



ORGANISATION OF PROVISION
TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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**Organisation and resourcing of in-class support (with a focus
on the roles of school and multi-agency staff)
St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School
Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School
Malta
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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education



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PREAMBLE

The Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education project is being undertaken by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (the Agency) from 2011 to 2014. The project's key question is: how are systems of provision organised to meet the needs of learners identified as having disabilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) in inclusive settings within the compulsory school sector? The themes to be explored include:

- Inclusion as a quality issue – the presence and participation of all learners in the school/classroom community enhances the quality of the educational experience.
- Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to diverse needs (including developing the role of specialist provision as resources to support the mainstream sector).
- Collaboration and networking – effective provision of educational and multi-agency support within the mainstream sector.
- Funding and resourcing – targeting support to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.
- Leading the change process.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

1. A Literature Review: this provides the conceptual framework for the project and includes a review of research literature post-2000 on project themes as well as an analysis of past Agency projects.

2. Country Information: a questionnaire has been circulated to Agency member countries to gather information on how provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools is organised and evaluated.

3. Identification of examples of practice: five sites in Sweden, Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Malta will be visited in February/March 2013. A report will be produced following each visit.

4. Thematic seminars: following collection and analysis of data from the visits, a series of seminars will be held in autumn 2013. The seminars will explore in detail the factors that have an influence on the success of inclusive education, taking into account different country contexts. A report will be produced following each seminar.

5. Project synthesis report: the report will draw together evidence from all project activities and, following an analysis of key issues, will provide a series of recommendations and potential quality indicators for the organisation of provision and implementation of new practices to improve systems of provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

6. Leading the change process: a practical tool to support policy makers in leading change towards more inclusive policy and practice will also be produced.



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Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role played by members of the Project Advisory Group, Agency Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators who took part in the visit and provided additional support.



INTRODUCTION

This report provides information about the study visit conducted by the Agency team in Malta in March 2013.

St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School and Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School in Malta were selected, along with another four sites, from practice examples provided by Agency Representative Board members and their networks as part of the Organisation of Provision project questionnaire.

The Agency team, in collaboration with the Project Advisory Group (PAG) members, identified criteria for the selection of the sites that should be followed up to provide relevant information for the project. The criteria were: relevance of the site, clarity of the information provided and evidence of the following: quality assurance; system leadership and the management of change; collaboration and partnership; sustainability and a variety of support systems (different approaches to and ways of organising support). Overall, the examples selected also needed to reflect diversity of geographical location and learner needs.

St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School and Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School were selected for their focus on inclusive practices. The visit theme was: 'Organisation and resourcing of in-class support (with a focus on the roles of school and multi-agency staff)'.

The focuses of the other study visits were:

- Essunga, Sweden: strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools – changing practice to improve support for learners with different needs (in particular those with disabilities).
- Flensburg, Germany: how do inclusion networks support the needs of learners with disabilities?
- Vienna, Austria: inclusive education as a quality issue – a collaborative approach to quality management.
- Ljubljana, Slovenia: developing the role of special schools as resources to support mainstream provision.

After presenting a short summary of the lessons learnt from the study visit to Malta, this report describes the different supports provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings and the different factors that contributed to their development. Information about the management of change, transformation strategies and sustainability is also included.



HIGHLIGHTS

- A shift from selective to inclusive education. Learners with special educational needs (SEN), including those with more severe learning disabilities, are engaged in the class activities supported by Learning Support Assistants (LSAs).
- School leadership is developing an inclusive culture by valuing and respecting every learner and responding to the diversity of learners' strengths and needs.
- The availability of a wide range of support services and personnel enables the inclusion of learners with SEN.
- There is close collaboration between the managers, the educational staff and the support staff of the school, with shared vision and goals.
- The teamwork approach between the classroom teacher and the LSA highlights the benefits of collaboration.
- There is a trusting relationship between schools, parents and learners.



CONTEXT

The Republic of Malta is a small and densely populated island nation, comprising an archipelago of three islands in the middle of the Mediterranean. Malta is the second smallest EU country in population (412,614 people, according to estimates from 2009) and the smallest in area (316 square kilometres).

The total number of schools within the compulsory system is 150 (98 state schools, 34 church schools, 18 independent schools). There are 110 primary schools (68 state primary schools, 27 church primary schools and 15 independent schools) and 65 secondary schools (30 state secondary schools, 21 church secondary schools and 14 independent secondary schools). It needs to be noted that church and independent schools sometimes cater for both the primary and secondary sectors. In addition, there are four resource centres (formerly called special schools) within the compulsory system in Malta.

The Education Act of 1988 and its subsequent amendments state that compulsory school starts at the age of 5. All learners, with or without special needs, must attend school during their compulsory education age. The Education Act of 2006 states that 'It is the right of every parent of a minor to give their opinion on any matter concerning the education that the minor is to receive'. In the amended Education Act (2006), reference is made to resource centres instead of special schools and this underlines the state's commitment to inclusive education.

The National Minimum Curriculum (1999), that applies to all schools in the Maltese Islands and has the force of legislation subsidiary to the Education Act, recognises inclusive education as one of the basic principles in education. This applies to all learners with and without SEN. A document entitled *Creating Inclusive Schools* includes guidelines for the implementation of the National Curriculum Policy on Inclusive Education.

St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School

St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School is a co-educational state primary school with 264 learners. The school caters for learners from the age of three (Kinder classes) to the age of eleven, when learners move on to secondary education. Luqa Primary forms part of St Ignatius College. A college is a cluster of a few primary schools and two secondary schools – one for girls and one for boys. There are ten such colleges in the Maltese state education system.

Like all schools in Malta, this is an inclusive school. While some parents opt to send their children to church or private schools outside the village, all the other children from the village of Luqa (population of 5,000) attend this state primary school irrespective of their needs, so no children attend resource centres (former special schools). Moreover, there are no special classes within the school and all children attend the regular mainstream classes.

At present there are 20 learners with identified Individual Educational Needs (IEN) due to a variety of conditions/disabilities (7.5%). Learners' difficulties range from autism and communication difficulties, to Down Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mild or severe learning or attention difficulties, to global developmental delay. These figures do not include those learners with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) who are supported by school support networks. These are made up of complementary (or remedial) teachers in the school and peripatetic literacy support teachers and the Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) Unit from outside the school.

In order for all learners to be able to attend regular mainstream schools, they are supported by LSAs. These are assigned to support individual learners by a National Statementing



Moderating Panel (SMP) which receives referrals about learners experiencing difficulties in education and issues statements according to the learner's needs. The support recommended is as follows: one-to-one support, shared in-class support (the LSA supports a maximum of two students in any one class) and shared support (the student has support of two and a half hours per day in specific subjects).

There are 20 learners with a Statement of SEN who receive LSA support. The support provided to learners with a Statement of SEN is as follows: eight learners with full time one-to-one support, ten learners with shared support in the same class and one learner with shared support for particular lessons.

The school, like all other schools in Malta, is also supported by an Inclusion Co-ordinator (INCO), who supports teachers and LSAs catering for the diverse needs of identified learners with IEN.

The identified learners and their families, upon entry into the primary school, meet their respective teacher and LSA and a meeting is held between all stakeholders. During this meeting, a Making Action Plans (MAP) session is held where the school personnel will become familiar with the needs and aspirations of the learner and their family.

Following this, a Peer Preparation Programme is held in class and the teacher and LSA start their observations and planning for the learner's Individual Education Programme (IEP). An IEP conference is then called and the programme is discussed by all stakeholders.

Throughout the year, the teacher and LSA work towards identified targets with the learner. Daily schedules are prepared by the LSA, reflecting targets from the IEP.

At the end of the school year, a review of the IEP is held and plans for the following year are discussed. This exercise is held on an annual basis and IEPs are planned accordingly.

LSAs support the learners for a maximum of two school years and then they are changed in order to encourage the learner's independent skills and avoid developing dependence on the same adult.

The identified learners are fully included in all school activities. Luqa Primary is physically accessible, with ramps and lifts catering for learners with mobility problems. The school is also equipped with the technology needed to cater for learners' needs. Software is installed on computers according to learner needs.

Teacher and LSA Continuing Professional Development sessions targeting inclusive practice are held regularly.

College-based meetings for parents/guardians of learners with IEN are also held on an annual basis.

The total academic staff of the school consists of: 3 Senior Management Team members, 11 primary teachers, 7 kindergarten assistants and 17 LSAs.

The school also has access to different services outside the school, including a school doctor and nurse, speech therapist, INCO, counselling service, guidance service, social worker, School Psychological Service, autism spectrum support teachers, early intervention teachers, the Access to Communication and Technology Unit (ACTU), literacy/maths support teachers, after-school literacy support for learners (NWAR) and their parents and the SpLD Unit.



Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School

The Mosta Boys Secondary School is an extensive new building, inaugurated one and a half years ago. It contains classrooms, ICT labs, science labs, home economics and food labs, workshops, a library, administration areas, a learning support zone, guidance rooms, art rooms, staff rooms, a hall, sports facilities and offices. Four lifts are installed to make the school fully accessible.

The school is currently led by a Senior Management Team (SMT), made up of the School Head, six Assistant Heads, Heads of Department and an INCO. There are around 110 teachers as well as 42 LSAs.

The school consists of around 870 learners aged between 11 and 16. The catchment area of the school is the north of Malta: Mosta, Naxxar, Gharghur, Bugibba, Qawra, St Paul's Bay and Mellieha. Intake is mostly from state primary schools in these localities, but learners from church and independent schools are starting to be enrolled too. As part of the present on-going reform in the education system, learners are enrolled without any selection (a comprehensive system). At the end of their primary education years, learners sit the national benchmarking examination, but they are automatically enrolled in the secondary school and the benchmarking results are only used for setting arrangements in the main subjects.

One of the Assistant Heads is directly responsible for inclusion, among other duties. She is supported by the INCO. These two members of staff co-ordinate the staff of 40 LSAs who support around 75 learners with a Statement of Needs, as well as other learners in class.

All learners supported by LSAs must have a Statement of Needs, issued by the central office. All learners with a statement have their own MAPs and IEPs formulated in conjunction with the SMT, INCO, parents, teachers, LSAs and, where possible, with the learner themselves. Learners with dyslexia are not automatically supported by an LSA.

Support is offered on a one-to-one basis, shared (same class) basis and shared basis, as in the primary school. All learners supported by LSAs attend all lessons. Learners are withdrawn only in special circumstances, with the agreement of the school SMT and the parent as indicated in the IEP. Learners' difficulties range from autism and communication difficulties, to Down Syndrome or ADHD, mild or severe learning difficulties and attention difficulties, to global development delay.

More time is dedicated to learners with one-to-one support. Every day they are welcomed to school by the INCO and LSA, who greet them, make them feel welcome and then carry on with their normal lesson.

All learners supported by LSAs are not only physically present in class, but also participate and work according to their level of attainment. Learners supported by LSAs attend all lessons regularly and also participate in special programmes.

Peer Preparation Programmes help learners who are not statemented to welcome and support their peers who have special needs.

The Independent Living Programme supports learners with special needs to become more independent by teaching them about managing a household, managing finances, safety awareness, etc.

There is on-going collaboration with the College's Resource Centre, situated a few kilometres away from the school at Wardija. Learners without special needs from the secondary school regularly visit this Centre to meet students there and give a helping hand.



Last year, a design and technology project was co-ordinated between the school and this Centre. This year they are also embarking on a robotics project.

Two other services at school help learners who are at risk of being excluded from the school community to reintegrate. These are the Learning Support Zone (LSZ) and the guidance service.

The LSZ offers programmes for learners who are not supported by an LSA, but have difficulties due to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This programme is co-ordinated by one specialist teacher and an LSA. Learners who are referred to this service are observed and monitored and then, if they qualify for this service, they are put on a two-to three-month programme with a group of learners. The LSZ does not exclude learners, as they are only withdrawn from their regular class for just two or three lessons twice a week. After each session they go back to their normal classroom.

The guidance service offers support to learners who have difficulties with a wider spectrum of developmental and life issues. Learners here are offered support on a one-to-one basis through sessions so that they are helped to reintegrate, as much as possible, into normal school life.

Learners also have the support of the College psycho-social team, made up of a prefect of discipline, a social worker, a counsellor, a trainee counsellor and a youth worker. This team supports the school by helping learners individually and/or as a class or group to make the best out of their educational experience and integrate into school life as much as possible.

Key influences of the country context

During the visit, colleagues working at the national level (in particular from the Ministry of Education and Schools) highlighted the features of the education system in Malta that might have a particular influence on the developments in both schools (St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School and Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School).

More information about the national system can be found in the national overview for Malta at: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/malta>, but relevant points are summarised here.

Since 1989, the government has embarked on an intensive programme for the promotion of inclusive education, with a substantial reduction in the number of learners with special needs attending special schools and a corresponding increase in the number of learners attending mainstream schools with support, including the service of an LSA on a one-to-one, full-time or shared basis. In 2013 there is a total of 2,264 LSAs supporting 3,700 identified learners (with a Statement of Needs) in state, church and independent primary and secondary schools. The *Inclusive and Special Education Review* (Spiteri et al., 2005) has charted a road map for the development of inclusive and special education for the coming years.

Up to 2005, inclusive and special education was closely associated with primary education and few learners with special needs succeeded in joining lower secondary or upper secondary education. However, the inclusion process in Malta has led to more and more learners joining lower secondary schools, while a number of others are even proceeding to tertiary education.

In 2007 the Student Services Department (SSD) in the Directorate for Educational Services (DES) was set up with the appointment of a Director. In 2008 the Department appointed Service Managers to manage the inclusive education section, special education, resource centres and the psycho-social service.



It is the government's policy to include learners with special needs within the mainstream education system, rather than in special schools. In 2012 over 97% of learners with SEN attended mainstream schools. However, parents are left to decide which provision they prefer for their children, particularly when learners have complex special needs and require specialised services and facilities that are difficult to obtain in mainstream schools.

During the past decade, action has been taken to make the schools' physical environment accessible and as user-friendly as possible for learners with a mobility impairment. Moreover, learners with special needs may be given services to cater for their physical, sensory, intellectual or other needs.

A team of educational psychologists provides support to schools that cater for the education of learners with special needs and may refer the learners to the SMP. Referrals can also be made by the School Head and by parents.

Four resource centres still function to cater for learners with more complex needs and to satisfy the wishes and expectations of parents who consider that their child can receive a better educational service in a centre where they may feel that there is better educational provision than that obtainable in mainstream schools. It is estimated that only 0.12% of the total learner population attend these schools, most being of secondary school age. The rest of the learners receive their education in mainstream schools.

The existing resource centres are networked so that they can complement each other's services and facilities and work more closely with mainstream schools. They are supported educationally and professionally by a central unit.

Over the years, substantial investment has been made in these centres in order to provide all the required facilities and services and to turn them into resource centres that also support mainstream schools. As a result, facilities and services provided at these schools can be used by pupils with special needs from other resource centres or mainstream schools.

Learners in resource centres visit mainstream schools, usually nearby, for varying periods of time. Educational programmes are also carried out between mainstream schools and resource centres. Learners in mainstream schools and resource centres follow the mainstream curriculum with the adaptation and modifications necessary to ensure full access to the curriculum. These schools emphasise that ALL pupils should have access to a common set of subject syllabi with the same quality of subject content. This should enhance equal learning opportunities and experiences and enable ALL pupils to become educated.

Each learner follows their IEP that is agreed upon and revised annually during an IEP conference meeting with the involvement of all professionals working with the pupil: school administration, teachers, LSAs, parents and sometimes the pupils themselves. Peripatetic teachers give lessons in drama, music, physical education and art and craft.

There are several other developments with regards to inclusion in Malta, including the National Policy and Strategy for the Attainment of Core Competences in Primary Education, which aims to address basic aspects of cognitive development which are essential for all learners. The Inclusive Curriculum supports teachers' professional practice in raising standards of education for ALL pupils and ensures that all learners in mainstream and resource centres have access to a common set of subject syllabi, thus ensuring equal opportunities. Teachers are supported to achieve these goals through collective critical self-evaluation. The education system has recently developed a National Curriculum Framework for ensuring access to the curriculum for the full diversity of learners.



THE PROJECT VISIT

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and consultants visited St Ignatius College Luqa Primary School and Maria Regina College Mosta Boys Secondary School from 20 to 22 March 2013. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about the developments in both schools, to observe lessons and interview different stakeholder groups: college principals, heads of schools, INCOs, inclusive education service manager, teachers, parents and learners. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the five project visits. All interviews were recorded for later analysis. In addition, relevant documents on national policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.



INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES

'Inclusion is a long process inspired by a rights-based principle, but it is also in our DNA, so no other alternatives considered' (Inclusive Education Service Manager).

Values and beliefs

During the visit and the discussions with the different stakeholders, it was highlighted that inclusion in society and in education has explicitly been on the Maltese national agenda for the past two decades. The first pilot project on inclusive education started 22 years ago at a church primary school with a 'facilitator' supporting a learner with SEN in a mainstream class. Over the years a lot of developments have taken place at policy and practice level, following a rights-based approach for the education of all learners and a shift from selective to comprehensive education. The key principles underpinning the process towards inclusion of the Maltese education system are also the guidelines of inclusive practice in the two schools visited.

The guiding values and principles of inclusive practice in both schools comprise:

- promoting a rights-based approach to the education of learners identified as having SEN;
- a clear shift from a selective to an inclusive education system;
- school leadership that develops an inclusive culture by valuing and respecting every learner and responding to the diversity of learners' strengths and needs;
- the motivation and commitment to inclusive practice of the SMT, the INCO, teachers, LSAs, professionals and support staff;
- the teamwork approach between the classroom teacher and LSA, that highlights the benefits rather than the difficulties of collaboration;
- teachers who take responsibility for the curriculum of all learners in the class and LSAs who support all learners with a focus on learners identified as having SEN;
- close collaboration with a shared vision and goals between the managers, the educational staff and the support staff of the school;
- the aim that all learners should finish primary school with sufficient competences in basic skills – reading, writing, arithmetic;
- the development of a trusting relationship between schools and parents/learners.

Attitudes

For the school educational and support staff, the change of beliefs and attitudes towards learners with SEN has been influenced by the introduction of the concept of 'inclusion' instead of 'integration' that entails strategies to engage all learners in the activities of the school community.

'In Malta, the term *inclusive education* was introduced to the education system to denote a new movement beyond integration' (Bartolo, 2010, p. 141). In inclusive schools, learners with SEN are not only physically present in classes, but also participate and work according to their level of attainment. Inclusion is about how to develop regular school and classroom communities that fit, nurture, and support the educational and social needs of every student in attendance' by making the regular school 'a place where everyone belongs, is accepted,



supports and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community' (Stainback and Stainback, 1990, pp. 3–4).

Over the years of implementing inclusive practice and participating in in-service training, the educational and support staff of both schools have changed their beliefs about learners' strengths and abilities by focusing on what they 'can do' instead of what they 'cannot do'.

To quote one of the teachers: 'Now we (teachers) have the expertise on how to address different needs of learners and engage them in the class activities'.

Through the Peer Preparation Programme, which is held at the beginning of the school year, the learners in a class are prepared for the inclusion of their peers with SEN. This is done by the LSAs in co-operation with the teachers through various activities such as videos, PowerPoint presentations, games, etc., aiming to make the learners aware that 'we are all the same, but different'.

As a result, in both schools visited, there seems to be an atmosphere of motivation and commitment to inclusion where learners with SEN have the feeling of belonging to their class. As a mother noted:

Although my son has got difficulties in communication, his peers find the way to communicate with him. He is well included and accepted in the class. The school has encouraged friendship and participation of my son in many activities. He is happy to come to school every day.

As one teacher pointed out: 'When you see learners with SEN being integrated with other learners and engaged in class activities, this is a real motivation for a change towards inclusion.'

To quote the Head of the primary school when asked what makes her strive for inclusion: 'It is what I would like all staff to do if these were my very own children'.

Collaboration

Collaboration among the different partners is a key element that ensures the smooth running of inclusive practices in both of the schools visited and is evident at all levels in Malta.

At classroom level, co-operation and a teamwork approach between the class teacher and the LSA is considered the only effective way to work.

At school level, the Assistant Head, in co-operation with the INCO, mobilise and co-ordinate all the support services and resources around the learner to ensure efficiency in the support provided.

The smooth transition of learners from primary to secondary education and the co-organisation of the transition meetings by the INCOs of the primary and secondary schools are an example of the co-operation between the two sectors that has a positive effect on the lives of learners and their families.

At community level, there seems to be good co-operation between the Ministry of Education and the University of Malta while undertaking training courses for the managerial, educational and support personnel of both schools.

Both schools co-operate with external psycho-social services and support is offered to learners upon request.



Finally, in the discussions with the staff and parents, participants highlighted the collaboration between the mainstream primary and secondary schools and the resource centres that run joint projects and provide advice and support upon request.

Collaboration among all partners involved at all levels is a success factor for efficient inclusive practices at school.



TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

The change process towards an inclusive education system in Malta over the last 20 years was initiated and affected by a number of developments and new approaches towards disability introduced at national and European level, including: the adoption of the social model of disability, the introduction of the concept of inclusion, the new approach to disability based on human rights, the shift from selective to inclusive education, the principles of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Salamanca Statement on inclusive education and the principles of the UNCRPD.

Malta was one of the first EU member states to sign the UNCRPD and its optional protocol, although it took much longer to ratify the convention (in 2012).

The recent developments at national level, combined with the key principles underpinned in the international policy documents, have led the Maltese state to undertake a number of initiatives at policy and action level, promoting inclusive education and including learners with SEN within the mainstream education system. The National Minimum Curriculum (1999), recognised inclusive education as one of the basic principles in education, supported by the following: the Equal Opportunities Act (2000); the policy statement about IEP procedures for learners with SEN, issued by the Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education (2000); the Guidelines for the Implementation of the National Curriculum Policy on Inclusive Education (2002); the guidelines for special examination arrangements for candidates with particular requirements (2002); the *Inclusive and Special Education Review* policy document (Spiteri et al., 2005); and the Education Act as amended in 2006, where reference is made to resource centres, underlining the commitment to inclusive education.

As a result of these initiatives and actions, implementation of inclusive practices was evident in both the primary and secondary schools visited.

In both schools a member of the SMT (Assistant Head) is responsible for co-ordinating inclusion in the school, supported by the INCO. These two staff members co-ordinate the work of all the LSAs, as well as the work of all the other support services in the school. This learner-centred approach to the co-ordination of all the educational and support services seems to be efficient in both schools. As one parent has noted: 'If I have problems, I know I can have all the support needed in a very co-ordinated way'.

The INCOs, appointed in both schools, support teachers and LSAs in catering for the diverse needs of learners with identified IEN. They promote an inclusive culture, a supportive community and collaborative teamwork in the school. They also ensure that learners have accessible examination arrangements, organise staff development sessions and mobilise support for learners.

The LSAs (17 in the Luqa Primary School and 40 in the Mosta Boys Secondary School) cooperate with the class teachers and support all the learners in the class, with a focus on the learners with SEN. Their support seems to be appreciated a lot by the learners and their parents. As one parent has noted:

My child's LSA uses an alternative curriculum for him, but she tries to involve him in other classroom activities. With her support he has improved a lot in communication and engagement with his peers. Thanks to her, he is happy to go to school every morning.

At the beginning of the school year, the Peer Preparation Programmes are organised in both schools by the teachers in co-operation with the INCOs, to prepare learners for the inclusion



of learners with SEN and make them aware that they are all the same, but different. This seems to have positive effects in the daily work of both schools by creating a climate of mutual respect which reduces incidents of aggression and bullying.

The development of Action Plans and IEPs for learners with SEN provides sufficient information on learners' strengths and needs and gives guidelines on what needs to be adapted, so that the LSAs can perform the daily adaptation.

Parents' collaboration and involvement in the MAP sessions and in the development of the IEPs is considered very important. In addition, teachers or LSAs write to parents in the 'communication book' on a daily basis and inform them about what the learner has done at school each day.

Strong and clear political leadership and support from the Ministry of Education as well as good co-operation among all the stakeholders involved is considered a key success factor in the whole process of moving towards inclusive practice.

In summary, the key strategies supporting the move towards inclusive practice in both the primary and secondary schools visited appear to be:

- Clear policy and stated commitment on inclusive education and the development of the necessary documents, guidelines and tools to facilitate and support the implementation of inclusive practice at school level.
- The availability of sufficient support services and personnel to support the inclusion and engagement of learners with severe SEN in the classroom activities. The teamwork approach of the educational and support staff, as well as the co-ordination of all the educational and support services around the learner, are key principles in the whole process.
- The development of trusting relationships between schools and parents/students.
- The engagement of all stakeholders with shared beliefs and values on inclusive policies and practices, with a focus on the strengths and abilities of learners rather than on the difficulties.



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Support structures in the community

Given the size and population of Malta, both the primary and the secondary schools have support from the national/local community at all levels. There is very close co-operation between the Ministry of Education/SSD, the SMTs and the personnel of both schools, and all the support and training that is needed is provided. Many local people (politicians, professionals, parents, etc.) have been involved in the process of transforming the schools into inclusive schools and their main goal, besides academic achievements, has been the well-being of all learners. The culture of inclusion and equal opportunities is well developed at local level so that the great majority of learners from the village of Luqa (population of 5,000) attend the Luqa inclusive primary school. Only a few learners attend church or independent schools outside the village. In the same way, the vast majority of learners from the north of Malta attend the Mosta Boys inclusive secondary school.

Besides the wide range of support services provided to learners within both schools, additional psycho-social services are offered to learners, upon request, at community level. These services include: speech therapy and child development assessment in co-operation with the health department, child protection services, substance abuse services, anti-bullying services (in co-operation with the SSD) and social, emotional and behavioural disorder services.

In the framework of co-operation between the inclusive schools and the resource centres and the role of the latter in supporting mainstream schools, some learners who attend the inclusive schools go to primary education or secondary education resource centres for daily programmes such as pool sessions, hippotherapy, etc.

Support structures in the school

There is a wide range of support services provided by both the primary and the secondary schools to enable all learners to attend mainstream classes.

Upon entry into the primary school, the learners with identified SEN and their parents meet their respective teacher and LSA and a MAP meeting is held, enabling the school personnel to get to know the learner and their strengths and needs. The stakeholders involved in the meeting include the family, the teacher, the LSA, an SMT member and other professionals working with the learner.

Following this, a Peer Preparation Programme is held in class and the teacher and LSA start to plan the learner's IEP, outlining how their needs are to be met at school and identifying 'smart' goals and targets, in line with their observations. The drafting of the plan is discussed with the INCO. An IEP conference is then called and all stakeholders are invited. The draft document is discussed and updated according to feedback received by the stakeholders. The IEP is then finalised and signed by all stakeholders. All stakeholders are then responsible for the implementation of the programme. LSAs keep a record of the implementation through daily schedules. If identified targets are reached prior to the end of the school year, a review meeting is called and new targets are identified. At the end of the school year, a review is held in preparation for the following year.

Both schools employ a number of LSAs, assigned to support all learners in a class with a focus on learners with identified SEN, and an INCO responsible for supporting teachers and catering for the diverse needs of learners. The INCO mobilises support for learners, by consulting all partners involved, understanding the learner's strengths and needs, getting the



appropriate resources, developing good relationships among all persons involved and ensuring effective communication among everyone concerned.

The INCO of the primary school, in co-operation with the INCO of the secondary school, organise 'transition meetings' for learners with SEN who are in year 6 and who will be moving to secondary schooling, aiming for the transition to be as smooth as possible. Two meetings are held, one in the primary school and one in the secondary school, where different stakeholders meet and discuss the transition document. These transition meetings are much appreciated by parents and learners. As one parent noted:

In primary school my child is protected, but I was really worried about the secondary school. During the transition meeting I realised that the transition will be smooth and my child will be supported by the INCO and the LSAs in the secondary school. I feel relieved.

The psycho-social services provided by both the primary and secondary schools to support all learners include:

- a counselling and guidance service working with parents and learners;
- a career education service that in primary school mainly focuses on potential and dreams;
- a social service working with learners who are absent for more than 40 days;
- the school psychology service;
- a prefect of discipline who deals with learners' behavioural problems and the well-being of learners and parents;
- the LSZ, that supports learners with social and emotional difficulties;
- a youth worker service;
- NWAR after-school literacy support programme;
- Club 3–16, offering leisure time activities and support for homework, after school hours until 6 pm.

In addition a number of staff have been attached to both schools to ensure the smooth running and administration of inclusive educational services, literacy and numeracy support staff, complementary teachers, language support assistants, third country nationals inclusion and diversity and to nurture class support teachers.

Collaboration and co-ordination among the different services and personnel around the learner is the key success factor for the smooth running of the system. Regular meetings are organised with the participation of all partners involved to monitor the learners' holistic development and identify strengths and needs. As a parent noted: 'There are many different services and staff supporting my child, but I can always contact the class teacher and the LSA to get all the information and support I need'.

Support structures in the classroom

A key factor for enabling learners with more severe SEN to attend and be engaged in the mainstream class activities is the support provided by the LSAs. As one mother commented:

My child has got serious problems in development, communication and moving. In the beginning it was difficult for me to understand how she could attend a mainstream



school. With the support of her LSA she has managed to be included. Without the one-to-one support from the LSA, she could not be in the school.

Both the primary and the secondary schools, like all schools in Malta, are supported by a number of LSAs, assigned to support all learners in a class with a focus on learners with identified SEN.

In the discussion with the class teachers and the LSAs it was highlighted that in the beginning, it had taken some time for the class teachers to accept the LSAs in their class. The role of each of them was not very clear and so teachers were suspicious. Teachers have since realised the benefits of co-operation with the LSAs and the advantage of working as a team. Thus LSAs are now welcomed by teachers in the class and they both look at the benefits of teamwork rather than the difficulties. LSAs are also more experienced and competent now and they know how better to deal with the different needs of learners. The relationship between the teacher and the LSA is very important. The LSA may work well with one teacher, but not with another. Good teamwork between teachers and LSAs is crucial for the support provided to the learner.

LSAs support the same learner for a maximum of two years as parents have realised that it is better to change the LSA after this time so that the learner does not come to rely upon one person.

The job description of LSAs was changed in 2007 to emphasise support for all learners in class with a focus on learners with SEN. This has had a positive effect on the relationship and teamwork approach of teachers and LSAs, as well as on the perception of learners with SEN about the role and the support of the LSAs. When learners grow up, particularly in the secondary school, they feel embarrassed to have an LSA supporting only them. They prefer to know that the LSA supports all learners in class, including themselves.

The support provided by the LSA to learners in a class can be: one-to-one support, shared in-class support (the LSA supports a maximum of two learners in the class) or shared support (the learner gets support of two and a half hours per day in specific subjects). It depends on the learner's needs and the statement issued by the National SMP. A pool of LSAs is available to support the schools when LSAs are absent from work.

The learner's IEP provides the necessary guidelines on what needs to be adapted and the LSAs have to perform the daily adaptations. In co-operation with the teacher, they work towards identified 'smart' goals and targets with the learner. Thus daily schedules are prepared by the LSA reflecting targets and goals as per the IEP. The national checklist on competences is also very useful for both the teacher and the LSA because they know how and where to help and support the learner.

Good communication with parents is very important for both the class teacher and the LSA. On a daily basis this exchange of information between teacher/LSA and parents about the improvements and needs of learners is carried out by writing in each learner's communication book. As a parent has noted: 'I am well informed about what my child is doing at school every day by reading the communication book and I can contact them if there is a problem'.

Curriculum and assessment

All schools in Malta follow the mainstream curriculum, the National Minimum Curriculum (1999), and it is stressed that ALL learners should have access to a common set of subject syllabi with the same quality of subject content. This enhances equal learning opportunities and experiences for all learners, enabling them to become educated. The *Creating Inclusive*



Schools document includes guidelines for the implementation of the National Curriculum Policy on Inclusive Education.

Learners with identified SEN follow their IEP, which is agreed upon and revised annually during an IEP conference meeting with the involvement of all the professionals working with the learner: school administration, teachers, LSAs, parents and sometimes the learners themselves.

The learner's IEP provides the necessary guidelines on what needs to be adapted and the teachers, in co-operation with the LSAs, have to make the adaptations. On a daily basis, they work towards identified goals and targets which are updated in line with the learner's development. They also note if additional support is needed.

The Inclusive Curriculum Project aims to raise the standard of educational achievement for all learners with SEN, ensuring that all learners have access to the Maltese syllabus. This project provides a vast repertoire of teaching activities and ideas on each curriculum subject area intended for all ages and abilities. It also aims to equip teachers to develop their professional skills, thus improving their classroom practice for all learners.

Support for professional development

Initial and in-service training for the managerial, educational and support staff in inclusive primary and secondary schools is provided by the Ministry of Education in co-operation with the University of Malta.

Training courses for LSAs are provided on two levels by the SSD:

- *Supporting Students with Individual Educational Needs Attendance Certificate*: a course with 70 contact hours and 110 hours of practice placement. In total 1,374 LSAs have participated in this course;
- *Certificate in Education for Learning Support Assistants*: a course with 140 contact hours and 110 hours of practice placement. In total 682 LSAs have participated in the course at national level.

In addition, for the past two decades, a two-year, part-time university undergraduate 'Facilitating Inclusive Education' diploma course has been offered by the University of Malta for the training of LSAs.

In-service training regarding inclusive issues is offered to SMTs of all inclusive primary and secondary schools on an annual basis. The 30-hour course covers issues related to inclusive education, such as MAP and IEP sessions, roles and responsibilities, services offered to learners, etc.

In addition, monthly meetings are held by the Ministry of Education/SSD with the INCOs and training sessions regarding various issues are organised in order to keep them up-to-date with any developments.

During discussions with the SMTs and LSAs, it became obvious that regular in-service training on new developments regarding methods and approaches in inclusive practices is considered very important and those who have participated in these courses stated that they have helped them a lot in their daily work.



Support for learners and family involvement

Parents' involvement in their children's learning process is a key factor in the development of trusting relationships between the school and the families. As one teacher noted: 'the more we involve parents the better for both the school and the families'.

In both schools, parents are involved in the MAP sessions and in the development of the IEPs. In addition, teachers or LSAs write to parents in the communication book every day and inform them about what the learner has done at school on the day.

It is worth noting the comment made by one parent in the primary school, who said how much she appreciated the communication book: 'Apart from the communication book, I really like the school blog on the school website. It is good to see the pictures showing your child being integrated in the school activities'.

The interviews with parents highlighted that they prefer to be involved in school developments, they like to have daily information about what their child is doing at school through the communication book and they consider the opportunity to be involved in the development of the Action Plan and the IEP of their child to be very positive.

They also noted that their children, including those with more severe SEN, feel happy and respected at school as teachers and LSAs make real efforts to include them in class activities together with their peers.

Parents' information meetings are held on an annual basis in both schools and parents visit the schools and talk to the education and support personnel on a regular basis. Parents also expressed the need to organise regular parents' meetings to exchange ideas, express their feelings and fears and support each other.

One learner (a wheelchair user) from the secondary school who was interviewed during the visit stated that his relationships with the teachers and his peers are very good. His classmates help him to move around the school when he needs to go from one class to another and his peers are his friends. He knows he can always ask his classmates for help.

Resources for learner support

In Malta, learners with special needs are assessed by the SMP, a specialist panel that identifies each learner's specific needs and advises on the special provision required within the mainstream education system. The SMP is the state-recognised body empowered to develop a statutory assessment of the support required in order to ensure a quality education for learners with SEN. The work carried out by the SMP is based on the Inclusive Education Policy regarding learners with a disability.

When a learner is assessed, the needs are identified although there is no legal definition of special needs. The SMP has its own criteria and attempts are being made to develop more specific descriptions of needs that require additional support. Learners with special needs attending mainstream schools may be given the services of an LSA to support them in class, if needed.

In addition to being supported by LSAs, learners with sensory impairments are also supported by peripatetic teachers, who visit the schools once or twice a week depending on the learners' needs. There are also learners who communicate through sign language and are provided with the services of sign language interpreters. These learners are also supported by interpreters in post-secondary education.



INCOs support primary and secondary schools in the implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy. These INCOs support SMTs, parents, teachers and LSAs and help to coordinate service provision for learners with special needs attending mainstream schools.

Besides these additional supports specifically dedicated to learners with a statement of SEN, all learners benefit from the variety of psycho-social and educational support services listed above under the section support structures in the school.



INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

The change process towards an inclusive education system in Malta, in the past two decades, has been initiated by the adoption of new approaches to disability based on human rights and equal opportunities. This has gradually led to the transformation of all schools from selective to inclusive.

The motivation of all stakeholders involved and the commitment to an inclusive approach, together with the development of the necessary guidelines and tools to facilitate and support inclusive practice at school level, have enabled learners with SEN to attend mainstream classes and engage with their peers in the school activities.

The availability of sufficient support services and personnel, combined with a learner-centred educational approach and teamwork by the educational and support staff, has had an impact on the progress made by learners in mainstream schools, in academic and social learning as well as in the development of confidence, self-esteem and well-being.

This change has had an impact on all of the stakeholders involved at national, community and school level, by changing beliefs and attitudes towards diversity, developing trusting relationships between schools and parents/learners, respecting the rights for quality education for all and promoting co-ordination of services to increase capacity and efficiency.

As one parent noted:

Society is inclusive in the sense that we are all different and we have learnt to respect each other, so it is better for children to learn to respect diversity at an early age. Inclusive classes are the best way to learn it.



SUSTAINING THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS

The progress made towards inclusive policy and practice in the last twenty years is evident in both the primary and secondary education sector and the availability of support staff enables learners with SEN not only to attend, but also to participate in mainstream class activities.

The key factors that have facilitated this progress include, among others, the motivation and commitment of stakeholders at different levels – national, community, school –, the availability of a wide range of support service, the expertise of the managerial, educational and support staff, the co-ordination of services, the multi-disciplinary teamwork approach and in-service as well as university training of personnel in new developments in inclusion.

The next step that needs to be addressed is how to ensure the continued development and improvement of inclusive practices and the sustainability of the process of inclusion.

During the visit, the stakeholders expressed some concerns and the following key issues were highlighted:

- The role of the INCO and the LSA is very important for the real engagement of learners with SEN in classroom activities. These people's personal characteristics can make a big difference, so choosing the right personnel is very important.
- The extent of learners' engagement in the class activities depends on the level of co-operation between the teacher and the LSA. An LSA may work well with one teacher, but not with another. Good co-operation between teachers and LSAs is important for the learner.
- The Maltese inclusive education system is characterised by a wide range of support services and an extensive variety of support staff. The roles and responsibilities need to be clear in order to avoid overlapping and to develop ways to collaborate. Time is also needed to plan for collaboration.
- The issue of bullying in secondary education was a concern expressed by some parents. Further action is required to change attitudes and behaviour.



KEY LEARNING POINTS AND AREAS OF FURTHER DISCUSSION

Some proposals on key areas identified that need further investigation include:

- The links between a supportive system for all learners and the additional support provided for learners with SEN.
- The challenge of provision for learners with complex SEN in the mainstream classes: further work needs to be done on how this group is included in regular classroom activities and what support and collaboration are necessary.
- Organisation of support in primary and secondary education: it was evident that there was effective collaboration between teachers and LSAs in the primary school, but this was less well developed in secondary school.
- The links between the regular curriculum and the curriculum followed by children with an IEP: there is evidence of a gap between the mainstream secondary curriculum and the needs of some children with severe learning difficulties who require withdrawal sessions and also the use of LSZs for students with SEBD.
- The procedure for identifying learners as having SEN: the Malta situation is leading to high levels of statementing and one-on-one LSA support and the criteria are not yet explicit.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Malta, the preparation of teachers for inclusion is rooted in a cultural-historical context linked to the development of a more inclusive society with implications for the education system as a whole (Bartolo, 2010).

The gradual development of inclusive education in Malta, based on human rights and equal opportunity principles as key components of an inclusive society, has resulted in inclusive practices in the compulsory education sector where almost all learners attend and participate in mainstream class activities. In 2012 over 97% of learners with SEN attended mainstream schools.

The key factors that have facilitated this development include, among others, the clear inclusive policy and the commitment of all stakeholders at different levels – national, community, school –, the availability of a wide range of support services, the learner-centred educational approach, the co-ordination of services, the multi-disciplinary teamwork approach and the in-service training of personnel in new developments in inclusion.

This process has a positive impact and has changed the beliefs and attitudes of society in general and of specific groups in particular – politicians, school managers, teachers, support staff, parents, learners, etc. – regarding the positive effects of inclusive education for all learners. All learners can benefit from inclusive practices.

Based on the lessons learnt and experience gained, the next step that needs further consideration is how the education system can continue these developments and ensure the sustainability of inclusion in education and society.



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