It is, however, also important to note that a substantial number of teachers and LSEs acknowledged that inclusion is beneficial for both the autistic student and other students. Indeed, many educators commented on this, with one LSE (E.L2) arguing that:

> …inclusion of ASD students in mainstream schools helps students with ASD to have a better outcome in academic and in social outcomes. On the other hand,

other students will learn how to include and help students with ASD in the classroom and in society.

Others also noted that accepting autistic students in mainstream schools helps peers become more tolerant and accepting, ultimately leading to a more inclusive society: 'It helps [the student's] classmates understand that their friend is different but valued' (E.T6); '…such [an] attitude enables [us] to move to a more inclusive society, thus minimising labelling and marginalisation' (E.T8); 'They need it for everyday inclusion in all aspects of life' (G.T5); and '…children should be prepared for the outside surroundings of a whole society in general' (J.T3). This supports findings in the literature that inclusion has a number of benefits, including more awareness, acceptance and opportunities for autistic students to interact and develop social skills (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). Moreover, several educators highlighted that inclusion is a human right: 'I believe that everybody should be included. No one is to be left out. Every student is important' (G.T6); 'They are different… every child is different. We need to cater to and love them equally' (K.T7); 'Because no child deserves to be left out of being included in a mainstream school with all the other kids' (E.L6); and 'I believe that they have a right to live a fulfilled life in every way possible, and this will help them more in the future to become independent' (G.L2). This links back to Ainscow (2020) where he argued that today inclusion is being seen as a principle that embraces diversity amongst all learners, starting from the basic belief that education is a human right leading to a more just society.

Table 12: *Educators' Reasons for Their Opinions Concerning Inclusion for ASD Students*

Q5 (second part): Why?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
A human right/They are like other students	6	8	11
Beneficial for the other students	3	13	10
Students can benefit from a resource centre	3	2	0
Beneficial for the autistic student/Opportunity to interact, socialise and communicate with others/Children learn from other children	4	12	15
Adjust to individual needs	0	0	1
We have come a long way	0	0	1
Can learn through differentiated learning/Individual help	1	2	2

Most autistic students are very bright/gifted/Can be included/They have abilities that are often undiscovered	1	1	3
Both systems have their benefits	0	0	1
Depends on nature/severity of case	13	49	25
Depends on ability to adapt to surroundings/ Classroom environment is too stimulating/ Depends on the ability to gain social and academic skills	0	0	4
Autistic children /severe autism will benefit more at a resource centre/At times, students can benefit from a resource centre	2	5	1
Students in resource centres should be kept to a minimum/I do not agree with special schools	12	0	0
Not all schools are equipped for autistic students/Mainstream schools do not have adequate resources/Need for a resource room in schools	1	3	2
Every student has his/her own needs irrespective of having autism or not	2	2	0
They disrupt the class/Their behaviour affects the other children	0	5	2
Challenging	0	1	0
Sometimes they need to be given life skills rather than academic education/They can benefit from non-academic lessons but not academic ones	0	1	1
Inclusion is good, but they need isolation too	0	0	1
No reply	0	4	0

5.3 Research Question 2

What are the opinions of SMT members, teachers and LSEs regarding the effectiveness of an inclusive system of education for autistic students in Malta?

Question 6 asked the participants whether or not they thought our inclusive system of education is effective in the case of autistic students (Table 13). All participants, except for one teacher, answered this question. The most common answer amongst SMTs was *No*, followed by *Both* and *I don't know*. The most common answer amongst the teachers was *I don't know*, followed by *No* and *Both*, while the most common response amongst the LSEs was *Both*, followed by *No*. Although there was some variation amongst the three groups, it was very clear that the majority of participants did not think that the inclusive system is effective.

Table 13: *Educators' Opinions about the Inclusive System of Education*

Q6: Do you think our inclusive system of education is effective in the case of autistic students?			
	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Yes	1	10	4
No	10	26	22
Both	8	22	26
I don't know	6	28	8
No reply	0	1	0

As in the case of Question 5, the participants were again asked to provide reasons for their answers (Table 14). One SMT, 19 teachers and 4 LSEs did not answer this question. Their responses indicated that, for educators, the biggest problem is that school systems, curricula and the school environment itself are not autism-friendly. Moreover, they noted that schools are not well equipped for the needs of autistic children. Indeed, one SMT (I.S1) stated that:

> …as a country, we embark on policies, like the inclusion policy, but do not make the necessary preparation to end up with success. One needs [many] more resources, especially trained human resources, to deliver [lessons] much better. We need more equipment and facilities to help in the challenges such children go about. Mainstream schools should be more autism-friendly. For instance, rigidity like punctuality, does not help autistic children. Facilities like sensory rooms are to be provided in all schools. Otherwise, we are preaching the impossible.

Another SMT (K.S1) argued that 'there is no clear policy. There is nearly no support to schools. Teachers are not prepared. Parents have too much say'. Such comments support the findings of EASNIE (2014), which clearly indicated that inclusion in Malta is not functioning properly. Moreover, one can once again see that, although educators have a strong medical perspective of autistic students, as was seen in the analysis of RQ1, in reality, the educators' statements indicate deficiencies in the environment, including an inadequate physical environment, lack of support and unprepared teachers.

An LSE (I.L11) also said that 'our education system is very difficult for educators to cater and give individual attention to every student, especially those who struggle to follow [lessons] on their own [due to learning difficulties], let alone for students with autism'. Indeed, research has shown that modifications and adaptations for autistic students are considered to be time-consuming, and this frustrates teachers (Emam & Farrell, 2009), as educators lack the time to dedicate to autistic students, particularly when there are large classes (Lindsay et al., 2013). Moreover, the literature has also indicated that, although inclusion is well-supported in theory, practising it tends to be more complicated (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006; Van Reusen et al.,

2001). This is especially so when educators are expected to practise inclusion without any support for doing so (Horrocks et al., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013). One LSE (D.L2) stated that:

> …each school should be [provided] with a special class which has a specialised teacher in autism and LSEs supporting. A special learning programme for these students is beneficial so that they can benefit to their full potential. These students can spend some time in mainstream and some time in these special classes.

This comment is interesting to note, as one can observe the repetition of the word 'special' in it, which suggests the idea that for educators to be able to work with autistic children, they need to have some sort of special skills, special environments and special teaching methods, which regular educators do not seem to have, according to them. Such responses link to what was discussed by Mercieca and Mercieca (2014, 2018) where they argued that many educators feel they are incapable of working with autistic students, as they believe other professionals know much more than they do (see Sections 2.1.4 and 2.3.2). Another LSE (B.L1) commented that 'some schools do not even have enough space for their students let alone providing a special area where students with autism can have some time out', while another LSE (G.L4) said, 'too [many] changes in lessons, etc. do not help. Environment does not help to keep them calm', again highlighting the challenges arising from the environment, as was discussed above.

Curricula in mainstream schools are believed to pose difficulties for autistic students. One SMT (K.S2) specifically explained that 'the higher the year group, the greater the pressure on the teacher, so disruptive behaviour may negatively affect the teaching and learning'. Moreover, a teacher (K.T11) argued: 'I think we should give more importance to life skills. We are giving a lot of importance to academic (which is important), but life skills are much more important', and an LSE (I.L2) explained, 'the syllabus cannot always be adapted for them, especially as they grow older. There is only about half an hour free play in the day in which the child could interact with his peers'. Another LSE (K.L11) highlighted this issue, saying that 'children with autism find it very hard to cope with peers. The syllabus is above them'. Furthermore, the severity of a particular case was a common issue, on which the effectiveness of the system depends, since the system might be effective for cases which are not so severe but ineffective for cases which are more severe. As one teacher (H.T2) explained, 'There's quite a difference between the same child being in year 1 and/or year 6 or even year 11. Apart from that, there's a difference amongst students who [are] at different [points on] the spectrum'. Though the vastness of curricula was not directly addressed in the literature review, we have seen literature referring to the difficulties encountered by teachers when trying to adapt and modify curricula to the needs of autistic students (Emam & Farrell, 2009), as well as the

difficulties faced by teachers when the behaviour of the autistic students is disruptive to the flow of the lesson (Johansson, 2014). In addition, we have also found that the severity of autism is one factor affecting the effectiveness of inclusive education for autistic children (Khochen & Radford, 2012).

Another important aspect that lowered the effectiveness of the inclusive system of education was brought up by one teacher (K.T13):

> …inclusion is not something that can be enforced (such as the use of tablets). Inclusion should be brought about from [within] the peers, inside and outside school. It is pointless to force a child to join his class during school hours and then have him out on a social level within his locality.

Such a comment indicates a need for more awareness, not only amongst educators, but also amongst peers and society in general. This will be discussed in detail in the findings for Research Question 4.

Two other important aspects that render the inclusive system ineffective, according to educators, are the lack of resources, including human resources, and the lack of training available to educators, both of which were discussed in the literature as factors affecting educators' attitudes towards inclusion (Khochen & Radford, 2012), and which were again listed as barriers to effective inclusive education in Malta in the NIEF (2019). Moreover, as Lindsay et al. (2013) stated, the barriers to inclusion also include a lack of training and unavailability of resources. Some educators went further, with one SMT (I.S2) specifying that:

> …schools need to be equipped with resources that aid LSE[s] to work better with the child. These days, you do find inexpensive resources; however, heavy-duty resources are very, very expensive, way out of the school's budget. So, schools need to be given allowance to have more resources at hand for the LSE to do her job better and work more efficiently with [the] student.

One teacher (D.T6) said that 'I think more equipment is needed to meet their needs. Like a multisensory room in each school. Also, a touch screen computer in class', while an LSE (I.L8) expressed her concerns: 'If we want true inclusion, this must be catered [to], not just by being in a class. The school must have the adequate resources to cater [to] the child'. Another teacher (J.T2) also argued that the system needs to have more human resources who can 'provide for [the child's] behavioural, psychological, educational and skill-building needs before anything else'.

While also emphasising the importance of having more resources, one LSE (J.L1) highlighted the lack of knowledge amongst teachers, thus underscoring the importance of training: 'Not every educator understands that students with autism can't always follow the class instructions or rules. [There is a] lack of resources and technology, [more] (information

about available resources) [is needed]'. Another LSE (E.L6) agreed, insisting that 'all the staff needs to learn more about how to interact with these children'. The teachers themselves acknowledged that their lack of knowledge limits how much they can understand their students and deal with their behaviour appropriately (Lindsay et al., 2013). This is a very important point worth noting. I have argued earlier that educators tend to believe that other professionals know more than they do in regard to working with autistic children (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018). This is again evident in some of the responses to this question. However, the educators also acknowledged that if they were more knowledgeable about autism, they would be able to work with autistic students more confidently, thus the importance of training (Segall & Campbell, 2012; Westling, 2010; Wilkins, 2004).

Besides needing more training, certain educators noted the lack of support they have in schools, while also highlighting the issue of parents who, according to them, have too much say in the education of their children. One LSE (I.L3) stated:

> We don't have the support needed to work with children with autism. Teachers are not trained to work with these children. LSEs are not understood by teachers and SMT. Parents who are in denial want their children to access [the] same syllabus as [their] peers, which is impossible. They don't accept adapted work and different strategies. This makes it impossible for LSE[s] to work with these students.

Another LSE (E.L5) emphasised that educators do not have 'enough support from professionals. Sometimes parents expect that they follow same curriculum in class although they are not [at] that level', while another LSE (K.L4) noted that 'parents have their say regarding inclusion and some refuse to have a time out [meaning some quiet time out of class] of class for individual tasks, such as self-help skills'. The issue of parents was also discussed in the literature review, as in the case of Lindsay et al. (2013) who found that parents are often unwilling to open up about their child's condition with educators, not to mention that some are in denial. According to the participants in this research and the literature, it is extremely important that parents and educators work together for the benefit of the child (Robertson et al., 2003). The comments above also show, however, that educators think that parents have too much say in the education of their children. This was not discussed in the literature review; however, it is understandable that parents have a right to decide for their child. I believe that, instead of saying that parents have too much say, we should argue that parents should be well-informed about the available resources and services they could choose for their child and then provided with the necessary training, so that they can make an informed decision as regards the services they should choose for their child. This will be discussed in detail in IQ1.

On a different note, one important comment worth noting here was the one raised by LSE (J.L3), who said:

> …[the effectiveness of the system] depends on the educators' perception of autism. So, if the educator sees autism as not appropriate in a mainstream setting, the system will never be efficient. But, if the educators [teachers and LSE] have positive views, then the system can be very efficient.

Such a comment speaks to the findings of Avramidis and Norwich (2002) that indicated teachers are fully committed to inclusion if they accept its principles. Majoko (2016) confirmed this, arguing that inclusion works best when educators accept and tolerate certain behaviours, attitudes and challenges.

Table 14: *Educators' Reasons for Their Opinions about the Inclusive System of Education*

Q6 (second part): Why?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Depends on various factors	4	2	2
Teamwork	0	0	2
Positive attitudes	1	1	2
Availability of required resources to meet their needs/Programmes	1	2	2
LSE/Competent staff	0	4	0
Most autistic students can be included but will benefit from some days at a resource centre/Some will benefit more from a special school	2	3	1
Getting there/Education system has improved a lot regarding inclusion	0	1	1
School systems, curricula and environments are not autism-friendly/Schools are not well-equipped for the needs of autistic children/ School system is not always effective	5	16	12
System is inclusive but more support for parents is needed/Parents who are in denial make it impossible to work with the student/Parents resist time-out sessions	1	0	2
Rigid settings/Depends on the environment one is in	1	2	2
Constant changes in personnel	0	0	1
Class timetable	0	0	1
Lack of teaching tools	1	0	0
Lack of awareness/experience/training	4	10	6
Need for more funds	1	0	0
No synergy amongst professionals/Visits from professionals are not always sufficient	1	1	0
No appropriate support	0	2	3

No adequate resources/Need for more resources/Lack of human resources	5	8	9
Would need to compare with other systems	0	1	0
Long waiting list for services	1	0	0
Never worked with autistic students	1	1	0
Professionalism/capabilities of teacher/How much teacher is supported/Difficult for teacher to handle both autistic student and class	1	3	0
Capabilities of LSE	1	0	0
Severity of the case/Depends of whether the child has another disability with autism/Severe autism can be disrupting/Each case is very different	5	16	14
All students must be included	0	0	1
Suitable for all	0	0	1
When students are not yet diagnosed, the teacher faces problems	0	1	0
Fruitful results from mainstream	0	1	0
Many of them are coping	1	1	0
Should be given a mixture of formal schooling and life/socialisation skills	0	2	0
There’s room for improvement	0	1	0
Autistic children should attend resource centres	0	1	0
Not aware of autism severities/Don’t know/ Cannot comment	0	1	1
Need for more support for educators	0	1	0
Inclusion is hard to reach/We do not understand the work behind inclusion	0	1	1
Negative attitudes	0	0	1
Attending other services within school hours is not good	0	0	1
Large number of students in a small classroom/ Different class abilities	0	0	2
No reply	1	19	4

After having obtained such a variety of reasons for the ineffectiveness of the Maltese inclusive system of education for autistic students, I felt it was necessary to include an interview question (IQ) about this issue to investigate it further. Thus, IQ1 asked the participants: ‘What needs to improve within the educational system so that the process of inclusion will be more effective when working with autistic students?’ Many of the issues discussed during the interviews were also raised in the questionnaires. However, one unique discussion topic was awareness. Two SMTs (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-B) believed that increased awareness of autism is needed in our education system, especially since it appears that we are not making a clear

distinction between integration and inclusion. One interviewee (I.SMT-A) stated that inclusion is much more than mere integration, so we need to train our educators as to what inclusion really entails. This was indeed discussed in the literature, with Mitchell's (2008) argument stating that inclusion is more than the mere placement of disabled students into a regular classroom; it is, in fact, composed of vision, placement and an adapted curriculum, assessment and teaching, as well as acceptance, access, support, resources and leadership. Although there is no one definition of inclusion, all definitions seem to agree that inclusion is not only about the placement of disabled students in mainstream schools, but is also a much more demanding process of removing all barriers and changing school structures to fully include disabled students (see Section 2.2.2).

Another interviewee (I.SMT-B) felt that training for educators would help bring about more awareness of autism. One teacher (I.TEACHER-J) agreed, stressing that the classroom teacher needs to have proper awareness of autism. This highlights the importance of educators receiving the necessary training in order to understand the needs of autistic students (Crisman, 2008). Such training should include both training about inclusive practices and training about autism.

As seen in the questionnaires, training for educators is very important; yet, it is lacking. The data indicated that most interviewees felt that training plays a very important role in the improvement of our education system (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-B, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-I, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-I, I.LSE-A and I.LSE-E). This is in line with what was discussed in Section 3.3, where the importance of training for educators working with autistic students was emphasised and discussed by Glashan et al. (2004), Gozales-Gil et al. (2013), Horrocks et al. (2008), Leach and Duffy (2009) and Leblanc et al. (2009), amongst others. One SMT (I.SMT-A) suggested that training opportunities should include all educators, not only LSEs, as everyone needs to be educated on autism. This was also suggested by Majoko (2016), who argued that training should be provided to everyone, including typically developing peers, and provided by the country's education department, which supports the findings of Galea (2018). Though not specifically stating that training should be provided to everyone, Mizell (2010) also acknowledged that training is important for head teachers and assistant head teachers too, since they need to learn about policies and laws related to disabilities, support available for persons with disabilities and how this could be obtained, and about the procedures related to educational intervention.

Other interviewees (I.SMT-B and I.LSE-E) felt that such training should be hands-on, where educators can work directly with autistic students, rather than just studying theory, as

this would help the educator in the classroom by having had some real experience of how one should work with autistic students. This is also supported by the findings of Morrier et al., (2011), where hands-on training was one of the identified training delivery methods. Moreover, training should be ongoing (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-I and I.LSE-E), specific (I.LSE-E) and include the practical aspects of the various conditions an educator might encounter (I.SMT-C). Simpson (2007) and Hess et al. (2008) argued that teaching autistic students requires specific skills which can only be developed through specific training, which was also confirmed by my findings. On the other hand, though the literature discussed did not specifically mention that training should be practical, some of it hinted at various practical issues that training should tackle, such as providing educators with appropriate strategies (Hess et al., 2008), effective ways to overcome daily challenges (Mizell, 2010), knowledge about how students learn, what impedes their learning and how teacher instruction can increase their learning (Mizell, 2010), behaviour management, accommodations and modifications, and understanding students' IEPs (Bhatnagar & Das, 2013).

The environmental conditions for this training should also be learner-friendly, suited to the type of training being given and ideally conducted in small groups (I.SMT-I). One LSE (I.LSE-E) preferred such training be given on a school basis, as s/he believed that, in this way, educators could discuss specific cases in their schools and base the training on those cases. Another interviewee (I.SMT-I) offered an example of a one-off training session in which all educators at this particular college were given training all together in an un-airconditioned hallway in June. In this case, neither the training nor the environment was learner-friendly –one cannot expect learners to focus in such conditions. These issues were interesting to note, as they were not discussed in the literature review, but were observed in the findings of this particular research. Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) added that 'In the case of autism, in particular, not only are teachers not trained, but most of the time, [neither are] the LSEs because LSEs are the jack of all trades but master of none'. The interviewee concluded that the system would take a big step forward if training were provided to teachers and LSEs. The issue of training will be discussed further in RQ4 Section 6.3.2, where the training of educators will be addressed.

The interviewees (I.SMT-B, I.SMT-D, I.SMT-F, I.TEACHER-I and I.LSE-I) also identified mainstream schools as important environments requiring improvement. Interviewees agreed that the mainstream school environment is inadequate for autistic students and needs to be improved, confirming that not enough is being done to provide adequate inclusive environments (Hinton et al., 2008; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Smith & Brown, 2000). There were those who suggested that classrooms should be more spacious because sometimes there

is literally no room where one can move about in the classroom (I.TEACHER-A and I.LSE-I). Furthermore, one interviewee (I.SMT-D) explained that, since the focus is on academic material and autistic children need help with their lack of social and emotional competences, the mainstream classroom can sometimes be overwhelming and stressful for them. This is why a multisensory room where autistic students can take breaks from the classroom, still learning but doing something different from what those in the regular classroom are working on, was suggested by many (I.SMT-D, I.TEACHER-I and I.LSE-I). The literature previously discussed also mentioned the importance of the physical environment in all this, as it was argued that the physical environment promotes or demotes the idea of inclusive education (Humphrey & Symes, 2011); however, it was not discussed in the literature as to what and how the physical environment of inclusive schools should be. Moreover, the idea of having a multisensory room in inclusive schools was also not specifically considered in the literature, but very comprehensively addressed in the findings of this research. Nevertheless, the need for more resources, which are severely lacking in schools (I.TEACHER-I), confirms findings by Lindsay et al. (2013).

Another interviewee (I.SMT-F) questioned the cases of children with severe autism who are put in mainstream classrooms, as they had their own reservations about how much these children would truly benefit from the mainstream classroom. This was also seen in the questionnaire responses, where educators argued that the efficiency of the inclusive system for autistic students depends highly on the severity of the child's autism (see Section 5.2). This again confirms that the severity of the condition affects educators' opinions about the effectiveness of inclusive education for autistic students (Khochen & Radford, 2012).

The services of professionals were also a factor mentioned by various SMTs (I.SMT-B, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-I and I.SMT-K) as important for improving the educational system. Such professional services would include an ASST teacher, considered by many to be an expert in the field of autism, as well as the services of other professionals from various fields, including a speech therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist and physiotherapist. Although the service of the ASST teacher was viewed as a source of support when educators needed advice about a particular situation or behaviour (I.SMT-B), the interviewees suggested that this service is lacking. One interviewee (I.SMT-K) explained that 'the ASD team [meaning the ASST team] is not keeping up with all the work… for example, in my case, in a whole scholastic year, the teacher from the ASD came only once'. Another interviewee (I.SMT-C) also referred to this issue: 'There need to be specialised teachers who give their help throughout the entire year, not come only once in a while, that is, come once a term or once a year… they should come

regularly'. This was also noted to be the case for other professionals whose services could improve this process. One interviewee (I.SMT-C) argued that professional services need to be more frequent because 'at the moment, you have to ask for their visit', as they do not come on their own. Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) stated that 'the government does not employ enough educational psychologists, and, therefore, it is natural that people will need to refer to the private sector and the waiting lists are long', in both the government and private sectors. The issue of waiting lists was also identified in the NIEF (2019) as an area to be tackled for an improvement in the Maltese inclusive system of education. The issue of therapeutic services as an important resource in inclusive settings was mentioned briefly in the literature review; however, frequency of services was not discussed in the literature, although it was very distinctly noted in the findings of this research.

As was also discussed in the questionnaire responses, educators seemed to believe that parents are sometimes given too much say in their children's education. One interviewee addressed this issue during the interview, noting that educators are not treated as professionals, unlike medical professionals, who are respected and whose advice is always considered seriously and most often followed. According to this interviewee, parents are given too much say on educational matters and always have the last word – which is not always in the best interest of the child (I.SMT-K). One teacher agreed with this, saying that certain parents are in denial about their child's difficulties, thus refusing available help, with the consequence that the child, the peers and the educators involved suffer (I.TEACHER-E). This issue was not amongst those discussed in the literature review, but seemed to be a major concern of the participants of this study. One teacher (I.TEACHER-E) suggested that, in the case of parents who are in denial or who refuse to apply for help for their child, a psychologist could step in by doing observations in class and be present during meetings with parents, where they could confirm educators' suspicions about the child being autistic, something that is not presently done. This comment links to this issue, which was also discussed in Q5, where it was also argued that it is the parents' right to make decisions for their children, and therefore it would be better if parents are well-informed and trained about the services available for their children, in order to be able to make informed decisions. In fact, Marcus et al. (2005) also suggested that parents be provided with training on autism and introduced to the services and resources available, further adding that, most importantly, they should be provided with emotional support. This particular suggestion is somewhat in line with this argument, as it is one way of helping parents make informed decisions. Suggesting training for parents of autistic children should not be seen as peculiar or discriminating; it should rather be seen as providing parents

with the necessary support and tools to help their children as best as they possibly can. Indeed, in Malta, training (often referred to as 'information meetings') is usually provided for parents when new curricula or new services are introduced. Nonetheless, it is important to note that such a service should not be there to 'convince' parents that their child has autism, as was discussed in great detail in Section 2.1.4, with arguments about the intrusion of professionals into the lives of autistic children and their families (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014), but rather should be there as a source of support and guidance in regard to the services available. I believe it is vital here to make reference to the fact that parents are most often the experts of their own children and thus know what is best for them, as was discussed by Hodge (2016) in Section 2.3.2; therefore, while we should support parents as best as possible, we should also respect their decisions concerning their child's needs.

In addition to the lack of services being provided, another interviewee (I.SMT-I) mentioned a number of professional services that are totally absent from the system, including a clinical psychologist and behavioural therapist. According to this interviewee, the importance of the behaviour therapist is in his/her ability to advise and equip educators with the skills necessary to calm autistic children. It is significant to note here the feeling amongst educators that there are other professionals who know more than they do, or the feeling of not knowing enough to be able to help an autistic child. This was discussed in Section 2.3.2 with examples from Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) and Hodge (2016). Further to this, one SMT (I.SMT-I) argued that teachers cannot know everything: 'How many readings can one do? I know we are professionals. But how many things can one read?'. Here one can clearly see the willingness of certain educators to know more about autism, but at the same time wanting someone to provide the information for them rather than search for it themselves. The lack of human resources discussed in the responses to this interview question was also brought up in the questionnaires, confirming that educators' opinions about the effectiveness of the inclusive system of education are highly dependent on the provision or lack of human resources, amongst other things (Khochen & Radford, 2012).

In the questionnaire responses, educators reported feeling that there was lack of support for them when working with autistic students. This issue was again brought up in the interviews. This confirms what was stated in the EASNIE (2014) report. Interviewees admitted that they needed guidance and advice on how best to work with autistic students because 'no one knows exactly how to take care of these children who fall within the autism spectrum (I.SMT-E). Here, one can observe once again the feeling amongst educators that they do not know how to best work with autistic students and thus desire some professional to intervene (Hodge, 2016;

Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018). This same interviewee expressed their wish that the Minister for Education, together with the directors concerned and all those managing the Directorate for Education, would launch a strategy or discussion in which all educators could have their say about how to move forward. Such an initiative could provide educators with guidelines on what works best when dealing with autistic students (I.SMT-E). One teacher (I.TEACHER-A) expressed the need for more in-class support, while also suggesting that classes should have a smaller number of students. Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) shared a concern regarding the unprofessionalism of certain professionals, especially certain professionals from outside the education system, who sometimes give advice to parents that is based on myths, not research. One such example, according to this interviewee, is that certain professionals promise parents that changing the diet of the autistic child would make him/her verbal. The interviewee argues that this not only gives false hope to parents but shows a lack of respect for educators, who have enough experience and knowledge to know that these myths will not help the child but will instead lead the parents in the wrong direction. This is interesting to note, as it contradicts the general feeling amongst educators, discussed above, that other professionals know more than educators where autistic children are concerned. Indeed, Hodge (2016) argued that the feeling of not knowing enough is one of the disabling effects of 'labels' that disempower parents and other not medically involved professionals (including teachers) by rejecting and disregarding the knowledge they have of the child.

Another important issue hindering the effectiveness of the educational system is that the statementing process, which is the process by which a diagnosed child is given the support of an LSE, is very slow. Although this was not amongst the most commonly discussed issues in the questionnaire responses, it was talked about in detail during the interviews (I.SMT-F and I.TEACHER-E). One interviewee (I.SMT-F) said that no one realises the urgency of cases in which children need immediate help, as these children still have to undergo the same statementing process:

> When you really need help and it is urgent help, that urgency is not recognised by anyone. Because the child still needs to go through the same process of the psychological report, then the statementing, which can take lots and lots of time. Because the psychologist needs to come and do the assessment, then send the report, this takes months and months because, although the head of school presses the issue so that the process is quickened, I'm afraid that nothing is being done when the case is extremely urgent.

Such an issue, also identified as an organisational barrier in the NIEF (2019), renders the system very ineffective, as autistic students as well as other students with particular needs will lose precious help, while educators and peers will also suffer from the consequences. In respect to

this issue, it is interesting to observe that the diagnosis or rather the labels (Hodge, 2006), which we are required in order for a student to be eligible for services (Hodge, 2006; Kelly, 2005), are actually acting more as barriers themselves for these same services. This is because the wait for the diagnosis and then the statementing process is so long, during which time the child is losing much valuable support.

Three SMTs (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-D and I.SMT-I) also discussed the role of the teacher as an important factor in the effectiveness of an inclusive education system, as was also addressed in Section 2.3.1. One interviewee (I.SMT-C) insisted that teachers need continuous training:

> Teachers need to be trained regularly, and they need help when they enter the educational system. That means, if a teacher is in class, [we cannot pretend that since s/he graduated from university, then s/he does not need any more training]; five years pass, ten years pass, fifteen years pass, and their education remains the same as when they came out of university. That is, they need to continue learning.

Once again, the need for training has emerged here, with a number of SMTs further reinforcing their argument regarding the need for more training for teachers. This lack of training for teachers could be the reason why another interviewee (I.SMT-D) noted that 'teachers feel [only] slightly confident in their ability to support students with autism while parents are even less certain of teachers' confidence to teach their children with autism', strengthening the idea that training increases educators' confidence when working with autistic students (Segall & Campbell, 2012; Westling, 2010). Another interviewee (I.SMT-I) addressed the challenges faced by teachers:

> …today's class is different …catering to everyone's needs. But the teacher is not a robot. The teacher is human. Even when she has an LSE in class, she still has big challenges, let alone when we have cases of children who are still not statemented because the process takes [so] long, and she has to manage all the challenges, together with all the differences present in her class.

This comment complements the idea that educators are expected to work in inclusive environments without being given the necessary support (Horrocks et al., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013).

The role of the LSE, another key factor in a more effective inclusive system of education, also requires more attention. The issue of the LSE was not the most frequently discussed in the questionnaire responses; however, it was considered extensively in the interviews. Two SMTs argued that the provision of an LSE is not being managed efficiently, noting that certain students receive shared LSE support even if their needs require full support. One interviewee (I.SMT-K) explained: 'I do understand that not all learners within the autism spectrum are entitled to one-to-one, but then there are learners who fall within the spectrum

whose behavioural issues render them unable to be educated if their behaviour is not restrained'. Another interviewee (I.SMT-I) expressed concern about how autistic students who have shared LSE support often end up with no support at all. This is a result of new regulations, which stipulate that students who need one-to-one support are never to be left without support; therefore, when these students' LSEs are absent, other LSEs in the school who support their students on a shared basis must leave their students and support the students who are entitled to one-to-one support. Students with shared support are very disturbed by this situation, which unfortunately is not a rarity:

> Apart from that, this is not a one-off. Due to the new agreement with the MUT, teacher training is being held within school hours, so sometimes you have think tanks. Sometimes, someone is sick. Sometimes, there is a CoPE session, and sometimes, there's someone with special leave. Because everyone has things that crop up. So, most often, those who are shared leave their students. In the school, we have more than one student on the spectrum, and they remain without [an] LSE. And what do the LSEs tell you? He was lost. He spent a whole day lost. Now, did they manage [or] did they not? But, here we are talking about quality education. Not the issue of whether they managed or not. (I.SMT-I)

One teacher (I.TEACHER-J) also discussed this in relation to an experience during the academic year, where an autistic child in the class was assigned an LSE who was pregnant and taking sick leave to avoid the various contagious illnesses amongst the students. The replacement LSEs being sent were also pregnant and thus, once again, were taking sick leave. The consequence of all this was that the child was often left without the support of an LSE (I.TEACHER-J). This teacher closed the argument by saying that 'it's not true that whoever needs this service is receiving it' (I.TEACHER-J). This important issue was not discussed in the literature; however, the NIEF (2019) identified the lack of LSEs as one of the organisational barriers in the inclusive system of education, which could be a possible reason for situations similar to the one described here. It is evident from this research that it is a major concern in the Maltese education system, and a major influence on the effectiveness of the inclusive system of education in Malta.

Another important issue raised in the questionnaires was that of the curricula, which, according to educators, is far too academic and, thus, not autism-friendly. This issue was once again discussed during the interviews, mainly by teachers and LSEs rather than SMTs. This is understandable since such an issue would be much more observable to an educator working closely with the children than to an SMT, who spends most of his or her time working in the office. Teachers and LSEs claimed that the curricula are not autism-friendly (I.TEACHER-A and I.TEACHER-H), focus heavily on academic and lack hands-on activities (I.TEACHER-K and I.LSE I). One teacher (I.TEACHER-H) stated that 'it is a system where everything goes

around examinations', and although 'there were changes lately, these were all just cosmetic'. Another teacher (I.TEACHER-K) added that the textbooks used in a mainstream class are not adequate for the needs of an autistic child: 'We have inclusion but we are still using the system we used before we had inclusion. Now, inclusion has been there for quite a while, let's say it, but nothing has changed in the syllabus or the education system to include these children. You have to see how to include them'. In relation to this, one LSE (I.LSE-E) mentioned the importance of modified teaching for the students who need such help. This issue of curricula was another concern very relevant for the Maltese education system, but which was not discussed in the literature review. It was, nevertheless, identified as one of the areas for improvement by the EASNIE (2014) in the audit report, since according to the report, the Maltese education system is still very competitive.

Another point discussed by one particular LSE (I.LSE-E) was that of peer preparation. This issue was also raised briefly in the questionnaire, though it was not one of the most commonly noted. This LSE talked about the importance of peer preparation, so that classroom peers are aware of the autistic child's difficulties related to autism and would then be more understanding and tolerant. Indeed, there tends to be lack of awareness and understanding amongst students which teachers find difficult to deal with and overcome (Lindsay et al., 2013). However, the LSE insisted that, in his/her experience, children are most often very inclusive and understanding towards autistic children, but some peer preparation would further enhance good relationships (I.LSE-E). The LSE also suggested that teachers be given training on how to conduct effective peer preparation (I.LSE-E) since this practice is not common in local schools.

One LSE (I.LSE-H) also raised a point about the importance of early screening for autism. This issue seems to be especially important to early childhood teachers (referred to as kinder teachers in local settings). This is because most children start attending school while still undiagnosed, and it is often kinder teachers who must detect and cope with the early signs of autism without any help from an LSE (Johnson, 2016). This LSE specifically pointed out that early screening would lead to earlier help (I.LSE-H), thus facilitating more improvement in the child and better educational outcomes (Gordon, 2009; Hart & More, 2013). Again, such opinions support the idea of early diagnosis and early intervention, but tend to dismiss considerations of the effects of these on the child, as was discussed in the literature review Section 2.1.4 (Fogel & Nelson, 1983; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014, 2018; Myers & Johnson, 2007; Russell, 2016; Stone et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2011).

5.4 Summary

This chapter has presented the analysis of the data obtained for RQs 1 and 2. It included several verbatim statements taken from both the questionnaires and the interviews to support the arguments put forward in the analysis. Moreover, it referenced various literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3 to further support the discussion of findings, as well as presented frequent critical discussions to provoke more profound thinking about the issues discussed.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the knowledge educators have about autism and the various attitudes amongst educators in regard to autism, as well as the reasons behind their attitudes, and discussed these in view of the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Moreover, this chapter has also presented the educators' opinions about the effectiveness of the Maltese education system and the reasons supporting their opinions, which were discussed in respect to the literature review.

The key findings show that educators seem to have a biomedical view of a definition of autism. Their initial feelings, upon being informed that they would be working with autistic students, were generally negative. SMTs also reported that their actual experience of working with an autistic child was negative. Although LSEs also reported negative experiences in this regard, more positive experiences were reported. Moreover, many teachers and LSEs believe that autistic children can be successful. On the other hand, educators who had never worked with an autistic child showed negative feelings towards the thought of having to do so. The majority of educators expressed mixed feelings about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, with a substantial number of them indicating that they believe that such a decision depends on the severity or nature of the particular case. In addition, educators' reactions to the current inclusive system of education were mostly negative, indicating deficiencies in the system, for which a variety of reasons were enumerated.

The following chapter will now present and discuss the data obtained for RQs 3 and 4.

Chapter 6

Research Findings and Analysis

Part 2

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is a continuation to the previous chapter and presents the second part (concerning RQ3 and RQ4) of the analysis of the data obtained in this study, in relation to the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs when working with autistic students in mainstream state primary schools during the 2018–2019 scholastic year. As was done in the first part of the analysis in Chapter 5, this chapter also includes verbatim statements where necessary, together with references to the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

As a continuation of the previous chapter, the findings are presented and analysed by research question; thus, I will present the research questions proposed for this research, and for each research question, I will discuss the questions and findings pertaining to it, whether they were questions from the questionnaire or the interview. This is a method for analysing qualitative data, as was discussed in detail in the Methodology chapter Section 4.5 (Akinyoade, 2013; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Park, 2016). The same procedure for presenting and analysing the data explained in the introduction of Chapter 5 will also be used in this chapter. Moreover, the coding system used in Chapter 5 is also used in this chapter.

6.2 Research Question 3

What do SMT members, teachers and LSEs think about the current resources, training and support available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools?

The participants were asked various questions about the resources, training and support they currently have, which led to answering this research question (See Appendices A, B, C and D for the questionnaire and interview questions).

6.2.1 Resources and services.

In Q7, participants were asked about what resources and/or services are currently available to them (Table 15). The majority of the participants answered this question; however, 1 SMT, 7 teachers and 2 LSEs did not give a reply, while 3 teachers gave an irrelevant answer. As the table shows, the different groups of participants seemed to be aware of or give more importance to different resources and/or services. Indeed, the SMTs acknowledged the importance of the resource centre most, followed by the services of the INCO and the ASST. Resource centres were very briefly referred to in the literature review Section 2.2.4, where it was noted that educators tend to encourage parents to send their children to resource centres for the whole week or to divide the week between resource centres and mainstream school (Tanti

Burlo', 2010). Indeed, receiving the services of the resource centres in Malta usually means that the child spends a minimum of one day a week at the resource centre instead of mainstream school, though the resource centres' services could also include the provision of support to mainstream schools in regard to resources, guidance and advice. While the resource centre was also the most popular amongst the teachers, quite a number of teachers acknowledged that they either are unaware of the resources and/or services available, or they are unavailable. The services of the LSE in class seemed to be the most popular amongst teachers, followed by those of the speech therapist and occupational therapist. As was argued earlier, this importance given to the job of LSEs could be because teachers truly appreciate the work done by LSEs; however, it could also indicate that teachers view the LSE as the one whose job is to work with the autistic child, thus saving them from the responsibility the autistic child would put on them, as was already discussed in Q4ai and Q4aiii.

As for the LSEs, the services of the speech therapist were the most popular with them, followed by those of the resource centre, occupational therapy and early intervention. One significant comment here was that of a particular SMT (K.S1) who stated that 'on paper we can avail ourselves of a lot of services [but] in practice the system is not coping'. In addition to noting these mentioned services, few educators made reference to resources being available. There did not seem to be many resources available, as the few LSEs who made reference to resources said that the only resources available are those done by the LSEs themselves. A number of educators commented on this. One LSE (D.L1) stated:

> …unfortunately, resources/services are very limited. The LSE has to spend hours upon hours at home preparing material. The [resource centre] has resources but they have to be taken back every 15 days. They have to be replaced during school hours so the students will have to have a replacement LSE until [the LSE goes] to [the resource centre] and come[s] back.

Moreover, another educator (I.S2) commented that, in order to have a space in his/her respective school where students can calm down, [the administration staff] had to do 'a lot of fundraising', claiming that the school does not receive adequate financial resources to buy necessary resources. This is in line with the beliefs of Frederickson et al. (2010) and Berzina (2010), who claimed that increased funding is an important resource in the teaching of autistic children. Lack of funding was similarly referred to as one organisational barrier, in relation to the buying of assistive devices needed in inclusive settings, in the NIEF (2019). One should note here that, as Table 15 shows, there might be more resources and services available that have not been mentioned by many educators. The reasons for this could be that the educators either do not know about them, or the resources/services are so inefficient, limited or difficult to gain access

to that educators do not rely on them as available resources/services, as suggested by the participants in some of their comments.

Table 15: *Resources and Services Currently Available to Educators*

Q7: What are the resources and/or services currently available to help educators work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
INCO/Inclusion support teacher	9	4	3
ASST	8	3	7
Nurture class	3	0	0
ABA	1	1	1
Speech therapist	5	12	20
Early intervention	5	6	10
Resource centre	10	17	17
Psychologist	5	2	2
LSE provision	6	13	0
School resources bought by the head of school	1	0	1
Inspire	2	5	8
Clicker 7	0	1	2
AAC	0	0	1
ICT	0	1	2
PECS	0	0	2
Visuals and flashcards/Laptop to produce visuals	0	6	6
Games	0	0	2
Occupational therapy	3	11	14
Online sites/courses and talks/ Lecture notes	0	5	5
Very few	0	6	3
None/Not aware of any/I don't know	0	16	5
Make do with what we have/ Only those done by LSEs or teachers themselves/Dedication of teachers/LSEs	1	6	10
No extra funding	1	0	0
Support services/Professionals from the education department	1	2	0
Human resources	1	3	0
Resources given by Access to Communication and Technology Unit (ACTU)/ Tablet	2	3	3
PE equipment	0	1	0
Boardmaker	0	1	0
Parents' acceptance of autism	0	1	0

Psychosocial team/Social workers	2	1	0
Counsellor/Guidance teacher	1	1	0
Psychiatric unit	1	0	0
Specialised classroom/Multisensory rooms	1	1	2
Asking for information/advice from the SMT, parents, professionals/colleagues	0	1	1
Psychological reports/IEP/Input by transdisciplinary team	0	3	1
Several are available	0	1	2
Sensory resources	0	2	3
Courses/Training	0	1	0
Literacy centre	0	0	1
Personal experience	0	0	1
IWB	0	0	1
Structure and routine	0	0	1
Pupils themselves	0	0	1
Therapists (some of whom do not know how to handle certain situations)	0	0	1
No reply	1	7	2
Irrelevant answer	0	3	0

As the participants seemed to be more aware of or interested in services rather than the resources available, an interview question was planned in order to delve deeper into their opinions or thoughts about the currently available services. Thus, IQ4 asked the participants: ‘What needs to be improved with the currently provided services?’ The question elicited a wide range of responses.

The most common aspect of the services which, they felt, needs improvement is the frequency of service (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-B, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-I, I.TEACHER-J, I.LSE-A, I.LSE-I and I.LSE-K), which includes speech therapy, occupational therapy, early intervention and the services of the psychologist, INCO, ACTU and ASST teacher. One SMT (I.SMT-E) noted that this is only fair ‘[for the parents who cannot afford financially] to pay for extra private sessions with therapists’. After all, as another SMT (I.SMT-A) stated:

> Why do parents need to search for other services outside of school to compensate for the lack of service given at schools?... Why does the school, if we are providing a service to the ‘normal child’, why shouldn’t there be the same care for these children? That they need not search for other services outside the school? Spending lots and lots of money?

SMTs (I.SMT-E and I.SMT-F) stressed that they wanted more human resources, such as psychologists and counsellors, to improve the frequency of services. This issue of frequency was not something I encountered in the literature; however, it was highly emphasised by educators, as could indeed be noted from the number of educators who made reference to it. Moreover, the issue of parents who refer to the private sector for services, even though this costs a lot of money, was also mentioned earlier (IQ1), where it was argued that parents refer to private psychologists to get their children statemented in order to be able to access services sooner. In fact, this is not a new issue in Malta, as it has also been confirmed by parents of disabled children who make use of these services, with one noting that, although the service of the early intervention is brilliant, receiving it once every fortnight is not enough (Anonymous, 2019).

Other interviewees (I.SMT-C, I.TEACHER-E, I.LSE-E and I.LSE-I) suggested that all services mentioned should be provided on the school premises, confirming the beliefs of Glashan et al. (2004) and Morewood et al. (2011) that therapeutic services should be provided on school premises. An interviewee (I.SMT-C) stated that '[the speech therapist comes on the school premises but most of the other services, as far as I know, do not come to school, or you need to ask them to come and they come almost because you filed a report, not because it is part of their timetable'. Another interviewee (I.LSE-E) claimed that such an improvement would provide numerous benefits to the child, including not wasting time in travelling, making sure that appointments are not missed as they are part of the school timetable and ensuring that the LSE is always given a handover from the occupational therapist (OT) and can work on the same tasks at school. Another interviewee (I.LSE-I) added that this also provides a sense of continuity to the child. One interviewee (I.TEACHER-E) noted that this would reduce the possibilities of the child having his or her routine disturbed, thus minimising possible challenging behaviours. It is worth noting here what two interviewees (I.LSE-E and I-TEACHER-J) pointed out: having the services provided on school premises and allowing educators to have a handover for continuation of tasks is beneficial, as sometimes parents may forget or are not available to take the child for the appointment (I.LSE-E) or may not be willing to continue the tasks given at home (for one reason or another) (I.TEACHER-J). Such an improvement would not only ease the stresses of students, parents and educators, but would also facilitate more teamwork amongst the professionals.

Indeed, teamwork amongst professionals was considered by some interviewees (I.SMT-C and I.SMT-E) to be one of the most important improvements that should take place in the provision of services, which corroborates one of the suggestions in the PIES (2019) about

having co-operative teaching and learning within a team approach. The interviewees explained that a multidisciplinary team should be set up in schools, with one interviewee (I.SMT-E) noting: ‘How good is it that in a school you have a team that you can work with, say [the therapist] is based in the college serving in three schools… you have a speech and language therapist (SLT), OT, clinical psychologist, educational psychologist, behaviour management… we had one previously yes… social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) teacher’. Also, as another interviewee (I.SMT-C) explained, currently, all professionals work with the child individually with no feedback amongst them. The interviewee emphasised that professionals need to work in a team and discuss feedback with the class teacher and the SMT, and amongst each other. This confirms what Grenier and Yeaton (2011) and Majoko (2016) suggested, that collaboration amongst professionals eases the inclusion of autistic students. Collaboration between therapists is also considered an important source of support by educators, as was discussed in Section 3.4 (Glashan et al., 2004; Yan et al., 2015).

Other interviewees (I.SMT-I and I.SMT-K) mentioned the importance of professionals giving a handover to the class teacher and LSE that consists of what the professional is currently working on with the child, as was also briefly mentioned previously by I.LSE-E. Moreover, one interviewee (I.SMT-K) insisted on the importance of establishing national assessment criteria for autistic students (and other disabilities) as well as a national record-keeping system that maintains a record of what the child has achieved and is currently working on and his/her targets. Such a system, which does not currently exist, would facilitate the handover if the child moves from one school to another. There is no formal handover process currently in place. The same interviewee (I.SMT-K) also noted that psychological reports are currently not reader-friendly and are intelligible only to those who specialise in psychology, making it very difficult for an educator to understand the child’s difficulties in educational terms. For this reason, having the child’s report in his/her file does not serve as a handover because the report itself is indecipherable. This issue was not encountered in the literature, and was also not identified by many participants of this research; however, this particular educator placed significant emphasis on the issue.

Another interviewee (I.SMT-D) mentioned the fact that parents have to choose between services; for example, if the child attends Inspire (an NGO providing services to disabled children outside of school), s/he cannot receive the services of the early intervention teacher or the ASST teacher. The interviewee questioned why parents are expected to choose between services instead of encouraging them to benefit from all available services. Again, this issue surfaced in this study in the context of the Maltese educational system, but does not seem to be

a concern in international literature. However, it is worth giving significant attention to this as it prevents autistic children from obtaining all available services.

Another interviewee (I.SMT-C) pointed out that parents should be more involved in the education of their children. Parental input should be valued because no one knows the child better than the parents themselves, and their knowledge and observations can be very useful for educators. This again confirms the suggestion of Stanviloff (1996) that parents can provide educators with valuable information about their child. Unfortunately, as the situation now stands, most parents have very little involvement in their child's school life, and feedback is mainly given on parents' days, during other meetings held for all parents and during the two IEP meetings held during the year. It is, in fact, up to the parents to solicit educators for feedback. Such input should not be given solely on parents' days and at other meetings, but ought to be continuous throughout the year. The interviewee argued that 'it shouldn't be that parents ask teachers and LSEs for feedback; the system should [provide this to] the parents regularly' (I.SMT-C). This goes against the argument put forward by a number of educators, discussed in respect to Q6, where it was argued that parents have a lot of say in their child's education. Moreover, this comment emphasises the arguments put forward by Gillman et al. (2000) where they stated that diagnosis of autism tends to disempower parents, and the knowledge they have of their child tends to be rejected and disregarded (see Section 2.3.2), which they condemn.

One interviewee (I.SMT-K) noted another deficit in the services provided: many parents are obsessed with having their child attend mainstream schooling on a full-time basis, receiving no services at all from a resource centre and where the child is largely expected to follow the exact same curriculum. According to this interviewee (I.SMT-K), by doing so, 'we are not giving learners with ASD a good service'. The interviewee added that this is also the case for children whose autism is very severe. This argument highlights very clearly what was discussed earlier in Q7, in regard to resource centres, and strongly confirms the beliefs of Tanti Burlo' (2010) about the growing trend amongst educators to encourage parents to send their child to resource centres.

Another point explored in the interviews was that parents should be made more aware of the services available for the needs of their children (I.TEACHER-H and I.LSE-A), with one interviewee (I.TEACHER-H) insisting that it should be the role of the school to guide parents about these services. For this reason, educators need to also be aware of the available services, in order to be able to guide parents in this respect, as was suggested by Campbell et al. (2007). The interviewee (I.TEACHER-H) further commented that the services offered should be made

easily accessible to parents, in the sense that they should be provided frequently and at a time and place convenient for them, as the easier it is for parents to access them, the greater is the probability of offering them to their children. Such a suggestion favours many parents of autistic children (and other disabilities), most of whom have to take a day off work to take their children for therapy appointments, which are only available during the morning (Anonymous, 2019). The other interviewee (I.LSE-A) explained the importance of parents being aware of the services available, commenting that it is, most of the time, the parents who have to apply for services, especially if their child does not have severe autism or has passive behaviour. This is because, in such instances, the child will not be bothering educators and peers in class, and thus, as far as the school is concerned, they do not feel the need to offer assistance or support services. This will lead to the child not benefitting from the services available, according to I.LSE-A. Another interviewee (I.LSE-H) specified the need for services to be more adapted to the particular case, instead of professionals having checklists of what skills children should have obtained by a certain stage. This is because every child has unique needs. These issues were not uncovered in the literature, but there seemed to be strong opinions about them amongst Maltese educators.

Other interviewees did not clearly identify improvements to be done to the currently available services but commented on what could be provided by or within the school to improve the life of autistic students and their educators. For example, a teacher (I.TEACHER-E) commented that educators could do with more information on autism to help them deal with the everyday challenges of the condition, while also referring to the benefits of having opportunities to share experiences with colleagues and learn from each other. In fact, training was amongst the most discussed issues in this research, as has been seen already and as will be further discussed in upcoming questions, and it is believed to help educators make their schools more inclusive (Gonzales-Gil et al., 2013). Another interviewee (I.TEACHER-A) identified the need to provide some space within the school where students can release their stress and tension.

6.2.2 Training.

Q9 in the questionnaire asked the participants about the training they had previously received to be able to work with autistic children (Table 16). All participants answered this question, except 1 SMT and 5 teachers. As for the SMTs, answers to this question varied, but most often consisted of noting credits they had earned at university during their undergraduate degree, master’s degree or post-graduate diploma, PD sessions or in-school training, or some general sessions or voluntary courses they had attended. PD sessions and in-school training

were what many of the teachers had received as training, while even more teachers stated that they received no training at all. One teacher (A.T7) revealed that they 'hardly ever heard the word autism during [their] training at university during the 80s'. As for the LSEs, the absolute majority received their training through credits during their diploma studies in Facilitating Inclusive Education, specifically organised for LSEs, with one (D.L2) noting that this training 'has nothing to do with when you experience working with students with autism'. These findings corroborate the findings of Galea (2018) that teachers stated that they were inadequately prepared for inclusion during their pre-service training. Complementary to this, PIES (2019) also suggested that educators should be prepared for inclusive education by providing courses which include training specifically focused on inclusive education.

Table 16: *Autism Training Received by Educators*

Q9: What training have you received until now to work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Credits during the B.Ed/ PGCE course/Postgraduate diploma/Masters	5	6	1
Credits during the diploma studies in Facilitating Inclusive Education/Short course at university/Course for Kindergarten Educators (KGEs)/Certificate course/Doing degree in Inclusive Education	0	5	45
In-service courses /Courses	2	9	8
ABA crash course	1	0	2
PD sessions/In-school training	5	18	7
Workshops with the speech and language department/ Workshops	0	1	1
Numicon course	0	0	2
Alternative and augmentative communication	0	0	1
General sessions/Seminars/ Attended voluntary courses	5	4	4
Half-hour talks/Short sessions	0	2	2
Few talks but no proper training/One day crash course	4	9	0
Not much/Bare minimum	2	7	1

None	3	24	3
Personal reading from books and online	2	7	2
SCERTS	1	2	0
Personal experience from working with these students/from working at a resource centre	2	3	6
Job shadowing experience abroad	1	0	0
Several training sessions but never enough	0	1	0
Asking support teachers	0	0	1
No reply	1	5	0

Q10 then asked the participants whether this training addressed all issues related to dealing with autistic students (Table 17). A significant number of participants (4 SMTs, 18 teachers and 4 LSEs) did not answer this question. A reason for this could be that the educators who had not received any training at all were not in a position to say whether the training addressed all issues or not. The majority of the SMTs stated that this training did not address all issues. Almost half of the teachers also said that the training did not address all issues, while a good number indicated that they did not know. Again, almost half the LSEs said that the training did not address all issues, while almost one-fourth of them indicated *Both*. Very few educators indicated that the training they had received addressed all issues concerned with autism, as one participant (I.S2) stated that 'you cannot possibly get trained in a one-off session'. This indicates that the training available to educators is not adequate.

Table 17: *Issues Addressed in Training for Educators*

Q.10: Do you feel this training addressed all issues related to dealing with autistic students?			
	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Yes	1	6	9
No	15	39	25
Both	3	9	14
I don't know	2	15	8
No reply	4	18	4

6.2.3 Support.

Q12 asked the participants about the support they currently receive to help them deal with autistic students (Table 18). All participants answered this question, apart from 1 SMT, 4 teachers and 1 LSE. In all of the three groups of participants, the majority of the answers were

negative, with *No* being the most common, followed by *Both* and *I don't know*. This indicates that educators are not satisfied with the support they currently receive.

Table 18: *Educators' Opinions about the Support They Currently Receive*

Q12: Do you think educators currently receive adequate support to help them work with autistic students?			
	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Yes	2	3	11
No	18	44	26
Both	4	18	12
I don't know	0	18	10
No reply	1	4	1

Q13 then investigated what type of support educators are actually receiving (Table 19). All participants answered this question except 1 SMT and 7 LSEs. From the table, one can see that educators mentioned various types of support; however, it appears that SMTs rely on the support of the INCO most, as this was the most common reply amongst the SMTs. As for the teachers, they seem to rely more on the support of the LSE, followed by that of the early intervention teacher and the services of the resource centres. Teachers' reliance on the support of the LSEs was also seen in the literature discussed, as Rose (2001) and Wilson et al. (2002) noted that teachers appreciate the help of the LSEs. On the other hand, LSEs seem to rely on the support they receive from the SMT and colleagues. Again, the literature has clearly shown how important the support of SMTs is to educators, with Stansbury and Zimmermann (2000) claiming that school leaders play an important part in educators' experience of inclusion, as they can provide educators with various types of support (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; DoE, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000; Yan et al., 2015). It is interesting to note that the trend in the replies from the three groups of participants varied significantly. Also noteworthy is the fact that, in all the groups, there were a number of educators who indicated that they receive very little or no support at all. Indeed, the comments from certain participants indicate that, although the majority of educators mentioned some kind of support they receive, they are still not satisfied with it. One SMT (I.S1) commented: 'The only concrete support is when particular children are statemented'. A teacher (K.T3) pointed out the artificiality of certain professionals' visits in class who 'only visit for a few minutes'. Two LSEs (I.L2, I.L3) supported this, further arguing that professionals 'suggest strategies which help or sometimes do not help at all' (I.L2) because 'they don't understand [the educators'] reality [at school]. They suggest strategies that at times do not help at all and [educators] feel more frustrated rather than helped/supported' (I.L3). This is very worrying,

especially because teachers need additional support from specialists (Glashan et al., 2004) and the literature has shown that this kind of support is in fact required more often than any other type of support (Yan et al., 2015). Therefore, educators are definitely not receiving the support they need.

Table 19: *Support Currently Received by Educators*

Q13: What support do educators currently receive from the school or education department to help them work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
Support from the INCO	9	6	9
Support from SMTs/colleagues	0	9	11
Support from the ASST	4	2	6
Psychosocial team	2	0	0
Support from the OT	2	2	6
Support from the speech therapist	3	4	7
Support of a psychologist	2	4	1
Support of LSE	1	18	0
Support from early intervention teacher	3	12	4
IfE courses	1	0	0
Voluntary courses	1	0	0
Resources	0	2	3
Nurture class/Guidance teacher/Counsellor/Social workers	2	1	3
Resource centres	3	12	7
Services offered do not comply with the demand for them	0	0	1
Sharing of ideas from colleagues	1	0	1
Seminars/PD sessions/ Information sessions/In-service courses	3	10	0
Support from professionals/ Teachers who work specifically with them	0	3	4
I don't know/Never asked for additional support	0	4	3
IEP meetings/Psychological report	0	3	2
None/Bare minimum/Not enough/Very little	6	11	14
Teachers find it difficult to deal with students	0	1	0

Parents' acceptance of autism/Support from parents	0	2	0
Information about students through medical reports and parents	0	1	0
Consultancy and advice	1	0	0
They skip waiting list for statementing board/ Children being statemented	2	0	0
Always found support whenever I asked for it	0	1	0
Inadequate support/LSEs are forced to work on their own	0	0	2
ABA	0	0	1
No reply	1	0	7

6.3 Research Question 4

What are the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic **children in mainstream primary schools?**

This research question investigated the perceived needs of all the educators concerned vis-à-vis resources and services, training and support. Various answers from the questionnaire (Q8, Q11 and Q14) and responses from the interview (IQ2, IQ3, IQ5 and IQ6) answered this question.

6.3.1 Resources and services.

Q8 asked the participants what resources and services educators need to help them work with autistic students (Table 20). One SMT, 13 teachers and 5 LSEs did not answer this question. As one can see from the table, educators mentioned various resources and services which they would like to have. However, there were a number of resources and services which were considered more desirable than others. As for the SMTs, the most desired resource appeared to be having specifically trained educators and skilled human resources. This was followed by having more training, again confirming the importance of training, as suggested by Gonzales-Gil et al. (2013). Also desired was support from colleagues and professionals working with the child. Again, this was an issue discussed in detail in the literature review, where it was emphasised that support from personnel helps educators to meet the requirements of inclusion and, thus, be able to implement inclusion practices (Lindsay et al., 2013; Messemer, 2010). Moreover, support from colleagues is important (Berzina, 2010; Gersten et al., 2001), as educators face various emotional challenges in inclusive classrooms, which result in fatigue

and a sense of isolation (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000), and thus might need personal and emotional support from colleagues, with whom they can share information and support each other (Berzina, 2010). Such support improves the well-being of educators and makes them feel less isolated (Stansbury & Zimmermann, 2000). The SMTs also expressed the desire for adequate settings for autistic students and spaces where they can calm down and release their energy, supporting what was also discussed in the literature about the important role the physical environment of the school plays in inclusive education (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Berzina (2010) stated that an adequate physical environment gives a sense of security to educators and encourages them to perform better, as it helps them feel more comfortable in their work environment.

The teachers seemed to desire multisensory resources most, though they also desire most of the same resources and services indicated by the SMTs, that is, adequate settings and spaces where students can calm down and release their energy, support from colleagues and professionals working with the child and more training, confirming what was discussed in the literature. Multisensory resources were also the most desired resources amongst the LSEs, followed by adequate settings and spaces where autistic students can calm down and release their energy. The need for more multisensory resources, together with the need for technology-related resources, was also suggested by Lindsay et al. (2013).

As one can see, most resources and/or services mentioned here link back to what was discussed in Q5 (RQ1), Q6 and IQ1 (RQ2), where the discussion was based on the opinions of educators about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools (Q5) and their opinions about the effectiveness of the Maltese inclusive system of education (Q6 and IQ1). In fact, most of the desired resources and/or services discussed here were mentioned as lacking or inefficient in the previous discussions. Examples include the need for adequate settings and spaces where students can calm down and the need for multisensory resources, as it was argued earlier that mainstream environments are not ideal and schools are not well-equipped. Another example is the need for more support and more training; again, these were previously reported as being lacking. One last example is the need for more frequent and efficient services by professionals, which was also noted as being lacking in the previous discussions.

Various participants commented further on their needs, explaining why such needs are of utmost importance. Two SMTs (E.S2, I.S1) explained that skilled human resources 'should be willing to teach and at the same time learn from students with autism' (E.S2), while giving 'practical advice on particular cases' (I.S1) because, as the situation currently is, 'we are very limited in this area' (I.S1). Another participant (H.S1) stressed that educators need 'more hands-

on [training] and exposure to different needs' because, as another participant (D.L1) stated, 'training has never been presented'. Another participant (G.S1) emphasised the importance of services being more frequent and more efficient:

> The ASST team should visit students more frequently! We need fast efficient service when it comes to statementing of students for an LSE. Also, children with ASD should be given full-time 1–1 LSEs by the statementing panel – sometimes they do not, even if psychologist's report clearly identifies this!

The need for appropriate statementing was also highlighted by another participant (B.T1) who stated that 'children should be screened for autism before admission to Kinder 1 and statemented appropriately, not after half an hour session', as was also noted earlier in Q4ai. However, in addition to the previous discussion, this teacher also suggested that the statementing process might not be statementing children appropriately. Moreover, the importance of support services was emphasised, and participants (E.T1, E.T6) stressed that the services need to be 'within reach in a short time'. One participant (H.L1) asserted that these professionals should also 'be present during IEP [meetings]'.

The need for special settings or spaces where students can calm down and release their energy was also highly emphasised in many of the participants' comments. One LSE (D.L1) argued that 'a resource room in each school is a must, where everyone will find the resources needed', while also explaining the need for a multisensory room at each school pointing out that there is:

> …no multisensory room except at [the resource centre] which [they] don't agree with because [they] believe that students with autism need to be with class students, not placed in a room with other students with autism, because this leads to imitating bad behaviour.

This last comment is significant because it indirectly links back to what was claimed by Tanti Burlo' (2010): that educators tend to encourage parents to send their children to resource centres and that parents tend to be attracted to the variety of resources and equipment at the resource centres. In this case, however, this LSE was against autistic students attending resource centres and suggested that mainstream schools should have a multisensory room on the premises instead. Aligned with this argument, the PIES (2019) also suggested that specialised centres should ideally be within mainstream schools.

Table 20: *Resources and/or Services Needed by Educators*

Q8: Based on your experience and/or in speaking with your colleagues, what resources and/or services do educators need to help them work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total SMTs [out of 25]	Total Teachers [out of 87]	Total LSEs [out of 60]
In-school help	1	1	0
Team work	1	0	0
More funding to buy resources	1	1	0
Proper guidance on the buying of resources	2	0	0
More support for parents is needed to help acceptance of situation	1	0	1
More support/More support from colleagues and SMT/More frequent visits from support services/ Professional help given within a short time/Ongoing feedback from all professionals working with the child (in and out of school)	4	11	6
Special settings/Classroom tailored to the needs of these students/Special resources/Resource room/Sort of a nurture class for autistic children in each school/ Quiet/White room	4	5	11
ABA	1	0	1
Multisensory resources: visual, tactile, manipulatives, toys, audio	2	27	18
Support and training for parents	1	0	0
Spaces where students can calm down/release their energy/Resources to help children calm down/ Resources similar to those at resource centre/Multisensory room	3	12	12
More hands-on training from professionals	1	2	1
Depends on severity of autism/IEP/interests of child	0	2	0
Speech and language services	2	4	4
Sensory and motor services	0	1	1
Early intervention	3	0	3
Social stories	0	0	1

AAC/Communication aids	0	0	5
Information and Communication Technology (ICT)/Apps/games/Computer software	0	5	4
PECS	0	0	3
ASST/More help from ASST	2	1	3
More individual sessions	0	1	0
Therapy tools	0	1	0
Sensory tools	0	2	1
More time to dedicate to these students	0	1	0
One-to-one support/LSEs	1	5	0
Specifically trained educators/Skilled human resources	7	6	2
Adequate class/school environment	0	3	0
Funds allocated to school according to number and not to needs	1	0	0
Fidget set/Calming products	0	1	1
More training/seminars	5	16	3
Training on how to use resources	0	0	1
Special kits about different subjects	0	0	1
OT	2	1	3
Support from parents	0	1	0
Children should be statemented before entering Kinder 1	0	1	0
Resource centres/More time at a resource centre	2	2	3
Routine/Structured timetable	0	2	1
Social and recreational services	0	1	0
Family support and respite services	0	1	0
Don’t know	0	5	1
Behavioural consultant	0	1	0
Patience	0	1	0
More hands-on activities	0	1	1
Conventions	0	1	0
Inspire	0	1	2
Fewer students in class	0	1	0
More time for LSE and teacher to prepare together	0	1	0
Dedication and love	0	0	1
Warning of change	0	0	1

School psychologist	0	0	1
I don't need advice from those who don't know the child	0	0	1
All services are important	0	0	1
More help/support from school and education department	0	0	1
Practical training	0	0	2
Some time out for myself	0	0	1
Peer preparation	0	0	1
Adapted work	0	0	1
Experience by working with them	0	0	1
Time out	0	0	0
No reply	1	13	5

IQ2 and IQ3 were designed to investigate these needs further. IQ2 asked the participants: 'What resources do you need that you currently do not have to help you teach autistic students? Give reasons why these resources are important'. There was a variety of responses to this question, some of which supported what was found in the questionnaires, while others provided new insights about the needed resources.

As was suggested in the questionnaires, one of the most important resources that educators felt is much needed in mainstream schools is the multisensory room (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-D, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-F, I.SMT-I, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-I, I.LSE-A and I.LSE-I). The interviewees affirmed that the multisensory room is missing from the education system, with one of them (I.SMT-F) insisting: 'I believe in the importance of a quiet room or a room equipped with a type of furniture, maybe a multisensory room or something similar, that stimulates [or] calms down the student and helps him concentrate more'. Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) also emphasised that:

> What is certain is that every school should have at least a room for [time out of the classroom]. I am not expecting that it will be state of the art as a sensory room. But nowadays with some money, even buying a light bulb… with 30 euros you can buy a light bulb which gives a feeling of relaxation to the student. Some foam, we are not talking about out-of-this-world things. Obviously, specialised places should have this equipment… but I am not expecting… but you find that many schools do not even have this bare minimum.

The importance of such a room was underscored by another interviewee (I.SMT-C), who stated that:

> …without this room, generally the teacher effectively sends the LSE away and tells her, 'Take him or take her somewhere' and generally they end up running around [on] the ground[s], as usual, until he calms down, whatever… I think if

> there is a specific room, he will be able to continue learning in this room until he can return to the 'normal' class.

The importance of a multisensory room did not surface in the literature, though it was very strongly argued for in this research. The literature did, however, discuss the importance of having an adequate physical school environment, with spaces where students can calm down, as was already discussed in IQ1.

It would appear, however, that creating a multisensory room in schools is not as easy as it seems. Indeed, various SMTs had considered creating such a room in their schools, only to be met by a number of obstacles. Two interviewees (I.SMT-C and I.SMT-E) noted that space always poses a problem, with one interviewee (I.SMT-C) stating that there is inadequate space for normal classes, let alone for an extra room to be converted into a multisensory room. This problem was raised by another interviewee (I.SMT-E) who claimed that the problem of creating a multisensory room is always:

> …a difficulty of space… like the room… where are we going to get a room from? Because we have the Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) room, we have the art room, we have the literacy room, and you're like, I don't know why, you ask am I going to do another room? For these children? I don't know... At times that's what I say, yes. We look at it as an extra… We say now [the LSE] will take him for a walk in the corridor… or out on the grounds playing with a ball. That's the thought… Sort of you say… sort of you manage without it, let's put it like that.

The interviewee (I.SMT-E) also added:

> …sort of we are preferring to move the school and all the children forward, the ones we call common, the normal, normal within inverted commas, we cater for them, and sometimes for the children that need the most, we are sort of putting aside the project we have in mind, and say someday we will do that room.

Another SMT (I.SMT-I) explored this further, opening up about efforts to create a multisensory room at his/her school. The interviewee explained that the school's SMT felt the room was necessary since they were experiencing many episodes of meltdowns from one particular student, who, as a result, used to spend most of his school day sitting in the hallway. S/he explained that, when explaining their wishes to their superiors, they referred to the room as a multisensory room, but 'as soon as the word *multisensory* was mentioned, the doors started closing, because [according to the superiors] a multisensory room should only be found at a resource centre'. Although this school still managed to create a room for students to relax and calm down, the interviewee further explained that the resources needed for such a room are very expensive: 'Anything that has to do with autism, with sensory [issues], things are very expensive'. The school therefore sought donations from parents and conducted fundraising to be able to buy the necessary resources. The interviewee asked: 'So the resources, from the

centre, what's coming to us? Is there a need to fundraise for these things? If it is quality education for all? For every child? Because if it is for every child, it's for all'.

In respect to this issue, various educators (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I, I.SMT-K and I.TEACHER-H), especially SMTs, also agreed that additional funding is important for mainstream schools, enabling them to invest in more resources for autistic students. Indeed, as was discussed in the literature, Frederickson et al. (2010) stressed the need for increased funding to help autistic students because a lack of it might easily result in shortages of education assistants, resources and necessary equipment, ultimately risking missing out on the opportunity of effective inclusion. On the other hand, two SMTs (I.SMT-A and I.SMT-K) said that they actually had received funds. In fact, one interviewee (I.SMT-A) said that tangible resources are not a real problem for him/her because s/he always manages to get the funds to buy them. Another SMT (I.SMT-K) said that s/he cannot really complain about the amount of funding the school receives because, although it is never enough, s/he still manages to buy necessary materials. This SMT argued that the issue should instead be a matter of using the funds wisely, as it is understandable that the government has a limited budget it can offer to schools: 'material resources, we are being given funds [for]. I cannot say that we aren't being given [funds]. But you have to be very wise in spending them. Obviously, we are never given enough, but there's never enough'. The same SMT therefore identified the need for SMTs to receive guidance and advice concerning the wise use of funds. Another SMT (I.SMT-I) emphasised the need for financial help to provide the necessary resources to autistic students, thus increasing their quality of education, as stated above. A teacher (I.TEACHER-H) also commented on this, claiming that it is the responsibility of the government to provide enough funding for schools, so that school administrators can make sure that the educators in their respective schools have the necessary resources.

Some interviewees (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E and I.SMT-K) also referred to the fact that schools tend to have inadequate environments. The need for adequate environments in mainstream schools was also referred to by educators from the three groups in the questionnaires. This supports the emphasis on the importance of an environment which is fully accessible to all in the PIES (2019). It was also discussed further that many schools do not have space for a multisensory room (I.SMT-C and I.SMT-E), with one SMT (I.SMT-C) noting that they do not even have enough space for the normal classrooms. However, another interviewee (I.SMT-K) explained that it is not only a question of space but also a question of what to do with that space. Experience had taught this SMT that an adequate environment for autistic children helps all children. One needs to consider what colours are used and the type of furniture

and anticipate the amount of noise that will be in the classroom. With some thought and a little money, the SMT can create an adequate environment for all children, including those with autism: for example, a corner in the classroom covered with foam to help for calming down, desks with partitions to help with individual work and tennis balls on iron-framed chair legs to reduce noise (I.SMT-K). Moreover, considering the difficulties encountered in creating a multisensory room in each school, it would make sense that there is, at least, some sort of space in or out of the class where the students can go and calm down whenever they feel the need (I.TEACHER-A and I.TEACHER-E). However, this can only be done if schools have more spacious classrooms, which is definitely an issue (I.TEACHER-A). One LSE (I.LSE-A) explained that, in their school, there was a tentative approach to create such a space but the only room available was the basement which was totally out of the way and one had to go outside to reach the room, so it was very impractical. The same LSE suggested that it would make more sense if such spaces are created within the same classroom the child attends with his/her peers, so as to remain in the same environment and avoid disturbance in the child's routine as much as possible. This issue of inadequate environments in schools is a serious concern because, as was noted previously and in the literature review, adequate physical environments in schools are very important in promoting or demoting the idea of inclusive education (Humphrey & Symes, 2011) because they provide educators with a sense of security and encouragement (Berzina, 2010).

Since autistic students learn differently from other students in mainstream schools, it is important for them to have the support of tangible and multisensory resources (I.SMT-C). This was also discussed in the questionnaires, confirming the importance of having tangible resources together with technology-related resources, as argued by Lindsay et al. (2013). A number of the educators (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-D, I.SMT-E, I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-I, I.LSE-A, I.LSE-E, I.LSE-I and I.LSE-K), especially teachers and LSEs, discussed the lack of such resources in their schools. One interviewee (I.SMT-D) mentioned a number of resources that s/he finds useful to have, including a laptop for those children who have problems with writing, software such as Clicker 7, a Chester mouse, Numicon shapes, flashcards and visuals and a kinetic sand and bubble mixture to serve as motivators for students. Two LSEs (I.LSE-E and I.LSE-K) stated that they do have many resources, whether they prepare them themselves, or whether they are bought by the head of school; however, they said that they find a lack of resources when it comes to social stories. One LSE (I.LSE-I) noted that LSEs prepare most of the resources themselves, requiring them to invest lots of their personal time and money, so therefore a colour printer would be good to

have at school, where LSEs can at least print the material they prepared at home, instead of also having to print it at home. This corroborates Westling et al.'s (2005) assertion that educators need printed and multimedia material to be able to function effectively. A teacher (I.TEACHER-I) confirmed that multisensory resources are seriously lacking in his/her school, requiring educators to buy their own resources for their class. Again, another teacher (I.TEACHER-A) noted that they have no resources whatsoever in their school, requiring parents to bring their own unique resources for their children to school. In respect to parents and resources, one teacher (I.TEACHER-H) commented that parents can serve as a very good resource, as parents are the ones who can give educators feedback on what progress the child is making or difficulties the child is encountering at home, thus agreeing with Stanviloff (1996). Moreover, this shows that parents' feedback in this regard is considered beneficial to educators, although at times parents' and other non-medically involved professionals' knowledge might be rejected and disregarded (Gillman et al., 2000). An LSE (I.LSE-A) also noted that tangible or multisensory resources should not be something to be used by the LSE with his/her own particular student, but rather something to be used with all the children during all the lessons. This is because, first of all, all children will benefit from the use of such resources, and secondly, the autistic child should, as much as possible, do whatever the other children are doing in class and not something totally different.

Many interviewees (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-F, I.SMT-I, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-H and I.TEACHER-J) stressed the importance of human resources, which seem to be lacking in more than one area (I.LSE-I). In respect to this, Berzina (2010) stated that additional staff in schools could contribute as important resources. As one SMT (I.SMT-C) said, 'that is the most important. Human resources… that is… the biggest resource in Malta are humans.' Another SMT (I.SMT-A) argued for more access to human resources as opposed to other tangible resources; while one can buy the latter, it is much more difficult to find skilled, helpful human resources:

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

Another SMT (I.SMT-F) maintained that human resources should be managed appropriately. S/he gave as an example the situation of a shared LSE supporting two different students, one with autism and the other with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). S/he argued that it makes no sense for an LSE to be shared between these two students since their particular challenges will surely oppose each other. In such a case, an LSE can actually

worsen the situation. Teachers (I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-J and I.TEACHER-K) seemed to consider the LSE as a very important human resource, with one (I.TEACHER-A) emphasising that the teacher could not manage without an LSE in class. Another teacher (I.TEACHER-H) insisted that the LSE supports the child in a way the teacher cannot, since the LSE knows the child well, is always next to the child and has the necessary tools to simplify and clarify whatever the teacher presents in class. Another teacher (I.TEACHER-J) noted that, in the case of his/her student, what the child needed was not extra resources, but simply the help of an LSE to guide him along. This issue of extra help in the classroom provided by the LSE was defended by Busby et al. (2012) who claimed that the assistance of the LSE is an important resource needed by educators because it allows them to work effectively with autistic students. Moreover, this issue was also discussed in detail in Q4ai, Q4aiii and Q7.

Another SMT (I.SMT-K) commented on the fact that tradespeople who work on school refurbishments are not in touch with the challenges of autistic students and, were it not for the intervention of educators, would be unable to create an adequate environment for these children:

> It is very worrying that the Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools does not have technical persons who specialise either in autism or in any other severe disability. So, when the refurbishment of schools etc. is taking place, if it isn't for the initiative of teachers, or let's say educators, who offer suggestions, things would not be made appropriately.

Some interviewees (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-I and I.TEACHER-J) also noted the need for more information sessions. This conforms yet again with the findings of Bhatnagar and Das (2014) who determined that the lack of training amongst educators is one common barrier to inclusion and with Busby et al. (2012) who stressed that training for inclusion should be given prior to entering an education profession and should be targeted at making inclusion look possible. Training is a way of increasing awareness, which is never enough and is a resource in itself (I.SMT-A and I.SMT-K), which again endorses the beliefs of Leblanc et al. (2009). Awareness is as important amongst peers and educators (I.SMT-A) as it is important for society in general (I.SMT-I and I.LSE-H). Moreover, information equips educators with the necessary knowledge to be able to help and understand autistic children. One teacher (I.TEACHER-J) explained that 'sometimes [s/he doesn't] know how to go about the child's needs'. One LSE (I.LSE-H) suggested that training provided, such as CoPE sessions, should be more adapted to the particular educators' needs. As an example, the LSE (I.LSE-H) suggested that it would be a good idea if, during a CoPE session, LSEs are

grouped together and given a session on a particular disability instead of giving them training on how to teach literacy, as the latter is more often targeted for teachers.

Two educators (I.TEACHER-K and I.LSE-H) also noted that they have always found the resources they required, as many resources can be found online (I.TEACHER-K), or they can be bought by the head of school if one asks for them (I.TEACHER-K and I.LSE-H).

Question 3 asked participants: 'What services do you need that you currently do not have to help teach autistic children? Give reasons why these services are important'. The responses to this question were insightful, for while the majority of the services mentioned already exist, they are in some way or other inefficient or severely lacking. The services mentioned were: speech therapy (I.SMT-D, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-K and I.TEACHER-J), occupational therapy (I.SMT-D, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-K and I.TEACHER-J), the services of the educational psychologist (I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I and I.SMT-K), counsellor (I.SMT-I), resource centre (I.SMT-D and I.SMT-I), INCO (I.SMT-F), ACTU (I.SMT-D) and the early intervention teacher (I.SMT-C).

The services of the speech therapist and OT need to be more frequently available (I.SMT-E, I.SMT-K and I.LSE-I), as do the services of the early intervention teacher (I.SMT-C and I.LSE-I). Moreover, one interviewee (I.SMT-E) contended that the services of the SLT and OT are so inefficient that parents have to pay for extra sessions at home:

> At times even the parents tell you, 'I need to bring the speech therapist home and I need to bring the occupational therapist at home because once every four weeks is not enough for children with such needs'. Those who have speech and language difficulties need the service once or twice a week, not once every five weeks or every four weeks [when] they have a session.

The same interviewee added that this is also the case for the OT:

> Because we have students [with autism], we boast of inclusion, [but these students] receive occupational therapy sessions on a review basis, that is once every two months. Three months? I think even the occupational therapist will forget the student's needs from one session to another.

Moreover, whereas speech therapy sessions take place on the school premises, this is not the case for OT sessions. It would be ideal if every service available were given on the school premises (I.LSE-I), as was already discussed in relation to IQ4, because having to go for services outside the school premises is inconvenient for the parent, the student and also the LSE who is expected to accompany the student and parent to the session but is not always able to do so, especially if s/he has shared support (I.SMT-E). This has also been discussed in the literature review, where Glashan et al. (2004) and Morewood et al. (2011) specified that therapeutic services, such as SLT and OT, should be provided on school premises, instead of students

having to leave the school premises to receive such services, making it possible for educators to ask for help from other professionals whenever needed. As for the early intervention teacher, s/he often has such a large workload that s/he is not able to visit more frequently (I.SMT-C). Although the literature discussed the importance of therapeutic services being provided on school premises (Glashan et al., 2004; Morewood et al., 2011), the issue of frequency of services did not surface in the literature.

The situation for the educational psychologist is identical, as noted by three interviewees (I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I and I.SMT-K). One interviewee (I.SMT-E) explained that the psychologist carries a very large workload and rarely visits schools to observe students. Another (I.SMT-I) confirmed this, also contending that this is very unfair for those students and parents who cannot afford to pay privately for such services: 'don't look at people who have [a] certain salary, not everyone is in the same boat… There are people who need to wait for the services at school. Takes too long to get diagnosed'. One teacher (I.TEACHER-H), in fact, suggested that there should be more educational psychologists in the system, so as to improve the service – the need for more complementary services such as that of the school psychologist was also suggested in the PIES (2019). In that way, the service would be more efficient, could be given to every school equally (and not give preference to bigger schools with more cases of students with needs) and could be given to educators, as a way to support and guide them in how to deal better with the students entrusted to their care (I.TEACHER-H). Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) said that the psychological service is almost totally absent from his/her school, adding that psychological services are needed not only for the students, but also for parents and educators, both of whom require a lot of support. Also, one particular teacher (I.TEACHER-A) opened up more about his/her wish to have the service of a psychologist for educators because, considering the many challenges they encounter, educators suffer burn-out, and they need to have someone they can speak to when this happens. Another teacher (I.TEACHER-H) added that parents sometimes also need support and guidance on how to deal with their own children, as they sometimes lack the necessary skills and knowledge. These findings agree with Berzina (2010) who noted that schools need additional staff, while also confirming the importance of the role of the school psychologists, who, according to Anderson et al. (2007), do not only provide services to autistic students, but also to educators.

Moreover, it would also be ideal if there are people in schools whose job is to replace educators, while the latter take some time out of the classroom (I.TEACHER-A). As the situation presently is, however, teachers and LSEs cannot leave the children unsupervised, even during the break, so there is no time for them to unwind a bit before continuing lessons. Indeed,

the importance of supporting teachers and LSEs, important resources in themselves, was also stressed (I.SMT-C and I.SMT-I). One interviewee (I.SMT-C) specified that:

> …the class teacher does not have the time, even if s/he wants, to take care… because don't forget that we are talking about autism, but there could be dyslexia, there could be a child with Down syndrome… in every class. That is, the teacher needs help. Now the LSE also cannot manage on her own, in the sense that the LSE is not that professional... Nowadays, LSEs are more qualified, perhaps they have a diploma, whatever… but they still need the help of professional teachers.

The issue of support was considered in great detail in Section 3.4, where various types of support needed by educators were discussed. One such support was having cooperation with as well as personal and emotional support from colleagues (Berzina, 2010; Gersten et al., 2001).

Other services that seem to be in similar straits are those of the INCO and the ACTU. In one case, since the INCO has a very large workload, s/he continually prioritises the larger schools where there are more cases of students with special needs. Thus, smaller schools are not receiving the help that s/he can provide. One interviewee (I.SMT-F) explained:

> …the INCO has such a busy schedule that if you do not call him/her and tell him/her, 'Listen, I need you to come…', the INCO will not come. Years have passed, and the INCO only comes when someone is about to get statemented to observe him a bit, but then that's all. And I don't blame her. Because s/he has so much work.

Similarly, the ACTU has a very long waiting list, and one has to wait a very long time to obtain their services (I.SMT-D).

Another service which seems to be very sporadic is that of the much sought-after ASST teacher (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-B, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-F, I.TEACHER-A, I.LSE-A and I.LSE-I). It seems that the ASST teacher serves as someone to refer to when situations the educator cannot handle crop up. However, the ASST teacher rarely visits school (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-E and I.LSE-A). Indeed, one interviewee (I.SMT-E) stated, 'We also need a teacher for autism… she comes once a year… I always say that… once a year… I don't know how s/he can help the LSE and how progress can be made'. Another interviewee (I.SMT-A), who expressed his/her wish for such in-school support, argued that such a service should ideally be based in the school, or at least shared between two schools. One teacher (I.TEACHER-E) acknowledged his/her wish to have some sort of 'support line' where educators can call for support whenever they need it. This kind of support already exists for all civil servants, which is offered by the Employee Support Programme offered by the People and Standards Division; however, the teacher (I.TEACHER-E) stressed that the professionals giving such service need to know the particular child the educator is talking about, so as to be able to give advice and

guidance. The teacher (I.TEACHER-E) therefore suggested that such professionals should attend IEPs to get to know the children. Such a suggestion is impractical, as it is almost impossible for those working on the support line to know each and every autistic child (and with any other disability/condition, for that matter). However, it might be possible for this kind of support to be provided by the ASST teacher, as suggested by other educators. One can note very clearly that, with almost every service mentioned by educators, the issue of frequency cropped up. As I explained earlier, frequency of services was not discussed in the literature review, but seems to be a very controversial issue in the Maltese education system.

Conversely, the service of the resource centre was described most often as very good (I.SMT-D, I.SMT-I and I.TEACHER-K). One interviewee (I.SMT-D) expressed his/her wish that 'parents of autistic children realise that the resource centre is a resource in itself… they have lots of material [from which] children can benefit. And I don't know why, but some people, some parents, think it's a stigma… It's not a stigma. Lately, there is a resource, and we are not using it…'. One teacher (I.TEACHER-J) discussed what a difference it would make if the services provided at the resource centre would also be provided at every school. However, another SMT (I.SMT-I) noted that the staff at the resource centre, like the other services described above, must manage a large workload, and therefore 'we need to take care of them. Because it is easy for them to have a burn-out themselves. We need to take care of what we have, not dishearten them'. It is worth pointing out here the reference made by I.SMT-D to the stigma related to sending one's children to a resource centre. A similar comment to this (though not making a direct reference to stigma) was made by another SMT earlier in response to IQ4 where it was argued that parents most often do not want the services of the resource centre and want instead that their children remain in mainstream schools. The SMT argued that by doing this we are doing a disservice to our children. Indeed, in Malta the issue of stigma is common amongst parents, especially in the case of resource centres, as these centres generally bear the weight of being the schools for children who are disabled and incapable of learning and thus need to be in a separate school. This sense of stigma is even stronger considering the small size of the Maltese islands, where everyone knows each other, thus making it easier for parents to be judged by others. Other reasons for this reluctance on the part of the parents include the possibility of their child imitating perceived 'bad' behaviour by being grouped with other children with perceived 'worse' disabilities, and the idea of their child losing essential parts of the curriculum while they attend resource centres. I should acknowledge here that it was not the purpose of this study to research the parents' concerns in relation to sending their children to resource centres, and therefore I have not investigated this, neither in the literature review

nor in my actual study; however, I felt it was worth referring to briefly, as it was also regularly experienced in my work as an autism support teacher. I should further note that the terms 'bad' and 'worse' used above are put in inverted commas, as they are considered demeaning when used to refer to the challenges presented by autism; however, they are normally common terms used by parents and common people, hence the reason why I used them. This stigma amongst parents might be another important reason why a multisensory room in each school would be a valuable and vital resource, as was already discussed by some educators.

Apart from the above-mentioned services, which are already in place, the interviewees mentioned other services they would like to have. Such services include a behaviour therapist (I.SMT-I), clinical psychologist (I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I) and counsellor (I.SMT-I). One LSE (I.LSE-E) explained the need for LSEs to know whether the student they are supporting is receiving behaviour therapies at home, such as ABA, and if s/he is, it is highly important that the LSE is informed about the strategies this therapy is employing with the particular child, so as to continue using such strategies at school. This would indeed lead to having more consistency in the use of strategies between school and home, as was suggested by Hedges et al. (2014). This LSE also explained that ideally s/he should be given the necessary training on the particular behaviour therapies used:

> There is this gap between home and school… You wouldn't know what's happening, so if a therapist is visiting their home giving this service, it would be ideal if it is continued at school. You would use the same strategy, not you use one strategy and the therapist uses another. So some guidance from the [ABA] service would be beneficial [for educators].

Moreover, another interviewee (I.SMT-K) mentioned the importance of having an adequate hydrotherapy pool built specifically for those autistic students who can benefit from that service.

6.3.2 Training.

Q11 asked the participants what the trainings should include to help them work better with autistic students (Table 21). All participants answered this question except for 1 SMT and 4 LSEs. As one can observe from the table, the trend in the responses of the participants was the same amongst the three groups. Indeed, the most common response for the three groups was to have training that included practical guidelines and tips on how to help students go about their normal school day, possibly by presenting case studies and video clips. This conforms with the beliefs of Busby et al. (2012) that training should be practical, offering case-based and field-based strategies and tutorials. This should be followed by training and guidance given by trained professionals, hands-on training and observations and professionals coming to the

school setting to observe the realities at schools. Indeed, Busby et al. (2012) insisted that appropriate training should include clinical experiences, while Morrier et al. (2011) suggested the use of workshops and hands-on training to prepare educators to work with autistic students. Teachers also noted that training should, first of all, provide them with some appropriate literature on the basics of autism. One teacher (B.T1) commented that 'each child is different, so professionals are needed to guide us on what strategies could be used with each child after these professionals have worked with and observed each of these children'. The issue of training given by professionals was again emphasised by an LSE (I.L2) who argued that 'training [should be given by] people who have had more experience with students with autism than us! Not people who have acquired their knowledge only from courses and who have not really worked in this field'.

Table 21: *Educators' Opinions on What the Trainings Should Include*

Q11: What should the training include to help educators work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total of SMTs [out of 25]	Total of Teachers [out of 87]	Total of LSEs [out of 60]
Specific training on autism/ Training on your specific case	0	1	1
Training about different types of autism	1	2	4
Information about autism/ Appropriate literature/The basics of autism	1	9	2
Practical guidelines and tips/ Video clips of particular situations/Case studies/How to help them go about a normal school day	7	19	12
How to understand the needs of these students better/How to facilitate the life of autistic students/How to deal with these students	3	7	1
Recommendations/ suggestions on how to help teachers and LSEs/How to support all stakeholders involved/How educators should work hand in hand	3	1	1
Advice on adequate resources to buy for these students and where to buy them	2	1	1
Voice of parents	1	2	0
Workshops	1	0	0

CoPE sessions/Staff development meetings	0	1	1
How to use the available resources, visuals and educational programmes	0	2	4
Being aware of available services	2	0	1
Any would do/Never enough because all students are different/Autism is vast so lots of training could be done	1	0	2
Practice and experience/ Getting to know the specific child and learning how to treat him	0	3	6
How to use technology related to autism	0	0	2
How to help students stay on task	0	1	0
How to increase students' motivation	0	1	0
Coping strategies	3	4	4
How to include students effectively in mainstream classrooms	0	3	0
How to make classrooms more appropriate	1	0	0
Teaching strategies/ Adaptation of the curriculum/ How to work with these students	0	3	3
More information about the child's behaviour and challenges/How to control their behaviour	0	6	3
Sharing of ideas/experiences by colleagues	2	4	3
Training/guidance given by trained professionals/Hands-on training/observations/ Professionals come to the school setting	7	9	9
Resources	1	1	4
OT provided on school premises	0	1	0
How to teach abstract concepts/How to teach autistic students	0	3	0
Where to seek help	0	1	0
How to avoid meltdowns while still pushing the student to reach his full potential/How to deal with	1	5	3

tantrums/How to help them keep calm			
To be available when need arises	1	0	0
Self-care	1	0	0
Stress management	1	0	0
How to communicate with severely autistic children/ How to interact more with an autistic child	0	3	2
How these students feel and what is important for them	0	1	0
How to improve social/communication skills	0	0	1
Real-life experiences of people with autism	0	0	1
How school experiences affect these children	0	0	1
How to reflect on practice	0	0	1
How to explain autism to typical students	0	0	1
Support all year round	0	0	1
Big difference between training and reality	0	0	3
No reply	1	0	4

IQ5 further investigated this issue. The question asked the participants: 'How could the training on autism be more efficient? If you have never received training, what do you think it should include?' The responses for this interview question gave even more insight into what kind of training educators need. A number of interviewees (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E, I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-J, I.LSE-A and I.LSE-H) pointed out that there is a serious lack of training amongst educators, with one teacher (I.TEACHER-J) specifying: 'We are not given training on autism. We are not given [any]', while others insisted that training needs to be for everyone—SMTs, teachers, LSEs (I.SMT-C and I.SMT-D) and parents (I.SMT-D).

Moreover, training needs to be ongoing (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-E, I.TEACHER-K and I.LSE-H). Two interviewees (I.SMT-A and I.LSE-A) commented that one cannot possibly learn everything about autism in a one or two-hour session, as is happening in the training that educators currently receive. Training needs to occur every term, or at least every year because:

> …even, for example, the services are updated. There are advancements in care. Resources, there are new resources. We will not always know about them. Right?

> There could be new methods. Even as a school, I'm saying. Why shouldn't we know about them? Where are we going to get knowledge from? (I.SMT-A)

This interviewee further stated that there is currently a greater need to be equipped with skills rather than resources; therefore, training is of utmost importance. This adds to what was discussed in Section 2.3.2 about the importance of educators having the necessary knowledge about autism and hence the need for training, as having necessary knowledge will equip educators to be better able to help the child with his/her difficulties arising from autism. In addition to that, the argument of this SMT also emphasised that, in addition to knowledge, educators also need skills that enable them to work with autistic students and all the students in class. One LSE (I.LSE-A) also commented on this, stating that all educators need to be aware of the new resources, strategies and services that are available, which children might be making use of at home or with other educators, so that when they are working with an autistic child, they are aware of and preferably trained in using the same resources, strategies and services. This issue had already been referred to in IQ3 and aligned with the ideas of Hedges et al. (2014), who have spoken about the importance of consistency between home and school. Moreover, Hedges et al. stressed the need for consistency in school policies, as in the example given by this LSE (I.LSE-A) to explain his/her point: If the year 2 teacher had been using red copybooks for maths and blue ones for English, the year 3 teacher should be aware that s/he should be using the same strategy. Educators should also be aware of the services available for autistic children and have basic knowledge of them, so as to be able to continue working on the same therapy at school (I.LSE-A), and to be able to guide parents on what services are available (I.TEACHER-H). Another interviewee (I.SMT-E) expressed his/her wish that training be provided continuously in such a way that educators receive training, practice what they have learned in class and then return to training to discuss and share their experiences and improve on their practice. This reflects the idea of Bhatnagar and Das (2013) who stated that training should include opportunities to reflect on practice.

In addition to this, interviewees (I.SMT-C, I.TEACHER-I and I.LSE-A) stated that the training should be very specific. As also argued by another interviewee (I.SMT-A), training is most often delivered in a two-hour session, which means of course that the content of the training is very general, again confirming what Shyman (2010) found: that training tends to lack specialisation in specific areas such as autism. An interviewee (I.SMT-C) explained: 'It needs to be very specific, not like going to a meeting, let's say, a two-hour meeting and [the lecturer] mentions around ten conditions and you learn something about every one of them but you almost learned nothing'. This applies especially to LSEs, who need the most training since

they have the most direct contact with the students. In addition, the same interviewee argued that:

> LSEs need to be given training on every child that they can ever meet throughout their career, that is, these need to be specific, as we said, so for autism you need to go in depth and have a whole course on autism, a whole course on a child with Down syndrome, a course on a child with dyslexia… she needs to know exactly what these are.

One LSE (I.LSE-I) suggested that, during training sessions at school, LSEs and teachers should be grouped separately and given training according to their particular needs. The LSE noted that LSEs are more interested in learning about different conditions rather than learning about how to implement maths in class. This issue had already been previously raised by I.LSE-H when IQ2 was discussed. However, it is important to note that teachers still need training on various conditions, including autism. In fact, they do lack this sort of training because the training they do receive mostly focuses on teaching curriculum subjects such as maths and English; rarely do they receive training on conditions such as autism, which teachers will surely encounter in class while teaching the curriculum (I.SMT-C), and which they need to be knowledgeable about, so as to be able to think about the different challenges their students might be facing and plan lessons and resources accordingly, as was discussed in Section 2.3.2. Notable here is that Galea (2018) found that educators have reservations about the efficiency of PD sessions (now referred to as CoPE sessions) and a considerable number of her participants did not want further training in inclusion – the reason for this being, not because they felt well-equipped, but rather because they believed this sort of training was not efficient. As a matter of fact, it was also suggested in the PIES (2019) that PD training should be practical and relevant.

In addition to the argument about the CoPE sessions, some interviewees (I.SMT-D and I.SMT-F) mentioned the idea of training in the form of CoPE sessions, with I.SMT-F suggesting the involvement of interaction between the speaker and listeners. However, another interviewee (I.SMT-K) stated that CoPE sessions are as ineffective and inefficient as the previous PD sessions had been, which corroborates the findings of Galea (2018) stated above; however, this interviewee asserted that this is because students are still at school during CoPE sessions, and it is a huge problem for the SMT to plan who will supervise the students while the educator is receiving training via a CoPE session. For this reason, this interviewee suggested that the best way for an educator to receive training would be to conduct such training (which would be obligatory) individually by enrolling in courses, whether online or face-to-face. These suggested methods are two examples of how an educator can receive training (Mizell, 2010). As regards online courses, Mizell (2010) posited that, despite their practicality, they do also

carry some limitations, including the inability to relate to the educator's specific challenges and the less effective nature of isolated learning. Noteworthy here is the interviewee's reference to training being obligatory. Although the interviewee, who is an SMT, did not specify why the training should be obligatory, it raises a question to the reader: Would educators not attend if it were not obligatory?

Hands-on training was a common choice amongst educators (I.SMT-B, I.SMT-I, I.SMT-K, I.TEACHER-K, I.LSE-H and I.LSE-I), as had been already observed from the questionnaire responses. One interviewee (I.SMT-I) complained:

> How long are we going to remain with lectures!? So, are we going to remain with [a] lecture type of training? We tell children, 'hands-on', and then we adults stick with preaching? Things need to become more interactive. And it's not discussions only. [Training could include] producing resources and have ice-breakers about them.

This again confirms the suggestions of Busby et al. (2012) and Morrier et al. (2011) regarding the idea of including hands-on training and workshops in the training provided. Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) further emphasised that the most effective way to learn is by job shadowing, agreeing with Groom (2006). Such training could be given in some sort of practicum, as was discussed in the literature review in respect to Shyman (2012) who stressed that a practicum could be an opportunity for students to observe autistic individuals in classroom settings and to work directly with the students, including writing reports on their observations and clinical experiences, not to mention the possibility of also interacting with the child's family members.

Some interviewees (I.SMT-F and I.LSE-I) suggested the idea of having workshops, again agreeing with Busby et al.'s (2012) and Morrier et al.'s (2011) suggestions discussed earlier, because during workshops, one involves oneself more. Another (I.SMT-I) suggested that training should be given in small groups, while others (I.SMT-I, I.TEACHER-J, I.LSE-E and I.LSE-H) specified that groups should preferably resemble a support group, so that educators can receive training and also open up about and share their experiences. Moreover, one LSE (I.LSE-K) argued that, in his/her case, experience ended up being the best training, as most of the things s/he learned were through experience, not through training. One teacher (I.TEACHER-K), however, noted that sometimes it is not about the kind of training, but more about the way the trainer delivers the message. S/he explained that, at a training session abroad, the training was still in lecture form, but the way it was delivered made it very interesting. One LSE (I.LSE-H) also insisted that it would be a good idea if the training provided also includes the voices of the parents, who could give many insightful views on their experiences, ultimately

helping educators understand their children more. This is again crucial to note, as it contradicts the idea that some parents might feel that professionals know more than they do, as was pointed out in Hodge's (2016) example in Section 2.3.2.

Other interviewees (I.TEACHER-H and I.LSE-I) commented on what they would like the training to include. There were those who insisted that training needs to be based on case studies, and others who said that training should focus on providing educators with practical guidelines, tips and strategies on how to best relate to autistic students and adapt to their needs better (I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-I, I.TEACHER-J and I.LSE-E), also possibly suggesting resources such as reliable online sources where educators can find more tips, information and resources they could use (I.TEACHER-E). One teacher (I.TEACHER-E) explained that it is not enough for an educator to tell him/her that autistic students learn through visuals, but the educator needs to know what sort of visuals are adequate for them because s/he once had a student who was becoming extremely hyperactive because of the bright colours s/he was using in his/her visuals, without knowing this. Another teacher (I.TEACHER-J) explained that more information on how to relate with them is important, stating: 'That is what I find most difficult. How should I relate with him? They are all stubborn. How can I… sometimes I just leave him [do whatever he wants]. Sort of… Because I don't even have time…'. This idea of time constraints was discussed in the literature review, particularly in reference to Busby et al. (2012) who argued that the role of the LSE is very important in assisting the teacher when there are time constraints. Moreover, understanding the condition better means that one can understand the child better too, and that is the only way the LSE can really work well with the student (I.LSE-H). As regards practical guidelines, one teacher (I.TEACHER-A) commented that certain professionals do not give practical suggestions, explaining that one person once told him/her that, when a student throws a tantrum, s/he should take all the other students out of class. The teacher said that s/he did this twice, but then realised it is a very impractical strategy.

The issue of impracticality in training matters emerged in respect to various aspects. Not only do professionals give impractical suggestions or advice, but also the little training available is very impractical. Educators (I.TEACHER-E and I.TEACHER-H) commented that the limited training they had received at university years earlier did not include training about autism; even worse, this is still the case today. One LSE (I.LSE-H) who is currently reading for a degree in inclusive education explained that s/he does not have credits specifically on particular conditions, which is why s/he enrolled for the degree in the first place. This again relates to what Shyman (2012) stated about how university courses tend to lack specialisation in particular areas. Moreover, this LSE also noted that training is important because it increases

awareness and acceptance, which is still obviously lacking, both amongst educators and society in general. This was also noted in IQ2.

6.3.3 Support.

Q14 asked the participants what support they need to help them teach autistic students (Table 22). All participants answered this question except for 6 LSEs. As shown in the table, the desire for more training, more strategies and more hands-on experience is very much evident once again. Indeed, it was the most common response for both the SMTs' group and teachers' group. One SMT (A.S3) even commented on the importance of training 'minor staff' as well. The teachers also noted their wish for more support from professionals and other human resources and better feedback from them, followed by more support from LSEs, parents and SMTs, together with more resources and modern devices to attract and motivate students. One teacher (E.T7) stated that s/he needs 'an LSE [who] knows what to do'. As for the LSEs, they expressed their wish for more professional support, especially that of an ASST teacher, and for this to be more frequent, more guiding, more concrete and more ongoing and for advice to be given on-site. One teacher (I.T10) said, 'The team of therapists working with the child should meet the teacher at the start of the scholastic year and should be available when difficulties arise during the year', while another teacher (K.T14) expressed his/her wish to have 'someone in class showing [him/her] how to act, not just visiting the class for a short time and telling [him/her] what [they] should do'. This issue of in-class modelling was raised by Yan et al. (2015) and Bryant et al. (2001), describing it as one type of support which could be given to educators. Two LSEs (D.L1, I.L11) talked about the importance of having the services of an ASD expert who should be 'stationed in a school or maybe two schools to help guide the LSE on how to make the students' experience a success' (D.L1), but that this should not be the INCO 'since [INCOs] are ex-teachers and never worked directly with students [meaning that they had never worked directly with students with disabilities] and sometimes when asked, they don't know how to help' (I.L11). LSEs also expressed the need for more resources and modern devices to attract and motivate students, and the desire for emotional and psychological support through praise and encouragement. Again, praise and encouragement were discussed in the literature review as important ways to support educators, amongst others (DoE, 2010).

Table 22: *Support Needed by Educators*

Q14: What support do you think educators need to help them work with autistic students?			
Responses	Total of SMTs [out of 25]	Total of Teachers [out of 87]	Total of LSEs [out of 60]
Support from parents	1	11	3
Support from class teacher	0	1	3
Support from SMT	0	10	4
Support from support services	1	1	0
Support from professionals/ Professionals giving feedback/ Human resources	3	18	5
More training/More strategies/ Hands-on experience	9	19	14
Teamwork by all professionals	2	2	0
Support for parents	1	1	1
Psychological support team should be set up for all involved/School psychologist	1	0	2
Financial help	3	0	1
Specifically trained LSEs/educators	1	2	0
Same LSE provision when assigned LSE is on sick leave	1	0	0
Emotional/psychological support/Praise/Encouragement/ Individual support	0	2	8
More awareness	0	1	1
Peer preparation programmes	0	0	1
Ways to include students in class even if not following class curriculum	0	0	1
Lots of resources/Modern devices to attract and motivate students/Sharing of resources	1	9	8
Relaxation room/Multisensory room	0	0	2
More frequent professional support/advice on site/More services/Support of an autism specialist/Concrete support/ Guidance support/Ongoing support	2	5	17
Nurture class	0	1	0
Support from education department	0	2	0
Better physical environment/ Spacious classrooms	1	2	0
Being understood by superiors	1	1	0

Support from INCO	1	0	2
Physical support	1	1	0
Voice of parents	1	0	0
Workshops	1	0	0
Autism support teacher	0	0	1
Experience	0	0	1
Sharing and discussing with colleagues/Sharing of experiences	0	0	3
LSEs	0	13	0
Special education programmes for autistic children /Special programmes/classes for autistic students in same school	0	1	1
Fewer children in class	0	1	0
Any help will do	0	1	0
Don’t know	0	1	0
Behaviour plan in place	0	1	0
Same support currently available in resource centres	0	3	0
Time out	0	1	0
Less comprehensive syllabus/More time/Less paperwork	0	2	2
Activities that are planned	0	0	1
More help in using technological aids	0	0	1
Support depends on case	0	0	1
No reply	0	0	6

IQ6 investigated the issue of support even further. Interviewees were asked about the supports they need: ‘What support do you need to help teach autistic students? Give reasons why this support is important’. Most of the responses to this question confirmed what had been observed in the questionnaire results. A number of interviewees seemed to sense a lack of support in some way or another in their work with autistic students. An issue of serious concern expressed by the educators was the fact that there is no one to consult when they need help, support and guidance. In fact, some interviewees (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I, I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-I, I.LSE-I and I.LSE-E) expressed their wish to have someone to confer with when particular incidents happen at school, with one LSE (I.LSE-E) specifying that s/he needs the guidance of a professional trained in behavioural issues. As already discussed, this confirms the findings of Glashan et al. (2004) who indicated that educators need support from specialists and those of Yan et al. (2015) who found that this kind of support is most often

required by educators. Two interviewees (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-K) specified that such support should be available within a few hours. Another interviewee (I.SMT-E) explained this need in more depth:

> ...there is someone that can understand you, listen to you. Like I look up at the head... when the head doesn't know what to do, we call the teacher for inclusion, the head of department (HOD) comes, but she doesn't know this child... what can she solve in a minute? But, you wouldn't know where to search for help, you wouldn't know what to do. Then finally, against our will, we will have to call the mother or father, tell them [to] come because we cannot control him. It is humiliating both for us and for the parents, but sometimes we do not find a strategy, especially where behaviour is concerned.

This comment is, in my opinion, a very significant one. While support for educators was one of the areas discussed in the literature review (Section 3.4), in which I presented various types of support educators need, with reference to the literature, similar situations to the above were not explored in the literature. This comment definitely shows the serious deficiencies in the Maltese education system, to the extent that educators lose all control over the situation – not only the 'common' educators (that is, teachers, LSEs and SMTs), but also the 'so-called' specialists, such as the HOD and teacher for inclusion. Therefore, this comment underlines the various needs in the Maltese education system, including a need for more support to educators, together with the need for more training as well as more resources, all of which were discussed in great detail in the previous sections.

Further to the above, another interviewee (I.SMT-A) expressed the desire to have more knowledge about dealing with challenging behaviour. Also, for this reason, the need for more counsellors was expressed, as, according to educators, counsellors are in a better position to support both educators and parents in similar matters (I.SMT-E).

Another interviewee (I.SMT-K) noted that a word of encouragement when the educator (in this case, the SMT) is going through a rough patch makes a big difference. This again confirms that educators need emotional support through praise (DoE, 2010). An LSE (I.LSE-H) also expressed this desire, stating that there is a serious lack of appreciation towards educators' work with children in class, as the people in higher positions are more interested in the paperwork, rather than the real work happening in classrooms. In addition, this LSE (I.LSE-H) stated that it would be supportive for educators if less paperwork is required from them and more value is placed on interactions in class. Another interviewee (I.SMT-E) expressed a wish to have support forums for educators, where experiences, challenges and good practices can be shared and participants can encourage each other.

One interviewee (I.SMT-K) also shared his/her concerns regarding the lack of synergy amongst different departments, a situation that results in the SMT having to face a variety of challenges as though they were not related to each other. The interviewee (I.SMT-K) specified that 'ASD is not the only problem in schools. There is dyslexia, there is the problem of gifted children, there is the issue of whether the curriculum is being adapted for all children. Now I don't feel this synergy between the different departments'. As a matter of fact, it is notable that the PIES (2019) also suggests that there should be support structures within the education sector as well as amongst different sectors.

One SMT (I.SMT-C) expressed a desire for financial support, as was discussed earlier (IQ2, I.SMT-A, I.SMT-E, I.SMT-I and I.SMT-K) and the importance of which has been emphasised by Frederickson et al. (2010). The interviewee (I.SMT-C) explained that:

> We need support to buy resources, let's say, for example certain LSEs come to you, listen I want to buy those flashcards, I want to buy that software, I want to buy this and that... Well, I'm not saying that we don't buy them, but financially sometimes you don't have the funds available on the spot to buy things... and we buy them, not at that moment, but we buy them slowly in the long run.

Another interviewee (I.SMT-F) stated that urgent cases of autistic children, those needing immediate help, should be given priority over others since delays will result in more problems for both the autistic child and his/her peers. This was confirmed by a teacher (I.TEACHER-J) when s/he expressed his/her desire that when an LSE is needed, there should not be a prolonged wait for the LSE to be assigned.

The need for support from colleagues was also raised during the interviews by teachers and LSEs (I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-J, I.TEACHER-K, I.LSE-A, I.LSE-E and I.LSE-H), as discussed earlier and noted by Lindsay et al. (2013), Messemer (2010), Gersten et al. (2001) and Berzina (2010). There were those who expressed the importance of support from the SMT, with many agreeing that they actually do find the necessary support from the SMT (I.TEACHER-J and I.LSE-E). One teacher (I.TEACHER-H) specified that teachers need to be supported by being understood by the SMT and those higher up. The importance of support from SMTs was also found by Galea (2018). Also, others argued in favour of more support from teachers (I.TEACHER-K, I.LSE-E) or LSEs (I.TEACHER-J, I.TEACHER-K and I.LSE-A). One interviewee (I.LSE-A) expressed his/her displeasure when certain teachers show a lack of interest in understanding the child and his/her situation, leaving it all up to the LSE to do whatever s/he thinks best for the student. This comment shows very clearly what was discussed in Q4ai, Q4aiii and Q7 in relation to the importance of the LSE as a vital resource, in that, at times, the LSE is considered necessary so that teachers can put all the responsibility of the

autistic student on the LSE. The interviewee (I.LSE-A) stated that this is unfair for both the child and the LSE. One teacher (I.TEACHER-K) also talked about the importance of having a handover from colleagues who have worked with the child, so as to be able to understand the child better. On the other hand, one LSE (I.LSE-H) expressed his/her thoughts about the importance of having IEPs with practical goals which reflect the true abilities of the child. The LSE (I.LSE-H) explained that some colleagues mark the goals in the IEP as 'reached' at the end of the year, even though this is not true, with the consequence that the LSE supporting the child the following year does not know what the child can and cannot do.

The need for more training was again discussed as a form of support in terms of this question, strengthening what has been previously discussed (I.TEACHER-E and I.LSE-H), as was the need for more resources, again supporting previously noted ideas (I.TEACHER-E). Teachers and LSEs also expressed their desire to have human resources who could replace them in class, while they take a short break from the classroom (I.TEACHER-A and I.LSE-K), as was discussed in IQ3. An LSE (I.LSE-K) explained that, although LSEs are entitled to a 15-minute break each day, in reality, they are not availing themselves of it because, if there is no one to replace the LSE, s/he cannot leave the child alone.

The interviews also revealed that teachers and LSEs require the support of the parents, both those of the autistic child (I.TEACHER-J and I.LSE-H) and of the parents of the other children in class (I.LSE-H). This conforms with the beliefs of Stanviloff (1996) about the importance of parental support. Indeed, parents of other children in class need to understand the needs and differences of an autistic child (I.LSE-H).

Considering the importance of having support from parents, which was raised in both the questionnaires and the interviews, I felt the need to have another question requesting the interviewees to talk about the support educators expect to receive from parents. IQ7 asked the interviewees: 'To do your job better, what support do you expect from the parents of autistic students?' in order to determine this.

Interviewees (I.SMT-C, I.SMT-D, I.SMT-F, I.TEACHER-I and I.TEACHER-J) responded that they would like parents to accept their child's condition because doing so helps the child make greater progress. One interviewee (I.SMT-C) stated that, while most parents do support the educators, there are parents who will very nearly blame the educators for their child's challenges: 'Sometimes there are parents who one way or another sort of... they almost... they almost say that we have caused the problem, let's say it that way'. Another interviewee (I.SMT-D) stressed how vital it is that parents understand and accept that their children might need some adaptations to the curriculum, which is not always the case. The interviewee also

maintained the importance of parents applying for available services, which they also sometimes resist:

> We have to accept that there need to be some changes for the benefit of the child. When you have [the parents'] support it will be much easier. They apply for the OT, speech [therapy], if they need, then we apply for different services. ACTU, LSE… because sometimes they say, 'My child does not need an LSE, my child does not need to go for a psychological report'.

Similarly, some interviewees (I.SMT-K and I.TEACHER-A) expressed their wish that parents would have more faith in educators: 'I simply wish that parents [would] have more faith in me' (I.SMT-K), further arguing that sometimes parents get upset when things don't go as they wished, not understanding that it is all for the benefit of their child. Similar thoughts were expressed by other interviewees (I.SMT-I and I.TEACHER-E) who insisted that parents need to realise that the educators' aim, most often, is that the child receives a good education and is happy at school. Therefore, as the other interviewee noted (I.SMT-K), parents need to have more faith in educators. Other interviewees (I.SMT-B, I.TEACHER-J and I.LSE-I) pointed out that parents need to understand the challenges of educators too and put themselves in their shoes, and as argued by others (I.TEACHER-A and I.LSE-I), should thus refrain from being too demanding of educators and, instead, being realistic as to how far their child can go.

Interviewees (I.SMT-A, I.SMT-C, I.SMT-E, I.TEACHER-E, I.TEACHER-H, I.TEACHER-I, I.LSE-A, I.LSE-E and I.LSE-K) also expressed the wish that parents would collaborate with educators, discuss with educators any issues that arise and be open with educators. One interviewee (I.SMT-C) stated that parental input is especially important when the children are very young (Kinder 1 and Kinder 2), since, at that early stage, educators do not know them well and parents need to 'teach' the educators about them. As the child grows older, educators get to know the child better and the roles shift. Another interviewee (I.SMT-E) said that IEP meetings at their school are preceded by a meeting with the parents during which the child's challenges, likes and dislikes and preferred means of communication are discussed. Again, no one knows the child better than the parents. When parents work hand in hand with educators, autistic children make great progress (I.SMT-A), and it is therefore important that parents are open about issues that may arise (I.SMT-A and I.SMT-C):

> What I want from parents is that they are open, so if they want anything, if something is bothering them, if they want to say something... they shouldn't be afraid to say so. So then we know their needs, they know what we are feeling, then we can... a programme can be planned and we work together. (I.SMT-A)

An interviewee (I.SMT-C) further explained that 'if the parents do not tell us or keep something from us, they cannot pretend that the teacher or LSE will know what to do, because every case

is different'. Moreover, parents should be willing to continue working at home on what the child is academically learning at school (I.TEACHER-K) and to buy the required resources if these are not available at school (I.LSE-A).

One interviewee (I.SMT-A) also noted that, while it is important that parents accept the situation, educators need to make sure that they have accepted it too, as the ways in which educators sometimes behave and talk do not support and encourage the parent. A number of interviewees (I.TEACHER-A, I.TEACHER-J and I.LSE-E) also expressed the need for parents to have psychological support too, as well as support from educators (I.LSE-H). As one teacher (I.TEACHER-A) explained: 'The things I desire for myself are their needs, too'.

6.4 Other Issues

Q15 gave participants the opportunity to add any other comments they wished to share. Eleven SMTs, 14 teachers and 17 LSEs replied to this question. The replies to this question were too long and varied to fit neatly into a table, so replies will be discussed and quoted when necessary. Amongst these replies, there were some positive comments about inclusion and autistic students. One SMT (B.S1) stated that we will come to a point when we will be able to support all children, specifying that 'this is the start of a long journey, but I'm sure that we will arrive at the destination – that is, we [will] fully support all children with all types of autism'. Another SMT (D.S1) expressed the belief that the child makes a lot of progress with one-to-one support, while one teacher (K.T7) emphasised that 'with patience and love, it is possible to teach autistic students'. However, the majority of the replies to this question conveyed serious concerns, with some participants (E.S1, A.S3 and I.L2) insisting that there is a definite need for more training amongst educators and one SMT (A.S3) arguing that:

> …these cases are increasing in number, and I don't think that creating awareness is enough… Action is needed in that people around autistic children must have the right training and tools to create a pleasant learning environment for these pupils.

Another participant (K.S1) expressed his/her concern about this issue, stating that 'ASD is here to stay. It should be taken more seriously'. Three SMTs (C.S2, E.S3 and I.S2) stressed the importance of the role of professionals, whose services should be available on a daily basis, while some participants emphasised the importance of giving more support to LSEs. For this reason, an SMT (I.S2) suggested, there need to be more professionals who can work hands-on with teachers and LSEs, explaining that there needs to be:

> …more support for the LSE when she/he has a challenging case of [a] child with autism. It needs to be ongoing since, at times, it becomes so overwhelming that she/he begins to question her/his worth and doubt herself/himself. When an LSE is assigned a case of a child with autism, that's where training and support is

> more efficient [be]cause he/she faces difficulties every day. We need more professional experts in this area to guide and support.

Another participant (I.L4) insisted that support from professionals is even more important for LSEs when there is 'lack of help from parents or denial and so makes the work more difficult'.

Another participant (C.S2) supported this idea, arguing that a multidisciplinary team of professionals should be established in schools. Yet, another participant (C.S2) suggested that, since a child's behaviour might vary between the clinic and the school, psychological reports should be completed after observations in both settings. Some participants noted that certain autistic students, especially those experiencing severe autism, fare better in special schools, with one teacher (A.T7) stating that '[s/he doesn't] think that children with severe cases of autism should be included in the mainstream. They can be better catered for in a special environment more adequate to their needs'. An LSE (I.L3) added that 'severe students find it very difficult to stay in class all day long making it very challenging for the LSEs to cope with their tantrums. It is unfair for the autistic child, his teachers and peers to force them to stay in class for the sake of inclusion'. Worth pointing out here is the persistence of certain educators in regard to the schooling of autistic students in resource centres, barely acknowledging that the difficulties of autistic students could be in the environment rather than within the child him/herself, as was discussed earlier on.

For this reason, a number of participants noted that parents should understand that their child might need at least some time out of the classroom throughout the day. One participant (K.S2) suggested that 'parents should be aware that special classes or services are more beneficial in [the] case of [a] severe[ly] autistic child', while another participant (K.S3) commented that 'parents who have children with autism need to be more educated for the benefit of their own child… sometimes [children with autism] need not do all the classroom curriculum like their peers'. Others argued that it should not be up to the parents to decide whether the child attends mainstream school or a special school, as '[educators] are the professionals so [they] are the ones who know what is best [for the student], so why does the last word have to be [that] of the parent?' (K.T2). Others also noted that some parents tend to 'put pressure on SMT and staff to make [the] child exactly [like the] class peers' (K.T3) refusing to let their child have some time away from the classroom, and therefore 'parents should be prepared from an early age' that their child might need to be away from class for some time during the day (K.T14). This issue has also been discussed earlier on. In addition to this, some LSEs showed their discontentment, knowing that some parents are very demanding towards

LSEs, yet very often not appreciative. On the other hand, one teacher (E.T2) acknowledged that 'parents of children with autism need a great deal of support [because] many of them suffer silently'. It is essential to note here that very few educators acknowledged that parents might have their own issues, challenges and difficulties related to the autistic child. This was not the purpose of this study, and thus, I did not go into it in the literature. However, it is important to point out that parents' emotional and psychological difficulties should also be considered. Moreover, educators should also consider that parents might have their own very valid reasons behind the decisions they take for their child. One such example could be not wanting to send their child to a resource centre so as not to give their child a label. The effects of labels were discussed in detail in Section 2.3.2, and these parental issues in this regard were also discussed earlier in various sections of the analysis of findings of this study (Q6, IQ1, IQ4 and IQ3).

One participant (I.T8) also acknowledged the importance of autism to be diagnosed early so that children start benefitting from services as soon as they enter school, suggesting that 'screening for autism, alongside with hearing tests, should be compulsory as are the required vaccines to enter school'. Issues related to early diagnosis and early intervention were discussed in great detail in Section 2.1.4 in the literature review and also in various sections of the analysis of findings (Q4ai, IQ1). Another participant (J.T5) expressed his/her beliefs that 'children with autism are to be given our utmost attention and all the help needed, but we shall not forget other students'.

IQ8 also gave the interviewees the opportunity to share any other thoughts they might not have had the opportunity to share, asking them: 'Do you have any other comments or suggestions related to teaching autistic students?' In their responses, interviewees additionally shared a diversity of thoughts and suggestions.

One interviewee (I.SMT-C) expressed a number of thoughts, one of which suggested that it does not always matter how many services we offer, but rather the quality of those services. This interviewee also pointed out that the job of the LSE has changed from that of 'babysitting' to the more positive role of educating the student with different needs. The same interviewee also suggested that the training delivered to educators be mandatory, as making training optional would mean that very few would enrol in it. This issue of mandatory training had already surfaced earlier on (IQ5) and it is again relevant to note. It is surely perplexing to have different SMTs arguing that training should be mandatory and at the same time have a constant reference to the need for more training amongst various educators.

To be able to give hands-on tips and practical examples of class situations, trainers should have had direct experience in the field (I.SMT-C). This latter point was also made by

another interviewee (I.SMT-I), who contended that training should be conducted by persons who have had direct contact with autistic children.

Another interviewee (I.SMT-F) pointed out, once again, the importance of having an ASST teacher, while another interviewee (I.SMT-B) stressed that services for students with autism should be continuously improved and updated in order to always provide them with the best possible services. Another participant (I.SMT-A) suggested establishing more parent support groups, where parents can share experiences, raise awareness and support each other, supporting what was discussed earlier in regard to parental emotional and psychological difficulties. This interviewee (I.SMT-A) also shared his/her opinion that autistic students should only be sent to a resource centre to receive certain services.

The importance of teamwork amongst educators, service providers and parents was raised by another interviewee (I.SMT-D), who claimed that such cooperation will benefit everyone, especially the child, as was indeed discussed earlier on and was emphasised by Grenier and Yeaton (2011) and Majoko (2016). Moreover, as one LSE (I.LSE-H) stated, the autistic child in class is also the responsibility of the teacher, not of the LSE only; thus, the teacher needs to work hand in hand with the LSE to provide for the autistic student. Another interviewee (I.SMT-C) expressed his/her concern that educators' attitudes are still negative towards autistic students, therefore warranting additional awareness and training. In addition to this, a teacher (I.TEACHER-J) commented that there also needs to be more awareness amongst society in general, as people still do not understand the needs and challenges of people with autism. Still another interviewee (I.SMT-K) argued that we need to be more proactive in the face of the challenges of autism, and that adopting strategies for autism will help not only those autistic students, but all students in the school.

Another teacher (I.TEACHER-I) suggested that there needs to be some reform on the part of the education department so as to make it more possible to reach autistic children, whether it be through more financial resources or more time slots for meetings. This was also suggested by Messemer (2010). Moreover, another teacher (I.TEACHER-J) argued that the assigning of LSEs to students should be done with more responsibility. The teacher explained that severe cases of autism where the child throws a lot of tantrums should not be given to a pregnant LSE or to an LSE who has a small stature, as this does not make sense. Another important point was brought up by an LSE (I.LSE-A) who stressed that we must also think about those autistic students who are on the higher end of the spectrum, as these most often end up being bored in the class. Therefore, we must also be able to provide challenging activities for these students.

To conclude, it is worth noting some comments show us there is hope, promising perhaps a brighter future for autistic children. Indeed, while one LSE (I.LSE-K) emphasised the importance of showing love and affection to autistic children, another LSE (I.LSE-E) insisted that s/he has seen great improvement over the years where the education of autistic children is concerned. However, s/he underlined the importance of providing good training, an adequate environment and differentiated learning in the classroom.

6.5 Summary

This chapter presented the analysis of the data obtained for RQs 3 and 4. It included several verbatim comments taken from both the questionnaires and the interviews to support the arguments put forward in the analysis. Various references to the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3 were also included to the discussion of findings. Frequent critical discussions were also included to provoke more profound thinking about the issues discussed.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the educators' opinions about the resources and services, training and support currently available for educators working with autistic children, and I have enumerated the educators needs in regard to the resources and services, training, and support. The findings were discussed in view of the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Key findings show that educators have several services available to them but these need significant improvement. Moreover, the training they received was not adequate. Apart from that, educators in general are not satisfied with the support they currently receive.

Some of the most commonly desired resources/services amongst educators include more specifically-trained educators and skilled human resources, an adequate environment for autistic students, and spaces where students can calm down and release their energy, amongst others. Educators suggested training should include practical guidelines and tips, be hands-on and include observations, workshops and job shadowing, and be given by trained professionals who have had direct experience in the field, amongst others. In addition, educators also desire more support from professionals, more teamwork amongst educators, and more parental support, amongst others.

Following this, Chapter 7 will present a discussion through thematic analysis drawing on discourse analysis of the participants' discourse which was observed during the analysis of the research findings.

Chapter 7

Discussion of Findings

7.0 Introduction

During the presentation and analysis of my research findings in Chapters 5 and 6, I noted that there were various types of discourses that were recurrent in the data. As I discussed in Section 4.1.3 of the Methodology chapter, recurring discourses within a context affect the way individuals make sense of the world around them and what knowledge they construct of and/or through a particular discourse. For this reason, I felt it was important to include a Discussion chapter where I present a thematic analysis drawing on a discourse analysis (see Sections 4.1.3 and 4.5). This is because the perceived needs of educators related to resources and services, training and support that were presented and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 need to be further discussed in light of the contexts of the participants and the knowledge they have of autism, autistic students and inclusive education. In this chapter, I will link my discussion to the theoretical approach that frames this research, that is, social constructionism, and CDS, to help me provide insights into the discourse themes presented here. I will also refer to the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

7.1 Discourse Constructing the Autistic Child

As I explained in Chapters 5 and 6, the findings of this study reflect a very biomedical view of autism amongst educators in general, which categorises the difficulties arising from autism into groups, as is most often done in definitions such as those presented in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Such views of autism find their roots in the medical model view of disability, which views disability as something which should be cured, as was discussed in great detail in Section 2.1.2. Perceiving autism biomedically puts all autistic children in one limited category, in the sense that it assumes all autistic individuals behave in the same way and that all experience the same challenges. Indeed, as the research findings chapters indicated, most educators have defined autism by drawing on discourses which construct autism as a cluster of difficulties related to behaviour, communication and social interaction, specifically referring to autism as a disorder or a disability. One such example is a comment made by one teacher (K.T5) who argued that autistic children 'obviously, find it difficult to cope'. The word 'obviously' here reflects the depth of this teacher's belief that autistic children are not capable of learning in an inclusive environment like other children. This is not to say that autistic children will not experience challenges in an inclusive environment, but rather that all children, whatever their abilities, will experience their very own challenges. This biomedical framing of autism leaves a very meaningful impact on both children and teachers alike. Through this discursive framing, the deficit is firmly positioned within the child and, at the same time, outside the teachers. One

can note that the discourse used here indeed reproduces the medical model view of disability in direct opposition to a social model view (see Section 2.1.2). Hence, unknowingly and discreetly, educators are reproducing and reflecting 'normalising' practices which they favour. This discussion takes us back to Section 4.1.2, where the principles of CDS were outlined. Indeed, it has been argued by the proponents of CDS that the culture of society in general is one that favours the normative (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008). Moreover, CDS supporters also state that disability is socially constructed (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) and thus agrees with the social model view of disability, which perceives disability as created by society and thus seeks to find ways that society can adapt itself to accommodate the disabled individual, instead of the disabled individual changing for society (Krcek, 2013; Larsen, 2018).

Another example which clearly reveals educators drawing on discourses that reflect the medical model view of disability is that of a teacher (D.T8) who stated that the child is 'impossible to handle… disruptive… [and not] capable of learning', while an SMT (A.S3) noted that 'the child's ability to function in school or any other public place might create a problem'. Yet another example of this is a teacher (G.T1) who said that 'something is wrong with the child'. Again, the child is constructed as the problem, which, of course, goes against what is proposed and advocated by CDS scholars and proponents of the social model of disability, as already explained above.

A further example is that of a teacher (I.TEACHER-J) who shared his/her concerns about not being able to relate to autistic children, since according to him/her, 'they are all stubborn'. Again, this reveals the ways in which the teacher draws on discourse which constructs the child as being problematic. Firstly, the use of the word 'all' homogenises the experience of autistic students, and it reveals that s/he believes that all autistic children are stubborn, again reflecting the biomedical definitions of autism existing amongst Maltese educators in general which are deeply rooted in the medical model view of disability, as argued above; secondly, such a statement also constructs certain features of autistic behaviour to be the result of stubbornness, when such behaviour might merely be the way autistic children are communicating their feelings; thirdly, it calls into question what the teacher understand by the word *stubbornness* – is this referring to the repetitive behaviours and limited interests commonly associated with autism? If so, this once again the medicalised discourses Maltese educators draw on to construct the autistic child, which is rooted in the dominant Maltese culture of viewing disability biomedically (see Section 2.3.5). It is also important to note that narrating autism through the biomedical view, as seen above, constructs a boundary between

autistic students and 'other' students who are considered 'the normal students', thus creating the division between 'us' and 'them': 'if we are providing a service to the "normal child", why shouldn't there be the same care for these children?' (I.SMT-A). It is in such statements that we once again observe the persisting cultural preference for the normative, which rejects diversity and seeks conformity (Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000) discussed in CDS (see Section 4.1.2), thus establishing the oppositional view of 'us' versus 'them'.

Another type of discourse worth pointing out is that specifically related to the general biomedical definition constructed through common discourse amongst educators and society at large, which is normally related to autism, and which then leads to prejudice. In other words, the autistic child is constructed in light of the discourse associated with a biomedical view of autism, as shown in the following examples. Indeed, one teacher (F.T8) expressed her confusion in relation to teaching autistic students 'because [s/he] know[s] that children with autism could be a bit difficult', whereas another teacher (H.T1) said that s/he was worried about teaching autistic students 'as [s/he] was told that [the autistic child] throws tantrums regularly'. Such discourse mirrors the existing culture in Maltese education and society that revolves around autism and disability in general, as was discussed in Section 2.3.5. In fact, in the first example, one can see that the teacher's (F.T8) discourse constructs the autistic child as a difficult child simply because s/he is affected by the biomedical definition of autism circulating amongst educators and society in general that constructs the autistic child as a behaviourally challenged child. In the second teacher's (H.T1) statement, one can also observe that the teacher's discourse is affected by another educator's negative experience with one autistic child, and thus s/he constructs the autistic child in light of what s/he was told about the child. In fact, this fits with the social constructionism theory framing this analysis, as here one can observe well how the understanding that educators have of autism is constructed based on their culture and the social interaction they have with their colleagues, as was discussed in Section 4.1.1. Moreover, this also relates the ideas of CDS (see Section 4.1.2) and the social model of disability (see Section 2.1.2), where it is believed that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon (Krcek, 2013; Martin, 2008, as cited in Martin et al., 2019b; Tremain, 2005) and that the disabling effects are imposed upon the individual by society rather than by the difference in the individual (Krcek, 2013; Martin, 2008, as cited in Martin et al., 2019b). It is important to note here, that by no means is this analysis of discourse aimed at portraying educators as 'bad' individuals who are against autistic children and in favour of the 'normal' child. Indeed, it is of utmost importance to clearly highlight that, in such discourse, educators are merely reproducing the wider culture, policy and attitudes present in the Maltese society in general. Moreover, it is also

worth pointing out that, in a context where educators are expected to 'get students to behave', it is somewhat understandable that they consider the autistic child as the one who is creating problems for them, hence the belief that the problem is located outside their practice and within the autistic child.

7.2 Discourse Constructing Inclusion

Discourse constructing inclusive education was observed and noted repeatedly in the two findings chapters. Such discourse revolves around different issues, each of which, however, reveals the educators' inner beliefs that, in regard to autistic children, the problem lies within the child and that the decision whether an autistic child should be included or not depends solely on them, their behaviour and their dis/abilities. Upon a closer look, one would notice that the educators' construction of inclusion is framed in the same way as their construction of the autistic child, discussed in the previous theme. More specifically, just like in their construction of autism, they position the deficit as coming from within the child (mirroring their medical model approach), and in the same way, in their construction of inclusion, they position the deficit in the system of inclusion. In each case, educators never consider that they could also be contributing to the said deficits. I will address this below.

As regards the educators' opinions about the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools, it seems that they believe this depends on the severity of autism. In fact, the educators' discourse reveals that they draw on reasoning that again reflects the medical model view of disability and that they construct inclusive education and its effectiveness in light of such a view: 'but it depends on how severe the autism is. Students with severe autism… [make] it impossible for the LSE to work and cope in class' (I.L3). What is relevant here is that this LSE's discourse turned what is normally considered as the autistic child's challenges into his/her own challenges, thus constructing the autistic child as being a problem him/herself; instead of arguing that it might be difficult for the autistic child to cope in class, s/he thinks about his/her own difficulties of coping in class when supporting an autistic child. Such discourse reveals a somewhat self-centred view of inclusive education. This perception amongst educators of the effectiveness of inclusive education being dependent on the severity of autism was reflected in an SMT's (K.S2) comment, where s/he argued about the child's readiness to be included: 'Is he ready to be included? Will it help him?', making it sound as if there is a list of criteria that should be ticked which would reveal whether the child is prepared to be included or not, or if the child is in a position to decide whether s/he is ready to be included. This comment is rather troubling, in my opinion, as it indicates the persisting ideas or beliefs amongst educators

drawing on the medicalised discourse amongst themselves and society at large that construct inclusion as dependent on many different factors. This, in turn, suggests that educators do not truly believe in inclusion, despite stating that they do. Indeed, this reveals an important point about their understanding of inclusion, which I would say, reflects more closely an integration model rather than an inclusion model. If they truly believed in inclusion as it should be (see Section 2.2.3), then they would not think of any criteria that are needed to decide whether the child should be included or not, but would instead think about what strategies each school should adopt to ease every child's inclusion in mainstream schools, in a way that each and every child would feel a sense of belongingness and authenticity within the school community of which they form a part (Jansen et al., 2014). Such a perception of inclusion goes against the principles of the social model of disability, which clearly specify that society should change and adapt to accommodate the disabled child (Larsen, 2018).

In another view concerning the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools, some educators have even argued that sending them to resource centres instead of mainstream schools is actually beneficial for the autistic child because, they claim, autistic children who are 'non-verbal or severe suffer in a regular class! They get frustrated and are not happy' (I.T8) as 'the classes may be too overwhelming for the child' (J.L10). The latter LSE even called for practicality in this regard: 'Let's be practical' (J.L10), making the inclusion of autistic students sound as a very impractical suggestion. This discourse once again reveals the educators' beliefs with regard to inclusion and its effectiveness that draw on their construction of the autistic child based on a medicalised definition of autism and disability in general, as discussed in the previous theme. Such an argument strongly opposes the principles of CDS, which propose giving disabled people a voice with which they can share their thoughts about any given subject (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) (see Section 4.1.2). As a matter of fact, instead of listening to what autistic children think about their education in inclusive schools, they are randomly guessing at what is and is not beneficial for the autistic child and, even worse than that, deciding that inclusive environments are actually harmful to autistic children. Indeed, one can note here that educators have strong opinions as to where autistic students should be educated and how they feel in mainstream schools, which are obviously based on what they think. Their thinking draws on the biomedical view they have of autism and disability, and on the medicalised discourses commonly found within the Maltese educators' community and society in general. Not only are they not considering autistic students' perceptions, but they are also not acknowledging that every autistic child is different, and therefore what they propose does not necessarily apply to every autistic student. The short discussion in Section 3.1.4 about

autistic students' perceptions illustrated that autistic students consider educators as an important part of inclusive education and suggest characteristics that educators should have, one of which is the ability to provide a structured and calm classroom (Saggers, 2015). Surely, such discourse amongst educators does not reflect positive characteristics.

Another type of discourse which constructs inclusion clearly reflects the unpreparedness of Maltese schools and Maltese educators for inclusion, which again draws on the medical model view they have of disability, as discussed in Section 2.3.5. One SMT (I.SMT-C) stated that, when an autistic child shows difficulty coping in a particular situation in the classroom, the teacher most often sends the LSE and the child out of the class and 'they end up running around [on] the ground… until he calms down'. This links back to the need expressed by many educators of having a quiet space or a multisensory room within the school aimed at providing autistic students with an area where they can calm down during such situations. From the two findings chapters, it seemed that such a resource was difficult to provide due to lack of resources and a lack of space within the school. However, certain discourse revealed that the problem could be more related to the medical model perspective that educators have of autism (see Section 2.3.5). Indeed, one SMT (I.SMT-E) shared his/her thoughts on this, stating: 'I don't know why you ask if am I going to do another room? For these children? At times that's what I say, yes. We look at it as an extra…'. This does indeed make a lot of sense when considering that one particular school, despite not being given the necessary funding, did manage to provide a basic multisensory room in the school by obtaining funding through other means, such as fundraising. In fact, this goes back to what was discussed in the introduction to this theme, that educators seem to position the deficit in the system of inclusion, but rarely do they consider their role in the inclusion of autistic children and all disabled children for that matter. There are multiple considerations that one should reflect on, after reviewing the discourse above. Indeed, one could reflect upon the argument about whether the deficits in the Maltese education system are truly so grave that they render it impossible to include autistic children. It could perhaps be that such deficits are rooted in a lack of motivation amongst the stakeholders concerned, apart from the system itself. It could also be that such deficits reflect a lack of willingness amongst educators to cooperate with and support each other within the inclusive system. It is somewhat understood that not all educators are willing to do what it takes to make inclusive education effective. One particular comment which reflects such thoughts was that of an LSE (J.L3), who argued that:

> …[the effectiveness of the system] depends on the educators' perception of autism. So, if the educator sees autism as not appropriate in a mainstream setting,

> the system will never be efficient. But, if the educators [teachers and LSE] have positive views, then the system can be very efficient.

What is also worth noting here is that educators do not seem to understand that whatever strategies and/or resources they provide for autistic children, this will not only be beneficial for autistic children, but also for every child in the class or school. Thus, in the case of a multisensory room, if it were to be provided in each school, every child would benefit from it. All of this is once again evidence that our culture favours the normative, as purported by CDS (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) (see Section 4.1.2).

Another type of discourse within the medical model view of disability is that which constructs inclusive education as dependent on early screening, early diagnosis and early intervention. Educators generally draw on discourses that reflect their thinking that these three factors are crucial for the inclusion of an autistic child in mainstream schools. One particular teacher (B.T1) stated that 'children should be screened for autism before admission to kinder 1 and statemented appropriately' with the actual statementing being considered as 'the only concrete support' (I.S1) that educators receive. This is another worrying statement, as it yet again reflects how deeply rooted Maltese educators still are in the medical model view of disability, as was discussed in Section 2.3.5. Whatever challenges and concerns they shared all centred around the medicalisation of autism and the idea of autism as being the problem within the child, which should be taken care of and treated by diagnosing and statementing the child and providing him/her with an LSE, so much so that one SMT (G.S1) claimed that the statementing process should be a 'fast efficient service'. Hence, such discourse continuously constructs the autistic child as the problem within a medicalised definition of autism and disability, while at the same time constructing the effectiveness of inclusion as dependent on the autistic child and his/her diagnosis. Such beliefs once again indicate that our culture still favours the normative, as specified by CDS (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008), and as a result strives to normalise whoever fails to meet their criteria of being normal. This idea of screening and diagnosing the autistic child and intervening in his/her perceived difficulties was discussed at length in Section 2.1.4, where it was argued that, despite the great cultural insistence for early intervention, such intervention has a number of downsides which are rarely considered, including time commitment which can result in exhaustion and that, at such an early age, it is often difficult to distinguish between autism-like symptoms in an autistic child and autism-like symptoms in another child who is merely a late developer (Russell, 2016). In addition, it has been argued that early intervention is somewhat considered as a promising tool which takes an impairment away (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2014). Further to this, Mercieca

and Mercieca (2018) also argued that screening tests carry the risk of acting as barriers between the teacher and the child concerned. Screening, diagnosing and intervening also contribute to the issue of labelling and all its disabling effects (Gillman et al., 2000; Hodge, 2016; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2018; Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009), which was discussed in great detail in Section 2.3.2.

Concerning the issue of treating autism as outlined above, although none of the educators referred to autism as treatable, they did frequently make reference to the importance of early intervention aiming at normalising the child. Indeed, contrary to many educators, one particular LSE (D.L1) expressed that s/he does not agree with placing the autistic child 'in a room with other students with autism, because this leads to imitating bad behaviour'. In such a statement, one notices that, without specifically referring to autistic children as needing to be normalised, s/he is still claiming this indirectly by arguing that they should not be imitating autistic behaviour. This discourse draws on the medical model view of disability and reveals the educators' beliefs that construct autism as something that should be treated and cured, hence the insistence that it should not be imitated. Another point worth noting here is this LSE's reference to autistic behaviour as 'bad', again constructing the autistic child in light of a biomedical definition of autism. This was seen throughout the findings of this research, as will be discussed in the following section, again drawing on the medical model perspective amongst educators (see Section 2.1.2), which is socially constructed (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) (see Section 4.1.2) and rooted in the culture of Maltese educators and society in general (see Section 2.3.5).

7.3 Discourse Constructing the Behaviour of Autistic Children

During the process of analysing the data, I observed that Maltese educators tend to associate autistic behaviour with 'challenging' behaviour, frequently referring to it as 'bad' and 'disruptive'. One type of discourse constructing the behaviour of autistic children was related to this, clearly reflecting a lack of understanding on the part of educators towards autistic children. Indeed, one teacher (D.T8) very clearly claimed that 'it's impossible to handle. He is disruptive', adding that his 'odd and disrupting behaviour' frustrated him/her because s/he couldn't deal with it. Another teacher (E.T2) complained that '…the child was severely autistic and had disrupted the class, without showing any improvement'. One LSE (K.L4) associated challenging behaviour with hitting when claiming that '[the autistic child's] first communication was by hitting [him/her]', while an SMT (I.S2) argued that autistic behaviours 'literally drain energy from the LSE'. This negative construction of autistic behaviour, which

associates autistic behaviour with bad behaviour, results in negative attitudes amongst educators towards the inclusion of autistic children. This was noted in Ainscow et al.'s (2006) typology of the five ways of viewing inclusion; in fact, the second type of inclusion presented by Ainscow et al. (2006) was that which associates inclusion to bad behaviour, which in turn results in educators becoming fearful of the concept of inclusion. Moreover, the very demeaning way in which educators construct autistic behaviour focuses solely on the less positive characteristics of autism, without considering the positives that autistic children can bring to schools, as was indeed highlighted in Section 2.1.2. Further to disruption in class, one SMT (H.S1) stated that s/he associates autistic children with 'complaints from [the] teacher, LSE and parents', again negatively focusing solely on the less positive aspects of autism. In addition to this negative focus, I feel such a statement is also very worrying, as it not only reflects this educator's lack of understanding of autistic behaviour, but also reflects that, at times, SMTs might only be worried about the complaints they receive, rather than being concerned about the child's well-being and inclusion at school. This links back to what was discussed in the previous theme about the educators' construction of inclusion, where it was argued that the educators themselves might indirectly be contributing to the ineffectiveness of the Maltese inclusive system of education by their negative construction of the autistic child and of inclusion. I refer here to the statement by an LSE (J.L3) presented in discussion of the previous theme which clearly argued that the effectiveness of the inclusive system depends solely on the educators' attitudes.

Other educators explained that disruptive behaviour affects the flow of the classroom and makes it 'very challenging for the LSEs to cope with their tantrums [which] is unfair for the autistic child, his teachers and peers' (I.L3). In this regard, one SMT (K.S2) explained that 'disruptive behaviour may negatively affect the teaching and learning', especially as the child gets older and the pressure on the teacher related to curriculum is greater. Here, one can note that certain discourse constructs behaviour as disruptive in relation to the pressure exerted by the curriculum on the educators concerned, yet again reflecting deficiencies in the Maltese inclusive education system, as was discussed in great length in the two findings chapters. From this, one can see once again that educators are very pressured by the targets put on them by the education system itself, as was noted multiple times throughout the two findings chapters. I feel it is noteworthy to emphasise once again that this discourse analysis is not aimed at portraying educators as the bad individuals, but rather to illustrate the negative effects that socially constructed knowledge has on the individuals, as described by the social constructionism theory and CDS which were discussed in length in Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2.

Also, worth highlighting here is the statement by I.L3 constructing autistic behaviour as unfair for all concerned. As I have noted, such discourse is a result of Maltese educators focusing solely on the less positive characteristics of autism, without even considering any positives that the autistic child can bring to the school (see Section 2.1.2). This is a result of the Maltese culture of both educators and society in general, as was discussed in Section 2.3.5, reflecting a deep-rooted culture around the medical model view of disability (see Section 2.1.2). This confirms the principle held by the social constructionism theory, framing this research (see Section 4.1.1), that knowledge construction is dependent on the individual's view of the world and the interaction the individual has with his/her surroundings (Andrews, 2012; Burr, 2015b; Gergen, 1985; Wisker, 2008) as well as the arguments presented by CDS scholars (see Section 4.1.2) that disability is socially constructed and that the culture of the same society constructing disability is one that favours normative (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008). In addition, as I argued in Section 4.1.3, once discourse becomes very common amongst individuals, it becomes natural to think and act in light of that discourse. This is one such clear example of this.

Related to the previous observation about the level of the curriculum was the discourse associated with the inadequate environment found in Maltese schools. One could, in fact, observe that another type of discourse constructing the behaviour of autistic children is that which reflects the educators' beliefs that inclusion would have been effective for autistic students if there was an adequate environment in schools as well as enough support and resources for educators. One LSE (G.L4) explained that 'the environment in big classes, [with] too much stimulation, does not help children with [ASD]' because, according to another LSE (K.L12), autistic children need 'calmer environments where they can move freely, make noises'. Moreover, one LSE (E.L4) argued that 'there isn't enough support for LSEs and parents', while another (E.L5) claimed that 'the environment at school is not resourceful [and] LSEs and teachers need support'. Once again we note here the tendency amongst educators to locate the problem within the inclusive system itself without considering that they could also be contributing to these deficiencies in the system. This issue was discussed in length in the second theme above.

Another type of discourse constructing the behaviour of autistic children was that reflecting the lack of or difficulties with communication. It was observed that educators often consider communication as a source of challenging behaviour in itself. Educators shared various concerns in this regard, such as 'they cannot understand what you're trying to say' (I.T4), 'it was difficult [for the child] to communicate, interact and to follow with the daily

schedules' (F.L1), 'as this student couldn't express himself in words, it was difficult to communicate with him' (D.T8) and '[autistic children] mak[e] little or inconsistent eye contact [and] he rarely shared enjoyment' (J.T2). This discourse links back to what was discussed in the two findings chapters, where the need for more training was pronounced, as such needs might have been felt as a result of educators not being able to understand and communicate with autistic students.

Another type of discourse constructing behaviour was that which metaphorically associates autistic behaviour with animal-like behaviour, where the autistic child is considered in need of being tamed, just like an animal might need to be. For example, one teacher (E.T2) stated that 'by the end of the year, [the autistic child] was like a lamb'. Of course, this is a very demeaning and belittling way of explaining that the autistic behaviour improved over time. Such a way of thinking was also presented by one SMT (I.SMT-K), who claimed that certain autistic children's behaviour 'render[s] them unable to be educated if [it] is not restrained'. Such a comment is yet again very demeaning as it transmits the message that autistic children should be restrained. Considering that, for certain autistic students, their behaviour is the only way to express themselves, this discourse means that autistic children are being held back from expressing their needs and feelings. Once more this construction of behaviour draws on the very biomedical definition Maltese educators have of autism, and hence the need for more training surfaces again. Also, worth pointing out is the discourse reflecting certain educators' fear of having to work with autistic students, which was encountered and discussed throughout the findings chapters. One such example is that of a teacher (H.T1), who said that '[s/he] fears that one day [autistic children] will be in [his/her] class'. This communicates the message that autistic children should be feared and, at the same time, reflects the unpreparedness of Maltese educators to work with autistic children. Considering that discourse that becomes common becomes natural and normal, as discussed in Section 4.1.3, this is very dangerous, as it is constructing the autistic child as someone who should be feared. These arguments around the behaviour of autistic children discussed above mirror once again the medical model view amongst Maltese educators discussed in the previous themes and in the literature review (see Sections 2.1.2 and 2.3.5).

7.4 Discourse Constructing the Roles of the Teacher, the LSE and Other Professionals

The roles of the teacher and the LSE have been discussed in considerable length in the literature review as well as in the two findings chapters. However, discourse constructing these roles reveals more than their mere respective responsibilities. It has, in fact, been observed that

teachers struggle with regard to the teaching of autistic students because, according to educators, the Maltese education system has high expectations of teachers: 'our education system is very difficult for educators to cater and give individual attention to every student… let alone for students with autism' (I.L11); 'the teacher is not a robot. The teacher is human. Even when she has an LSE in class, she still has big challenges, let alone when we have cases of children who are still not statemented…' (I.SMT-I); and '…the class teacher does not have time, even if s/he wants… the teacher needs help.' (I.SMT-C). This discourse reveals yet again the possibility that negative attitudes amongst educators in general towards autism and inclusive education might arise from these expectations put on educators by the education system, as was mentioned in the previous themes above. Section 3.1.1 in the literature discussed that various challenges that educators encounter when working with autistic students, one of which was indeed the lack of time they have to dedicate to autistic children (Lindsay et al., 2013). One SMT (I.SMT-D) expressed his/her concerns that 'teachers feel [only] slightly confident in their ability to support students with autism', a statement which was confirmed by a teacher (I.TEACHER-J) who claimed that 'sometimes [s/he doesn't] know how to go about the child's needs'. Such discourse draws on the significant deficiencies in the Maltese education system, as was discussed in length in the findings chapters, particularly with regard to the unpreparedness of educators for inclusive education, specifically the lack of knowledge they have about autism (see Section 2.3.2). On another note, it is worth considering whether such discourse associated with the high expectations of the Maltese education system of teachers arises from the educators' construction of autistic students and their deep-rooted beliefs that autistic students require individualised strategies which would only be prepared solely for their sake. As argued above, educators seem to fail to recognise that whatever strategies or resources they prepare for autistic students are beneficial for all students in class, not only for autistic students, as was highlighted in Section 2.3.2 of the literature review.

While discourse that constructs the role of the teacher revolved around the struggles of the teacher, discourse that constructs the role of the LSE revolved more around the importance of this role within mainstream schools. Indeed, many teachers talked about their struggles in the absence of an LSE, or otherwise their success in the presence of one: 'it was a bit of a hard challenge for me, as no LSE was assisting [the] student' (G.T2); 'I always feel discouraged because in Kinder 2, they never have an LSE' (G.T1); '[I felt] confused because in kinder 1, usually the child will not come to school and have an LSE immediately' (K.T5); '…[the child] is not disrupting the classroom with the help of the LSE' (E.T8); 'always positive when I had an LSE… quite difficult with undiagnosed cases…' (I.T8); '… I was still confident that he

could change, as the LSE working with him has been at a [resource centre] for many years' (E.T2); and '[with] a dedicated LSE… the child will learn a lot' (E.T7). Here, it can easily be observed that such discourse constructs the LSE as having a very significant role and being considered almost a 'salvation' by teachers, as most often s/he takes full responsibility for the autistic child, including academically. This was acknowledged and discussed at length in the two research findings chapters, as well as in the literature review. In fact, the literature confirms the important role of the LSE who works most closely with autistic students by providing students with direct pedagogical instruction (Blatchford et al., 2009; MacBeath et al., 2006), and who therefore is considered by teachers as a valuable asset who offers them support and help in the classroom (Jarvis, 2003; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003; Wilson et al., 2002).

Another type of discourse within this theme is that which constructs the role of other professionals who, in some way or another, provide services related to autism. It was claimed that these professionals 'only visit for a few minutes' (K.T3) and 'suggest strategies which… sometimes do not help at all' (I.L2) because 'they don't understand [the educators'] reality [at school]' (I.L3). In addition, it could be observed that educators expect that these professionals do not merely suggest strategies for the sake of doing so, but rather use their experience of working with autistic students (which they hopefully have) to guide educators accordingly. Educators specifically claimed that such professionals 'guide [them] on what strategies could be used with each child after these professionals have worked with and observed each of these children' (B.T1) and '[show them] how to act, not just visiting for a short time and telling [them] what [they] should do' (K.T14). Nevertheless, through their discourse, educators revealed their construction of such professionals as providing 'special' services: '…each school should be [provided] with a special class which has a specialised teacher in autism and LSEs supporting' (D.L2) and 'There need to be specialised teachers who give their help throughout the year' (I.SMT-C). Such discourse draws on their construction of autistic children based on the medical model view that educators have of disability, thus leading to their insistence on having specialised services. One more important point to note is that, related to the training of educators, the discourse draws on the educators' desire that training be provided by 'people who have had more experience with students with autism than us! Not people who have acquired their knowledge only from courses and who have not really worked in this field' (I.L2). Here, one can again note the belief amongst educators that autistic students require the so-called 'special' services by those considered as 'special' professionals, which draw on their construction of the autistic child within a medical model view of disability. This discourse links to Hodge (2016) and Mercieca and Mercieca (2018) who argued that educators tend to think

that other educators know more than they do and therefore continue relying on the perceived knowledge of these 'specialist' professionals to guide them with educating autistic students. Such perceptions could be the result of Maltese education culture, which is still rooted in the principles of exclusion rather than those of inclusion and therefore perpetuates the belief that anyone who does not exactly fall within the parameters of being 'normal' needs 'special' attention, care and education. This reflects the beliefs of the proponents of CDS, who argue that disability is socially constructed and that the culture of society persists in favouring the normative (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) (see Section 4.1.2). Such perceptions are also a confirmation of the principles of the social constructionism theory framing this research, in that they reveal that the knowledge that Maltese educators have of autism is a mirror of the culture in which they were raised and the interaction they continuously have with their environment (Andrews, 2012; Burr, 2015b; Gergen, 1985; Wisker, 2008) (see Section 4.1.1).

7.5 Discourse Constructing the Role of the Parents

In the research findings, it was observed that discourse constructing the role of the parents portrayed them as essential members of the team working with the autistic child and, thus, as having significant importance in the progress of the child or the opposite. One teacher (E.T7) argued that, if the autistic child has 'understanding parents, the child will learn a lot', while an SMT (I.SMT-A) expressed his/her wish that 'parents… are open' so that '[educators and parents] work together'. In fact, parents' understanding and cooperation seemed to be appreciated by educators and considered to be essential components in the child's progress: 'Negative experiences occurred when parents (not often) are less or not cooperative or in denial' (G.L2) and 'If parents find it difficult to accept the situation… there will be no cooperation to give the child all the (needed) attention' (F.T7). Yet, others constructed parents as the educators' rivals, who are in denial in view of their child's autism and whose aim is solely to put pressure on educators. Indeed, one LSE (I.L3) argued that the child's mother 'was in denial… constantly saying that he can cope as other students and that at home he cooperates'. Another teacher (K.T3) contended that parents 'put pressure on SMT and staff to make [the] child exactly [like the] class peers'. Moreover, one particular SMT (I.SMT-C) stated that, at times, parents even 'almost say that [educators] have caused the problem'. Such attitudes amongst parents draw on their need to normalise their child, due to society's lack of understanding and its culture that favours the normative, as was discussed in length in Section 4.1.2 with regard to the beliefs of CDS scholars, again underlining that the society's culture is one that favours normative (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008).

However, much more evident was the discourse reflecting educators' construction of parents acting as barriers themselves with regard to their child's progress, mainly because they tend to resist educators' considerations for adapted curriculum and specialised services for the autistic child. One such example was the comment by an SMT (K.S2) who noted that 'parents should be aware that special classes or services are more beneficial in [the] case of [a] severe[ly] autistic child'. Another SMT (K.S3) insisted that parents of autistic children 'need to be more educated for the benefit of their own child'. Particular observations in this regard which merit consideration are those linked to the services of the resource centres. One particular SMT (I.SMT-K) argued that resisting the services of the resource centres means that autistic children are being deprived of 'a good service', while another SMT (I.SMT-D) claimed that 'some parents think it's a stigma', despite his/her own belief that resource centres are valuable in themselves as they offer a wealth of material from which autistic children can benefit. Again, one can note here the culture that favours the normative as proposed by CDS scholars (Connor, 2005, 2014; Gabel & Danforth, 2008) discussed in length in Section 4.1.2, hence the importance of the resource centre which helps in 'normalising' the autistic child.

Another type of discourse is that which constructs parents as unknowledgeable with regard to their child's autism, in contrast to educators, who construct themselves as the professionals who always know what is best for the autistic child. A very clear example of this was one teacher's (K.T2) comment: '[educators] are the professionals so [they] are the ones who know what is best [for the student], so why does the last word have to be [that] of the parent?' Similar to this comment was an SMT's (K.S1) comment that 'parents have too much say'. Both these comments indicate that educators often do not consider the parents' position at all and do not empathise with or understand the parents' feelings and thoughts. At the same time, however, educators seem to expect parents to 'have more faith in [them]' (I.SMT-K). This sounds very contradictory, as it is quite difficult for someone to have faith in a person who does not understand or empathise with them. A very interesting opinion related to this was that of an SMT (I.SMT-D), where s/he stated that 'parents are even less certain of teachers' confidence to teach their children with autism', indicating certain parents' lack of faith in educators. This concept was not delved into in the literature review, as it was beyond the scope of this research. However, it is significant to point out here that Maltese educators have the general feeling that, as educators, they are not respected and/or appreciated and that their profession is not taken seriously (Galea, 2020). This is indeed a much debated subject in Malta, in which, I believe, lie the roots of this discourse discussed above, which divides educators and parents into two

separate groups, each of which considers their own group as the one which knows better what is best for the child.

7.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a thematic analysis informed by the discourses common amongst Maltese educators. The recurring themes that emerge from these discourses revolve more around the negative attitudes amongst educators in relation to autism, autistic students and inclusive education; obviously, this does not reflect each and every educator's attitudes, as positive attitudes were also observed and reported throughout the analysis of the findings in Chapters 5 and 6. Nevertheless, I recognised the need for this discourse analysis so that the recommendations which will be presented in the following chapter will not only be based on the educators' perceived needs, but also proposed in the light of the educators' knowledge and attitudes towards autism, autistic students and inclusive education. In this way, the recommendations with regard to policy, practice and research, which I present in the next chapter, will be more specific to the Maltese context and thus more practical.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the key results of this research about the perceived needs of educators vis-à-vis working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools in Malta. It addresses the research questions and this study's limitations, and it offers a number of recommendations to solve the problems found, which would need to be implemented to enhance the experience of educators when working with autistic students as well as the experience of the students themselves. Further research in the field is also discussed, together with some personal insights.

It is important to highlight here that the main scope of this research was that of investigating the educators' knowledge of and attitudes towards autism, their opinions about inclusive education and their perceived needs with regard to the teaching of autistic students in mainstream schools. In the process of doing so, however, I noted that certain discourses, attitudes, and behaviours on the part of educators definitely do not match the principles of inclusive education and therefore would need to be altered for a more effective inclusive education. Hence, the recommendations given in this chapter should be understood in the light of the Maltese context discussed throughout this work.

8.1 Addressing the Research Questions

This research aimed to explore four research questions:

1. How much do SMT members, teachers and LSEs know about autism, and what are their attitudes towards autism?
2. What are the opinions of SMT members, teachers and LSEs regarding the effectiveness of an inclusive system of education for autistic students in Malta?
3. What do SMT members, teachers and LSEs think about the current resources, training and support available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools?
4. What are the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic children in mainstream primary schools?

Different sources and research methods revealed various deficiencies and shortcomings in the Maltese inclusive system of education for autistic students (as of the 2018–2019 academic year), as regards the resources, services, training and support provided to educators working in this context. Educators are aware of the problems, and this needs analysis revealed that similar ideas are shared amongst the different groups of educators concerning improvement. These will

be discussed in more detail in the following sections which address each of the research questions.

8.1.1 Research question 1.

How much do SMT members, teachers and LSEs know about autism, and what are their attitudes towards autism?

This research question aimed to investigate what kind or level of knowledge educators have about autism, their initial attitudes towards it, and whether these changed after the actual experience of working with an autistic child. Moreover, it was designed to explore educators' opinions about the inclusion for autistic students.

8.1.1.1 Educators' knowledge of autism.

Overall, educators seem to have general knowledge of what autism is. Many stated that autism presents difficulties in communication; difficulties in behaviour or different behaviour; and difficulties in social interaction, relationships, social skills, expression, emotion management and eye contact. Others added that it is complex because it consists of a broad spectrum of conditions, while some others mentioned that autism is a developmental disorder or disability. A number of LSEs also noted that autism presents difficulties in adapting to change, and autistic children tend to like schedules. Therefore, one can say that educators have a biomedical view of a definition of autism.

8.1.1.2 Educators' attitudes towards autism.

Educators' initial feelings, upon being informed that they would be working with autistic students, were generally negative. In fact, though most of the SMTs and some of the LSEs seemed to have positive feelings, negative feelings such as helplessness, frustration, discouragement, fear, anxiety, tension, worry and shock were felt amongst the three different groups. The reasons behind such feelings seemed to vary; however, the most common seemed to be the fact that educators are not trained in autism care and, thus, lack the required knowledge and experience. Another reason is that educators feel that autism is a difficult and challenging disorder, which can present itself in challenging behaviour. Some teachers also noted that such challenging behaviour disrupts the classroom flow. Another reason seems to be that some children enter formal schooling undiagnosed and, as a result, without the necessary support, such as that of an LSE.

Upon being asked to describe the actual experience of working with an autistic child, SMTs reported negative experiences. Although negative experiences were also common

amongst teachers and LSEs, the latter seemed to have had more frequent positive experiences, as they realised that working with autistic children can be rewarding and fruitful. Amongst those who had negative experiences, the reasons appeared to be the lack of communication and interaction with the child and excess pressure from the parents. The study revealed that the experience educators have with inclusion affects their attitudes; many indicated that after the experience they felt more knowledgeable about the subject and, thus, more able to help and understand autistic students. Many of the teachers and LSEs believe that autistic children can be successful if educators find the 'right way' to teach them. However, educators also learned that working with autistic children can be physically and mentally demanding.

However, educators who had never worked with an autistic child showed negative feelings towards the thought of having to do so. As for the reasons behind such feelings, it was found that the lack of training and knowledge about autism is in most cases the cause for such feelings. Moreover, the idea of autistic students having challenging behaviours also worries educators for various reasons, one of which is that they could be disruptive to the classroom environment and the lessons' flow.

Overall, the majority of educators expressed mixed feelings about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, with a substantial number of them indicating that they believe that such a decision depends on the severity or nature of the particular case. While a substantial number of SMTs believe that students in resource centres should be kept to a minimum, none of the teachers and LSEs mentioned this, with some indicating that children with severe autism would be better off in a resource centre. Other reasons determined were that mainstream school environments are not adequate for autistic children, there is not enough support for educators and parents and there are no adequate resources. It is important to note that, despite these beliefs, a substantial number of educators do believe that inclusion is beneficial for both the autistic student and the other students. Others also indicated that inclusion is a human right.

8.1.2 Research question 2.

What are the opinions of SMT members, teachers and LSEs regarding the effectiveness of an inclusive system of education for autistic students in Malta?

This research question aimed to investigate educators' opinions about the effectiveness of the current inclusive system of education where autistic students are concerned. In addition to expressing their negative reactions to the system, educators were also asked to suggest improvements that could be made.

8.1.2.1 Educators' opinions about the current inclusive system of education.

Educators' reactions to the current inclusive system of education were mostly negative, indicating deficiencies in the system, for which a variety of reasons were enumerated. The most common reasons identified were that school systems, curricula and school environment are not autism-friendly, schools are not equipped for the needs of autistic children, the severity or nature of the particular case, lack of resources, especially human resources, and lack of training and support.

8.1.2.2 Educators' suggestions for improvements.

Educators offered various suggestions as to how the inclusive system of education for autistic students can be improved. Educators suggested more awareness of autism, as a first step to achieve this, and therefore the need for training. Suggestions for such training included that it should be provided for all educators, be hands-on and ongoing, include practical aspects of the condition, and be provided in adequate environmental conditions, in small groups and preferably on a single school basis. Educators also identified the need for mainstream school environments to be improved, suggesting that classrooms should be more spacious, there should be a multisensory room in each school and there should be more resources available. Services in resource centres should also be considered for those students whose autism presents itself more severely. Educators also recommended that the services of professionals, including the ASST teacher, speech therapist, OT, psychologist and physiotherapist, be improved; they also stressed that there should be more therapists, support should be more frequent and there should be more services of different professionals, such as a clinical psychologist and a behaviour therapist.

More support for educators is another improvement that should be considered, according to educators. This should include guidance and advice on how to work with autistic students, more in-class support and a smaller number of students in class, and that educators need to be treated more professionally, especially in the case of parents who, educators feel, do not believe in educators' advice and suggestions. According to educators, the statementing process should also be reviewed: more importance should be given to urgent cases. The role of the teacher and of the LSE should be more appreciated, especially by providing them with more training and support, and their challenges should be acknowledged. The process of the provision of LSEs should also be done more efficiently: students who require full support should be provided with full support, the assigning of pregnant LSEs should be reconsidered, as they often take sick leave and are often not able to handle certain behaviour, and the current regulations

stipulating that LSEs on a shared basis must leave their students to support other students on a full-time 1:1 basis in the absence of their assigned LSE should be reviewed.

Educators also suggested that curricula are still heavily focused on academics and lack hands-on activities and that the current textbooks are inadequate. These issues need to be addressed. Moreover, peer preparation should be done in classes where there are autistic students, and teachers should be given training to be able to do the peer preparation. It was also suggested that there should be early screening for autism, so as to be able to provide earlier intervention.

8.1.3 Research question 3.

What do SMT members, teachers and LSEs think about the current resources, training and support available to them when working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools?

This research question aimed to investigate the educators' opinions about the current resources and services, training and support that are available to them.

8.1.3.1 Resources and services.

The three groups of participants made reference to different services available including the resource centre, INCO, ASST, LSE, speech therapist, OT and early intervention. However, there is an apparent lack of resources available, as educators claimed that most resources have to be prepared by the LSEs.

Despite the number of services available to educators, it seems that these still need significant improvement for them to be rendered efficient. Some of the improvements to be done on the services as mentioned by educators are the following:

- Services should be provided more frequently, and thus, more human resources are needed;
- All services should be provided on school premises;
- There should be teamwork amongst professionals, ideally by setting up a multidisciplinary team in schools;
- Hand-overs should be given by professionals to both the LSE and the teacher of the child receiving services;
- Parents should be given the opportunity to benefit from all the services available for their child, and not made to choose from amongst them;
- Parents should be more involved in the education of their children;

- Parents should be made more aware of the services available and given the necessary information about the services, so as to be able to make informed decisions when deciding about the services for their child;
- Services should be made easy to access by parents; and
- Services should be adapted to a particular child's needs, instead of the use of checklists.

8.1.3.2 Training.

The most common training received by educators was some credits at university, PD sessions or in-school training, some general sessions or voluntary courses. There were a number of teachers who said that they did not receive any training at all, while a number of LSEs said that the formal training they received had nothing to do with practice. It was clearly evident that whatever training the educators received was not adequate at all.

8.1.3.3 Support.

Educators made reference to various types of support available to them, including the support of the INCO, LSE, early intervention teacher, resource centre, SMT and colleagues. A significant number of educators indicated that they receive little or no support at all, while other educators commented negatively on the support they actually receive. It is, in fact, also clear that educators, in general, are not satisfied with the support they currently receive.

8.1.4 Research question 4.

What are the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs working with autistic **children in mainstream primary schools?**

This research question aimed at investigating what the educators' needs are vis-à-vis resources, services, training and support to be better able to work with autistic students in mainstream schools.

8.1.4.1 Resources and services.

The most commonly desired resources/services amongst educators were the following:

- More specifically-trained educators and skilled human resources should be employed and these should be able to give practical advice;
- LSEs should be managed efficiently;
- An adequate environment for autistic students, considering colour schemes and type of furniture used, as well as more spacious classrooms;

- Spaces where students can calm down and release their energy, preferably a multisensory room;
- Multisensory resources;
- Colour printing availability in schools;
- More financial resources, as well as guidance and advice on the use of such funds;
- More training which should expose educators to different needs and should preferably be hands-on; training should also be given to all those who will be working in schools, whatever the length of period of work, including tradespeople; educators should also be grouped and given training according to their specific needs;
- Services should be given more frequently and should include the services of the speech therapist, OT, early intervention teacher, INCO, ACTU, ASST teacher and psychologist;
- Services should be continuously improved and updated;
- Psychological services for educators and parents, in addition to those offered to autistic children;
- Support from colleagues and professionals working with the child;
- Human resources to serve as replacements while educators take a short break during the school day;
- Efficient support services for educators;
- Appropriate statementing of autistic students;
- Additional services of a behaviour therapist, clinical psychologist and counsellor;
- A suitable hydrotherapy pool; and
- The continuation of services given at the resource centre.

8.1.4.2 Training.

Apart from being very inadequate, it is also evident that training is very lacking amongst Maltese educators and, at the same time, very much desired. Educators suggested training should:

- Be mandatory;
- Include practical guidelines and tips, case studies and videos;
- Be hands-on and include observations, workshops and job shadowing;
- Be given by trained professionals who have had direct experience in the field;
- Be given in small groups;

- Include professionals coming to the school setting to observe the realities at school, specifically an ASST teacher;
- Include appropriate literature;
- Be specific and more adequate for the particular educators' needs. LSEs should be given more training on conditions, such as autism, rather than on how to teach curriculum subjects;
- Be for everyone, including SMT, teachers, LSEs, minor staff and parents;
- Be ongoing and continuous, giving educators time to practise what they learned in class and then going back to training to discuss and share experiences; and
- Be delivered in an effective way which is also adequate for educators, considering the advantages and disadvantages of different delivery methods.

8.1.4.3 Support.

As previously noted, educators are not satisfied with the kind of support they receive, even arguing that it is very lacking, and therefore they suggested the following:

- There should be more training, offering strategy suggestions and hands-on experiences;
- There should be a professional to consult when the need arises;
- More support from professionals should be given to educators, especially by giving them better feedback on students and giving advice after they have observed the student in class;
- There should be more teamwork amongst educators, service providers and parents;
- There should be synergy amongst the professionals within the education department so as to understand educators better in the real context they work in;
- Urgent cases of autistic children should be given priority when in need of help;
- Better planning when assigning LSEs to students;
- More support from colleagues, including support from LSEs for teachers, from teachers for LSEs and from SMTs for teachers;
- More resources and modern devices to attract and motivate students;
- Emotional and psychological support, through praise and encouragement;
- To have more counsellors and support forums;
- To have human resources who could replace educators in class while they take a short break; and
- Financial support.

Educators also stated that they require support from parents, including:

- Accepting their child's condition and that the child might need some adaptations;
- Having more faith in educators, and understanding that educators want the best for the child;
- Collaborating with educators and have open communication with them;
- Continuing to work with the child at home on what the child is learning at school; and
- Purchasing the required resources.

Educators also noted that parents need to have psychological support and support from their child's educators and that there should also be more parent support groups.

8.2 Synopsis

The educators who participated in this research showed that they have general knowledge about autism, which reflects a biomedical view, and so need to have more knowledge when it comes to working with autistic students in practice. Their attitudes, overall, were quite negative, especially prior to having worked with autistic students, or if they had had a negative experience of working with autistic students; however, the study also indicated that negative attitudes tend to change when educators have positive experiences. Educators' opinions about the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools depend on a number of factors, as does their opinion on the effectiveness of the inclusive system of education for autistic students. Educators are not satisfied with the resources, services, training and support available to them, and they also claimed that these are very lacking. They provided various suggestions on how this can be improved. They also offered recommendations based on their respective perceived needs in cases where these are lacking.

8.3 Limitations of the Study

Since this research adopted qualitative methods, it was not possible to deliver questionnaires and conduct interviews in all government, church and independent primary schools in Malta and Gozo. Therefore, it provided an overview of the current situation and perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSEs through a representative sample. The sample included all the educators (SMT, teachers and LSEs) in all state primary schools of one particular college. Moreover, not all prospective participants agreed to participate in the research, which restricted the data.

Although questionnaires tend to have very low response rates, in this case, I had quite a high return. This could be due to the preventive measures I took. Indeed, I delivered all the

questionnaires by hand to try to minimise this limitation as much as possible — meeting with the participants face-to-face and explaining to them what the research was about proved to be a good technique for generating more interest in the study.

Since almost all of the participants preferred to speak in Maltese, all the interviews, except one, were held in Maltese. Hence, there is a limitation with regard to the language translation when transcribing the interview recordings. Another limitation related to the interviews was that some interview participants did not prepare in advance, although I had sent the questions well beforehand, and thus, they needed to be prompted during the interview, as at times they tended to be unsure about how to respond. Moreover, in certain cases, the environment where the interview was held was not the ideal environment, as there were disruptions. There were also two interviews which were interrupted, and I had to stop the recorder and start it again.

A final limitation was that, for both research methods, certain participants gave responses to certain questions which overlapped on the information in other questions; for example, if they were asked about the resources they would like to have, they included more training as a resource, not considering that there was a question dedicated to training. This is not incorrect per se, especially because each time issues were raised, the context of the argument was different as well as the examples provided by the participants. However, it sometimes led to overlapping information in the research findings chapters. Nevertheless, it was still felt necessary that the information provided by the participants be presented exactly as and where it was provided, as this was the most transparent way to present the data, making sure each and every bit of information obtained would be considered and analysed; I then summarised the findings in the conclusion chapter.

8.4 Contribution to Knowledge

As already discussed in the literature review chapter of this study, although research about autism has increased in the Maltese context, there is very little research concerning the needs of teachers who teach autistic students, while there is no research whatsoever about the needs of SMTs and LSEs in this regard. Moreover, the limited research that exists about teachers does not delve deeply into the research questions, as this type of study has not been done at a doctoral level. At the same time, it is a well-known fact that the diagnosis of autism is on the rise, and this study showed that educators' challenges in regard to the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schools are increasing proportionately. The findings clearly showed that the Maltese inclusive system of education has many deficiencies and that there are

many limitations as regards the resources, services, training and support provided to educators to be able to work more effectively with autistic children. Therefore, this research contributes to the knowledge on this issue in that it provides a review of the current resources, services, training and support available to SMT members, teachers and LSEs, and provides a needs' analysis of these educators vis-à-vis the teaching of autistic students in mainstream state primary schools. Moreover, it provides a clear picture of the Maltese context in this regard, therefore enabling me to provide recommendations related and suitable to the Maltese context.

In addition to that, this study can contribute to further knowledge, as it can be used as a basis for more research in this field, namely that of investigating the needs of educators vis-à-vis the teaching of autistic students in a mainstream middle or senior school. Considering the age of students at these levels as well as the different styles of teaching, different environments of these schools and the level of subject content, I would assume that new insights would emerge from the study related to the needs of educators at this level. The same research methods could be used to conduct such research.

8.5 Recommendations: Policy, Practice and Research

8.5.1 Policy.

From this study, a number of challenges arising from current policies emerged, for which the following changes should be considered:

1. Statementing of autistic students should be done appropriately within the shortest period possible. Autistic children should be diagnosed after being observed in different settings by a qualified psychologist and then referred to the statementing board. This allows for the diagnosis to be done responsibly, with the sole aim of providing the child with the necessary support to reach his/her full potential. The needs of the child should be considered seriously when deciding on what kind of support will be given to the child;
2. Early screening for autism should be encouraged. At present, a screening programme (*Lenti*) is offered to parents of very young children, which is voluntary and which basically entails a checklist being presented to the parents and ticked off by a professional. However, screening should be encouraged as parents may feel reluctant to do the screening, even if they suspect their child might need help, as they might be in denial. The aim of such screening should be that of being able to support both the parents and the child during the time when parents start noticing their child as being different. Since differences are normally looked at more negatively from the medical model

perspective in the Maltese education and societal culture, such a time could be very disturbing and stressful to parents.

3. In the case of autistic children who enter formal schooling and are still undiagnosed and, thus, not statemented, and where particular challenges are affecting the child, the educators and the peers, the case should be treated as urgent and the statementing process should be started immediately. In such circumstances, when there appears to be certain challenges related to inclusive education, support should immediately be provided for the sake of the child, his/her peers and the educators concerned.
4. The assigning of LSEs should be planned rigorously. LSEs who are assigned shared support should be shared amongst students whose difficulties will not interfere with each other; for example, a child with ADHD and an autistic child are not the ideal cases for a shared LSE. Moreover, the stature or present condition of the LSE should be considered; for example, autistic students who have severely challenging behaviour should not be assigned to an LSE whose stature is very small or who is pregnant, as they would be unable to support the child effectively.
5. The policy regarding full-time one-to-one LSE support versus shared LSE support should be reconsidered. While it is absolutely correct that students with full-time one-to-one support stay at school if their assigned LSE is absent, it is unfair for students with shared support to be without LSE support for an amount of time during the day, or perhaps a full day, while their own assigned LSE is supporting another student with full-time one-to-one support. Such a situation not only leaves the students without support for an amount of time, but also affects their schedule and routine, which is a problem considering that autistic students are affected by such changes.
6. Timetables for teachers and LSEs should permit time slots which they can use together for lesson preparation and resource creation. Timetables should also allow for a short break for educators during which they can move away from the classroom while the students are being supervised by another responsible adult. This especially applies for those LSEs who are supporting a student on a full-time one-to-one basis. As the situation currently stands, LSEs supporting students on such a basis are entitled to a 15-minute break each day, as per the latest MUT collective agreement (MUT, 2017); however, in reality, in certain circumstances, they are unable to avail themselves of it, as most often there is no one to replace them during those 15 minutes.

8.5.2 Practice.

In order to render the inclusive system of education more efficient for autistic students, the following suggestions should be considered:

1. More training should be provided to all stakeholders concerned, that is, SMTs, teachers, LSEs, minor staff and parents. Tradespeople who will be completing work in schools should be guided on how to implement such work for the benefit of autistic students, for example, the type of furniture or the range of colours to be used, as tradespeople are not normally trained on autism. Also, serious considerations should be given to what kind of training should be provided to educators so as to be effective. Considering that educators expressed their wish for the training to be on-going and focus on the practical aspects of working with an autistic child, the type of training given should definitely move away from the idea of giving educators a 2-hour session where they are merely provided with a very general overview of autism. Moreover, it should also move away from the idea of lecture-type training, as this is not effective for educators. The following suggestions regarding training should be considered:
    - Considering that educators have a medical model perspective of autism and disability in general, the first step should be aimed at guiding educators towards a more social model perspective. It is useless to train educators about autism if their view remains a medical one, since this view persists in locating the problem within the child, and thus educators will resist recommendations to improve their practice with regard to autistic students and their inclusion in mainstream classrooms.
    - Since the training (if any) that educators have received to this point has primarily been focused on the limitations of autistic students, it is understandable to some extent that the Maltese educational culture remains that of perceiving autism and disability from the medical model. Educators should be guided into critical thinking during their training by being posed various questions that require them to think, reflect and consider various aspects to autism. They also need to be made aware of the different ways of viewing autism and disability, such as the medical model and the social model of disability, and be acquainted with the principles of CDS. Most often, educators are not even aware that their way of thinking is limited to the medical model, as this is the only way they know and it has been perpetuated by the culture they were raised in.

- It would be ideal if training can be delivered by different sources, including parents of autistic children, as well as autistic people themselves. Providing educators with different perspectives can further enhance their critical thinking about autism and inclusive education. It is, however, to be noted that, despite this ideal, considering the context of a very small island such as Malta, it could be quite difficult to find autistic individuals and parents or families of autistic children that are willing to deliver such training. This is because many individuals and families are uncomfortable sharing intimate experiences in a context where everyone knows each other.
- Training provided should differ from the current training being offered in the sense that it should be more practical and allow for more critical thinking, a skill which is still very absent in the Maltese culture, not only amongst educators, but amongst society at large.

2. Peer preparation programmes should be introduced in schools to be held at the beginning of the scholastic year in classes where there is an autistic student. Such programmes would ultimately lead to more awareness and a more inclusive society. Educators should be trained on how to implement such programmes, or else trained professionals should be assigned to deliver such programmes.
3. There should be more flexibility in the curriculum. The curriculum should allow for more life skills and more time for hands-on activities to consider the needs of those students who learn differently. Too much emphasis on academics and assessments is currently given.
4. There should be more teamwork amongst all the professionals working with the child. Written handovers should be given to the parents, the LSE and the teacher of the child after each session, and a copy of these should be available in the child's file in case other professionals need to refer to it. An even better system would be if a child's file is available online and every professional working with the child (with the parents' consent), together with the parents, has access to the child's file to enter data on the child or to access information from other professionals. Such a digital system would eliminate bureaucracy.
5. More human resources should be employed and well trained to provide better services which are more frequent. Professionals should be able to guide educators appropriately by providing practical advice and be on school premises whenever needed. Preferably, such professionals should be assigned to one particular school, or two/three schools

(depending on the size of the school), so as to be able to build a relationship with the students and the educators and get to know the challenges in the school/s s/he is assigned to. In addition, it is of utmost importance that the services offered are subject to regular quality assurance assessments to ensure accountability and thus quality of services. This is especially important since the services are provided by different departments, for example services of OT and speech are given by the health department, whereas the services of the early intervention teacher are provided by the education department, while others are provided by private entities.

6. Psychological services should be provided, not only to students, but also to educators and parents alike.
7. Effort should be made to provide better environments in mainstream schools. Classrooms need to be more spacious and equipped with the necessary resources, yet adapted to the needs of autistic students. Every school should have some sort of multisensory room equipped with the basic multisensory resources so that autistic students can have access to it during meltdowns.

8.5.3 Research.

Despite the growing research in this field, more research into autism and inclusion could be done to further improve the lives of both the autistic students and their educators. Doing so will surely lead to better school experiences for all stakeholders involved. Some research ideas that could be delved into, according to the results of this research, include:

1. A study of the needs of educators working with autistic students in a mainstream middle or senior school;
2. A study of the needs of educators working with autistic students in a private or church school;
3. A study of the needs of autistic students in a mainstream primary school or a mainstream middle or senior school;
4. Action research about different types of training for educators, getting their feedback about it and providing benefits and limitations for each type of training, ultimately suggesting the best training to be used in the Maltese context;
5. Research that investigates the difference in both attitudes and classroom practices before and after educators are given training;
6. Research that goes into the creation of resources or a resource pack to be used with autistic students; and

7. A study investigating the opinions, challenges and needs of service providers and/or therapists who provide services to students (government, church and private schools), considering the large workload they have, which is an issue that emerged from this research.

8.6 Personal Insights

This research has helped me to grow both personally and professionally for various reasons. Studying for a period of four years at this level requires a certain commitment and passion towards the study one is doing. At the same time, many things have happened parallel to the study itself. I started the journey with a one-year old, experienced another pregnancy during the journey and ended it with a five-year old and a one-year old. I have also worked full-time throughout, changing jobs twice during the process, with both jobs bringing along their own unique challenges. Moreover, dealing with family routines, commitments and other daily matters was challenging – it has taught me to handle the pressure and the value of having a fixed routine in order to maintain time management plans to allow me to perform all tasks.

Moreover, studying in a foreign university has provided me with an opportunity to meet people with diverse backgrounds and observe their different methodologies and compare them to the ones used at the University of Malta, while reflecting on how various approaches could be adapted professionally to get the best possible outcome. At the same time, having completed my master's degree with the same university has allowed me to observe the gigantic step between a master's degree and a PhD degree and understand the deeper analysis required by the researcher at a doctoral level, so much so that the research becomes part of the researcher – thus prompting me to daringly admitting that it is my third 'baby'.

As discussed in the introduction, I have always had a special interest in the subject; however, through this research, I developed an immense fascination with it. It helped me understand the realities out there, the challenges, the strong opinions of educators, but more importantly the reasons behind them, and it urges me to continue working in this regard.

8.7 Final Note

The field of autism is an area of growing importance, especially when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools, due to the major limitations existing in Maltese schools in this regard. Success in this area is, however, possible if all the stakeholders concerned are able and willing to work towards it. This needs analysis was a first step in providing some enlightenment on the issues being addressed, but considerable work is still required in this academic endeavour.

If this crucial field is given the necessary political attention by the stakeholders and authorities concerned, inclusive education for autistic students will be a far better experience for everyone involved, including the autistic students, all the educators and, of course, the parents of autistic students.

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Appendix A – SMTs' Questionnaire

Questionnaire for Senior Management Team

SECTION A

Background Information

In this section, you will be asked for background information about yourself.

Please ☑ tick where appropriate.

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. How long have you been in your current role?
☐ 1 year or less ☐ 2–5 years ☐ 6–10 years ☐ 11–15 years
☐ 16–20 years ☐ 21–25 years ☐ 26 years or more

SECTION B

Knowledge and Attitudes about Autism

In this section, you will be asked for information on your knowledge about and attitudes towards autism.

Please ☑ tick or fill in as appropriate.

3. What do you understand by the term *autism spectrum disorder*?
____
____
____
____
____

4. Have you ever dealt with an autistic student in your role as an SMT member?
☐ Yes (Go to 4a i, ii, iii, iv) ☐ No (Go to 4b i, ii)

a. If yes,

i. what were your initial feelings when you found out that you would be dealing with an autistic student?
____
____
____
____

ii. Could you explain why you experienced these feelings?
____
____
____

iii. Could you describe your experience of dealing with this autistic student?

____
____
____

iv. How did this experience affect the way you feel about autistic students?

____
____
____

b. If no,

i. what are your feelings about the possibility of dealing with an autistic child in the future?

____
____
____

ii. Could you explain why you have these feelings?

____
____
____

5. Do you agree with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both

Why?

____
____
____
____

6. Do you think our inclusive system of education is effective in the case of autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

Why?

____
____
____
____

SECTION C

Resources, Training and Support for Educators Working with Autistic Students

In this section, you will be asked about the resources, training and support for educators working with autistic students.

Please fill in as appropriate.

Resources and Services

7. What are the resources and/or services currently available to help the school's SMT deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

8. Based on your experience and/or in speaking with your colleagues, what resources and/or services do SMTs need to help them deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

Training

9. What training have you received until now to deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

10. Do you feel this training addressed all issues related to dealing with autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

11. What should the trainings include to help SMT deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

Support

12. Do you think SMTs currently receive adequate support to help them deal with autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

13. What support do SMTs currently receive from the education department to help them deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

14. What support do you think SMTs need to help them deal with autistic students?

____
____
____

Others

15. Would you like to add other comments?

____
____
____
____

Please read the instructions below to participate further

As the second step in my research, I will conduct a short interview with some of the participants. The interview will comprise about 15 questions based on your perceived needs to work with autistic students in mainstream settings. All participants will remain anonymous. To participate in this interview, please fill the attached reply slip below. Please note that not everyone who volunteers will be included. The selection will be performed according to the exigencies of the research. Also, the interviews will be recorded so that the researcher can more easily recall what has been discussed. Those who volunteer are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

First Name: ____________________ Last Name: _________________________

Email: ____

Mobile: __________________________ Landline: ________________________

Position at School: ☐ LSE ☐ Teacher ☐ SMT

Appendix B – Teachers' Questionnaire

Questionnaire for Teachers

SECTION A

Background Information

In this section, you will be asked for background information about yourself.

Please ☑ tick where appropriate.

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. How long have you been in your current role?
   ☐ 1 year or less ☐ 2–5 years ☐ 6–10 years ☐ 11–15 years
   ☐ 16–20 years ☐ 21–25 years ☐ 26 years or more

SECTION B

Knowledge and Attitudes about Autism

In this section, you will be asked for information on your knowledge about and attitudes towards autism.

Please ☑ tick or fill in as appropriate.

3. What do you understand by the term *autism spectrum disorder*?

____
____
____
____
____

4. Have you ever taught an autistic student?
   ☐ Yes (Go to 4a i, ii, iii, iv) ☐ No (Go to 4b i, ii)

   a. If yes,
      i. what were your initial feelings when you found out that you would be teaching an autistic student?

      ____
      ____
      ____
      ____

      ii. Could you explain why you experienced these feelings?

      ____
      ____
      ____

      iii. Could you describe your experience of teaching this autistic student?

iv. How did this experience affect the way you feel about autistic students?

b. If no,

i. what are your feelings about the possibility of teaching an autistic student in the future?

ii. Could you explain why you have these feelings?

5. Do you agree with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both

Why?

6. Do you think our inclusive system of education is effective in the case of autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

Why?

SECTION C

Resources, Training and Support for Educators Working with Autistic Students

In this section, you will be asked about the resources, training and support for educators working with autistic students.

Please fill in as appropriate.

Resources and Services

7. What are the resources and/or services currently available to help teachers teach autistic students?

___

___

___

8. Based on your experience and/or in speaking with your colleagues, what resources and/or services do teachers need to help them teach autistic students?

___

___

___

Training

9. What training have you received until now to teach autistic students?

___

___

___

10. Do you feel this training addressed all issues related to teaching autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

11. What should the trainings include to help teachers teach autistic students?

___

___

___

Support

12. Do you think teachers currently receive adequate support to help them teach autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

13. What support do teachers currently receive from the school or education department to help them teach autistic students?

___

___

___

14. What support do you think teachers need to help them teach autistic students?

___

___

___

Others

15. Would you like to add other comments?

___

___

___

___

Please read the instructions below to participate further

As the second step in my research, I will conduct a short interview with some of the participants. The interview will comprise about 15 questions based on your perceived needs to work with autistic students in mainstream settings. All participants will remain anonymous. To participate in this interview, please fill the attached reply slip below. Please note that not everyone who volunteers will be included. The selection will be performed according to the exigencies of the research. Also, the interviews will be recorded so that the researcher can more easily recall what has been discussed. Those who volunteer are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

First Name: ________________ Last Name: ___________________________

Email: ____

Mobile: _________________________ Landline: _______________________

Position at School: ☐ LSE ☐ Teacher ☐ SMT

Appendix C – LSEs' Questionnaire

Questionnaire for Learning Support Educators

SECTION A

Background Information

In this section, you will be asked for background information about yourself.

Please ☑ tick where appropriate.

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. How long have you been in your current role?
   ☐ 1 year or less ☐ 2–5 years ☐ 6–10 years ☐ 11–15 years
   ☐ 16–20 years ☐ 21–25 years ☐ 26 years or more

SECTION B

Knowledge and Attitudes about Autism

In this section, you will be asked for information on your knowledge about and attitudes towards autism.

Please ☑ tick or fill in as appropriate.

3. What do you understand by the term *autism spectrum disorder*?

   ____
   ____
   ____
   ____
   ____

4. Have you ever worked with an autistic student?
   ☐ Yes (Go to 4a i, ii, iii, iv) ☐ No (Go to 4b i, ii)

   a. If yes,
      i. what were your initial feelings when you found out that you would be working with an autistic student?

      ____
      ____
      ____
      ____

      ii. Could you explain why you experienced these feelings?

      ____
      ____
      ____

      iii. Could you describe your experience of working with this autistic student?

iv. How did this experience affect the way you feel about autistic students?

b. If no,
   i. what are your feelings about the possibility of working with an autistic student in the future?

   ii. Could you explain why you have these feelings?

5. Do you agree with the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both

   Why?

6. Do you think our inclusive system of education is effective in the case of autistic students?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

   Why?

SECTION C

Resources, Training and Support for Educators Working with Autistic students

In this section, you will be asked about the resources, training and support for educators working with autistic students.

Please fill in as appropriate.

Resources and Services

7. What are the resources and/or services currently available to help LSEs work with autistic students?

____

____

____

8. Based on your experience and/or in speaking with your colleagues, what resources and/or services do LSEs need to help them work with autistic students?

____

____

____

Training

9. What training have you received until now to work with autistic students?

____

____

____

10. Do you feel this training addressed all issues related to working with autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

11. What should the trainings include to help LSEs work with autistic students?

____

____

____

Support

12. Do you think LSEs currently receive adequate support to help them work with autistic students?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Both ☐ I don't know

13. What support do LSEs currently receive from the school or education department to help them work with autistic students?

____

____

____

14. What support do you think LSEs need to help them work with autistic students?

____

____

____

Others

15. Would you like to add other comments?

____

____

____

____

Please read the instructions below to participate further

As the second step in my research, I will conduct a short interview with some of the participants. The interview will comprise about 15 questions based on your perceived needs to work with autistic students in mainstream settings. All participants will remain anonymous. To participate in this interview, please fill the attached reply slip below. Please note that not everyone who volunteers will be included. The selection will be performed according to the exigencies of the research. Also, the interviews will be recorded so that the researcher can more easily recall what has been discussed. Those who volunteer are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

First Name: ______________________ Last Name: ____________________

Email: ____

Mobile: _________________________ Landline: _______________________

Position at School: ☐ LSE ☐ Teacher ☐ SMT

Appendix D – Interview Questions

Interview Questions

The inclusive system in regard to autism

1. What needs to improve within the educational system so that inclusion can be more effective for working with autistic students?

Resources and services

2. What resources do you need that you currently do not have to help teach autistic students? Give the reasons why these resources are important.
3. What services do you need that you currently do not have to help teach autistic children? Give reasons why these services are important.
4. What needs to be improved with the currently provided services?

Training

5. How could the training on autism be more efficient?
    - If you have never received training, what do you think it should include?

Support

6. What support do you need to help teach autistic students? Give reasons why this support is important.
7. To do your job better, what support do you expect from the parents of autistic students?

Other

8. Do you have any other comments or suggestions related to teaching autistic students?

Appendix E – Ethical Approval Letter

Downloaded: 13/06/2018
Approved: 24/05/2018

Vanessa Saliba
Registration number: 160244029
School of Education
Programme: PhD Education - Malta programme

Dear Vanessa

PROJECT TITLE: Working with Students with Autism in Mainstream Primary Schools
APPLICATION: Reference Number 018956

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 24/05/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 018956 (dated 26/04/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1043034 version 1 (26/04/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1043033 version 1 (26/04/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1042606 version 2 (20/04/2018).
- Participant consent form 1043036 version 1 (26/04/2018).
- Participant consent form 1043035 version 1 (26/04/2018).
- Participant consent form 1042608 version 1 (17/04/2018).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

The reviewers advise the following: Think about how to ensure confidentiality, especially as Gozo is such a small place. Consider data protection for any young people who are mentioned by participants. They should not be identifiable. Consider including in the project aims, highlighting GOOD practice as well as challenges. This will be important to ensure good practice is valued and maintained. The ethical considerations may be a little more complex than appear in this outline ... the chance of offending fellow professionals is quite high. This does not mean the research should not go ahead, this potential for 'harm' requires more recognition than appears here, and some measures to try to address it.

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Appendix F – Information Sheet for Questionnaire Participants

Working with Students with Autism in Mainstream Primary Schools

Questionnaire Participant Information Sheet

What is the project's purpose?
This research is carried out as part of my PhD studies, which I am doing at the University of Sheffield. My research is entitled *Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools* and aims to understand the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSAs working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools, particularly with regard to resources, training and support.

Why have I been chosen?
I would like to invite SMT members, teachers and LSAs who work in a mainstream primary school to participate in this research. I am asking you to participate because you are an educator working in a mainstream primary school.

Do I have to take part?
No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to participate. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You will be asked to sign a form indicating that you are willing to participate in this research project. However, you can still change your mind and stop participating at any time, and you do not even have to give a reason.

What will happen to me if I become a participant?
You will be asked to fill in a 5–7-minute questionnaire. The questionnaire will be delivered by hand at your respective school and collected in the same manner, so you do not have to worry about returning it. You could also take part in an interview later on in the research if you wish to do so. Individuals who would like to be interviewed may fill in their details in a specifically designed caption at the end of the questionnaire and will be contacted later. If you are being interviewed, you will be asked to be recorded so that I can analyse the data better after the interview.

What do I have to do?
You will be asked to fill in a questionnaire. Those who wish to participate in the interview will be interviewed later on in the research, and the interview will be recorded.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I cannot foresee any serious disadvantages or risks in participating in this project. However, sometimes talking about our challenges at work can be upsetting or distressing, particularly when these might affect the futures of our students.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Your participation in this research project can help me understand the needs of educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools. This can help me come up with suggestions as to how these needs could be met. You might therefore find it important and/or helpful to have the opportunity

to contribute your story to a research project that aims to improve the lives of educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools.

What happens if the research project stops earlier than expected?
Although unlikely, if for any reason the research project stops earlier than expected, you will be offered a full and clear explanation as to why.

What if something goes wrong?
If you feel something has gone wrong, you are advised to make contact with the supervisor of this research, Prof Katherine Runswick-Cole:

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole
Tel: (+44) (0)114 222 8101
email: k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
As a participant, your participation in the project will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications when I write up the findings of the research. I will anonymise research write-ups; for example, I will replace your name with a pseudonym and take out any obviously identifiable features of you and your story.

What will happen to the results of the research project?
The results of the research project will be analysed and reported in my thesis. After the study is completed, a summary of the findings will be sent to your school to be forwarded to all the academic staff so that you will be informed about the results of the research in which you participated.

Who is organising and funding the research?
This research is partially funded by the Endeavour Scholarships Scheme. More information can be found in this link: https://education.gov.mt/en/education/myScholarship/Pages/ENDEAVOUR%20Scholarship%20Scheme.aspx

Who has ethically reviewed the project?
This project has been ethically approved following the School of Education's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University. It has also been approved by the Education Division of Malta.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for your time!

Regards,
Vanessa Saliba
Mob: [redacted]
Email: vanessa.saliba@mcast.edu.mt

Appendix G – Information Sheet for Interview Participants

Working with Students with Autism in Mainstream Primary Schools

Interview Participant Information Sheet

What is the project's purpose?
This research is carried out as part of my PhD studies, which I am doing at the University of Sheffield. My research is entitled *Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools* and aims to understand the perceived needs of SMT members, teachers and LSAs working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools, particularly with regard to resources, training and support.

Why have I been chosen?
You participated in the filling in of the questionnaire and showed your interest in participating in the interview too. To choose my interview participants, I used a sampling method and your name was drawn out.

What do I have to do?
You will be interviewed by me to further discuss the themes which emerged through the questionnaire responses of the participants. The interview will be recorded with your consent, in order to facilitate my analysis of the data.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I cannot foresee any serious disadvantages or risks in participating in this project. However, sometimes talking about our challenges at work can be upsetting or distressing, particularly when these might affect the futures of our students.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Your participation in this research project can help me understand the needs of educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools. This can help me come up with suggestions as to how these needs could be met. You might therefore find it important and/or helpful to have the opportunity to contribute your story to a research project that aims to improve the lives of educators working with autistic students in mainstream primary schools.

What happens if the research project stops earlier than expected?
Although unlikely, if for any reason the research project stops earlier than expected, you will be offered a full and clear explanation as to why.

What if something goes wrong?
If you feel something has gone wrong, you are advised to make contact with the supervisor of this research, Prof Katherine Runswick-Cole:

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole
Tel: (+44) (0)114 222 8101
email: k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
As a participant, your participation in the project will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications when I write up the findings of the research. I will anonymise

research write-ups; for example, I will replace your name with a pseudonym and take out any obviously identifiable features of you and your story.

What will happen to the results of the research project?
The results of the research project will be analysed and reported in my thesis. After the study is completed, a summary of the findings will be sent to your school to be forwarded to all the academic staff so that you will be informed about the results of the research in which you participated.

Who is organising and funding the research?
This research is partially funded by the Endeavour Scholarships Scheme. More information can be found in this link: https://education.gov.mt/en/education/myScholarship/Pages/ENDEAVOUR%20Scholarship%20Scheme.aspx

Who has ethically reviewed the project?
This project has been ethically approved following the School of Education's ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University. It has also been approved by the Education Division of Malta.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for your time!

Regards,
Vanessa Saliba
Mob: [redacted]
Email: vanessa.saliba@mcast.edu.mt

Appendix H – Consent Form for Questionnaire Participants

Consent Form: Questionnaires

Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools

Title of Research Project: Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools
Name of Researcher: Vanessa Saliba
Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please check the boxes**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the above research project, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. I can contact the researcher (mob: [redacted]/email: vanessa.saliba@mcast.edu.mt) or the supervisor of this research Prof Katherine Runswick-Cole (Email: k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) if I wish to discuss withdrawal or have any questions pertaining to withdrawal. ☐

3. I understand that my real name will not be used in the study. ☐

4. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports, future presentations or publications arising from this study. ☐

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research, if necessary. ☐

6. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

________________	________________	________________
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
________________	________________	________________
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: *Once all parties have signed this form, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form and the information sheet.*

Appendix I – Consent Form for Interview Participants

Consent Form: Interviews

Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools

Title of Research Project: Working with Autistic Students in Mainstream Primary Schools
Name of Researcher: Vanessa Saliba
Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please check the boxes**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. I can contact the researcher (mob: [redacted]/email: vanessa.saliba@mcast.edu.mt) or the supervisor of this research Prof Katherine Runswick-Cole (Email: k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) if I wish to discuss withdrawal or have any questions pertaining to withdrawal. ☐

3. I understand that my real name will not be used in the study. ☐

4. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports, future presentations or publications arising from this study. ☐

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research, if necessary. ☐

6. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

7. Interview recordings will be stored in a safe place and destroyed once the study is completed. ☐

____________________	____________________	____________________
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
____________________	____________________	____________________
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: *Once all parties have signed this form, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form and the information sheet.*