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**Maltese primary teachers' perceptions on the inclusion of  
students with autism in the mainstream classroom:  
A Critical Disability Theory perspective**

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a degree  
in Professional Doctorate in Education**

**March 2025**

**Keele University**

## DECLARATION

I, Noella Borg Saliba, hereby certify that the material submitted in this dissertation towards the award of the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form to any other institution for any academic assessment other than the fulfilment of the award named above.

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Noella Borg Saliba

March 2025

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents, Miriam and Anthony, and my brother, Josmar. Their unwavering support and love propelled me forward and instilled in me a hard work ethic. To my parents, you have always believed in me and stood beside me no matter what. To my brother, you are my sounding board and my inspiration.

Thank you; I am indebted to you. Without you, this achievement would not have been possible!

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In the same way, I am thankful to my loving family, whose love and support cannot be forgotten. I am grateful to my fiancé Isaac and his family, and Jasmine, for bearing with me during this journey and always motivating me to continue pursuing my dream. I am filled with gratitude for their understanding and support.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to all the participants who have collaborated with me and dedicated their time to sharing their educational experiences and insights.

## ABSTRACT

The number of students with autism in mainstream classrooms is globally surging year after year. As a result, teachers are experiencing extra pressure and increased responsibility to effectively meet these students' individual needs and ensure their successful inclusion in mainstream classrooms. Given the association between teachers' perceptions and their practices with students with autism – practices that directly impact students' learning experience and development – studying teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism becomes paramount.

Through a mixed-method approach, this research investigates the multifaceted landscape of inclusive education and teachers' perceptions within the Maltese context. Critical Disability Theory is used to guide this research, amalgamating the experiences and perspectives of teachers and analysing the role of creating more inclusive and equitable models within the realm of education. Four preliminary factors potentially influencing teachers' perceptions and hindering the successful teaching and inclusion of students with autism were analysed.

One hundred ninety-eight participants completed online questionnaires, while ten continued with the follow-up interviews. Findings revealed that most participants hold positive perceptions towards inclusion. They accept neurodiversity as the standard and believe that successful inclusion encompasses more than mere integration. Yet, participants also reported new issues that influence their perceptions and hinder students' successful inclusion. These mainly include communication and power imbalances between educational stakeholders, vast curriculum, training and resources, teachers' experiences, and the issue of responsabilisation.

To improve practices and ensure a more successful inclusion, participants advocate for a systemic shift in educational policies, institutional structural and curricular changes, and enhanced training. This study contributes to scholarly research in inclusive education, autism, and Critical Disability Theory, offering valuable insights for educational stakeholders and researchers in an attempt to create a more inclusive mainstream setting where students with autism can thrive.

**Keywords:** *primary teachers, Autism Spectrum Disorder, teachers' perceptions, inclusion, mainstream classrooms, Critical Disability Theory.*

## GLOSSARY

<b>Autism Spectrum Disorder</b>	A neurodevelopmental disorder that can cause social, communicative, and behavioural challenges.
<b>Critical Disability Theory (CDT)</b>	A framework that centres around disability and challenges traditional notions of disabled people and 'normal' bodies.
<b>High-functioning autism</b>	Level 1 autism showing mild symptoms, where individuals require low support needs and have average or above-average intelligence.
<b>Inclusion</b>	The action of providing equal access and opportunities to all students irrespective of their differences, who might otherwise be excluded.
<b>Learning Support Educator (LSE)</b>	Educational stakeholders who provide one-to-one or shared support to students with additional needs.
<b>Low-functioning autism</b>	Level 3 autism, marked by severe symptoms of autism, and characterised by impairments in socialisation, communication, and behaviour.
<b>Mainstream classrooms</b>	The act of teaching students with special needs in the same class as their same-age peers with no disabilities.
<b>Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR)</b>	The Maltese State Ministry of Education aiming to provide students with the necessary skills for citizenship and employability.
<b>Perceptions</b>	A belief or opinion of an individual which then influences their actions and experiences.
<b>Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE)</b>	The Maltese Ministry for Catholic Schools that aim to improve students' lives and their ability to succeed in inclusive mainstream classrooms and beyond.
<b>Senior Leadership Team (SLT)</b>	Head of Schools and Assistant Heads responsible for the effective management of schools.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Setting the Scene

All journeys are influenced by their starting point. At this point, I feel the need to be clear about my motivation for carrying out this study. The following autobiographical paragraphs in this section attempt to look in depth at some of my personal and professional experiences between the years 2014 and 2024, and designate how the area of inclusion, mainly the inclusion of students with autism, the provisional research topic, was initially formed. My post-graduate studies further contributed to my enlightened awareness of diversity within mainstream classrooms, instilling and enamouring a sense of social justice that will forever be crystallised within me.

In the bustling corridors of a typical Maltese primary school, where the shouting of students filled the air with the intensity of thunderous applauses at a concert, a particular student named Tom<sup>1</sup> danced to a different beat at the far end of the corridor. From age two, my youngest cousin Tom seemed restless and unsettled, and interacting with other children was not part of his world. His silence became a concern and the first red flags for his parents. As he grew older, Tom's parents noticed that he was not looking directly at them when they called out his name but reacted when he heard his favourite song, showing no problems with hearing. He was not speaking like other children his age despite being a bright student, and he was doing several repetitive movements with his hands. Years later, Tom was diagnosed with autism. Autism Spectrum Disorder is an invisible condition that cannot be physically seen but can reveal its identity months or

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<sup>1</sup> Tom is a fictitious name.

even years after a child is born. Like Tom, children with autism start to show signs of persistent difficulties with communication skills, social interaction, limited interests, and repetitive patterns of behaviours (Little et al., 2019).

When Tom's parents were told that he had autism, they were worried sick that he would not be accepted and appreciated because of his *differences*. At that time, due to the relatively 'closed' Maltese culture, autism was not just a label given to help Tom; it was a pass to a trial that taunted him, mocking his behaviours. In the first two years of primary school, Tom was on the upswing academically, but what his parents feared the most started to materialise further when Tom was in year 3, attributing this to the teacher's negative views of inclusion. In this year, Tom fell drastically behind in his academic performance. He was not included in lessons, was not provided with adapted work, and experienced several moments of being excluded from activities and playtime. His year three teacher constantly remarked that he was 'different' from his peers while undermining and stripping away his self-confidence. Ultimately, this had a direct knock-on effect on his following scholastic years. This experience was the first spark that ignited my interest in inclusion and autism.

The negative labelling, i.e. assigning descriptions to individuals, still directed at students with autism to the present day, from stakeholders who should set an example and be role models, further intrigued my desire to research this topic. Being a primary teacher myself, I heard colleagues indirectly but publicly, teasing, humiliating or stereotyping students with autism. Other educators even exclaimed that teaching students with autism is laborious and tedious and that these students should be



segregated from mainstream education. Though I am constantly searching for reasons behind roadblocking inclusion for these students instead of valuing their differences, referred to as *neurodiversity* (Alves, 2018), no acceptable reason was ever given by these colleagues. Through hindsight, I realised how these teachers, consciously or unconsciously, tend to build an image of what a 'perfect' student should be academically, socially, and physically, resulting in unjust and *ableist* practices – beliefs or actions that devalue and discriminate against certain students who 'need to be fixed' (Sweetapple, 2022).

Becoming a part-time lecturer in Malta, teaching Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs)<sup>2</sup> and classroom educators about the importance of inclusive education, has put me in a better position to witness the increasing rate of students with autism in mainstream classrooms, the debates about teachers' perceptions of these students, and inclusive education, that remain largely underdeveloped in Malta. To this day, I still long for the day when all primary teachers accept and do not view individual students through an ableist lens. Throughout this research process, I aim to uncover themes that should be worked on to improve and foster a better understanding of an inclusive and equitable learning environment that honours all students' strengths and needs. Looking back at the above experiences with rose-coloured glasses, together with eight years spent supporting and working with students with different abilities, including those with autism, in mainstream classrooms, all influenced my ontological and epistemological assumptions to carry out this study.

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<sup>2</sup> SLTs – school administrators responsible for the running of schools

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Education systems have drastically evolved as the years have progressed, with the inclusion of all students becoming a highly important topic and an integral educational aspect in several countries worldwide. An outcome of this change is a mounting concern for equity in inclusive education among governments and the international community. Although inclusion is an ambiguous word and, to date, there is no exclusive, universally accepted definition of inclusive education, it most commonly encompasses the education given to all children, including those with different abilities, in mainstream schools. Stadler-Heer (2019) endorsed that, from a broader perspective, inclusion is a process of addressing all students' needs, especially those considered more susceptible to marginalisation and exclusion than others.

Within professional life, teaching involves human interaction and emotional engagement. This is stipulated by Cunliffe (2016), who stated that teachers are not separate entities, but their inter-subjective ontology indicates that they are always in a relationship with other people. However, a vast body of research confirms that successful inclusion in mainstream classrooms rests on the teachers' shoulders, the front-line personnel who make up the central force to impact the success of inclusive educational practices (Lautenbach & Heyder, 2019; Memisevic et al., 2021; Saloviita, 2020). In fact, "teachers set the tone of classrooms, and as such, the success of inclusion may well depend upon the prevailing attitudes of teachers as they interact with students with disabilities in their classrooms" (Carroll et al., 2003, p. 65). Other critical philosophers (Bahamonde-Birke et al., 2017; Démuth, 2013) are also convinced that our world is a sum of attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and ideas surrounding a subject that

eventually influence successful inclusion. Thereby, as teachers are the key agencies in inclusive education, recent literature has given a growing volume of attention to their perceptions toward inclusion. Démuth (2013) defined *perceptions* as the cornerstones of our knowledge, the starting point of any cognition that affects our thoughts and actions. More specifically, in this dissertation, *perceptions* are defined as the individuals' thoughts, understandings, and interpretations of students based on prior experiences and the environment, which lead to specific actions or behaviours (Cook, 2021).

A large-scale study by Mulligan (2016) found evidence to suggest that teachers' perceptions of students impact their successful inclusion and engagement in mainstream classrooms. In turn, successful inclusion directly influences students' learning and development, especially in the primary years (Saloviita, 2020; Sharifi Brojerdi, 2017). Indeed, there is a consensus amongst educators that the primary years are a crucial period in which inclusive education programmes portray the most significant impacts on students' inclusion, development and learning, leading to influencing outcomes across students' lives (Memisevic et al., 2021; Trawick-Smith, 2019). A body of literature from the Critical Disability area revealed four factors – (i) power and support by SLTs, (ii) the curriculum, (iii) the discourse of labelling, and (iv) teachers' training and resources – which might feasibly influence teachers' perceptions and the way they view the inclusion of students with autism (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Sweetapple, 2022; Trawick-Smith, 2019). However, Crispel and Kasperski (2021) alleged that despite several studies that identified barriers to successful inclusion and the reference to the established link between teachers' perceptions and the continued

transition of students with autism into mainstream classrooms, the conducted studies lack depth into the intricacies of the subject.

An epistemological endeavour presently making me feel somewhat apprehensive is how Maltese primary teachers perceive students with autism in terms of their pedagogical understandings, experiences, and personal identities, which ultimately influence how they treat these students. In this concern, this thesis will not only identify barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education practices but also delve into teachers' perceptions towards inclusion. If we aim to successfully serve the needs of these students and adopt a genuinely inclusive and stimulating environment – a place where students can thrive and reach their potential – it is paramount to understand teachers' perceptions and the factors contributing to these perceptions. In agreement with such belief and given,

- the upsurge in the number of students characterised with autism in primary mainstream classrooms in Malta;
- the direct association between teachers' perceptions and their impact on students' inclusion, development, and learning; and
- the literature gap in the Maltese setting (as discussed in detail in Chapter 3) on teachers' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with autism,

this research study represents an effort to investigate the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of students with autism and focus on the factors influencing these perceptions.

### 1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The overarching question framing this research proposal is: *What are the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of including students with autism in mainstream classrooms?* The analytical questions deriving from this research question include:

- How do Maltese primary teachers perceive mainstream classrooms as addressing the educational needs of students with autism?
- To what extent and how do the four specific factors (power and support from SLTs, the curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and teachers' training and resources) identified from the literature review allow us to uncover the way Maltese primary school teachers perceive the inclusion of students with autism?
- Are there any other issues that could potentially impact Maltese teachers' perceptions of these students and their inclusion in mainstream classrooms? How are they manifested? How do they extend the core four factors identified in the literature?

This study aims to add new insights by investigating Maltese primary teachers' perceptions about including students with autism in mainstream classrooms and exploring the factors influencing teachers' perceptions within the local setting. It is guided through four initial factors sought out from the literature while identifying additional ones during the study. Based on the purposes determined from examining this field, this thesis intends to:

- investigate how Maltese primary teachers perceive the concept of inclusive education of students with autism in mainstream classrooms;

- examine the Maltese teachers' understanding and discourse of inclusive education for primary students with autism;
- explore whether the four preliminary factors – power and support by SLTs, curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and teachers' training and resources – affect teachers' perceptions, and
- identify and unpack any other themes that might be shaping Maltese teachers' perceptions about including students with autism.

This will be framed through a Critical Disability Theory (CDT) lens that challenges society's assumptions of disability and explains how, rather than the disability itself, the environment 'disables' someone by not providing settings where students can be their authentic selves. Using this theoretical framework not only contributes to the theory itself but further helps to question and challenge any Maltese primary teachers' ableist norms and perceptions influenced by the immediate setting.

Recognising the progress made over the past years and acknowledging that Malta still has a long way to go in educating all primary teachers about autism, this study intends to embed knowledge-driven research at the heart of Maltese education and sustain improvements in the quality of life for students with autism. In conjunction with further understanding teachers' perceptions as people with unique perspectives and insights, the study will explore their role in the journey toward quality inclusion in educational settings for students with autism. This study will also underline the importance of understanding students with autism and building resiliency to support social connections in mainstream classrooms.

## **1.4 Outline of the Thesis**

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of this research, discussing its scope and objectives, research questions, and the study's rationale. The next chapter serves as a backdrop, providing a detailed account of the Maltese background and educational context. Chapter Three includes a detailed review of relevant literature in the field, identifies gaps where further study is needed, and establishes its theoretical framework. The fourth chapter engages with the methodology debate, describing the research design, justifying the chosen methodology, data collection and analysis method, and ethical considerations. This is followed by Chapter Five, which presents and analytically discusses the findings in relation to CDT. This dissertation finishes off with Chapter Six, a summary and discussion of the main conclusions drawn from the study in light of the research question, as well as the implications and recommendations for future studies in this line of research.

## **CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE MALTESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT**

This study takes place in Malta, the smallest country in the European Union, an island in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. At this point, I discern the need to provide an account of the broader historical and cultural context concerning Malta's educational system to help readers grasp the concept of how Maltese teachers' perceptions of inclusive education can be influenced, formed, and altered. Besides that, this chapter gives a broad overview of the education and support provided to students with additional needs within the local context.

### **2.1 Background Information on the Maltese Educational Context**

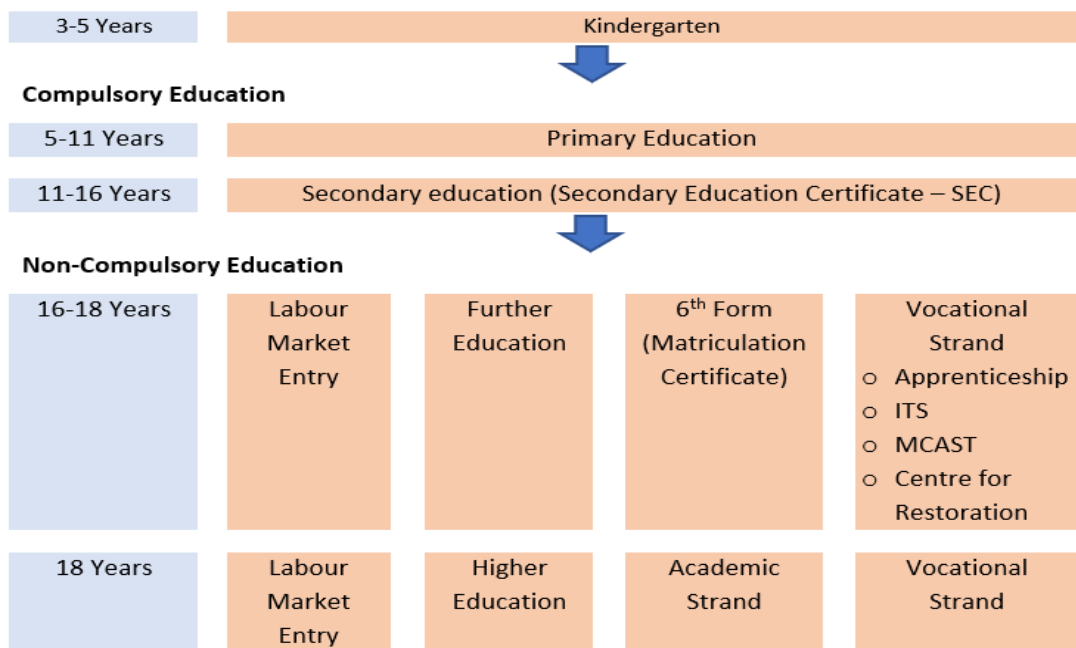
A global map shows Malta as a mere speck, barely visible due to its diminutive surface area. The Maltese archipelago comprises three inhabited islands – Malta, Gozo, and Comino – covering a total area of 316 km<sup>2</sup> with a combined population of around 516,869. This makes Malta one of the smallest countries in the world but also one of the densest. Malta is notably a trendy tourist destination known for its long history, breathtaking landscapes, warm climate throughout the year, and being home to numerous fortresses and some of the world's oldest megalithic temples (Hrushka et al., 2021).

History shows that Malta was governed by several imperial powers, including Phoenicians, Muslims, Normans, the Knights of St John, and the British Colonies, the latest powers that left an indelible mark on these islands, including in the educational system. Consequently, Malta is a bilingual country, with Maltese and English as its



official languages. Most of the Maltese population is bilingual and has a knack for both languages, which is an unsung asset that this island ought to value and promote. Education is thus very accessible to both local and international students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. To retain proficiency in both languages, no local or international student in Malta is exempt from studying Maltese and English, regardless of how many years they have been staying in Malta. Malta gained independence in 1964, became a republic a decade later, and joined as a Member State of the European Union in 2004.

The Maltese educational system is deeply rooted in its history, particularly the influence of the British tuition model. Maltese schools provide compulsory education consisting of a six-year co-ed primary education and a five-year secondary education before leading to post-secondary and higher learning. Figure 1, adapted from Cutajar (2007), provides a simplified overview of students' progression from kindergarten (non-compulsory) to higher education in Malta.



**Figure 1:** The Maltese Educational System

The Maltese educational system follows a tripartite system of state, church, and independent schools as the educational providers on the islands. There are 109 state schools, 43 church schools, and 21 independent schools, including pre-primary, primary, secondary, and learning support centres. The latest statistics by the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2023a) reveal that Maltese state-run institutions absorb the highest intake of students (58.9%), followed by church and independent schools. Table 1 below, adapted from the NSO (2023a), illustrates the number of students enrolled by type of institution and education level for the scholastic year 2021-2022.

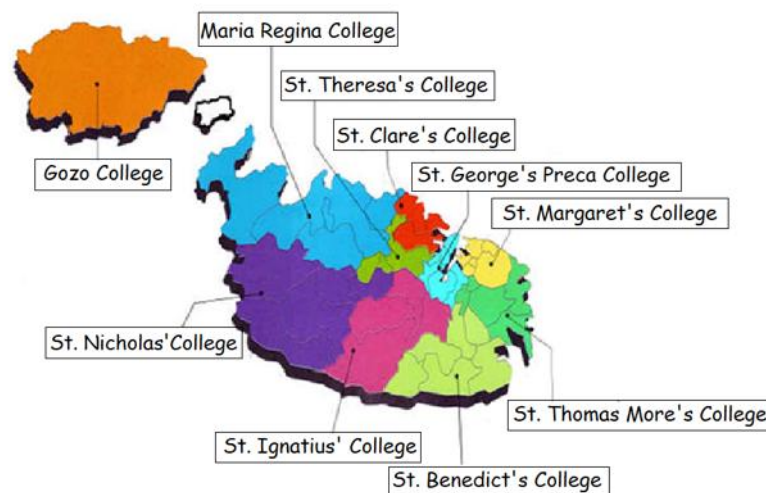
**Table 1:** Student Population among Sectors in Malta (NSO, 2023a)

Education Level	Type of Institution			
	State	Church	Independent	Total
Pre-primary	6,730	964	1,650	9,344 (16%)
Primary	15,719	7,560	3,760	27,039 (46%)
Secondary	11,920	7,472	2,602	21,994 (38%)
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>34,369</b>	<b>15,996</b>	<b>8,012</b>	<b>58,377</b>

There is a consensus among the general public that Maltese educational stakeholders in all three institutions strive to empower students with the necessary skills, attitudes, and values to be active citizens and succeed at work and in society (Azzopardi et al., 2023). However, the approach to achieving these objectives often depends on the institution. Although each system implements inclusion policies, how students are included and treated, and the support level provided vary between these systems. The sections below will briefly overview each of the three types of institutions.

### 2.1.1 State Schools

State-managed primary and secondary schools hosting mixed-gender students can be found in nearly all the main towns and villages around the Maltese islands. Of the 109 state schools, 69 are primary, and 26 are secondary, while the remaining include induction hubs, learning support centres, and resource centres. These schools are accessible to all students free of charge, provide free transport to and from school, and free textbooks for the scholastic year. The only expenses that parents bear are the costs of uniforms and educational outings. In Malta, state schools are grouped into college networks with a principal college head. There are thirteen colleges in the Maltese Islands, twelve covering Malta and one for Gozo, with a number of primary schools and at least two secondary schools in each college (Cutajar et al., 2013). Ten of these colleges pertain to mainstream primary schools. These college networks aim to enhance the standard of state schools' education level and ensure that all students receive full educational entitlements. Figure 2 below, adapted from Cutajar et al. (2013), shows the ten state colleges for mainstream primary schools around the Maltese islands.



**Figure 2:** Regional State Colleges around the Maltese Islands

### **2.1.2 Church Schools**

83% of the Maltese population consider themselves adherents of Catholicism (Borg, 2023); thus, religious-based education is a paramount feature of these islands' educational framework. Admission to church-run institutions is determined through a school ballot, and these schools, providing education from infancy through the teen years, offer free tuition for local students (EduServices, 2017). However, parents are asked to contribute annually to help with school costs, and also cover the costs of uniforms, books, and school activities. The Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE) is the head office of church school systems, providing curricular and psychosocial assistance.

It is believed that the Church school sector is more willing to embrace the inclusion of students with additional or special needs, believing that even Jesus Christ encompassed the most marginalised and despised individuals. However, as this sector has the highest teacher-student ratio, it has the potential to negatively influence the provision of effective inclusive services in some places (Spiteri, 2013). With a significant number of pupils in a class, teachers will have less time to adapt and provide tailored support that meets the unique requirements of all students (Gilmour, 2018).

### **2.1.3 Independent Schools**

A number of independent-run institutions also enjoy an established reputation in Malta, with no private schools in Gozo. The state also funds the salaries of teachers and LSEs working in these independent schools. Like the sectors mentioned above, independently managed schools also provide education from early childhood through

secondary levels, but the education cycle in this system is organised at different levels, with early school (ages 2-7), middle school (ages 8-11) and senior school (ages 11-16). All tuition is generally delivered in English, with such schools charging costly educational fees for attendance, yet the government gives the students' parents some tax breaks. As all schools try to adhere to the inclusive education principle, no independent special institutions exist. However, as this sector encourages parents to pay high tuition fees, it is also receptive to inclusive education and tends to equip educators and staff to treat students with special needs favourably (Rizzo, 2021).

#### **2.1.4 Higher Education**

After completing compulsory secondary education, youths can then choose whether to continue to higher education or join Malta's workforce. Upon successfully completing the Secondary Education Certificate, students who wish to continue studying are asked to sit for the matriculation certificate, a system also based on the British O-level system known as MATSEC. A pass in Maltese, English, Mathematics, and at least two other subjects is obligatory for students to enrol in and attend a two-year post-secondary education programme in Sixth Form. In these institutions, students get prepared to sit for another matriculation certificate – the A-levels – at which point, after achieving it, they can proceed to tertiary education at the age of 18. The Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) is an alternative to the Sixth Form that offers higher education at various levels, ranging from part-time evening courses to university-level degree courses. Students who have finished their compulsory education without the requisite secondary education certificate can formally embark on post-secondary courses, including vocational courses at MCAST or preparatory programmes such as the

ĠEM 16+. This programme is designed to help students engage in intensive revision of the core subjects before giving them a second chance to achieve their SEC qualifications. The Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) is another option that provides students with theoretical knowledge and extensive hands-on, practical educational experience in the tourism and hospitality industries. In Malta, there is only one university, the University of Malta (UoM), providing undergraduate education free of charge for all Maltese and EU nationals. Other tertiary-level institutions and some smaller, privately-run degree programmes also exist.

#### **2.1.5 Resource Centres and Learning Support Centres**

There are five resource centres around the Maltese islands catering for primary students with Individual Educational Needs, secondary students between 11 to 16 years, students with profound and multiple learning disabilities, and a post-16 Resource Centre (EduServices, 2017). These centres aim to provide opportunities to students, varying from academics adapted to their needs to vocational and extra-curricular experiences that teach independent living skills. Some Resource Centres also offer specially designed classrooms and other therapeutic areas, including intensive early intervention, horseback riding, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology, multisensory therapy, and physiotherapy (EduServices, 2017). However, not all students with special needs obtain access to these centres due to limited financial resources, social stigma, and a shortage of support staff (Alotaibi, 2017). Six Learning Support Centres are also offered to primary and secondary students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. These centres seek to offer a balanced curriculum and mentor

students in working on challenging behaviours during the reintegration process into mainstream schooling (MEYR, 2022).

### 2.1.6 Teachers in Malta

Teachers are vital stakeholders accountable for implementing techniques and approaches essential to students’ holistic development. As is customary in Malta, unlike secondary and tertiary education teachers, pre-primary and primary school teachers remain with their students throughout the school day for all core subjects. Maltese primary teachers who graduated from the UoM before 2016 obtained a bachelor’s degree in education but could pursue further studies and enhance their skills and competencies of their free will. As of 2016, those who desire to conduct analysis in primary or secondary education and choose teaching as a career are now requested to read for a master’s degree in teaching and learning (MTL) in addition to their Bachelor of Arts (Caruana, 2016). Table 2 displays the most recent exposed profile of teachers and academic staff for the academic year 2021-2022, adapted from NSO (2023b).

**Table 2:** Teachers and Academic Staff by Education, Sex, and Institution (NSO, 2023b)

Characteristics	Sex		
	Males	Females	Total (%)
<b>Education Level</b>			
Pre-primary education	11	951	962 (9.4%)
Primary education	290	1,839	2,129 (20.8%)
Secondary education	1,656	3,014	4,670 (45.7%)
Tertiary education	1,506	962	2,468 (24.1%)
<b>Type of Institution</b>			

State	2,611	4,752	7,363 (72.0%)
Church	358	1,181	1,539 (15.0%)
Independent	494	833	1,327 (13.0%)
<b>Total</b>			<b>10,229</b>

The table above shows that female educators are over-represented in the teaching force, far outnumbering male educators in all types of institutions and at all educational levels except at the tertiary level. In pre-primary to secondary education, female teachers and academic staff make up 75% of the teaching force, with their numbers dwindling in tertiary education. Han et al. (2020) suggest that this high percentage, which is making teaching a highly feminised occupation, could be because men are assuming that women, bearing a mother's role, have a natural affinity for children; some may be viewing teaching as a non-respected job; and men also rank intrinsic motivators as less influential than extrinsic ones.

## **2.2 Towards a Broader Understanding of Inclusive Education in Malta**

Across the nations, people with disabilities had to battle a history of bias. Taking inclusion in the Maltese context back to its roots, in the earliest days, children born with a condition or special needs were the source of shame and guilt among their families and rarely received any education. "In the 1800s, people with disabilities were considered meagre, tragic, pitiful individuals unfit and unable to contribute to society, except to serve as ridiculed objects of entertainment in circuses and exhibitions" (Anti-Defamation League, 2018, p. 1). Research shows that in Malta, these people were also subjected to much rejection and denied a complete sense of identity in society (Camilleri



& Callus, 2001). They were considered taboo, often hidden underground in cellars, stashed away in institutions, or brought up with farm animals. This inhumane behaviour could have been attributed to early Catholic beliefs, with these children being considered as a punishment from God due to past wrongdoings or impurity in the family, relegating them to a miserable life of social exclusion. Although nowadays, such an idea receives backlash from numerous Maltese citizens, it is still deemed true by certain individuals who link disability with the original sin (Calleja, 2023b). While changes are evident, Malta's National Autism Strategy sustained that "Maltese society still maintains a strong culture of shame, and a wrong view of autism... [our society still] hurts people on the autism spectrum and their families" (Government of Malta, 2021, p. 9).

For many years, the Maltese education system has attempted to make substantial strides to promote equal opportunities for all students to develop their potential. As the Maltese government is dedicated to an inclusive education across the school cycle, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR), formerly referred to as the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE), has been striving to implement laws and regulations to achieve this aim and ensure high-quality education for all students (Rizzo, 2021). However, this has not always been the case.

Even though international regulations have required all children to attend school since 1918, many children with special needs were routinely kept out of public schools (Goldberg & Drash, 1968). Up until the 1960s, in most countries, children with a statement of needs were segregated into special classes, i.e., classes where students with disabilities are grouped and viewed as incapable of successfully performing

academically, robbing them of their right to learn alongside their peers. These children were labelled as requiring an adaptable, clinically focused corrective strategy that could only be restored if placed in a suitable curative environment (Goldberg & Drash, 1968). In 1974, the *Education Act* stipulated that students who are mentally, emotionally, or physically handicapped should attend one of the special schools around the Maltese islands (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009). Teachers at such schools were trained to work exclusively with students with difficulties and customise instruction to meet their unique needs and talents. Following this period, as part of a larger educational change, Malta started shifting away from special schools towards a more integrated paradigm where students were given extra support and resources to help them adjust into mainstream educational environments. This time frame acted as a springboard to the modern idea of inclusion, which highlights every child's right to learn alongside their peers in a cooperative setting, regardless of ability. A few years later, educational stakeholders realised that "inclusion is not going to go away", so they started planning on addressing the different learning demands of students with special needs previously considered 'lazy' or 'disobedient' (Smith & Smith, 2000, p. 162).

Advancements in the health sector started to change perspectives, making societies recognise that students with special needs also have rights (Cardona, 2013). Twenty-nine years ago, Malta was among the first countries to ratify the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (henceforth referred to as the Salamanca Statement), a landmark document to raise awareness and provide a humanistic vision for inclusive teaching and learning, calling inclusion the norm (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). This

declaration of Malta as a signatory was an essential groundbreaking document on which several Maltese stakeholders prominently discussed and based their protests. This framework, referred to by Maltese stakeholders as a 'tour de force', was a noteworthy milestone in the local educational agenda, aiding deliberation on a national level and leading inclusive education to become featured among the top priorities (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019).

Yet, inclusive education requires more than allegiance to international policies like the Salamanca Statement. Over time, students with special needs began spending more and more time in state school settings with other students having no special needs and receiving assistance from a Learning Support Educator (LSE), an educator who provides one-to-one or shared support and facilitates a child's learning in a classroom. This process, which started to be called 'inclusive education,' was a catalyst meant to improve the quality of education for all students. From that onwards, Malta started to strive to make institutions more inclusive, promote diversity, support and encourage learning, and cater to each student's needs.

In 2000, influenced by the British style, Malta set up a *Statementing Moderating Panel and Appeals Board* to identify and assess students experiencing difficulties in the educational system and allow them full access to the curriculum. Around this time, the *Equal Opportunities Person with Disability Act*, an anti-discrimination act, was also introduced for people with special needs to acquire equal recognition under Maltese law (Cardona, 2013). Malta issued its first document, *Creating Inclusive Schools* (2002), to provide local teachers with guidelines for developing a more inclusive, community-

based educational environment (Bartolo et al., 2002). This inclusive policy and the availability of free public education for all students from kindergarten through tertiary level demonstrated Malta's commitment to its two central tenets – equity and excellence. In the same year, Malta also introduced and started implementing the Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) to assist students with special needs access to the mainstream curriculum. IEP is a map that lays out a programme for teaching specific students based on their needs and identifies measurable annual goals and objectives to be tackled. It is discussed and created by classroom educators, parents/guardians, school administrators, also referred to as the Senior Leadership Teams, and related services personnel, who all discuss the best ways to refine the educational results of students with a statement of needs (Holmes & Butcher, 2020).

From that year onwards, Malta has witnessed significant progress in education, launching a string of other official documents and federal legislation based on safeguarding the rights of students, promoting diversity, and ensuring equal opportunities for students with special needs. Since then, the fundamental concept of enrolling students with special needs in typical classrooms has been one of the most considerable educational and pedagogical challenges within the Maltese educational system, but one that has progressed and gained impetus. In 2005, more emphasis was placed on providing quality education for all students in Maltese mainstream classes, which was included in *For All Children to Succeed. The Inclusive and Special Education Review* (2005) and the *Education Act* (2006) evaluated the Maltese situation and proposed that special schools be transformed into Resource Centres (MEYR, 2022). A national policy document that aimed to offer a holistic vision of equity and inclusive

education, the *National Curriculum Framework (NCF)*, was issued in 2012 to provide teachers with guidelines on how to depart from the traditional curriculum and improve students' quality of education through the integration of diverse learning experiences (MEDE, 2012). Table 3, adapted from MEDE (2012), shows the six general principles of inclusive education that form the foundation of the NCF, leaning towards a more child-centred and needs-oriented educational system.

**Table 3:** Six General Principles Forming the Foundation of the NCF (MEDE, 2012)

General principles	Details on each principle
<p><b>Principle 1:</b> Entitlement</p>	<p>Every child is entitled to a quality educational experience. Students should be supported in developing their potential and achieving personal excellence.</p>
<p><b>Principle 2:</b> Diversity</p>	<p>Every student can learn, grow and succeed. The NCF acknowledges and respects individual differences.</p>
<p><b>Principle 3:</b> Continuum of Achievement</p>	<p>The curriculum should meet individual student's needs based on their stage of development in the school cycle.</p>
<p><b>Principle 4:</b> Learner-Centred Learning</p>	<p>The NCF endorses the development of an active and personalised learner-centred approach.</p>
<p><b>Principle 5:</b> Quality Assurance</p>	<p>It affirms the efficient and effective use of resources that foster school improvement.</p>
<p><b>Principle 6:</b> Teacher Professional Support</p>	<p>This principle outlines the importance of continuous professional development in meeting the needs of all students in a stimulating and supportive learning environment.</p>

The above table reveals how the principles of NCF acknowledge each student's uniqueness, promote inclusive education practices, foster holistic development,

promote an inclusive learning environment, advocate for equity and social justice, encourage active learning and critical thinking, and emphasise partnerships and collaboration (MEDE, 2012). The World Health Organisation praised Malta for its attempt to accommodate an inclusive environment in schools. However, this praise was disputed three years later in a study issued by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2014), which showed the Maltese educational system as still inflexible to diversity. The authors in this critical document observed that traditional teaching methods, strict discipline, formal structures, and high-stakes exams continued to characterise the Maltese education system. It thus recommended that Maltese teachers develop a more flexible curriculum and offer instructional strategies and resources that engage all students, especially those exhibiting learning difficulties (EASNIE, 2014).

In line with these recommendations, MEYR issued other frameworks to provide insights into current policy and practice and encourage stakeholders to foster a more supportive learning environment. The *Respect for All Framework* (MEDE, 2014a) has inclusive education as its leading principle and was issued to ensure that all students have opportunities to obtain the necessary skills, values, and attitudes to be active and successful citizens. A ten-year *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024* was also launched to cultivate student engagement and promote high aspirations for all students to learn in an inclusive, safe, and orderly environment. This framework referred to the four UNESCO pillars – learning to be, learning to do, learning to live, and learning to know – envisaging an environment where every student can learn in a flexible and unrestricted way (MEDE, 2014b). These pillars are offered to “improve

quality in our country and develop a society that is competent, resourceful, critically conscious and competitive in a global economy driven by information, knowledge and innovation” (MEDE, 2014b, p. 5).

In 2015, a document presented by the Maltese Association of Parents of State Schools Students indicated that more work is needed in Maltese schools to guarantee a clearer understanding of the concept of inclusion, “unfortunately, we are having most of them [students with special needs] being inserted in the system and not being able to have them included as should be the case with all children” (p. 2). Successively, in 2019, the *National Inclusive Education Framework* focused on individual differences as learning opportunities and once again highlighted the importance of offering a more inclusive learning environment by providing high-quality education that meets all students’ individual needs (MEYR, 2022). The latest policy launched in Malta regarding inclusive education, the *Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion* (MEYR, 2019, p. 8), pointed out that students should not only attend typical schools “but also belong as valued members through active participation and the elimination of the barriers limiting the participation and achievement of all learners”. These policies specified four strategic baselines: (i) the participation of students in educational activities, (ii) the assistance and support from SLTs and other professionals in the education system, (iii) the availability of training and resources to facilitate inclusive environments for all students, and (iv) the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL, an instructional approach that endorses participation and educational activities, aims to assist all students in overcoming obstacles that restrict accessibility to the curriculum faced in traditional classrooms. This approach, which

allows for multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement, is specifically advantageous for students keen to learn but feel stigmatised due to the educational environment (MEYR, 2019). Adopting UDL can significantly optimise student learning and engagement and create a more inclusive learning environment. In fact, UDL propound guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education that align with the principles outlined in the Salamanca Statement – that every child has the right to learn and attain results at a level accessible to them (UNESCO, 1994).

Recently, Malta has been working and attempting to change the curriculum design, which has hitherto been rigid and tied to the content of national examinations, by introducing the *Learning Outcomes Frameworks* (LOFs). Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016) define LOFs as a set of statements that move from the restriction of following centrally mandated knowledge-centric curricula to the freedom of designing student-centred programmes. These are assessed on a year-by-year and subject-by-subject basis, meeting the three national education entitlements of knowledge, attitude, and skill-based outcomes. These frameworks were designed to provide specific student attention, stretch their potential, promote collaboration and inclusion, and fulfil stakeholders' expectations (Xerri Hili & Schembri, 2022). However, "*bejn il-kliem u l-fatti hemm baħar jikkumbatti*" [between the words and the facts, there is a battling sea]. Although the above definitions of the LOFs present a paradise-on-earth school system, researchers argue that the facts are otherwise, indicating that there is a considerable discrepancy between what is officially written on paper and what is truly happening in Maltese classrooms, bringing more challenges to the Maltese education system (Xerri Hili & Schembri, 2022).



## 2.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the backdrop of the current study by analysing the Maltese education system and how local policies can dominate and control pedagogical understandings and experiences to provide quality education for all students. The abovementioned policies show that Malta has made tremendous advances in the past years, bringing a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive education system. Understanding how these policies are experienced and practised can reveal the strengths and limitations of the existing system, which can then inform policy changes and support the implementation of more inclusive practices at the systemic level. Nevertheless, there is a long and difficult way to go before all students with additional needs can experience full participation, equality, and inclusion in Maltese classrooms (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Borg, 2019; Depares, 2019; Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021).

In contributing to international efforts to spawn knowledge on inclusive education and autism and filling the research lacuna in primary education in Malta, this study's validity is justified. Conducting this study within the Maltese context can elucidate cultural and contextual factors influencing these teachers' perceptions and offer a unique perspective on how students can receive more accessible and relevant inclusive education practices in Malta. The next chapter, Chapter Three, examines international and local studies on inclusion and Autism, providing insights into the similarities and differences in perceptions across different cultural and educational settings. It also summarises research in Critical Disability Theory as this study's main theoretical framework.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Following some ethical and legal considerations, the concept of inclusive education for all students, including those with autism, has recently become an integral part of the educational experience, even in Malta. Inclusive education seeks to create equitable learning environments that generate a sense of belonging and mutual support. This chapter probes into the multifaceted landscape of inclusive education, comprehensively and critically reviewing existing literature that guides the development and understanding of the analytical questions posed in the introduction chapter. This is followed by information on autism, including its history, characteristics, and diagnosis, and pinpointing some explanations for the increasing rate of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. This chapter also identifies inconsistencies and gaps in the current literature where further research is needed and refers to pertinent information from significant and contemporary studies to provide a detailed overview supporting this study's significance within the Maltese context. This literature review also offers foundational information revolving around Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as the theoretical framework underpinning this study. This theoretical and empirical discussion chapter then leads to the Methodology Chapter, outlining this study's research paradigm and design.

### **3.1 Literature Search Study**

To discuss significant findings, locate this study within existing works, and identify any research gaps, it was vital to examine the already-published evidence-based studies

on inclusive education and autism. This research used high-quality local and international publications, including reports, books, PhD theses, reference lists from previously completed literature reviews, and worldwide scholarly journal articles. Careful consideration was taken to ensure that the articles found were peer-reviewed. These articles and studies were obtained through multiple online library references and electronic databases, including the Keele University Library, the University of Malta Library, the Maltese Ministry for Education website, Psych INFO, EBSCOhost, PubMed, and ERIC. Key terms searched included *inclusive education*, *autism spectrum disorder*, *the inclusion of students with autism*, and *teachers' perceptions of inclusion*.

### **3.2 Conceptualisations of Inclusion and Inclusive Education**

All students have the right to receive education and be treated equally, regardless of their differences. Yet, some students are still excluded for belonging to a 'different' group. Discrimination along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, national origin, and social class has been one of the perennial challenges in the history and development of education (O'cay et al., 2021). These different forms of 'otherism' that distinguish 'us' from 'them' based on collective traits entail negative stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusionary practices (Wenz, 2020). Wenz further elaborates that discrimination based on race, gender, and other attributes is not always directly observable but can also be hidden or in the form of unintentional actions that indirectly harm some groups. This thus underscores the importance of schools, where inclusivity and equity must be actively cultivated. In fact, schools are not isolated islands but are social institutions that run the very bedrock of a society. Understanding the principle of inclusion is the initial phase toward having inclusive schools that accommodate all

students' needs. For several years, the term *inclusive education* has been an internationally prominent theme in educational research and has sparked heated controversy among academics in special education, embodying ideas and arguments that have long been discussed and debated. To conceptualise inclusive education in more depth, one must deliberately refer back to its history and the twists and turns that moulded it into how we know it today. The following are only a few examples of international milestones that were the key turning points in how inclusion has evolved to its current state, shaping our understanding of it. However, this is a continuous process that is moulded by the actions of individuals worldwide.

In the early days of compulsory education, students were expected to progress through the grades and eventually graduate as productive citizens ready for the workforce. However, in this historical landscape, there were no public-school programmes or special lessons to cater to students with disabilities (Anderson, 2015). It was in the 1940s that students with disabilities started to be educated at special schools that segregated them from the regular education curriculum received by neurotypical peers. In Malta, despite their limited reach and resources, religious institutions and charitable organisations such as the Sisters of Charity, were instrumental in providing opportunities for students with disabilities. These settings, although they perpetuated the idea that students with special needs were completely different and could not keep up with their peers, were the first step towards the initial form of educational provision that started recognising children's rights (Bartolo, 2001). An increased awareness of disabilities was noted worldwide shortly after World War II, which started the shift

toward integration, with students placed in mainstream settings but without full participation and support.

Research shows that the idea of inclusive education stemmed first and foremost from the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which laid the foundation for a collective effort against discrimination and the restriction of rights to education for students with disabilities (Anderson, 2015). Building on this policy, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, declared it unlawful to arbitrarily discriminate against some individuals with special needs and deny them equal educational opportunities (Russo et al., 1994). Although this idea referred to racial segregation, it began to significantly influence our thinking about students with disabilities, and brought new ideas about integration. These policies, together with more recent ones, such as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* and the *Salamanca Statement*, confirmed that special classes minimised, rather than maximised, students' potential. Thus, they started paving the way against denying access to public education based on students' disabilities and, in turn, advocating for equal opportunities for all learners around the world.

By early 20<sup>th</sup> century students with disabilities were attending regular schools but still taught in separate classrooms or taken out for special instruction. In 1975, the United States Congress approved the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA), also called *Public Law 94-142*, to address the worldwide precarious situation of entitling children with disabilities to free and appropriate public education by 1978. This legislation gained impetus and started a new era of advocating for the provision of basic

education to all. Yet, those with physical, cognitive, developmental, or mental impairments, referred to back then as *handicapped* or *crippled*, were still being marginalised and barely acknowledged (Dreilinger, 2021). History shows that the EHA was revised in 1990, modifying its name to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA), also known as *Public Law 108-446* and reupdated in 1997 to endorse an inclusive 'whole-school' approach (Yell et al., 2017). With this revision, IDEA started to consider the terms *cripple* and *handicap* as being disrespectful toward students with disabilities and began to include students with special needs on the list to be given additional educational services (Yell et al., 2017). The signing of this act further bridged the gap and changed society's perspectives about those students with disabilities who did not afford the same rights to equal educational opportunities as their classmates.

Around this time, the Maltese government also took a strong stance on inclusion and started issuing policies accenting children's rights, including the rights to have the same educational opportunities in mainstream classrooms (Bartolo, 2001). A few years later, however, Maltese stakeholders expressed concern that the education system was still practising integration of students with disabilities rather than inclusion, implying a need for curricular and institutional change for all students to be fully accepted and belong (Bartolo, 2001). At this time, special schools in Malta started to serve as resource centres to support mainstream schools in accommodating the needs of students with disabilities. Malta also started introducing LSEs to provide students with disabilities one-on-one support and facilitate their inclusion into mainstream classrooms.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a movement for full inclusion, was fuelled by the principle that students with disabilities ought to attend school alongside their peers, regardless of ability. The *Salamanca Statement* (1994) was a worldwide consensus that also grew out of EHA. Article 3 of the Salamanca Statement explicitly indicated that all stakeholders in the education system “should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 5). Such a guiding principle conveyed a more progressive description of inclusion, emphasising the importance of educating all students in places designed for general education and giving them the support they require. It marked a significant transition with the prospect of real and substantial shifts in how and where students with special needs are educated, resulting in more international and federal statuses (Spirko, 2015). Overtly, this further stressed the principles of students’ rights and promoted the idea of education for all, with educators and policymakers worldwide being requested to bring support services to children and provide them with school environments capable of serving their individual needs. Despite the fact that neither the Salamanca Statement nor IDEA explicitly used the term *inclusive education* (Gryskiewicz, 2019), their passage was undeniably a significant push that mandated that all students, regardless of their unique needs, are entitled to free and equal access to public education in the least restrictive environment possible. Gryskiewicz (2019) defined the term *least restrictive environment* to mean, as much as feasible, an environment whereby the specific services required by an individual student can be catered for. These treaties, together with other international and national legislations, safeguard the holistic rights of students with disabilities and put them on an equal basis with their peers (Callus & Farrugia, 2016). Building on these, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the

*Education for All* global movement and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* were other turning points that further endorsed the idea that including all students in mainstream classrooms is the best way to counteract oppressive normativity and achieve the goal of inclusive education (De Beco, 2014).

“Inclusive education is good education” (Richler, 2012, p. 177). The idea of inclusive education has evolved from a narrative about children with special needs to one about inclusive and accessible learning environments for all children from different physical, cognitive, and social backgrounds (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Valenti, 2020; Wilson, 2017). In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916), one of the greatest philosophical exponents of inclusive education, stressed the importance of providing students of different races, religions, abilities, and customs with the opportunity to participate and learn in an inclusive environment that caters to their diverse needs. Despite years of research, inclusive education continues to be an empirically investigated and fiercely debated subject worldwide, necessitating more thorough research on its understanding, as it is by no means a term precisely defined or shared by all people or nations, particularly in the goals to be attained (Paraskevi, 2021; Wehmeyer et al., 2021; Woodcock & Jones, 2020). In 1997, the UK Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) presented a definition of inclusion enshrined within the principles of social justice “where all children are included as equal partners in the school community” and valued for who they are (DfEE, 1997, p. 5). A year later, DfEE offered another definition of inclusion, stating that it is “the participation of all pupils in learning which leads to the highest possible level of achievement” (DfEE, 1998, p. 23).



In their study, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) referred to numerous studies and categorised their definitions of inclusion into four distinct groups: (i) the placement in general education classrooms, (ii) the creation of groups of students with similar needs in the same classroom, (iii) the requirement to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and (iv) meeting the social and academic needs of all students. These authors analysed schools' approaches to particular students and discussed how these relate to the broader concepts of segregation, integration and inclusion in education. Although inclusive education still faces limitations in practice and requires specialised resources, trained personnel, and tailored curricula, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) advocate moving beyond mere integration toward inclusion, highlighting the structural and curricular changes needed to equitably meet each student's needs. In more recent work, Krischler et al. (2019) endorsed that, from a broader perspective, inclusive education is regarded as giving every child the right to joint education in a local school. In their analysis, Wehmeyer et al. (2021) further specified that inclusion signifies that students with an identified disability have at least an 80% attendance rate in the same mainstream classrooms as their peers.

Notwithstanding the fact that the concept of inclusion is still a contentious idea, with meanings slightly varying depending on a person's involvement in the educational system and socio-political contexts, its core principles and values are generally consistent – that each student, irrespective of differences, is respected and provided with the right to be educated and thrive in a welcoming and equitable learning environment to achieve his/her highest potential (Woodcock & Jones, 2020). This is the definition that was taken onboard for this study.

### 3.3 The Idea of Mainstreaming

With the passing of the Salamanca Statement and IDEA, there has been a pressing call for practising mainstreaming. For the past decades, *mainstreaming* has become a central term used globally to refer to students with special needs who were placed in general education classrooms, where they received the same formal education set forth for neurotypical peers and were provided with suitable techniques, instructional practices and adequate materials (Memisevic et al., 2021). Data from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) shows that amongst the EU countries, Malta has one of the lowest segregation rates of students with individual educational needs (0.1%) placed in special schools. However, Azzopardi et al. (2023) strongly question whether all students in Maltese mainstream classrooms are indeed included or just placed there in the name of inclusion. Mainstreaming has been controversially and polemically debated over the decades, with some arguing in favour of it (Memisevic et al., 2021; Mutabbakani & Callinan, 2020; Scoresby et al., 2022; Stadler-Heer, 2019), whereas others argue against it (Hammel, 2012; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Sieber, 2019).

A substantial body of research supports the efficacy of mainstreaming and maintains that including all students in mainstream classrooms provides remarkable achievements that contribute to many positive benefits. Krischler et al. (2019) revealed that including all students in a mainstream classroom is the best method to combat prejudice and negative perceptions. Backing this, Stadler-Heer (2019), elaborating from the opposite angle, maintained that *segregation*, i.e., the separation of students by

inequitable means, discriminates against students' rights and chances of attending an education with neurotypical peers, causing fear and prejudice.

Research shows that students with special needs taught in mainstream classrooms benefit from increased participation, reduced anxiety, enhanced problem-solving skills, and better observational learning, which help to improve performance and communication and enhance their social and developmental skills (Memisevic et al., 2021; Scoresby et al., 2022). A study by Schwab et al. (2021) revealed that during their teaching careers, teachers observed several academic and social improvements in classes where students with different needs were included.

Nevertheless, although, to date, the broad understanding of mainstreaming is widely accepted within the literature, there remain scholars who are sceptical about its value and implementation and have proposed controversial and polemic arguments on the opposing side of the debate that tend to revolve around the issues of marginalisation, labelling and social rejection. Hammel (2012) stated that in mainstream classrooms, students with special needs are often ostracised for being *different*, with a lack of understanding of their condition eliciting an ableist perception and leading to labelling and marginalisation. Sieber (2019) further commented that apart from being overstimulating, mainstream classrooms can have challenging educational content for students with additional needs. While not totally against including all students in mainstream classrooms, other researchers maintained that such students would benefit more from smaller class sizes and direct interventions in *pull-out programmes* (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Kauffman et al., 2022). By pull-out programmes, these authors

referred to the process where students with additional needs are exited from mainstream classrooms with a Learning Support Educator (LSE) for remediation or tutorials on specific aims and skills not yet grasped by a student. Ryall (2014, p. 75) argues that pull-out programmes like resource rooms, although being mistaken by some individuals as “a dumping ground for ‘unmanageable’ children”, offer specialised support and intend to promote inclusion and reduce the need for segregated educational environments.

In this regard, despite some authors opposing the full inclusion of all students in mainstream classrooms, the benefits of mainstreaming outperform those against it. Yet, its extent could only be mitigated if society adopts a more positive outlook. This shift from the ‘why’ to the ‘how’ of inclusion requires altering “the physical as well as the social structures of society” (McGowan, 2014, p. 38). This argument that emphasises the need to change how inclusion is understood and addressed has further prompted me to use CDT in this study, moving away from students’ characteristics to explore the societal aspects influencing teachers’ perceptions. To further understand the importance of having a positive outlook and transforming society to a more inclusive mainstream environment, this study integrates CDT as a valuable paradigm to stress how ableist views and environmental factors can shape the inclusion of students with autism. Ainscow (2020) argues that how disability is understood within society influences how the same society considers the importance of inclusive education. This thesis contributes to the field of inclusion, and using CDT intends to shift the focus away from students’ characteristics and address and dismantle societal barriers that hinder

inclusion, fostering a more equitable and just setting. The section below discusses in more depth the key tenets of CDT that have informed this study's research focus.

### **3.4 Critical Disability Theory**

Disability studies surfaced as an academic discipline across the Western world around the 1970s and have since been employed in several disciplines, including social sciences, humanities, and applied sciences (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Over the last decade, in particular, the term CDT has been increasingly used in scholarly work. This study employs CDT as its theoretical framework to serve as a roadmap that elucidates the focus of inquiry, aiming to bring about a physical and social structural change in society. In this study, CDT helps contribute to promoting disability inclusiveness and explores how society uses language to perceive, interpret and value differences and inclusion while focusing on the beliefs of individuals close to students.

Perspectives towards disability impact the way neurotypical individuals think and treat those with special needs, inevitably influencing how the latter act, interact and participate in society. The first method used in society to understand disability was the moral model, the belief that disability was God's punishment for sins committed by the person with a disability or their families (Attard & Attard, 2023). This method was replaced by the medical model of disability. In the mid-1800s, people with disabilities were labelled by society as dysfunctional, ill, or needing medical treatment, being perceived from a medical model perspective. In this model, the problem of the diagnosis or impairment was located within a person who is viewed as needing 'medical fixing' in a 'defective' body, making it hard to 'escape' the disability (McGowan, 2014). This model

has been criticised and opposed by many as it defined people with disabilities solely on their impairments, making them look 'unnatural', helpless and unable to fully participate in society (McGowan, 2014).

CDT challenges this model for perpetuating an ableist worldview and aims to analyse and expose the discrimination of people based on their abilities (Hall, 2019).

Campbell defines ableism as

a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human (Campbell, 2001, p. 44).

This ableist worldview, implying that individuals with disabilities should conform to standards and endeavour for an able-bodied norm to function in society, led to CDT's formation (Peña et al., 2016). As described in Peña et al.'s (2016) article, dysfunction further arises when accommodations for individuals with disabilities concentrate solely on their disabilities and ignore other aspects of their identity or the broader societal discrimination against them. This study intends to tackle the root causes of societal attitudes through teachers' perceptions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to better recognise and support students' full and diverse identities.

Over the years, students with disabilities started to be perceived as a minority group, with them experiencing more or less the same social disparities from attitudinal and structural barriers in the environment that restricted them from effectively

navigating society (Peña et al., 2016). These paradigms started to challenge the idea of the medical model of disability. The social model of disability was put forth in 1976 in a proposal by the *Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation* when the 'problem' began to be placed on society for not providing individuals with disability with the adequate services to meet their individual needs, thus imposing disability on people (McGowan, 2014; Tremain, 2001). From these ideas, a number of manifestations of critical theory were developed based on the principle that disability is not the inevitable consequence of impairment but a system of exclusion (Goodley et al., 2018). These include, among others, critical race theory, feminist theory, and CDT.

The concept of CDT has its roots in critical theory, which was first introduced by Max Horkheimer in 1937 to construe how social, political, and ideological structures create meanings that privilege some individuals over others (Wilson, 2017). CDT sets out to explain what is wrong with society and strives to transform society through human emancipation. It aims to identify and challenge barriers that prohibit persons with disabilities, considered to be outside of 'normalcy', from full inclusion and, in turn, strives to foster practices that allow them to participate and engage with their communities in a more democratic and equitable society (McGowan, 2014). As CDT maintains that discrimination against these individuals is very ordinary, it tries to reveal beliefs and values that impede understanding the world and review the assumptions leading to a distorted insight into reality (Neupane, 2023). CDT is a multidimensional version of the social model of disability, which values rights, disability voices, and transformative politics. This is presented by David Hosking (2008), one of the influential disability scholars in this trend. His CDT's seven key elements are explained in Table 4.

The subsequent sections of this thesis discuss some of these tenets that are challenged within society, mainly around the issues of power, experiences, and responsabilisation.

**Table 4:** Hosking’s Seven Key Elements

Key elements	Details on each element
Key element 1	Based on the <i>social model of disability</i> , CDT assumes that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon triggered by the institutional, attitudinal, and physical environment, which fails to respond to the needs of individuals who do not match the societal expectations of ‘normalcy’. At its core, CDT criticises that these individuals bear sole responsibility for their inclusion and adaptation to societal expectations. Adding to the social model, CDT acknowledges disability not because of impairment but as a socially created interrelationship between a condition, a person’s response to impairments, and the social setting. This infers that rather than physical differences, humanity, which is the first step towards inclusion, deactivates those outside of the ‘norm’ by providing social environments that are not welcoming to an individual’s differences.
Key element 2	With the <i>multidimensionality of disability</i> , Hosking recognises the disability facets that must be identified and addressed. CDT highlights that disability is a complex phenomenon, and thus, it advocates for people with disabilities not to be categorised into one group.
Key element 3	Building on the previous element, CDT maintains that society should <i>value diversity</i> , embrace differences, and remove barriers that prohibit persons with disabilities from fully participating in society. CDT advocates for diversity and equality and aims to address barriers and pursue solutions to achieve the full participation of individuals with disabilities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).
Key element	The <i>rights-based approach</i> is an indispensable tool to advance equality and support the rights to autonomy and full integration of people with



4	disabilities in all aspects of society. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is one example of this approach. Yet, it has been criticised for framing it in a way that can threaten inclusion and not fully addressing the comprehensive framework of disability (Neupane, 2023).
Key element 5	Traditionally, the <i>voices</i> of people with disabilities have been suppressed and sidelined. CDT addresses the power imbalance between people with disabilities and those without, gives voices and control to marginalised groups, and argues that these should be listened to and valued.
Key element 6	<i>Language</i> , which CDT understands to be inherently political, includes both terms used to describe or label persons with disabilities and the concepts and images used to portray disability. Hosking (2008) notes that the choice of words and ableist language that is still being portrayed by the media and the cultural industry are impacting the social attitudes towards people with disabilities, rendering the latter powerless, vulnerable, and dependent. CDT advocates for a language that respects diversity and criticises the one that reinforces harmful stereotypes. Devlin and Pothier (2006) mentioned that word choice can influence disability, giving the example that <i>a handicapped person</i> implies that because of the impairment, the entire person is handicapped, whereas a person with disability affirms the individual’s personhood.
Key element 7	The last term presented by Hosking (2008) is <i>transformative policies</i> . CDT offers a theoretical basis for transformative policies that take into account the inclusion, equality, and autonomy of people with disabilities. It inquires about the traditional notion of able-bodied (we) in opposition to disabled (them) and works towards freeing society from the ‘mental prisons’ of ableism to one without barriers where people with disabilities belong.

CDT highlights the importance of promoting neurodiverse thinking and providing knowledge in the fight for disability justice, equality, and inclusion in society

(Sweetapple, 2022). As the CDT paradigm focuses on critiquing ideas and systems that stigmatise individuals from their full participation in society, it is inextricably linked with critical inclusive education. Nevertheless, it criticises the latter's shortcomings, mainly because it might perpetuate norms and beliefs that exclude specific students and try to *fix or cure* them (Mueller, 2021). Correspondingly, Snipstad (2020) also acknowledged that as this might foster a narrow vision of what constitutes *normal* behaviour, which can stigmatise those deviating from the *norm*, more research on how prejudice can be created in inclusive practice for students with special needs is needed.

Over the years, there have been various efforts to create a sense of 'normalcy' for students with disabilities, including students with autism. However, placing these students in typical classrooms does not assure social integration, understanding, or empathy, as societal attitudes are deeply entrenched and not easily changed (Snipstad, 2020; Tejpar & Butler, 2023). "Critical Disability Theory offers a powerful framework for analysing how autism has been constructed as a pathological and tragic condition and for challenging the dominant medical and social models that perpetuate stigma and exclusion" (Anchustegui-Vila & Ustrell-Torrent, 2017, p. 178). In their article, Anchustegui-Vila and Ustrell-Torrent stated that CDT presents an insightful viewpoint for examining how society depicts individuals with autism, viewed as 'pathological' and in a 'tragic condition'. These authors maintained that CDT challenges this prevalent language surrounding autism and, in turn, strives to promote social inclusion and agency among these individuals with autism. Since autism is believed by a number of individuals in society to deviate from the norm and is associated with social differences (O'Dell et al., 2016; Goodley, 2014), this makes it a condition of particular relevance to CDT.

In relation to individuals with autism, O'Dell et al. (2016, p. 7) stated that CDT not only emphasises the need to respect and appreciate the personhood of individuals with autism “but also reveals how the construction of autistic identities holds important insights for how to rethink and extend ideas associated with cognitive ‘normalcy’ (or ‘ability’) and difference”. This challenges traditional notions of cognitive normalcy and abilities that have perpetuated societal oppressive environmental barriers. In turn, CDT advocates for a more just and inclusive understanding of cognitive diversity for students with autism (Valenti, 2020). Despite autism being generally defined as a neurological developmental disability, very few researchers have used CDT to study individuals with autism, particularly in education (O'Dell et al., 2016; Valenti, 2020). CDT thus acted as a catalyst in this study and sparked the impetus for this research journey. Applying CDT to this study underlined the importance of moving away from marginalisation towards equity and an inclusive and supportive learning environment that appreciates individual differences and fosters social inclusion. CDT will be used as a lens for interpreting and analysing its findings and extending what we know to date on the importance of going beyond the only physical placement of students with autism in the same classroom with other students without autism (Eilers, 2021).

### **3.5 Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Autism Spectrum Disorder, usually diagnosed in early childhood, is a neurological disorder involving persistent difficulties with communication skills, social interaction, lack of interest, and repetitive patterns of behaviours (Little et al., 2019). In recent years, several organisations have made commendable efforts to raise awareness about autism among the general public. Because of this, while some individuals might believe that

autism is a recently found condition, it is essential to point out that autism has been recognised as a neurodevelopmental disorder for several decades, with its understanding evolving over time. Looking back at the origin of the word 'autism', this word finds its roots in the Greek word 'autos' meaning 'borrowing', indicating that the hurdles faced by a person with autism are predominantly in the social aspect and how one socialises with others (Attard & Attard, 2023).

Eugene Bleuler first introduced the symptoms of autism in 1911, yet this term was not used directly for those with autism but for those who displayed common symptoms of schizophrenia. The term 'autism' was coined by Leo Kanner in 1943, followed by Hans Asperger in 1944, to refer to children who showed repetitive behaviours, echolalia, social deficits, and no hallucinations or family history of mental illness (Wilkerson, 2012). Kanner identified that children with autism were 'perfectly oblivious' to their immediate environment and acted as if they were alone in a room full of people. In the 1950s and 1960s, the birth of a child with autism was considered a tragedy and a result of bad parenting, with the child's withdrawal behaviour being the result of the *refrigerator mother*, a mother who was cold, uncaring, and neglecting the child's nourishment (Cleary et al., 2023). At that time, people with autism were considered disabled and doomed to a life of isolation because it was widely assumed that they were emotionally incapable (Cleary et al., 2023). This theory was discredited around the 1970s.

However, although Kanner formally documented autism in 1943, the disorder entered the world of clinical diagnosis in the 1980s with the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), an

international assessment entitled DSM-III (Rosen et al., 2021). Rosen et al. (2021) showed that autism was included in this edition under 'Pervasive Developmental Disorder', marked by lags in sociability and communicative development skills. Nonetheless, the definition of autism presented in this APA document received several criticisms for being too narrow and viewed as highly hostile and unpleasant (Rosen et al., 2021). Up until ten years ago, there was still a general worldwide consensus that autism was comprised of three diagnostic classifications:

- Autistic disorder (individuals who were considered to be severely impaired);
- Pervasive developmental disorder (those who displayed fewer symptoms of the disorder); and
- Asperger's syndrome (those having average to above-average intelligence but marked social impairments).

As new information suggesting a dyadic perspective of symptoms surfaced, the so-called triad of impairment, which had persisted since 1980, has been supplanted.

In 2013, the above diagnostic classifications were consolidated within the overarching category of 'Autism Spectrum Disorder', with the DSM-5 providing more specific standardised criteria to help diagnose autism (APA, 2017). This change signifies how the symptoms of autism, rather than being distant disorders, represented a continuum from mild to severe. DSM-5 maintained that to be diagnosed with autism, a child needs to have persistent deficits in all areas of social interaction and communication, together with a minimum of two types of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviours, as outlined below.

**A** Persistent social communication and interaction deficit in a variety of contexts, evidenced by the following:

- Inadequate social-emotional reciprocity, reduced sharing of interests, or failure to initiate or participate in social interactions.
- Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours, eye contact and body language abnormalities, or a total lack of facial expressions.
- Difficulties in sharing, imagining, or absence of interest in making friends.

**B** Restricted, recurring patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities manifested by at least two of these:

- Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements.
- Insistence of consistency, rigid adherence to routines and ritualised patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour.
- High-intensity, fixated interests that are abnormally intense or focused.
- Abnormal interests in sensory aspects of the environment and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024) recently indicated that the DSM-5 presented more detailed criteria for a child to be diagnosed with autism. These criteria included that although symptoms can be seen from birth, the presence of autism is usually reliably diagnosed between 18 months and two years. The CDC (2024) indicated that these symptoms must cause clinically significant impairment in certain areas of current functioning, such as social and occupational. CDC further outlined that reduced eye contact, a lack of facial expression, failure to respond to name, and apathy toward parents/guardians are among the early signs of autism, with these symptoms

improving over time or lasting throughout a person's lifetime. Autism is, therefore, a condition that remains in an individual's life and influences it (Attard & Attard, 2023). Hurley-Hanson et al. (2020) mentioned that some children with autism may develop normally but become withdrawn, aggressive, or lose already-learned language skills. Rare diagnoses might also be possible in nine or ten-year-old girls who tend to mask autism and conceal their struggles around this time but find it increasingly challenging to cover up these differences as puberty hits, with these late diagnoses resulting in mental strain (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). Although no individual ever grows out of autism, with the necessary help and support, children and adults with this condition can develop the autonomy to achieve their aspirations (Attard & Attard, 2023).

Nowadays, several individuals talk about the beauty of diversity, but only a few imagine how the presence of differences can bring challenges and might cause social exclusion for persons considered 'different' from the norm. Individuals with autism have a distinct way of interpreting, comprehending and relating to the world that can make them 'different' from the rest of society (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). They can find it challenging to communicate and understand social rules, adjust to the change in their lives, and gather information from the senses, with hypersensitive ones being overstimulated while hyposensitive ones experiencing limited response from a stimulus (Attard & Attard, 2023). These individuals with autism should not be put on an equal footing as every person has a distinct pattern of behaviour and may act, interact, or learn differently. On one side of the spectrum, some individuals have learning difficulties and show challenges in communication, play, and interaction, requiring much assistance in their daily lives, whereas others can live and work with little to no support and for

whom it is challenging to discern or notice this condition (Little et al., 2019; Mubashir et al., 2020).

The DSM-5 introduced the severity levels of autism ranging from Level 1 to Level 3, from a competent and outstanding professional to a non-verbal individual (CDC, 2024). Those with:

- Level 1 or High-Functioning autism requires minimal shared support with social communication and interaction, organisation, and planning skills;
- Level 2 exhibit frequent, repetitive behaviours, have difficulty focusing on more than one topic in a conversation, and require support with verbal communication;
- Level 3 or Low-Functioning autism are those on the severe end of the spectrum who require substantial support. Individuals on this level have more stringent signs than Levels 1 and 2 and are accompanied by other complications.

A student with autism can fall anywhere along the broad spectrum. At the upper end, one may only have a few autistic traits, with few or no acquaintances and a few quirky habits, whereas at the lower end of the autism spectrum, the student would have poor speech and language skills, can become violent, and require much more intensive autism therapy. Regardless of where a child is on the autism spectrum, s/he can and must be adequately assisted. In Malta, students on Level 3 are given one-to-one LSE support, whereas an LSE might not always be present in a mainstream class to help students on Levels 1 and 2 (Attard & Attard, 2023).

It is essential to point out that although the terms 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning', are currently not featured in the diagnostic literature, might not directly



align with practices in other countries, and might fail to grasp the complexity of the condition, which could lead to misinterpretation or judgement, these are the phrases most commonly used among Maltese educators, and thus also in this study's method. To confirm this and determine the appropriate terminology to use in this study, I gathered feedback from a number of local teachers, an Inclusive Education Coordinator (INCO) and a Maltese Autism Specialist.

There is still a disagreement in the literature about the best way to refer to individuals with autism, whether one should use people-first language or identity-first language to refer to these individuals (Robasse & Reinhardt, 2023). Kenny et al. (2016) indicate that this disagreement on the best way to conceptualise autism is due to the debates within the scientific community and the growing prominence of disability rights. This disagreement is also among Maltese professionals within the autism sector. Some argue that 'autistic' is a non-offensive adjective emphasising differences (Attard & Attard, 2023). In contrast, others say that defaulting to people-first language is more well-received and non-offensive compared to the use of 'autistics' (Azzopardi et al., 2023). Although there is no preferred term to refer to these individuals, in this study's discussion, the term 'students with autism' was preferred over 'autistic students' as I want to emphasise the person before the condition.

### **3.5.1 Causes and Prevention**

Autism has emerged as an essential topic in developmental psychopathology, yet diagnosing it can sometimes be complex. As no single known cause or medical test exists to diagnose autism, the precise mechanisms underlying autism are still obscure. Yet,

what is known is that during the developmental stages of a baby's brain in the womb, certain factors can give rise to a brain disorder, leading to autism (Wilkerson, 2012). Given the complexity of the disorder, research indicates that the possible causes of autism are a combination of genetic and environmental factors, with a 37% to 90% chance that genes for autism are passed down from one person to another (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020). Although autism does run in families, research shows that even identical twins do not exhibit autism symptoms analogously, leading scientists to examine other potential causes (Russell, 2021). In fact, "autism can be thought of as a multi-dimensional collection of psychological traits that interact with each other and the environment; traits that may alter with development" (Russell, 2021, p. 6). Wilkerson (2012) and Russell (2021) have found that factors such as gender, family history, older parenthood, and disorders, such as preterm babies, tuberous sclerosis, and co-existing syndromes, might also increase a child's risk of having autism. It is still unknown whether there are any links between autism and factors such as viral infections, air pollutants, or complications in pregnancy; however, what is known is that, after extensive studies, researchers have found no link between autism and vaccines (Attard & Attard, 2023).

Although there is no way to prevent autism and still many unanswered questions abound about this disorder, it has been found that early diagnosis and intervention are crucial and can remarkably improve a child's behaviour, language development, and social skills. Interventions should be employed as early as possible by enriching the learning environment and strengthening parent-child communication to refine behaviour and development towards more 'normal' pathways (Wilkerson, 2012).

### 3.5.2 Prevalence Rate

Autism is nowadays considered to be the fastest-growing neurodevelopmental disorder of this decade (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020), yet its prevalence statistics might not be accurate. The subsequent data are derived entirely from the CDC (2024). For decades, autism was believed to be excessively rare, with approximately one in 2,500 students worldwide diagnosed with this condition during the 1950s. However, studies show an exponential increase in the prevalence rate documented yearly since then. In 2002, 1 in every 150 children around the globe was identified with autism. In 2004, the prevalence rate of autism increased to 1 in 125 children, 1 in 110 in 2006, and 1 in 54 children in 2016, respectively. The CDC's most recent data released in 2024, from their research completed in 2020, reported that this disorder affects 1 in 36 children and is four times more common in boys than girls. This significant difference might be due to girls' capacity to hide specific difficulties, especially in the social aspect, with the result that it would become more challenging to identify autism in these girls. Kibedi (2007) mentioned that individuals who do not work in the education sector believe that having autism is considered taboo, and thus, some parents resist having their child diagnosed or are unable to embrace the truth about their children's condition and will not seek a diagnosis. Having said this, one cannot neglect that there are also parents who exaggerate a child's symptoms to be entitled to better services. Additionally, the fact that every student with autism is unique and no two students present the exact needs or difficulties – hence the term 'spectrum', showing the heterogeneity in the symptomology and diversity of eventualities – also hinders accurate statistics.

There is a general agreement that this remarkably increasing prevalence rate of autism coincides with an inclusive educational scenario, where the number of students diagnosed with autism being educated in mainstream schools is also on the increase (Zeidan et al., 2022). While researchers have not yet ascertained this drastically increasing prevalence rate, research lists some factors that could be possible reasons for this increase, including the expanded definition of autism, better extensive professional screening, the medicalisation of behaviour at the lower end of the spectrum to place it under the umbrella term of ‘diagnosable autism’, new styles of life, parents becoming more forthcoming about their children’s differences and difficulties, and environmental factors (Russell, 2021; Zeidan et al., 2022), or simply “a true increase in the frequency of autism spectrum disorder” (APA, 2013, p.55). Furthermore, given the higher public awareness reigning among societies these days, individuals with autism are now also being diagnosed later in life. One of these is Susan Boyle, the singer who gained international fame and was diagnosed with autism at 52 after spending her life believing that she had an intellectual disability. This experience further shows that autism can go undiagnosed for years.

### **3.5.3 Autism in Malta**

Although even in Malta, there is no statistical prevalence rate of students with autism (Attard & Attard, 2023; Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021), a recent article by Calleja (2023) contended that autism is thought to affect around one in every 60 to 70 Maltese students, with around one in three Maltese mainstream classes having at least one student with autism and with Maltese teachers expected to have taught several students with autism by the end of their teaching careers. The ‘Lenti

fuq l-*l*żvilupp ta' Wliedna', a Maltese screening programme, offers parents of young children with autism the opportunity to have their children screened for early interventional services.

In light of the documented increase in the prevalence rate of autism, in 2018, an Autism Toolkit was published to help provide practical strategies for educators in mainstream education (Galea Soler & Pace Gellel, 2018). In 2021, the Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing published a National Autism Strategy entitled *Respecting Diversity Safeguarding Equity: Malta's 2021-2030 National Autism Strategy*, which addressed the issue of autism and inclusion in Malta and aimed to raise understanding and awareness of this disorder among the general public. This policy, the first of its kind, emphasises the importance of understanding where educators are, as the key stakeholders who spend significant time with students and influence their inclusion, development and learning (Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021). The National Autism Strategy was issued to provide a list of local facts about autism and detail the initiatives the Maltese government will undertake, covering the period 2021 to 2030. The main points highlighted in this policy document are presented in Table 5 below.

**Table 5:** Main points highlighted in the Maltese National Autism Strategy

Main points	Details on each main point
<b>Main point 1</b>	The Maltese population is still not knowledgeable enough about autism. For this reason, Malta intends to strive towards disseminating correct information about this disorder, challenging

	existing stigma and judgemental attitudes, increasing awareness about the importance of fostering a more accepting and inclusive society, and stopping bullying against these individuals.
<b>Main point 2</b>	No statistics exist about the number of people on the autism spectrum in Malta. This document outlines that Malta will work towards collating anonymised statistics on the number of persons with autism in Malta and increasing their services.
<b>Main point 3</b>	At all educational levels, students with autism are not given the same treatment as neurotypical peers. Thus, Malta will strive to protect the right to an education for individuals on the spectrum, improve the assistance provided in schools, and give teachers the necessary information to develop a more holistic framework that guides and supports these students.
<b>Main point 4</b>	Workplaces are not accessible for people on the autism spectrum. The document outlined that Malta will award companies that consider the needs of people with autism, ask people with autism to pay less tax, work to reduce discrimination cases, and provide the necessary assistance when they join the workforce.
<b>Main point 5</b>	The voice of people with autism is never heard. The Maltese government will support and encourage people with autism to speak in public, lead organisations, and target decision-makers by revising pertinent laws and regulations as needed.
<b>Main point 6</b>	There is the idea that people with autism in Malta are incompetent in making decisions. Thus, Malta will try to identify students with this disorder early and create opportunities for these people to socialise with others and make their own choices.

“All students should feel good, valued, and accepted by their learning environment, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, cultural or other conditions” (Heyder et al., 2020, p. 1). Making inclusive educational practices

available to all students should be a top priority of any educational policy. However, changes are not always smooth and effortless. Research shows that in the last few years, inclusive education has increased significantly worldwide, including in Malta, and mainstream classrooms are increasingly multifaceted in intensifying diversity. Yet, the question is how schools can create inclusive environments that are willing and capable of providing the most desirable possible support for all students, irrespective of their individual needs (Memisevic et al., 2021). Following the Autism Strategy, in 2023, Attard and Attard recently published their first-ever book in Maltese that delves into and presents the various aspects of autism to help readers, primarily educators, understand this reality and work towards achieving the six goals mentioned above.

In an article issued recently in a renowned newspaper in Malta, a number of families of students with autism believe that the Maltese education system is still not catering for their children's needs. A father of a 15-year-old child with autism stated that this is making his child feel "locked in a mini-personal hell" when he is at school and his needs are not met (Times of Malta, 2024, para. 1). This is especially true when considering that these students are forced to totally leave school or to attend less often as they grow older, because of the deficits in social inclusion and programmes within the local educational system (Times of Malta, 2024). In light of this, Prof Callus, an associate professor at the University of Malta (UoM), argued that "it's high time to have another evaluation of the way inclusive education is working – or not working – in Malta" (Times of Malta, 2024, para.5). This, together with the suggestions made by the National Autism Strategy (Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021) and the book issued by Attard and Attard (2023), clearly shows the need for more recent

research in the field of inclusion and autism within the Maltese context. Although in Malta, “the reality on the ground is much more complex, and things are harder than they seem”, de Gaetano, Chairperson of the Maltese Autism Advisory Council, stated that if we all work together, we can accomplish radically effective measures and bring about a fundamental change (Ministry for Inclusion and Social Wellbeing, 2021, p. 11). Guided by Hosking’s (2008) elements of CDT, this study will respond to this gap, contributing to the advancement within the Maltese literature and providing new insights into teachers' perceptions of including students with autism.

With this continuous surge of students with autism in Maltese mainstream classrooms, teachers face the challenge of having to educate an increasingly diverse population of students. In front of students’ diversity, the inclusion of students with autism is influenced by teachers’ perceptions, with some educators having preconceived stereotypical notions or lacking thorough knowledge of autism, while others create a more inclusive classroom environment by modifying their teaching practices and offering the appropriate support for students with autism (Memisevic et al., 2021). However, this is under-researched in Malta as, up to this date, I couldn’t locate any studies that investigate Maltese primary teachers’ perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism using a CDT approach. The following section aims to refer to local and international research to discuss teachers’ perceptions, voices, and experiences in their social and cultural settings, being individuals who can directly improve or hinder the inclusion and academic success of students with autism. In addition to extending the current understanding of inclusion, this study recommends planning more inclusive and equitable practices and policies and sheds light on factors



that can create a more supportive school environment that benefits students with autism.

### **3.6 Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusion and Autism**

If we do not research how to perceive students with autism “from the perspective of wanting to understand and appreciate the differences, then everyone will lose out on the unique gifts of people with autism” (Kibedi, 2007, p. 13). As perceptions involve subjective interpretations, this study intends to embark on the mission of researching how Maltese in-service teachers perceive students with autism and how their actions treat and include them within their class. The word *perception* used in this study refers to a notion or opinion frequently shared by many individuals that describes how something is considered, comprehended or interpreted and how that information is used to respond to and engage with the surroundings (Gryskiewicz, 2019).

The nature of inclusion places the responsibility of students' education and development on the teacher, with research showing varied results and being far from unequivocal when assessing how teachers feel toward including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. As teachers are critical agents in inclusive education, literature has given a growing volume of attention to how they view students, including students with autism, and how they feel towards their inclusion. Some teachers have embraced these responsibilities and have found it rewarding to deal with and serve students of different learning styles, multiple intelligences, learning difficulties, and disabilities (Garrad et al., 2019; Saloviita, 2020; Schwab et al., 2021). In contrast, others have slowly embraced this change, accompanied by misconceptions and unfavourable

attitudes toward inclusive settings (Leonard & Smyth, 2022; Luthuli & Wood, 2022; Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022). Between the two types, there is a continuum of opinions.

It has been amply shown in research that teachers' perceptions are a prerequisite for the successful implementation and outcomes of inclusive education, as they act as a springboard and affect students' learning and performance (Gryskiewicz, 2019; Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023; Schwab et al., 2021). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that teachers' mindsets and perceptions have been viewed as critical initiators of inclusive teaching and, therefore, worthy of study. If we had to put the research as mentioned earlier on one scale, all studies contended that as classroom teachers have an influential position in students' lives, depending on their perceptions, these actors have what can be viewed as a daunting responsibility or a welcoming task in providing engaging education that fulfils the different students' demands. An optimistic outlook positively impacts students' development and social-emotional experiences in contrast to a negative one that leads to uncooperative and unsupportive environments.

A study conducted by Garrad et al. (2019) reported successful implementation of inclusion in Australian schools, resulting from classroom teachers being receptive and having positive attitudes. Teachers in this study positively influenced classroom norms and presented a learning environment that valued and supported all students, serving as role models for neurotypical students. An extensive study by Saloviita (2020), which involved 1,764 Finnish teachers, also proved that as most teachers favoured inclusion, students had positive experiences which positively affected their learning. Kielblock and Woodcock (2023) also showed that positive perceptions led to lower competitiveness

and greater cohesiveness. Sharma et al. (2018) further elucidated that teachers with positive attitudes adapt the curriculum and assessment practices to students' needs and influence whether students with disabilities are included or excluded in social activities.

Although positive perceptions toward inclusion are considered a prerequisite for successful inclusive education, a plethora of other research refers to significant societal and environmental obstacles to successful inclusion that influence teachers' perceptions, as also demonstrated by my study. This further strengthens CDT's adequacy as a suitable framework for this study. A study carried out by Jury et al. in 2021 revealed that most participating teachers had negative attitudes toward inclusion, with the physical environment of the class, the teacher-to-student ratio, and the type and severity of students' individual needs being formidable barriers to their apprehension of teaching and including students with autism. These authors also mentioned how stereotypical beliefs, such as the notion that students with additional needs are challenging to control, can lead to ableist attitudes, which can, in turn, obstruct learning (Jury et al., 2021). Backing up these results was Leonard and Smyth's (2022) study, which reported similar findings. Carried out in Ireland in 2022, Leonard and Smyth's research sought to examine the views of seventy-eight classroom teachers toward inclusion. Of concern, it revealed that most participating teachers were characterised as having ambivalent or solid negative perceptions about including students with autism in mainstream classrooms, believing that apart from modifying and accommodating learners, educators also need to ensure that environments support their individualities. These ableist perceptions often lead to less effective teaching practices, ultimately impacting students' inclusion, development and learning.

Previous literature's continuous reference to addressing these environmental factors to enhance teachers' perceptions further strengthens the reason for choosing CDT as the theoretical framework guiding this endeavour. Since, as highlighted above, teachers' acceptance of inclusion is on the threshold of affecting their commitment to its implementation, having negative perceptions is a formidable barrier that may tremendously and profoundly influence the success of inclusive classrooms and ultimately impact students' development and academic learning.

Although continued efforts were established to help students with additional needs experience successful inclusive education in mainstream classrooms, Tejpar and Butler (2023) argue that it has been around 27 years since policies were internationally debated, with organisational biases and systemic barriers remaining a concern. Participants in Leonard and Symth's (2022) study elaborated that teachers' ableist attitudes resulted from a lack of assistive devices and resources provided by school administrators, a lack of support to educators, and a lack of classroom time to cover the whole syllabus while simultaneously being expected to provide individualised support to all students. These researchers argued that among the greatest potential factors that could explain teachers' ableist perceptions is the lack of training and knowledge given to pre-service teachers before starting their careers (Leonard & Symth's, 2022). Entering the mainstream classroom and facing a class with students with different abilities without the necessary support and training may lead teachers to look at these students in a negative light. This is consistent with what was outlined in Article 24 of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which maintains that inadequate

teaching methods and an entrenched mentality may negatively impact teachers' assumptions of their potential and directly influence their perceptions (De Beco, 2014).

Having a fixed mindset that some students, including those with autism, are incapable of learning could lead to stereotyping and limited opportunities for learning and growth (Vaz et al., 2015). Mutabbakani and Callinan (2020) confirmed that this could be because of the inability of some students with autism to imitate or interact with their peers having no autism or to control their emotions and behaviour, posing significant challenges to educators in providing inclusive environments that effectively meet their individual needs. Mahadew and Hlalele (2022) divulged that several teachers need to be more receptive to inclusion and more aware of how to rise to the challenge of instructing or supporting a range of students with different learning styles and needs. Luthuli and Wood (2022) argued that teachers' negative perceptions might also contribute to students perceiving themselves as survivors in an unwelcoming environment instead of actively participating in the institution's academic and social life. CDT is liable to alter these ableist perceptions to a more strengths-based lens that puts more prominence on students' strengths and resilience, helping them thrive in their overall educational attainment (Tejpar & Butler, 2023). In this regard, it recommends that teachers hone their critical thinking, regularly reflect on their teaching and approaches to inclusion, question and challenge the prevalent notion of the 'normal' child within the classroom, and respond creatively to the individual students' needs in a classroom (Eilers, 2021).

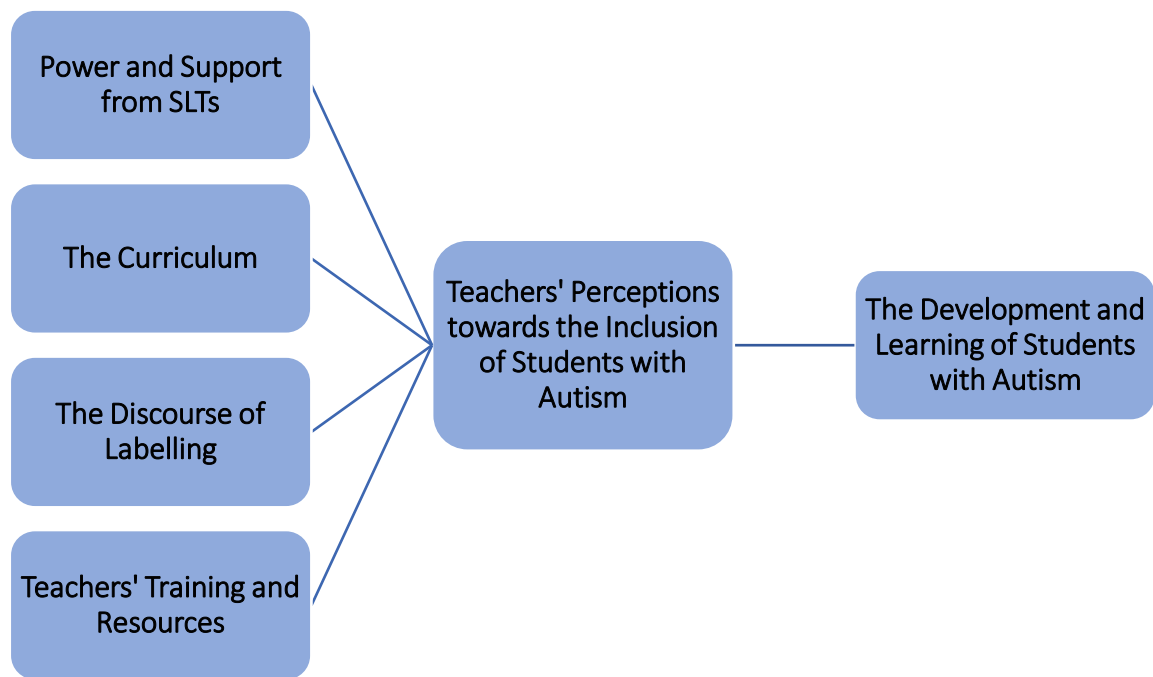
One key component of CDT is how ableist presumptions and social expectations may affect teachers' perceptions of disability in the educational context, which can lead to marginalisation or exclusion and substantially influence students' lives (Eilers, 2021). By looking at how autism is construed in the education system and exploring the perceptual barriers through a CDT lens, this study hopes to uncover ingrained biases and misconceptions that undermine the full inclusion of students with autism in Maltese mainstream classrooms while helping to pave the way towards equity, inclusivity, and improved educational outcomes. To foster a more inclusive classroom environment that recognises and supports the uniqueness of every child, this study will also examine and address the factors that shape teachers' perceptions of inclusion and challenge the dynamics that might hinder them from adopting an equitable and inclusive education system, as explained in the next section.

### **3.7 Factors Influencing Teachers' Perceptions**

Teachers' responsibilities extend beyond just giving instructions; teachers should strive to teach students diligently and guide them towards academic success. Given the above complexities of 'fitting in' mainstream classrooms, the controversy surrounding inclusion and mainstreaming, the diverse teachers' perceptions, and the empirical research about the range of feasible factors that could shape educators' perceptions, an epistemological endeavour that presently makes me feel somewhat apprehensive are the research gaps that exist between scientific knowledge and practice. While a wealth of research focuses independently on CDT, teachers' perceptions, and the inclusion of students with autism, there is still a notable gap in research concerning the intersections of CDT and teachers' perceptions towards these students' inclusion in

mainstream classrooms. This is in terms of teachers' pedagogical understandings, experiences, and personal identities, which ultimately influence how they treat students.

While reading literature studies on the subject, I sought more profoundly into the philosophical assumptions of the existing literature and, keeping in mind the tenets of CDT, I was able to present my analysis of preliminary factors that might influence teachers' perceptions in de/constructing inclusion of students with autism in inclusive mainstream classrooms (Iqbal et al., 2022; Leonard & Symth, 2022; Mouchritsa et al., 2022). CDT serves as a pivotal foundation in these chosen factors, as it not only acknowledges but philosophically probes into the realms of power and discourse of labelling to perpetuate inclusion, maintaining that society needs to use adequate resources and adapt the curriculum for successful inclusion of all students. These four preliminary factors, derived from the literature review, were chosen over others due to being theoretically relevant to the analytical questions. These are believed to build on previous research and contribute meaningfully to advancing knowledge in the fields of inclusion, autism and CDT. These four chosen factors are illustrated in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3:** Four Identified Factors that Could Influence Maltese Teachers’ Perceptions

The literature review suggests that the four identified factors presented in Figure 3 above, *(i)* power and support from Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), *(ii)* curriculum, *(iii)* discourse of labelling, and *(iv)* training and resources could all potentially influence Maltese teachers’ perceptions towards inclusion and ultimately influence the development and learning of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The following sections present these four factors deconstructed in the literature review and discuss how each can enhance our understanding of teachers’ perceptions and how they may consequently affect, consciously or not, teachers’ entanglements with exclusionary practice towards students with autism. Against this backdrop and the gap in Maltese literature, these four factors will be compared and analysed within the Maltese and international contexts.



### 3.7.1 Power and Support from SLTs

Anthropologists, policymakers, and laypeople have long been drawn to how power influences behaviour and action. Power relationships in teaching and learning are a central issue in CDT, which interrogates society's response to an individual's circumstances and encourages an adequate education and a socially just world. "Disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health; nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power (lessness), power over, and power to" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 2). The issues of disability, as perceived by Devlin and Pothier, do not include questions of impairment or functional limitations but on who and what gets valued or marginalised in various situations.

The thinking goes that although the teacher is responsible for all students' learning in her class, it is the *powerful* administrators in the education system who decide and undertake decisions about what happens inside the four walls of the classrooms, imposing powers on teachers in less powerful positions (Rigby, 2015). Similarly, while acknowledging the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders as the top formula for the successful inclusion of all students, Holmes and Butcher (2020) argue that the main person liable for sowing, cultivating, and reaping the seeds of inclusive education rests with the SLTs, the people responsible for placing students in classes for instructional purposes, allocating resources, making curricular choices, and shaping school policies.

Despite not actively delivering education, research shows that administrative stakeholders indirectly influence teachers' perceptions toward students with autism

and the quality and extent of access that these students have to general education situations (Roberts et al., 2018). Camilleri and Sammut's (2016) research in Malta also claimed that, unfortunately, stakeholders in positions impose everything that happens within the four walls of the class, and rather than easing the administrative burden on teachers and making sure they receive consistent instructions, these stakeholders are placing students in different levels based on perceived ability and leaving them there until they finish that particular educational cycle without giving teachers the necessary support. This contradicts the principles of inclusive education. Power put over teachers by administrators may then be exerted on students and influence their learning and development (Holmes & Burcher, 2020). Thus, this study comprehensively considers the perceptions of teachers, those stakeholders in the middle of the school power dynamics who receive power over them from administrators and project it onto students, contributing to a deeper insight into power relations in the Maltese educational context.

In any setting, robust support structures are critical for a thriving, inclusive environment. *Powerful* stakeholders carry the potential to cultivate or withhold an equitable and supportive environment where individuals are assisted, encouraged, and equipped with tools to flourish. Holmes and Butcher (2020) note that SLTs who possess positive perceptions towards the inclusion of all students will be more likely to assist classroom teachers and offer them the necessary resources and training to effectively support students and become more patient, sympathetic, and understanding. In contrast, having negative perceptions toward inclusion will result in these administrators not providing teachers and other educators with the necessary support, simplifying the process for teachers to overlook students' unique strengths and

challenges (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Besides influencing teachers' perceptions and making them feel unsupported and overwhelmed, a lack of support might also indirectly influence students and their involvement in the classroom community.

Although SLTs are expected to discuss with and guide teachers to implement and review inclusive policies and practices at school, according to Rigby (2015), several decisions regarding students' inclusion are taken without teachers' consultation, with these latter ones being commanded to obey the instructions and directives given by the upper tiers. Some classroom teachers in the study conducted by Roberts et al. (2018) have expressed concern that directives are imposed on them, yet they are experiencing a lack of support from their Heads of Schools, with the latter not having a deep understanding of inclusion and instructional procedures. These participants showed that administrators are often detached from educational practice and classroom life and far from knowing what is happening within the classrooms or the challenges they face. This is also confirmed by some Maltese teachers in Demanuele and Calleja's (2023) study. Administrators are "afraid to step in their classroom" (Greenway et al., 2013, p. 462), making teachers feel frustrated and concerned, notably when considering that they are forced to include all students without the necessary support. As most administrators are out of touch with the realities of an inclusive classroom, Roberts et al. (2018) further endorsed the view on the importance that all school administrators frequently conduct on-site visits and audits to identify disparities, discuss and hear educators' worries, question and change policies and processes that do not support inclusive practices, and provide a higher degree of autonomy.

On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that schools with strong and active administrative support and involvement encourage a shared commitment to inclusion and positively influence teachers to integrate all students into their classrooms. In their study, Wehmeyer et al. (2021) maintained that administrative support creates a non-hierarchical system and empowers teachers to engage in shared decision-making around inclusion. Participating teachers in their study who had changed schools in the last few years were instructed to compare administrators who supported them with those who did not. The results showed that when they were given support from administrators, teachers did not feel isolated and experienced more positive attitudes toward inclusion, in contrast to when they received no administrative support (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Juvonen et al. (2019) also confirmed that support from the educational departments is a crucial factor for a successful inclusion programme and is, once again, linked to more favourable attitudes among teachers, in contrast to inadequate support. While not mentioning how Maltese teachers feel and whether they are supported, Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) stated that in Malta, SLTs and other educational stakeholders are putting considerable pressure on Maltese teachers to include all students in their classrooms and abide by the presented curriculum. This further raises the importance of doing this study.

In conclusion, research shows that teachers are influenced by the power dynamics and support of administrators, which may positively or negatively impact their perceptions and subsequently shape the inclusive experiences of students in mainstream classrooms. Given this, it would be worth identifying whether primary teachers in Malta feel supported or compelled and forced to abide by the inclusive

educational policy by their SLTs, which could negatively affect their perceptions. Upon analysis, this thesis intends to contribute to the area of education research by using CDT to offer new insights into the issues of power and support, i.e. how these are perceived to be exercised in the Maltese context. This will aid future researchers in expanding on this study and deepening our grasp of this critical issue.

### **3.7.2 The Curriculum**

As the diversity of the student population is unceasingly increasing, the mainstream educational system must be fundamentally altered to follow the inclusive education principle, which promotes the idea that all students must attend regular classes with neurotypical peers and be given the same opportunity to learn. Ainscow (2020) argues that no student should be forced to adapt to an education system; instead, the system should be adapted to respond to students' diversities. In agreement, CDT underscores the importance of inclusive and accessible education for all students, claiming that educators should consider students' interests and needs and adapt, change, and revise their teaching, assessment, and content presentation to embolden all students' lived experiences rather than just a privileged few (Castrodale, 2017). Awareness of the students' preferred interests, academic readiness, and learning profiles can help teachers make better decisions about the content, method, and product.

In 1994, UNESCO suggested that to make inclusive education a reality, all students should be provided with high-quality instruction that caters to their unique learning needs. The *Salamanca Statement* also highlighted the importance of delivering an

efficient curriculum that accommodates the needs and identities of individual students and eliminates any challenges of accessing inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). A curriculum that fails to accommodate the learning styles of a group of students reinforces the stereotype that these students are incapable of learning and can perpetuate marginalisation in the mainstream educational system, whereas a curriculum tailored to the requirements of students can boost their chances of success and foster positive perceptions of their skills (Dowling et al., 2017). As also emphasised in CDT, this positively affects students' inclusion and achievement and keeps students engaged and active throughout the instructional process, valuing each student's individuality and potential (Mueller, 2021).

Another factor that demonstrates how teachers' expectations about students influence the latter's performance and achievement is the 'Pygmalion Effect', a form of bias discovered in 1968 that demonstrates how teachers' interpersonal expectations and perceptions affect student performance and create reality. In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson randomly selected and assessed 20% of students attending a particular school who were considered 'exceptionally intelligent' by their teachers. Results were gathered and analysed. After eight months, the same students were reassessed, with Rosenthal and Jacobson discovering that because of their positive interactions with teachers, they significantly outperformed the other 80% of students. The authors concluded that teachers' expectations, anticipation of certain behaviours, and perceptions increase the likelihood that an expected action will occur (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Years later, following Rosenthal and Jacobson's study, Hansen-Thomas et al. (2016) also proved how teachers are vital stakeholders in predicting and influencing students' outcomes and performances. The authors gave the example that if teachers have high expectations for students, these will likely flourish and live up to those expectations. Contrariwise, a student can also live up to a teacher's expectations and perform poorly if the teacher does not expect the student to succeed (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016). Gryskiewicz (2019) also agreed that teachers' expectations of students' abilities affect the latter's school involvement and academic success, with such perceptions being transmitted to students. This indicates that rather than helping students with autism to learn with joy, teachers can assist them in understanding that they should abide by what is presented to them in the curriculum to succeed (Mueller, 2021). These perceptions could, in turn, directly affect and wash back on students' academic results from texts, exams, and assessments.

Literature has suggested that teachers' perceptions, based on curriculum and assessment, also play an essential variable in how they respond to students' demands (Pozas et al., 2020). Practising integration might make teachers rely on a 'one-size-fits-all' teaching approach, presuming that students with autism will naturally adapt. This can result in inadequate practices where students are physically present but not wholly supported or included, with the latter finding it difficult to stay up due to limited opportunity for differentiation. A standardised, one-size-fits-all curriculum that is not intended to be tailored to students' needs upholds the myth that performances determine intelligence and that some students are less capable or intelligent than their peers (Sasson, 2020). The idea of providing relevant, high-quality educational materials

to students with different learning needs has been among us for several years. Even back in 1977, Foucault warned that giving all students within a particular class the same tests, exams, and assessments and then comparing their results with their classmates would place students in a 'mechanism of objectification', causing them to be classified based on specific criteria. On the same wavelength and by CDT, Imray and Colley (2017) emphasised that rather than fostering a sense of belonging and agency, teachers with ableist attitudes refrain from differentiating the curriculum, reinforce misperceptions and perpetuate marginalisation in the educational system.

However, despite the benefits mentioned above, differentiating instruction is not without limitations. In addition to their ordinary teaching duties, mainstream school teachers must pay close attention to and offer help to children's various requirements. As each child has a different set of skills and learning preferences, with some students requiring no accommodations, whereas others might require many adaptations to efficiently access the core curriculum, teachers must effectively differentiate, adapt, and dynamically improve their tactics to meet students' varying learning needs (Pozas et al., 2020). For such reason, CDT suggests that stakeholders should re-evaluate their perceptions and approaches while designing the curriculum and consider different methodologies with accessibility and inclusivity in mind. Nevertheless, some teachers might be dissatisfied with providing students with the necessary modifications and support since they lack the resources and expertise to differentiate successfully and are burdened by the vast amount of syllabi (Sasson, 2020). Imray and Colley's (2017) results continued to reveal that the participating teachers in their study confirmed that changing the curriculum, lesson content, approaches, and strategies to effectively meet



all students' needs were piling extra pressure on them and increasing their sentiments of unpreparedness and irritability towards those students who needed more support, ultimately also affecting their perceptions.

Empirical studies show inconsistent results on teachers' stated usage of differentiating instructions and assessments, with some hardly employing this technique, whereas others adopt it regularly (Pozas et al., 2020). Nonetheless, as explained above, there is a general agreement that adapting and modifying the curricula to promote inclusion, accessibility, and equality for all students, including those with autism, directly improves students' learning outcomes and boosts their chances of success. Results from this thesis can offer significant counsel on the relationship between the curriculum and teachers' perceptions and discuss how teachers can overcome the challenges posed by facets of their work and ultimately enhance both teaching and learning outcomes.

### **3.7.3 The Discourse of Labelling**

“People seem to have trouble realising that we can learn a compensatory skill, but not how to be ‘normal’ (even if we wanted to be normal). They can’t realise that our brains and thought processes are different and that we can’t change that any more than the blind can learn to see with their eyes” (Jared, 1993, as cited in Jordan et al., 1998, p. 15).

Like Jared, Kibedi (2007) also contended that students with autism are typically taught in an environment that presumes they possess deficiencies because of their conditions, with other students not on the spectrum and educators tending to disregard the fact

that these students might learn and understand in ways that differ significantly from the general population. Research shows that the main challenge when including all students in mainstream classrooms is to accept that each student is unique and learns differently but that all have the ability to learn (Holmes & Butcher, 2020). Similarly, with regards to communication, in his book *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, Biklen (2005) carried out a qualitative study in which he interviewed numerous people with autism to challenge the widely held belief that although people with autism might not converse in the same ways as neurotypicals, it does not mean that they do not want to interact with others. Following this, Hendrickx et al. (2017) also found that this same negative idea was prevailing among many of the students in their study, with students with autism being socially excluded, as their peers were unaware of how to adequately interact with them.

A CDT approach to inclusion demonstrates that students come into the classroom with a myriad of different perspectives passed down from generation to generation or taken up from media and other social sources and transferred in the representations of their identities (Baglieri, 2022). These different perspectives are mirrored through language and behaviour, which can lead to marginalisation and labelling. CDT maintains that labels given to students with disabilities highly impact perceptions and shape how other individuals interact with and include students in the classrooms (Jackson, 2014). It directs attention to the barriers associated with labelling by examining how teachers' attitudes and behaviours might perpetuate inequalities and discrimination. A study by Juvonen et al. (2019) further espoused the idea of bias by indicating that as students spend a significant amount of time at school, labels given to students influence teachers'

perceptions and their educational choices and behaviour, ultimately influencing students' inclusion and performance. Iqbal et al. (2022) agreed and commented that while social inclusion does not ensure academic success, students characterised by the teacher as *ignorant, bad*, or any other discriminatory language to undermine them tended to magnify feelings of marginalisation, isolation, or threat, leading them to struggle and not perform well in school subjects.

“Individuals with disabilities have struggled to live full and productive lives as independently as possible in a society laden with stigma, discrimination, and attitudinal and environmental barriers” (Hiranandani, 2005, p. 2). The vocabulary directed at students with a disorder reflects how a particular society views that condition (Jackson, 2014). Historically, autism was referred to as a *disease*, producing a medicalised picture of this disorder with students with autism being labelled as *deviant, dubious, overly noisy, or disabled*, with no or limited chances of developing intellectually or socially (Rimmerman et al., 2020). Even today, some educators are still humiliating, bullying, and marginalising students, especially those who find it hard to defend themselves. In their study on teachers' influence on students, Hendrickx et al. (2017) claimed that classroom teachers have the unique power of persuasion. We know from CDT that the compliance by teachers in Camilleri and Sammut's (2016) study may be linked to teachers' perceptions of inclusive practice and stereotyping of neurodiverse students. In fact, according to CDT, disability is not merely an individual attribute but is moulded and impacted by societal perceptions and stereotypes of disability, which may lead to marginalisation, exclusion, or labelling (Eilers, 2021).

Hebron & Humphrey (2014) expressed concern that compared with neurodiverse students, students with autism whom educators assigned ableist labels had a significantly higher chance than their peers of being explicitly and implicitly bullied, shunned by neurotypical students, and experiencing feelings of loneliness in a classroom. Heselton et al.'s (2022) research studied adults with autism and implied that the participating adults were still living with the traumatic experiences of bullying and negative perceptions they had encountered in their primary school settings. The authors continue that this then precipitates lower classroom participation by students with autism, lower grades, and aggressiveness, which in turn might once again influence the way teachers perceive these students (Heselton et al., 2022).

Students who fall short of the norm can face marginalisation or exclusion from mainstream education. In their research, Hendrickx et al. (2017) indicated that neurotypical students often turn towards their teachers for social clues about how to react to individuals and situations surrounding them. Students then adjust their appraisals of a classmate based on their teachers' attitudes and whether the teacher likes or dislikes their peers. Furthermore, Alasim and Paul (2019) affirmed that such negative comments and labels not only influence neurotypical students but can also shape the perceptions of other colleagues, with the latter acquiring the same negative perspectives.

As stated above, there is widespread agreement that positive teachers' perceptions encourage students' potential and strengths to thrive, unlike ableist ones, which hinder opportunities and interactions. In turn, by speaking courteously,

accurately, and respectfully to and about students with autism, we can encourage these students' understanding, acceptance, and inclusion. Students with autism should be understood through empathy, respect, and appreciation; nevertheless, to effectively do this, educators must first understand the importance of not labelling and stereotyping students based on their behaviour or conditions. They often have to auto-analyse their perception and beliefs objectively, depart entirely from the misconceptions embedded in their mentality, and start looking at things with a critical and inquiring mind. As labelling students with autism can impact their academic and social outcomes, studying the discourse of labelling on autism from Maltese primary teachers' perceptions can identify and highlight existing biases or stereotypes and help inform the development of targeted interventions that improve student outcomes through deconstructing labelling.

#### **3.7.4 Teachers' Training and Resources**

Scholars of CDT have debated that a disability is not a condition in an individual's body but an issue between the body and the environment, which requires an expert to 'fix' discrepancies between these (Kibedi, 2007). Students on the autism spectrum might not have visible physical features that accompany the disorder but can still behave 'differently' from the norm, leading some educators to conclude that instead of being unable to follow the rules and instructions, a child might be rebellious. As mentioned in section 3.6.2 above, the number of students with autism who are placed and educated in mainstream classrooms is on the surge year after year. This constant rise in students being different and learning in different ways within a mainstream classroom reveals that teachers are confronted with progressively challenging tasks every year, amplified

by the need to plan a repertoire of strategies that provide quality instruction to students with diverse learning needs (Sharifi Brojerdi, 2017). As also emphasised by CDT, this demands a growing need for all teachers to be knowledgeable and adequately prepared to teach and include diverse students and view them as enriching education. This is because teachers who lack training in conditions such as autism may mistakenly interpret students' 'different' behaviours as intentional, paving the path for negative consequences and perceptions (Sharifi Brojerdi, 2017; Spirko, 2015).

Although parents, lawmakers, and SLTs are strong advocates for including students with autism in mainstream classrooms, regardless of mounting pressure from these stakeholders, teachers must be personally eager to accept these students for ultimate success (Mouchritsa et al., 2022). Several recent research studies suggested that many teachers who enter the workforce worldwide are not provided with adequate information and knowledge on students' conditions and how to holistically support their needs in today's inclusive classroom environments (Kauffman et al., 2022; Schwab et al., 2021; Scoresby et al., 2022; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Improving teachers' training should remain vital for delivering high-quality inclusive education and improving confidence to adequately teach these students, as a lack of knowledge and skills might lead them to question their expertise and qualifications and resent their educational systems (Bureau of Education and Research, 2011).

Decades after US federal laws mandated that students be educated in the least restrictive environments, research shows there has been a significant thrust around the globe toward ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable about students' conditions and

inclusive classroom practices, as a lack of teacher training leads to disinterest in teaching neurodiverse students (Sharifi Brojerdi, 2017; Spirko, 2015; Vaz et al., 2015). Woodcock and Jones (2020) recognised a positive link between teachers' beliefs in inclusive education, their training, inclusive strategies and practices, and students' successes and failures. They found that providing educators with adequate training and resources can considerably change their perceptions and give them the confidence to implement effective strategies with students, which can help to improve their academic and social outcomes (Woodcock & Jones, 2020). Thus, in addition to training, access to resources, including assistive technology, visual supports, and communication aids, can all facilitate the development of more inclusive perceptions and practices in the classroom, making it easier for students to access the curriculum and feel included (Kibedi, 2007). Kibedi (2007) further elaborates that before preparing lessons, teachers need to consider students' specific needs and the resources available and include content they believe is essential for children to understand. Still, research suggests that most general education teachers who teach in mainstream classrooms still struggle to inclusively differentiate the presented syllabus within their classrooms and access resources due to their lack of training (Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023).

Rieser (2020) indicated that in Malta, there exists the idea that LSEs receive more training on neurodiverse students when compared to classroom teachers, who, although they are prime targets, are not prepared to meet these different needs. This lack of knowledge and training makes teachers put the responsibility of students with conditions on LSEs, even though it is sometimes not part of the latter's job (Rieser, 2020). This research recommends the importance of teachers keeping abreast of new

knowledge, training themselves to strengthen their teaching and understanding of neurodiversity, and learning how to positively manage and include all students in mainstream classrooms (Rieser, 2020). By equipping classroom teachers with the necessary training and resources to successfully support all students, including students with autism, they are more likely to possess positive perceptions and create a more respectful and inclusive environment for all students on the autism spectrum.

### **3.8 Significance of the Study in the Maltese Context**

The debate and complexity surrounding inclusion continue to impact students with autism. While the topics of inclusion and teachers' attitudes have been heavily researched, and one can find an abundance of empirical evidence to support students with autism, the findings from the literature consulted suggest there is scant literature investigating Maltese teachers' perceptions of including students with autism in primary classrooms. This is confirmed by some Maltese researchers, including Bajada et al. (2022), Marić (2018) and Rizzo (2021), who argued that inclusive education in Malta had received little attention from researchers. Correspondingly, the studies that sought to examine the factors that might influence teachers' perceptions were conducted outside Malta, with very few researchers incorporating a CDT approach. Thus, filling this gap by investigating Maltese primary teachers' perceptions and identifying the barriers that must be tackled is crucial to promoting more inclusive and equitable learning practices in mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, the results and analysis of this study will align with the key factors of CDT (Section 3.4) and the recommendations outlined in the Maltese National Autism Strategy about the inclusion of students with autism.



This lack of research and the importance of doing studies on Maltese educators' understanding and resilience in supporting students with autism in mainstream classrooms was also brought to light in a recent conference held in Malta in 2022. In the 'Connections and Autism' conference, Dr Jacqui Ashton Smith, an experienced educationalist and trainer, raised the issue of the pressures and expectations imposed on Maltese teachers to adapt their teaching to suit students' needs, which, although Maltese education is intensely aware of, it is still unclear whether Maltese teachers are implementing inclusive education in their classrooms and its impact on their perceptions (Staff Reporter, 2022).

To the best of my knowledge, the originality of this study stems from it being the first study in Malta with an attempt to bridge the educational knowledge gap and delve deeper into the factors behind Maltese teachers' perceptions toward including students with autism in mainstream classrooms using a CDT lens. This study focuses only on Maltese primary teachers, as apart from having a personal interest in and experience with younger students, the primary sector is the basis of education, portraying the most significant impacts on students' inclusion, development and learning and provides them with the foundational skills for later life (Alotaibi, 2017; Trawick-Smith, 2019). Having first-hand experience of inclusive education, these stakeholders were considered knowledgeable about these phenomena.

Apart from adding new insights into inclusion and autism in Malta, this study also aims to contribute to the field of CDT by aligning with its broader goals in advocating for the rights and inclusion of students with autism and emphasising a holistic and inclusive

education. The justification of research from the standpoint of CDT necessitates that we critically investigate teachers' perceptions as one form of barrier that might impact students' inclusion and development while acknowledging that students with autism have distinctive viewpoints and experiences that may enrich our understanding of the world around us.

As Maltese schools are responsible for the progress of students with autism in mainstream classrooms, these students must be exposed to learning in these environments to the maximum extent possible. This study aims to enable a positive shift in favour of inclusive education by raising awareness of how teachers' perceptions and practices may impact the degree to which students develop holistically. Of particular interest is that this study might furnish Maltese policymakers and educational stakeholders with the foundational understanding and knowledge to use the findings and recommendations in the primary education decision-making process to develop a more effective and favourable inclusive learning programme for all students, in particular those with autism, grounded in research findings, evidence-based practices, and teachers' needs. It might also encourage them to reconsider classroom settings and understand current challenges in the classroom context in order to develop necessary training and workshops that prepare pre-service teachers and sensitise in-service ones about inclusion. Furthermore, it is envisaged that, apart from simply informing readers and policymakers, this research will also significantly help Maltese primary teachers identify and address any biases influencing their perceptions, motivate them to research additional information and identify specific components needed to successfully include students with autism in mainstream classrooms while becoming more cognizant and

knowledgeable in the field. The results of this study are hoped to provide valuable understanding and identify areas for improvement in the present Maltese education.

Despite Malta's improvements in the education system, inclusion practice is still under-researched, and not much is known about primary teachers' perceptions (Borg, 2019; Depares, 2019). This is one of the primary justifications for the importance of conducting this study. However, as this process is holistic and progressive, the onus is on teachers and the whole school community to fulfil obligations and internalise admirable human qualities in an inclusive learning environment. This can effectively be done if teachers are supported and educated through professional development opportunities, interventions, and funding (Alotaibi, 2017). All in all, the potential discrepancies between theory and practice at the local level, the gap in the literature related to the educational and social inclusion of students with autism in Malta, and my personal and professional interest in the field of autism further highlight and make it even more indispensable to investigate Maltese teachers' perceptions toward including students with autism in mainstream classrooms.

### **3.9 Summary and Conclusion**

Teachers' personal and professional lives are undoubtedly strongly linked, and being on the other side of the teacher's table suggests one keenly felt conclusion: that the teacher can make a plethora of decisions for her class, shaping them from perspectives, lived nascent practices, and social relationships, especially within a small context such as Malta, where there is a greater risk for one person to be influenced by another. Thus, studying and identifying teachers' perceptions is vital to students,

classrooms, and school learning environments, as it can present a clearer picture of their thinking and currently employed practices towards students with autism. Intended to be situated around the Maltese islands, this study aims to fill in the research gaps and serve as a foundational piece within a larger context by offering insight, knowledge, and explanations of the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions about including students with autism in mainstream classrooms as the core analytical unit of this study. It also intends to identify the factors that might influence their perceptions and contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education policies, informing potential reforms that align with the principles of CDT. The next chapter presents a detailed account of the methodology used in this study to investigate teachers' perceptions and the related factors. Results and conclusions from this research may be used to update or change existing policies and procedures currently surrounding the Maltese inclusion programme. These are then discussed and analysed in the subsequent two chapters.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this methodology chapter is to provide a detailed description of the research procedures used to gather data from primary teachers, such as the creation and administration of the research instruments, the steps used to assure the quality and reliability of the study, the types of data collection and analysis used, the sample of participants and how access was maintained, and the ethical considerations handled during the study process. This study also elucidates how and why pragmatism was employed as the philosophical underpinning to better understand and address the overarching research question.

### **4.1 The Purpose of the Study**

The previous chapter has shown that teachers' roles can be influenced by a myriad of factors that alter and shape their perceptions in educating and including students on the autism spectrum in mainstream classrooms. The increased rate of students diagnosed with autism, the enforcement policies in almost all countries around the world emphasising the importance of teaching these students in the least restrictive settings, and the direct association between teachers' perceptions and students' inclusion and development underline the need to study how teachers view their roles and guarantee the inclusive success of students with autism (Gryskiewicz, 2019; Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023). Driven by the imperative to explore and address these dynamics, I turned to Critical Disability Theory (CDT) and was inspired to use it as a theoretical framework. As alluded to in the previous chapter, CDT allows a deeper

examination of the social, educational, and cultural factors that can affect teachers' perceptions and contribute to the marginalisation of students with autism. By deliberately choosing this theoretical framework, I could dive into consciously foregrounding teachers' voices and create a more thorough and nuanced understanding of their perceptions as significant stakeholders directly involved in students' inclusion and development.

Framing my research in CDT, this study aims to link the choice of methodology between the methods used for data collection and analysis and the theoretical assumptions on which the study is based. It investigates primary teachers' perceptions and the factors influencing their perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. A two-phase approach was embraced to achieve these aims and comprehensively understand Maltese primary teachers' perceptions. This approach allowed for a dual-mode analysis, incorporating quantitative insights through questionnaires and qualitative exploration of personal experiences in semi-structured interviews based on open-ended questions informed by the initial quantitative data.

## **4.2 Research Questions**

The analytical questions, informed by literature and the purpose of the study that drove this type of data collection and their connections to theory are the following:

- *How do Maltese primary teachers perceive mainstream classrooms as addressing the educational needs of students with autism?* This question reveals nuanced and detailed information about teachers' perceptions of teaching and including

students with autism in mainstream classrooms, particularly those with low-functioning autism.

- *To what extent and how do the four specific factors (power and support from SLTs, the curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and teachers' training and resources) identified from the literature review allow us to uncover the way Maltese primary teachers perceive the inclusion of students with autism?* Using a mixed-method approach to study the effects of the four identified factors, this question explores their influence and impact on teachers' perceptions of creating a thriving, inclusive learning environment for students with autism.
- *Are there any additional themes that impact Maltese teachers' perceptions of these students and their inclusion in mainstream classrooms? How are they manifested? How do they extend the core four factors identified in the literature?* These questions aid in identifying additional elements to gain a more complete picture of other environmental factors influencing Maltese teachers' perceptions.

Based on the theoretical framework and the contribution of this research to theory, a conceptual question was also formed: *How do the findings of this study extend our current understanding of CDT, specifically those related to Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of creating inclusive environments, and how can this contribute to the advancement of inclusive practices and the transformation of perceptions in Malta?* This contribution will be tackled in the third research question and the recommendations section in this thesis's analytical and conclusion chapters.

### **4.3 Research Philosophy**

Since stakeholders perceive reality differently, pragmatism was chosen as an epistemological and philosophical framework that guided my reflection on the notions of autism and inclusive education. Pragmatism, deriving from the Greek word ‘pragma’ meaning ‘action’, holds the idea that yesterday’s realities, which were considered fixed truths, do not need to apply to the present or the future, as new values are created by men that change from time to time and place to place (Garrison & Neiman, 2003). Realities are subjective, not universal. Unlike other idealistic philosophical traditions, pragmatism focuses on real-world outcomes and accentuates practicality, flexibility, and the dynamic nature of truth, consistent with CDT’s principles (Adeleye, 2017). An interpretative framework based on pragmatism aims to explain how we perceive the world around us, causing a rise in behaviours, events, and outcomes. “It contains a worldview, a way of breaking down the complexity of the world and telling researchers what is important, what is reasonable and what is legitimate” (Patton, 1990, p. 72) to derive knowledge about an issue. This aligns with the focus of this study on how teachers perceive the world around them and how their perceptions are shaped.

As a research philosophy, pragmatism provides a suitable framework for a mixed-method approach due to its focus on realism, problem-solving, and the integration of methods to generate a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Pragmatic studies focus on the topic at hand, highlighting that to comprehend the world, one must interact with it in a practical and empirical manner and use the strengths of more than one method for a more robust understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2014). In pragmatism, “mixing at multiple levels is welcomed and



not intrinsically problematic” (Greene, 2007, p. 166), enabling me to effectively use more than one method to answer the analytical questions. This framework thus provides a lens through which perceptions can be viewed as tools teachers can use to navigate and address challenges and guide students to find solutions to succeed.

Thus, Pragmatism can be pertinent and effective in implementing and understanding CDT’s principles. Like CDT, pragmatism challenges discriminatory perceptions and aims for equal access and actionable outcomes for all students. CDT, pragmatism, and a mixed-method approach offer a promising way forward to developing inclusive settings that, in practice, support and cater to the individual needs of all students, including those with autism, and extend existing theory. The literature gap revealed that Maltese teachers and policymakers need pragmatic answers to questions about what influences the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. This worldview, along with the methods used in this study, characterises my beliefs, guides my action plan, and offers a solid framework for this investigation.

#### **4.4 Research Approach**

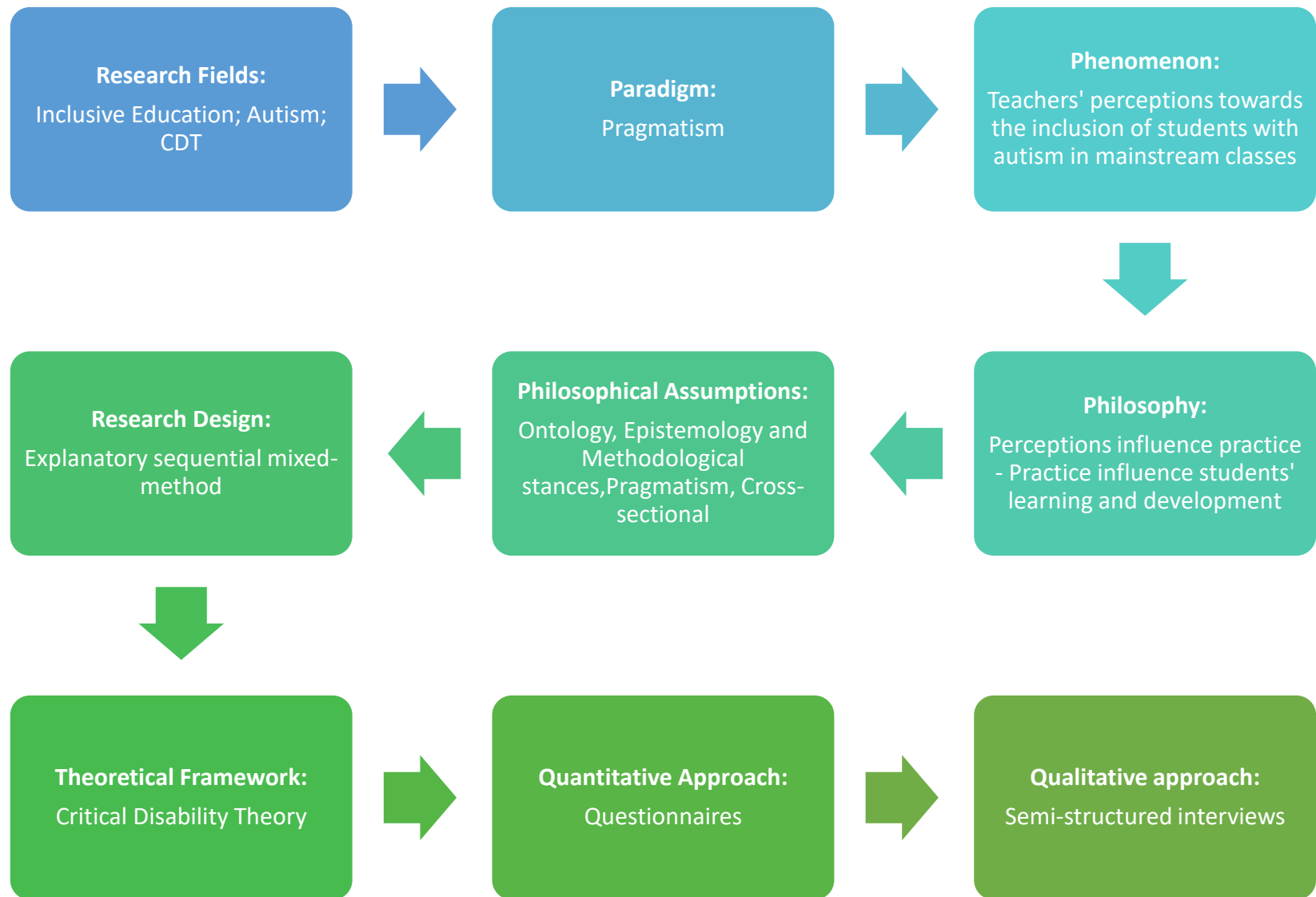
Historically, educational studies were carried out only quantitatively, with researchers in this field having an objectivist perspective that their research could be reliable, generalisable, and replicable. Around the 1960s, researchers noticed apparent difficulties with using solely a quantitative stance, as participants tended to choose their closest responses and did not always reveal their real beliefs about the subject (Alotaibi, 2017). The interpretative movement began in the 1970s to express that each person

perceives, comprehends, and makes sense of reality in their own manner, depending on their background and life experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Following this, the combination of qualitative and quantitative research emerged around the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has continued to grow in popularity ever since. By then, pragmatists had started arguing that using only one type of method does not provide extensive insights into the phenomena under investigation and began to underline the significance of drawing on different types of data through a mixed method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Mixed-methods research is defined by Johnson et al. (2007, p. 123) as the combination of “elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches... for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration”. This combination in a single study helps gather, analyse and solicit a more profound understanding of what is happening in practice (Creswell, 2014). Although mixed-method research can still hold biases and weaknesses, integrating these provides a fuller picture of the research question and more meaningful data than each can independently (Alotaibi, 2017; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Marić, 2018).

As pragmatists, researchers are “not committed to any system of philosophy and reality” as the world is not seen “as an absolute unity”; thus, they are “free to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes” (Creswell, 2014, p. 39). Although some researchers criticised mixed methods for the time and effort spent on undertaking it, the complexity of studying the problem from different angles, and the higher percentage of unmatched or conflicting results (Alotaibi, 2017), mixed methods research was viewed as the most suitable methodology

for this research. Following the above assumptions, this study utilises pragmatism and mixed methods to bridge the scholarly gaps and provides a comprehensive analysis that aligns well with the tenets of CDT, as well as the research questions framing this study. Figure 4 below, adapted from the study carried out by Marić in 2018, encapsulates this study's research design, briefly summarising what has been discussed until now.



**Figure 4:** Research Design

In this study, the explanatory design acted as a form of triangulation, helping to answer the 'why' and 'how' of the research and contributing to its richness and robust understanding. Explanatory sequential designs are one type of research design commonly employed in mixed methods research that provides a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and enhances the interpretation of initial findings and the trustworthiness of data (Creswell, 2014). Considering the aims and objectives of the study, an explanatory sequential mixed method approach was found to be the ideal form to provide insightful information and a better cross-sectional picture of the current situation in Malta. This was the reason why the original idea was to target the whole population of Maltese primary teachers.

Explanatory sequential data collection entailed gathering information in phase one, the quantitative phase, to supplement the formulation of questions and the information gathered in phase two, the qualitative phase. Although one method was used prior to the other, both methods were valued equally. These approaches were mutually relevant and balanced each other, presenting more comprehensive, precise, and trustworthy information that addressed the objectives posed at the start of the study. The two phases were connected in the intermediate stage of the study, as described in the following sections. CDT guided the selection of the questions asked in both phases and the data analysis, ensuring that the research was grounded in social justice perspectives on inclusion. As described above, this study intends to gather both quantitative data and qualitative insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions within a particular context, the Maltese education setting. The findings from the

quantitative phase will be presented in numerical format, while those of the qualitative phase will be presented as thematic text information.

#### **4.5 Quantitative Design**

Quantitative data is defined by Creswell (2014) as the process of systematically and statistically collecting and analysing the relationships between individuals to measure and describe particular phenomena. The study's first phase used questionnaires to provide a structured approach to inquiry. Using questionnaires to collect quantitative data is easy to use, time- and money-efficient, has rapid access to geographically disparate and unknown samples, and empowers participants to control the flow of the questionnaire and edit responses before sending or handing them in (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). The choice of the questionnaire in this study was pragmatic, as conducting a large number of interviews equivalent to the total number of administered questionnaires would have been challenging. While CDT and quantitative research methods may seem at odds, often stemming from the philosophical underpinnings of CDT, in this mixed methods approach these complimented each other. This combination helped obtain large-scale data and provide a broader picture that complements the depth of the follow-up qualitative insights. The quantitative findings, including the participants' input in the provided boxes after each section, were not treated as definitive but as a component of a larger critical analysis.

The questionnaires (see Appendix H for a copy) conformed to ethical guidelines, safeguarded participants' anonymity throughout the study, minimised intrusion into participants' lives, and gathered individual feedback about Maltese teachers'

perceptions towards including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The questionnaires were purposefully designed for this study, following an extensive literature review and a pilot study, with CDT guiding the selection of questions. In the pilot stage, a Professor of Health Care Research from Keele University was requested to give his subjective opinion about the questions for the questionnaire and to check the phrasing and suitability of the statements to ensure content validity. These were also discussed with an external Maltese expert on inclusion and autism to check their feasibility for Malta. These stakeholders' recommendations were followed.

A pilot study (discussed in Section 4.7 below), aiming to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, was conducted with twelve Maltese secondary teachers with inclusion criteria similar to the population selected for this study. Building on the insights from the pilot study, the data collection methods were refined with clearer and more straightforward statements to ensure that they were more robust, reliable, and aligned with this research's objectives. The questionnaires for the actual study were both printed out and designed on Google Forms. Google Forms is a user-friendly platform which simplifies the process of creating and sending out online surveys, allows for a high volume of simultaneous responses, and automatically stores responses in a spreadsheet that can be downloaded. The questionnaire, which was shared with teachers on Google Forms or in hard copies (see explanation below), was divided into three sections, with

- (a) eight questions on participants' demographic information and educational training;
- (b) fifteen statements aimed at assessing and evaluating teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism;

(c) twenty statements explored the four factors that might influence Maltese teachers' perceptions.

The statements in the questionnaire, guided by CDT principles, explored teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and preconceived notions about inclusive education for students with autism and informed efforts to address the gaps and inequities within the Maltese educational system. These were carefully designed to avoid causing harm or discrimination to any participant. Some statements were positively worded, while others were written negatively to avoid an 'acquiescent response style threat,' which, in simple terms, is described by Hibbing et al. (2019) as the widespread inclination to agree rather than dispute propositions.

The thirty-five statements in the questionnaires were closed-ended, requiring participants to select their level of agreement using a nominal rating scale with a fixed number of stipulated categories on a five-point Likert scale. A Likert scale provides ordinal response options in a bipolar manner, with positive and negative scales placed in a linear sequence (Joshi et al., 2015). This metric scale was balanced and symmetrical, with neutrality lying precisely between the two extremes. It is simple for participants to complete, influential in determining general perceptions, and helps expedite researchers' analysis of replies in less time. At the same time, it can measure perceptions "in a scientifically accepted and validated manner" (Joshi et al., 2015, p. 397). Although traditionally, CDT is often critical of quantitative methods and tools like Likert scales, as these might reflect researchers' biases and obscure complex experiences (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), in this research, the CDT-aligned Likert



scale helped illuminate trends in perceptions and institutional barriers, enabling the collection of valuable data affecting students with autism. The continuum of responses was: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. Participants who wanted to elaborate on their chosen answers could also submit their views as free text after each section. The questionnaires took participants approximately 10 to 15 minutes to fill out.

#### **4.5.1 Quantitative Data Collection Procedures**

Before data collection began, an application was submitted to Keele University Research Ethics Board for approval. Once this research application was approved, the first step in achieving access to participants was to contact the Maltese Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) and the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE) to gain access to carry out research in Maltese schools (See Appendix B and C). Some obstacles, as described in the limitations section, were encountered along the way, yet I overcame them effectively. Initially, the original plan was to send the questionnaires to all primary teachers around the Maltese islands (approximately 2,129 primary teachers) for a generalisable cross-sectional picture of Malta. Nevertheless, due to many other research studies taking place at the time within Maltese state schools, I was constrained by MEYR from adopting a total population sampling and restricted to choosing only ten state schools around the Maltese islands. Due to this restriction, in an attempt to have a larger response rate, I intentionally selected the ten state schools considered to have the largest teaching population on the islands. As these chosen schools are situated around the islands and not in one specific geographical area, there was the element of a broad representation of schools, ensuring

a diverse representation and providing a more holistic picture. Following a low response rate from these state schools, I informed MEYR, and the Maltese Research Ethical Board decided that my application would be reopened to add another six schools, for a total of 16 state schools. I also informed Keele's research ethics board of this change and received an amended ethical approval (REC Project Reference 0235, see Appendix A). There were no constraints in regard to the participation of teachers working in the church or independent sector. The inclusion and exclusion criteria of the participants can be found in Section 4.9 below.

After getting all the necessary approvals from MEYR and SfCE, I then contacted each Head of the respective state and church schools via electronic mail and asked them to act as gatekeepers and forward the email with an enclosed information sheet (see Appendices E and F) that clearly described the study's aim, process, and ethical considerations, a link to the online questionnaire, and other relevant documents to the eligible teachers in their schools. A copy of this email is provided in Appendix E. Making use of a gatekeeper to send out these questionnaires aids in remaining objective and detached from the research. For the private school sector, I directly contacted the primary school Heads themselves, since they do not fall under any Ministry, and asked them to forward my email to the teachers working in their respective schools on my behalf. All the Heads' email addresses for the three sectors were easily generated through an online search on the Ministry for Education website. My contact details were also provided to all stakeholders in case they needed more clarification about my study.

Forty-nine primary schools from the three sectors were forwarded the online questionnaire for the study between February and March 2023. Reminder emails followed by telephone calls were used for those Heads of Schools that had not acknowledged receipt of the original email within five working days. This was also done to encourage participation and increase the response rate. In total, 26 gatekeepers from the three sectors confirmed that they had read my email and shared the questionnaire with their primary teachers, with the remaining either not confirming or refusing to forward the link to teachers without providing any valid reasons. The interpretation behind this could have been that, due to their workload, Heads might not respond to all research requests, or they might have felt that there could be interruptions to the school routine and thus refrained from passing it on to teachers, although this was specified in my emails. More information about the questionnaire respondents can be found in Section 5.2.1 and simplified in a table in Appendix I. The data collection phase took approximately five weeks, as I had to contact some of the gatekeepers more than once since they were slow to accept and forward the link to teachers in their respective schools. To get more participants, I even prolonged the deadline for the questionnaire submission. Table 6 below shows the total number of schools confirming that they had forwarded my email to their respective teachers and the overall response rate.

**Table 6:** Response Rate for the Quantitative Phase

Quantitative phase	Type of Institution		
	State	Church	Independent
The number of schools who were invited to participate in the study	16	25	8

Number of gatekeepers who accepted to forward the email or hand out the questionnaires to their respective teachers	12	13	1
Online questionnaires returned	74	67	3
Hard-copy questionnaires returned	36	22	0
Total number of filled-in questionnaires returned	108	87	3

As seen in the table above, among the three sectors, the state school sector had the highest percentage of Heads of Schools who agreed to act as gatekeepers in this study (75%), followed by the church school sector (52%) and only 12.5% from the independent sector. In the state school sector, approximately 70.8% of the participants who were given a hard copy completed and returned the questionnaire, while 71.4% of the participants from the church school sector returned it. Originally, questionnaires were only planned to be distributed online. However, due to the relatively good to poor response rate of the online questionnaires, some gatekeepers suggested handing out a hard copy. Thus, I resorted to printing out the questionnaires and distributing them in person to the SLTs of the six last chosen state schools and four church schools to increase the response rate and engagement. All ten gatekeepers (Heads of Schools) in the chosen schools agreed to hand out and distribute the hard copies among their primary teachers.

A consent form (see Appendix G) that re-explained the research study and gave instructions on filling out the questionnaire was attached to these hard copies. For the online questionnaires, upon clicking the received link, participants were provided with

the same consent form. They had to check the box and voluntarily consent to participate in this research before being directed to the combined scale. This consent form ensured that participants were fully informed of their participation in the research. Participants who filled out the hard copies could complete the questionnaires at their convenience without an internet device. Once they completed them, they were asked to return the filled-in questionnaire to the gatekeeper in the sealed envelope provided. The completed questionnaires and the signed consent forms were collected from the gatekeepers' schools a week later and examined for completeness and accuracy. The data was then manually inputted into Google Forms, which also contained the online questionnaire results.

#### **4.5.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures**

After completing the questionnaire, data was gathered, analysed, and evaluated using the latest version of the Statistical Programme for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This platform is a software package used to perform statistical analysis that helps to draw conclusions from the data (Mishra et al., 2019). Following data collection, raw questionnaire data were downloaded as an Excel file from Google Forms and imported into SPSS to be summarised and grouped. The combination of these two applications streamlined the data collection and analysis processes, helping to provide information about its variables and obtain meaningful insights. Descriptive statistics, which sum up the main characteristics of a dataset, were exploited to gather and describe summaries about the sample, while frequency tables, standard deviations and mean were analysed to assist in data exploration (Mishra et al., 2019). These were visually represented through tables, as found in Sections 5.5 and 5.6. This statistical technique provided a

snapshot of the main characteristics of the dataset, guiding the subsequent qualitative analysis. The internal consistency of participants' responses to the questionnaire items was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), a statistical technique typically used in questionnaires with multiple-point scales. This study's overall level of internal reliability for the 35 questionnaire statements was  $\alpha = 0.731$  (Table 7). Thus, the questionnaire was reliable and consistent since  $\alpha$  was greater than 0.7 (Valenti, 2020).

**Table 7:** Internal Reliability Statistics

Number of items	$\alpha$
35	.731

Following the collection and data analysis of the questionnaires, the quantitative and qualitative phases were connected, with questions formulated from the gathered statistical results. Combining the findings from these two phases served as a bridge to better explain the quantitative results, identify areas for deeper exploration in the qualitative phase, and further underscored the elaborating purpose of using a mixed-method explanatory sequential design to answer the research questions more robustly and meaningfully (Ivankova et al., 2006). Results are reported in Chapter 5.

#### **4.6 Qualitative Design**

Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviour to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions and provide deeper insights into real-world problems (Tenny et al., 2021). The second phase of this study involved using semi-structured interviews as another mode of data collection to allow flexibility,

provide probing follow-up questions to clarify misunderstandings, and “produce rich empirical data about the lives and perspectives of individuals” (Cousin, 2009, p. 71). Understanding these dynamics in more detail, which could not be captured by the questionnaire alone, prompted the use of interviews in this study.

Following the successful completion of the questionnaire, participants were given the option to voluntarily proceed with the second phase of this study and explore, interpret and elaborate on the statistical results obtained. My email address was written on the information sheet (Appendix F) as well as on the last page of the questionnaire, supported by a statement informing participants that should they wish to continue with the follow-up interviews, they had to contact me via email, expressing their willingness. This was preferred over asking participants to fill in their email addresses directly on the questionnaire to safeguard their anonymity and ensure that responses remained unlinked to identities. Upon receiving their email, I forwarded the interested participants another information sheet providing details about the interviews and a consent form (Appendices J, K, and L) and scheduled a meeting to address any queries. Ten primary teachers, ages ranging between twenty-four and sixty, voluntarily opted to participate in the follow-up interviews and elaborate on the results gathered from the questionnaires. The participants were all female, with teaching experiences ranging between 2 and 25 years. Their profile is presented in the next Chapter, Section 5.2.2.

The questions presented in the interviews were planned and derived following the analysis of the quantitative results from the first phase of this study. Given the importance of listening to teachers in this study, the open-ended questions allowed

participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about the subject and provided rich, in-depth data. Accurate percentage results were included in the interview guide (see Appendix M), and care was taken to ensure that questions were rooted in social justice principles as guided by CDT. Any language that sensationalised findings was avoided, and negative, positive, and neutral results were all included to present a faithfully balanced picture. Although the interview questions were in English, since Malta has two official languages, participants could choose whether to conduct the interviews in English or Maltese, their native language. Two teachers (Elaine and Tara) felt more comfortable articulating in the Maltese language, while the rest of the interviews were conducted in English, with these teachers occasionally code-switching between one language and another to share their thoughts or feelings more profoundly. Where appropriate or when asked, I also paraphrased or translated questions from English to Maltese to improve comprehension of the question. To avoid losing meaning while translating between these two languages and ensure faithful and accurate translation, these interviews and statements were sent to a Maltese literacy specialist who converted the content from Maltese to English with its meaning intact. To ensure that meanings were not impaired in any way, I first translated the interviews myself and following translations by the literacy specialist, we compared the versions to ensure that the original meaning was preserved. The questionnaire statements were provided exclusively in English, and all participants elaborated on their chosen answers in English.

#### **4.6.1 Qualitative Data Collection Procedures**

In accordance with CDT's understanding, participant accessibility plays a significant role in a study. Hence, participants' preferences were given utmost



importance in the design of this phase. All participants received an interview guide one week in advance of the scheduled interviews to give them enough time to think about the questions and feel more confident during the interview. Participants were given the choice to conduct the interviews online or in person, as Valenti (2020) argued that some participants might feel more comfortable expressing themselves via digital interviews rather than face-to-face. This further helped participants exercise agency and make an informed decision about whether to participate. Seven interviews were conducted online on Microsoft Teams, a platform frequently used by primary teachers during COVID-19, with three of the interviews being done face-to-face in the natural setting of the participants, i.e., at their respective institutions. For the face-to-face interviews, the signed consent forms were collected from the participants on the day of the interviews, while for the online ones, these were collected from the participants' schools a day before the scheduled interview. On the consent form, participants were also asked to sign a permission form to audio record the interviews on Microsoft Teams as well as on a digital recorder to be reviewed and analysed further if needed (see Appendix L). Interviews were recorded twice as a precautionary measure to have a backup. Although notes were also manually jotted down during the interviews when participants used their body language and gestures to enhance communication, none raised any concerns. The only non-verbal communication technique that warranted inclusion in the analysis was the use of air quotes with hands to convey emphasis and add clarity during the discussion. All interviews were conducted in July 2023.

Before starting the interview with each participant, I re-explained the purpose of the research, the right to withdraw at any time, the secure storage of the collected data,

and other ethical considerations, and we agreed on informed consent. Furthermore, given that participants may be inclined to provide favourable responses, as MEYR and SfCE coordinated the research, I strived to minimise biases by clearly communicating in the information sheet and prior to the actual interview that their responses would be anonymous and confidential, assuring them that the sharing of beliefs will not be used for any punitive measures. Apart from the scheduled meeting prior to the interview, any questions the interviewee had about the study or procedure were also addressed on the day of the interview. During the one-on-one interviews, I adhered to and constantly referred to the schedule as an interview guide. The schedule included a set of questions that were asked to all ten participants in the same order to ensure that all relevant topics were covered in a systematic and organised manner. These also allowed for a more direct comparison of responses, a more comprehensive and insightful data analysis, and the resolution of any power imbalances between me as the researcher and the teachers participating in the study (as explained in the next paragraph), yielding more frank information and fruitful themes (Alotaibi, 2017). Yet, it was a rhizomatic process as I adapted and included additional questions based on the respondents' answers to explore unexpected areas of interest that arose during the interview while still keeping within the research questions.

Marić (2018) recommended that a researcher's role during an interview should be to maintain impartiality by listening to the participants and communicating but not responding. In this research, I was directly involved in understanding the subjective world of Maltese primary teachers and how they experience and perceive students with autism. Since I was a new acquaintance to the teachers, I made efforts to increase the

value of the interviews by seeking to establish a non-threatening environment and building a dialogue based on the interviewees' dignity and respect. During this study, I constantly engaged in a reflexive process to reflect on how my background may influence the type of questions asked or how these might guide responses, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2021). During the interviews, I tried to use language that lessened the tension between power and knowledge, and questions were posed to interviewees in a conversational manner to ensure they were understood and candidly addressed. At the beginning of the interview, I invited the participants to share something about themselves or their teaching roles to establish a more relaxed setting. This personal information was not included in the transcriptions to safeguard their anonymity. The interview questions began by asking participants about their training in inclusive education and to share their experiences working with students with autism. Teachers were allotted enough time to reflect and elaborate on their understanding of inclusion and autism and their forthright opinions on the questionnaire results. In this research, I had no intention of influencing the behaviour and perceptions of participants towards inclusion and autism. Thus, I was also cautious in avoiding being judgmental in any way that would have made participants reluctant to continue with the interview.

The participants offered various perspectives on the social, educational, and cultural aspects that shaped the development of inclusive education for students with autism at the primary level. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. After each interview, I manually transcribed the audio recordings line by line, verbatim, with this process taking roughly a fortnight. Transcriptions were also sent to the participants by email to "review the accuracy of the transcript, the content, narrative and analysis of

the interview, and provide their feedback concerning any corrections or including additional comments” (Alotaibi, 2017, p. 116), enabling them to make any adjustments or omissions as required. This avoided any bias, improved the study's credibility, and provided a clear picture of the data. Only one participant elaborated on one of her answers to enhance clarity. This interviewee’s feedback was considered for the final data analysis section. Transcripts were saved on a password-protected laptop to which only I had access, and the filled-in printed versions of the questionnaires were stored in a locked cabinet.

#### **4.6.2 Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures**

Qualitative coding involves identifying, organising, and interpreting themes within qualitative data. The transcription process included a combination of structural coding that categorises data, descriptive coding that condenses participants’ phrases, and in-vivo coding that preserves the integrity of participants’ precise words or phrases (Valenti, 2020). An example of this is shown in Appendices N and O. This study followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, which, in their own words, is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data”, allowing materials to be organised into codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). These steps included *(i)* becoming familiar with the data, *(ii)* creating codes, *(iii)* generating themes, *(iv)* reviewing themes, *(v)* defining and naming themes, and *(vi)* locating exemplars. In their recent follow-up, Braun and Clarke (2021) revisited these steps, offering additional insights and further centralising their approach by emphasising the importance of researchers being self-aware of their influence on the research process. In this work, the authors stressed on how researchers’ perspectives might shape the analysis and the

broader social contexts, and thus urged them to have a thoughtful and reflexive relationship with both the data and the research process.

Following the data transcription and before identifying themes, the first step was to review the transcripts and become acquainted with the participants' comments. I started familiarising myself with the data by rereading the transcript multiple times and looking for recurring words or phrases related to the study's objectives to be used as codes. Braun and Clarke's first step in becoming familiar with data was fundamental in outlining the primary topics related to the research questions and summarising the main ideas, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the data. I then looked for meanings and patterns (stage 3 of Braun and Clarke), thematically analysing these interviews to be consistent with the subject of inclusion and autism, and shaped and compared them with the theoretical framework and prevalent literature. Irrelevant data unrelated to research questions were removed, while recurring words were analysed and clustered into meaningful themes that reflected the content they encompassed. Following step four, codes were revisited, and data that did not sufficiently support or justify the theme was renamed. These recurring themes in the interviews coalesced to derive the implications that answered the analytical questions. Not being bound to any predetermined theory, assumption, or issue, I evaluated and reflected on all data items, building on Braun and Clarke's (2021) final step, as each item could shed light on the phenomenon being explored. The transcripts were also transferred to NVivo for thematic analysis (Appendix O), and themes identified through manual coding were matched with the ones from NVivo. These were found to be consistent and matched effectively.

The coding process has allowed me to hone in on participants' perceptions and derive meaning from conceptual groupings. Codes were then sorted and forwarded to two fellow teachers (in an anonymised form) to identify additional themes, a technique known as 'peer debriefing' (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Seven themes emerged from the data analysis: *(i)* power and support from SLTs, *(ii)* curriculum, *(iii)* discourse of labelling, *(iv)* teachers' training and resources, *(v)* students' uneven profiles, *(vi)* past experiences, and *(vii)* responsabilisation. Each code had other sub-codes that further captured relationships and dependencies within the data (see Sections 5.6 and 5.11). The subsequent analysis chapter describes and addresses these themes and their related codes.

#### **4.7 Pilot Study**

As the initial idea was to adopt a total population sampling with primary teachers, prior to carrying out the actual study, a pilot study that tested the reliability and validity of the quantitative phase was conducted with twelve Maltese secondary teachers who had similar criteria for whom these were designed. This pilot study aimed to contribute to a smoother quantitative and qualitative process and enhance the main study's overall quality of data. Following the successful response to the questionnaire, participants were asked to complete a short evaluation form (Appendix D) on its statements to guarantee validity. This included closed-ended and open-ended questions where participants commented on the statements, their clarity, whether certain aspects were impractical or burdensome, and whether they met the study's goals. Pilot participants were also asked to estimate the time taken to complete the questionnaire and suggest modifications for improvement to enhance the quality and efficiency of the main study.

This, together with Cronbach's alpha analysis test ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), demonstrated the content validity and reliability of the questionnaire. During this process, I also contacted a Maltese statistician to evaluate the statements using factor analysis. These turned out to be significantly and positively associated with the other statements in the category.

The analysis from the pilot study revealed that some statements and questions needed to be modified slightly to make them easier to comprehend, primarily due to some being double-barrelled questions, while others that were misleading or ambiguous were reworded or deleted to aid understanding and produce more consistent results, as per the received feedback. One example was the statement, 'The SLT in my school projects positive perceptions of students with autism and gives me a lot of support to effectively meet the educational needs of these students'. One participant mentioned that this is a double-barrelled question as *"you might think that they project positive perceptions without providing support, or possibly vice versa"*.

The pilot interviews were done with three secondary school teachers to get input on appropriate language and idea clarity, test the validity and effectiveness of the questions, and guarantee methodological rigour. Furthermore, collecting participant feedback provided several other benefits, including honing considerable interpersonal skills in asking questions, assessing key themes and mechanisms for discussion, utilising an audio recorder, and learning how to manage the allotted time while also affording me an optimistic impetus to proceed with this research. Participants commented that some interview questions were too lengthy or complex, resulting in the interviews exceeding the anticipated time. Based on the received feedback, questions were

revised, and complex elements were eliminated to make the questions more efficient, concise and participant-friendly.

#### **4.8 Population and Sampling Procedures**

As the current situation in Malta is that students with autism are educated in mainstream classrooms alongside neurotypical peers, most students with autism spend their school day under the supervision of primary teachers. Teachers of any age, gender, and experience working full-time in one of the identified school sectors (state, church, or independent) and teaching grades one through six were eligible to participate in this study. Gatekeepers (Heads of Schools), who acted as intermediaries, were asked to send the questionnaires to all primary teachers within their schools. As explained above, these gatekeepers ensured that research was conducted ethically before granting access to their settings, served as effective channels, and facilitated contact with participants.

Participants who desired to continue with the follow-up interviews were eligible based on two criteria: they had completed the questionnaire and had experience teaching and working with students with autism in mainstream classrooms. This allowed them to contribute intelligently and provide more in-depth information about the subject. Ten primary teachers voluntarily expressed interest in being interviewed for the qualitative part. Although compared to the total number of schools who participated in the questionnaires, ten interviews could be considered a small number, the interviewees who voluntarily agreed to participate came from different school sectors and had different demographics and backgrounds, which enhanced the findings,



contributing to a varied and representative sample. Researchers further emphasise depth over breadth in interviews, recommending that conducting between 6 and 10 semi-structured interviews is still an adequate sample size to lead to rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Galvin, 2015).

This study did not aim to develop generalisations but to better understand perceptions from a group of Maltese primary teachers. If the participants' answers had continued to vary immensely between participants, or there was not at least one teacher from each of the school sectors, I would have reached out once more to all gatekeepers who had previously expressed willingness for their teachers to participate in the first phase of the study and requested them to inquire within their schools and identify individuals who were interested in voluntarily taking part in the second phase of the study. However, this necessity did not emerge. The possibility of comparing participants' responses across different institutions was initially considered as it could have offered intriguing insights into potential differences in perceptions or practices. However, the usefulness of such a comparison was not only hampered by the difference in the number of responses gathered between institutions, which limited the statistical significance and trustworthiness of such comparison, but also by the data, which unveiled no pertinent differences between the institutions, making it needless to analyse these patterns. The purposeful approach to selecting participants who had experienced and been immersed in the social phenomenon being investigated helped provide rich, in-depth data.

#### **4.9 Validity and Reliability of Data**

Although data was collected and analysed in mid-2023, its validity is considered high, as there have been no identified changes within the Maltese primary educational system since then. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire items were established based on the pilot study, and statements on inclusion and autism were discussed with a professor from Keele University, followed by a Maltese expert, to ensure their validity and reliability within the Maltese context. A Maltese statistician also evaluated the items using frequency distributions and factor analysis. To ensure the reliability of the interview questions, an interview protocol was followed closely for each participant, as described in Section 4.6.1 above, whereas following word-by-word transcription, I provided interviewees with the final data analysis report to check if they were an accurate representation of their comments and perceptions, ensuring the questions' validity. Lastly, I checked the written transcripts more than once to identify potential mistakes made during transcription.

#### **4.10 Positionality in Research**

As teachers are primarily responsible for teaching students, researchers are committed to their discipline of study. As a good teacher aims to maximise students' learning chances, a good researcher must maximise involvement and data quality. Xu (2019) contends that role conflict can occur when the roles of a teacher and a researcher overlap, which is the case in the present study, given that I am a teacher and a researcher. Given that a researchers' positionality – formed by backgrounds, experiences and assumptions – shapes every aspect of the research process, engaging in ongoing professional development, consistently examining my personal assumptions,

and reflecting on my position during the design process allowed me to grow and change. My position in this research was as close to being 'neutral' as possible, enabling me to persist inquisitively and question the status quo, putting aside my "repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences" (Chan et al., 2013, p. 2). Throughout the study, I retained a research journal, debriefed with colleagues, and tried to maintain an open mind, allowing teachers to share experiences and perspectives without judgment. This practice allowed me to stay self-aware and critically evaluate how my presence, choices, and interpretations can affect the findings. Participants of this study acknowledged my intentionally adopted role, as they led the direction of the conversation without my interference, shared their personal anecdotes, and felt empowered to express differing opinions. Additionally, the responses from the interviews were related to those from the questionnaire, thus showing that keeping such position in this study was effective.

In the interviews, I clearly outlined the research methodology and tried to avoid leading or biasing questions towards my own beliefs, asking more neutral questions like "Can you tell me about your experience with the inclusion of students with autism?" rather than "Why do you think that a number of students with autism are not included in the classrooms?" During data analysis, I also avoided interpreting data to be similar to my preconceived notions, trying to remain receptive to any new insights that could surface from the data, prioritising participants' perspectives above my presumptions. In addition, I carried out member checking to ensure that the analysis minimises misinterpretation and accurately shows participants' points of view. Besides ensuring a more compliant and empowering experience for participants, the amalgamation of

reflexivity, participant-centred approach, and ethical engagement augmented the credibility of this research.

As a teacher, I became more aware of how our interactions with others might affect our personal and professional lives. As a researcher, I understood the need to create strong bonds with the participants based on communication and cooperation (Marić, 2018). Thus, before the interviews, I re-ensured anonymity so that participants would feel more confident and open. During the discussions, I tried to use neutral language, be mindful of my body language and gestures, and listen attentively to respondents without interjecting. Reflecting on the follow-up questions and my nonverbal cues allowed me to better combine my roles as an objective researcher and an engaged listener, helping me to achieve the study's aim and contribute to knowledge, which would have been difficult to achieve if I had opted to introduce myself as a figure of power. Although I am currently a primary teacher in an educational institution, to minimise coercion and for the dual teaching-research role reason, I did not send out any questionnaires or conduct any interviews in my school or with participants related to myself. This helped to alleviate any concerns that participants would not feel comfortable expressing themselves to me as the researcher and to mitigate any power differentials.

#### **4.11 Limitations and Challenges**

When conducting a mixed-method research study, several factors can contribute to its effectiveness or limitations. While the effectiveness of the approach in addressing the analytical questions of this study was mentioned in the above sections, there are

also certain drawbacks and challenges faced during this study's design, leading to changes from the original plan and delays in data collection. While mixed-method designs aim to offer a more comprehensive understanding and can contribute to generalisability in certain contexts, this study was limited due to specific restrictions by MEYR. As mentioned in Section 4.5.1 above, the idea of conducting a total population sampling among all primary teachers around the Maltese islands (Malta and Gozo) had to be abandoned, with the reason given by MEYR being that, at the time, there were a number of studies taking place in state schools. Permission was only granted to include 16 state schools out of 69, with a percentage of 23.2%.

The SfCE initially asked me to get approval from those Heads of Schools within the Church schools sector who were ready to support my study before I could be granted access to church schools. In dissent, some Heads did not agree to participate in my study without formal approval from SfCE. When I reached out once more to the Secretariat, there was some confusion. Other members later informed me that there was no need to go through this process before getting the SfCE's approval. This led to delays in obtaining approval to distribute the questionnaire within the Church school sector and eventually start data collection from these schools.

Receiving replies from the gatekeepers within a planned time frame was a challenge. Some gatekeepers' email addresses were incorrect; some did not read my email, or invitations to online questionnaires were sometimes mistakenly filtered into the junk folder. This was confirmed when contacting the Heads of Schools via phone. Moreover, only ten participants agreed and actively participated in the follow-up

interviews, which was relatively low compared to the number of schools that participated in the questionnaire. Nonetheless, after studying the interviewees' identities, it was noted that there was a diverse range of participants, with at least one teacher from each school sector, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences and perspectives.

#### **4.12 Ethical Considerations**

The whole study was conducted in accordance with the professional code of ethics. Approval was obtained from the Keele University Ethics Committee (Appendix A) in November 2022, and their guidelines were strictly followed and adhered to throughout the research. Following this successful application, I then started the process of obtaining access to Maltese primary schools. This entailed submitting an online application to MEYR (R08-2022 1209) and contacting SfCE. The study's primary purposes and outcomes were reviewed with significant individuals from these two institutions before starting the first phase. After approximately three months of submission, I received approval from both institutions (Appendices B and C), indicating that I could start contacting gatekeepers in the Maltese primary schools.

After assuring the gatekeepers about the participants' informed consent and anonymity and forwarding them the required approved documents via email, a number of them acquiesced and agreed to forward or hand in the necessary documentation to teachers in their respective schools. The gatekeepers' and teachers' inquiries about the research were addressed to build trust and "present myself as a serious investigator with sound ethical principles" (Marić, 2018, p. 77). The risk of participating in this study

was minimal, and discomfort was not anticipated, as participants shared only information they felt comfortable sharing related to their daily roles. Participants were reassured that the questions were not to evaluate their practices but rather about their understanding of how environmental factors impact their practices. Prior to the interviews, I ensured that the participants had access to thorough information about the study and knew what their participation entailed before consenting.

As advised by Braun and Clarke (2006), the need for informed consent, maintaining participants' privacy and anonymity, and making participants aware of the right to withdraw were kept in mind throughout the study. On three occasions, i.e., in the information sheet, consent forms, and prior to the interviews, participants were informed about their voluntary participation, the anticipated benefits and consequences of participation, anonymity, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time during the process. Furthermore, to ensure that all participants could consent to participate in the anonymous questionnaire, I set referrer verification so that no participant could skip the information page with the consent form. Additionally, no IP addresses were saved, thus guaranteeing anonymity.

Attempts were made to identify and preserve impartiality and decrease social desirability bias. Teachers were not compelled to write or discuss any identified information, and during the interviews, they were assured that their names and respective schools would not be linked to specific questions or research findings. Throughout this study, any identifying information was omitted or replaced by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity at every phase of the research process. The

research data was kept separate from participants' personal data, and only anonymised transcripts were analysed. Interviews were also listed in a non-sequential order to maximise secrecy and safeguard these participants' identities, especially considering Malta's small size. Transcripts and filled-in questionnaires will be kept in a locked cabinet for an estimated period up to October 2028 before being safely disregarded. Participants could withdraw from the questionnaire at any time by simply closing the browser window/tab or refraining from completing and handing in the hard copy of the questionnaire. Consistent with the information presented in the questionnaires, interviewees were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview until August 21, 2023.

The participants were all unknown to me. Yet, bearing in mind that being a teacher myself could, to a certain extent, have made them feel embarrassed to 'change their minds' to participate, I contacted each participant twice to verify their readiness for the interview. Although all participants gave permission to be audio recorded during the interviews, they were informed that should they request it, they could suspend recording midway. This made them feel more at ease and express themselves more candidly. All ten participants in the study provided informed consent prior to data collection and verbal consent on the day of the interview. In both methods, the participants were informed that the gathered information would solely be used for this study and any autism-related conferences and data would be destroyed four years after successfully passing the thesis submission and defence.



#### **4.13 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the philosophical foundations of the research methodology woven into the pragmatic paradigm and the interpretative framework of CDT. These helped me design research that can capture the teachers' perceptions and the factors that influence these perceptions in greater depth. This chapter describes the methods and the methodological framework used in this research study, justifying the reasons for undertaking mixed-method research through a quantitative and qualitative approach. Through this, I attempted to provide a more thorough understanding of the research issue and tackled the possible drawbacks of using just one technique. This chapter also outlined how the questionnaires and interviews fed into and built on one another, discussed data collection and sampling, as well as the ethical considerations encountered when developing and executing the study process. Building on this, the next chapter outlines the findings, discussions and analysis obtained through the research process to explore and pinpoint feasible solutions to the overarching research question.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter presents a comprehensive account of the findings collected in this study from the self-completion questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews as an answer to the questions presented in Section 1.3. The first section gives an overview of the quantitative data profile, including data distribution, total response rate, and a synopsis of the population's demographic characteristics. It presents a descriptive analysis of frequency tables, charts, and descriptive statistics for the quantitative phase and a thematic analysis for the qualitative phase. The subsequent sections thoroughly discuss the findings, including the quantitative and qualitative results, implications, and methodological issues to answer the outlined analytical questions. Each question will be comprehensively examined in Chapter 6.

### 5.1 Introduction

This study aims to investigate Maltese primary teachers' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Prior research (Gryskiewicz, 2019; Leonard & Symth, 2022; Sweetapple, 2022), in particular, research concerning Critical Disability Theory (CDT), identified four vital factors that could potentially influence teachers' perceptions: *(i)* power and support, *(ii)* curriculum, *(iii)* discourse of labelling, and *(iv)* training and resources. To this end, this study interprets the findings and conducts an analysis of the data from the perspective of these four factors and CDT's contribution.

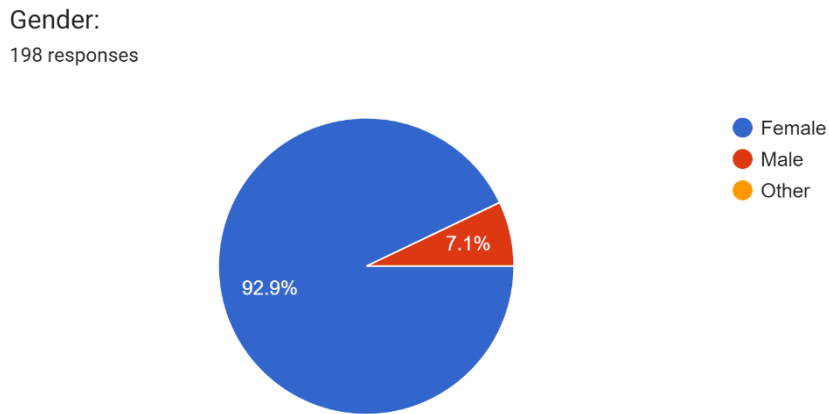
## **5.2 Demographic Data of Participants**

The research sample targeted full-time Maltese primary teachers registered with the Maltese Council for the Profession of Education. Participants who received and completed the questionnaire could then voluntarily continue with the follow-up interviews, as described in Chapter 4.

### **5.2.1 Questionnaire Respondents**

The questionnaires were distributed via email or hard copies to 40 Heads of Schools around the Maltese islands. Of these, only 26 confirmed they had forwarded the questionnaires to teachers. That amounted to 384 potential participants, assuming all primary teachers in these 26 schools could access the questionnaire as a soft or hard copy. Two hundred two questionnaires were initially returned, providing an overall response rate of 52.6%. These were then scrutinised for missing data during exporting to IBM Statistical Programme for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28. Missing data occurs when a respondent leaves unanswered variables, resulting in the researchers having to eliminate these questionnaires (Stavseth et al., 2019). Four hard copies of the 202 questionnaires were returned completely blank in an unsealed envelope, so they were rendered unusable and recorded as a non-response. These are disregarded from this point onward so as not to affect the integrity and validity of the statistical analyses (Marić, 2018). Since none of the remaining 198 questionnaires had any missing data, they were inputted into the SPSS data files for analysis. While this study did not directly use and compare demographic data, collecting them exemplifies transparency in research, ensuring that the study is conducted with fairness and respect for diversity.

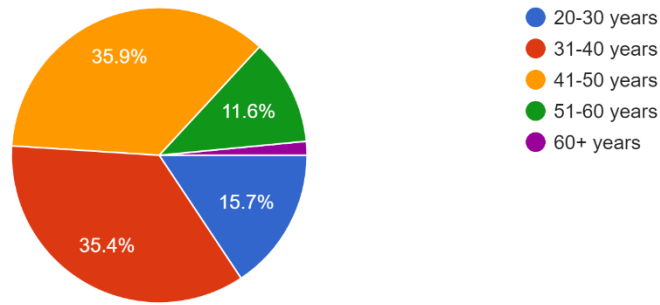
The following paragraphs represent and discuss these demographics through illustrations.



**Figure 5:** Gender Percentage Distribution

Figure 5 demonstrates the gender identity of the participants, with most respondents being female (92.9%, N=184) and a minimal number of males (7.1%). This high proportion of female teachers reflects the gender demographic distribution of Maltese primary school teachers, showcasing that males are still apprehensive about pursuing a profession in education, especially with younger students, as was also shown in Table 2. Attard Tonna and Calleja (2023) indicate that among Maltese citizens, there still reigns the idea that women have primary responsibility for child-rearing and that the job of a primary teacher is believed to fit well within the 'female family commitment' factor. Although these findings show interesting imbalances, these differences will not be examined since they fall beyond the primary scope of this study.

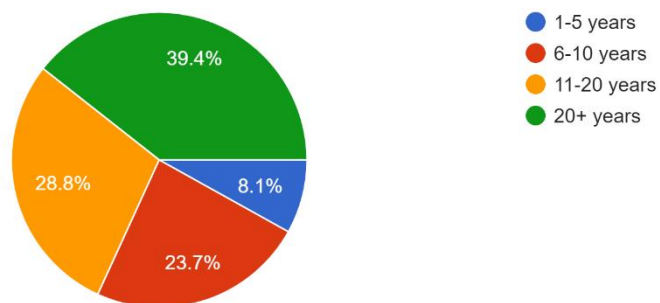
Age:  
198 responses



**Figure 6:** Age Percentage Distribution

As shown in Figure 6, the demographic data reveals a near-balanced distribution of participants between those in their 40s (35.9%, N=71) and those in their 30s (35.4%, N=70).

Years of experience:  
198 responses



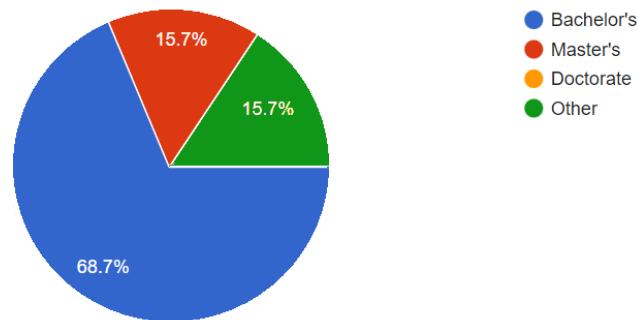
**Figure 7:** Teaching Experience Percentage Distribution

The participants' teaching experience in terms of years, illustrated in Figure 7, ranged from one to over 20 years, with most (39.4%, N=78) identified as veteran teachers having more than 20 years of experience. Given their extensive experience,

these participants could provide valuable insights into their experiences and perceptions of students with autism.

What is your highest degree earned?

198 responses



**Figure 8:** Educational Situation Percentage Distribution

Figure 8 shows that 136 participants, representing a rate of 68.7% of the total study sample, held a bachelor's degree in primary specialisation and obtained their certification through a traditional certification programme. Another 15.7% (N=31) were either enrolled in the newly introduced university master's in teaching and learning course (MTL) about early childhood and primary education or pursued further education by reading for a part-time master's degree course on their own initiative. Traditionally, the prerequisites for pursuing a job as a primary teacher in most countries were completing a training programme and obtaining a teaching qualification or degree. These measures are typically in place to ensure teachers have the abilities and expertise to provide all students with a high-quality education (Alarfaj, 2018). Nonetheless, given the well-recognised shortage of primary teachers in Malta (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2023), there have been several calls for supply teachers to temporarily work as

substitute teachers without the need for formal teaching qualifications in the primary sectors. These accounted for a total of 31 participants (15.7%). None of the participants had a doctoral degree in education.

Of the respondents in this study, 102 (51.5%) participants attended previous training related to inclusion within the last ten years. These courses consisted of short sessions in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) sessions offered by schools and scheduled during school hours over the scholastic year. Nevertheless, although all participants showed that they had taught at least one student with autism in their teaching career, only 30.3% of the participants (N=60) indicated that they had received information or attended training on autism.

### **5.2.2 Interviewee Profiles**

As described in Chapter 4, the criteria for participation in the interviews were Maltese primary teachers who previously taught or are currently teaching students with autism and had filled in the questionnaire in the first phase. Ten participants expressed interest in voluntarily continuing with the follow-up semi-structured interviews. These teachers who agreed to participate were assigned gender-specific pseudonyms using a random name generator to keep their identities confidential. The participants were all female, with varying years of teaching experience, teaching sectors, and the highest degree earned, as shown in Table 8.

**Table 8:** Demographics of Interviewees

Participants' pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	Sector	Highest degree
Christiana	6 years	State	Supply
Elaine	2 years	State	MTL
Gail	21 years	Church	B.Ed. (Hons)
Jane	24 years	Church	Supply
Jenny	20 years	State	B.Ed. (Hons)
Jessica	21 years	State	B.Ed. (Hons)
Sally	10 years	State	M.Ed.
Sasha	25 years	State	B.Ed. (Hons)
Stella	7 years	State	B.Ed. (Hons)
Tara	12 years	Independent	B.Ed. (Hons)

The following is a more detailed information about the participants. Similar to the first phase, while these profiles will not be directly analysed, they provide context and a deeper understanding of the factors shaping teachers' perceptions and practices and how these ultimately impact students' development and inclusion.

- **Christiana** has been teaching for the last six years. She stated that she had no formal training in autism but attended professional development workshops on the subject on her own initiative. These short training sessions only provided introductory information on autism with no follow-up or support once the training was over. However, Christiana mentioned that the best information



about inclusion and autism came from informal meetings with the students' parents/guardians and other colleagues.

- **Elaine** was the youngest participant in this qualitative phase, with only two years of experience at the time of the interview and having taught two students with autism. Despite recently reading for an MTL with the University of Malta (UoM), she stated that she had no formal training in including students with autism and had not received training through her school in these two years.
- **Gail** has been teaching for 21 years, 13 of which were in a state school and the other in the church school sector. She taught all the primary years and met many students with autism across the spectrum. She stated that her experiences with students and their families were positive, except for one particular year, on which she elaborated during the interview. After having her own children with learning difficulties, Gail developed a heightened passion for the fields of inclusion and autism. She strives to help all her students succeed, and regardless of the condition or labelling, she has high expectations for all of them.
- **Jane** has been teaching for 24 years in the same church school and has a special interest in inclusive education. She expressed that even though she witnessed numerous changes in the educational aspect and policies, she believed that even nowadays, many Maltese primary teachers are still not trained enough or equipped to work with students with autism. She shared that she has seen many primary teachers fail to connect with these students due to their lack of understanding of autism and the way this condition presents itself.
- **Jenny** has taught in a state school for 20 years. She decided to pursue a career in teaching after working for several years as a social worker. Jenny admitted that

she had no training in autism but learned the subject from research and first-hand experience. She stated that she makes every effort to read the students' files before every academic year while trying to refrain from forming judgments about their abilities.

- **Jessica** has taught in a mainstream state school for 21 consecutive years and has taught several students on the autism spectrum. She is also a guidance teacher at the same school, which instilled in her a deep, emphatic understanding of autism. Jessica sought seminars and attended training sessions organised by the Maltese Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) on her free will to effectively teach and include students on the autism spectrum.
- **Sally** has attended university as a mature student and has taught the early years sector for the past ten years. She shared that at the UoM, she had only one module on inclusion as a general concept but no modules on autism. Sally stated that she read for a master's degree in education at a foreign university but noted that in this latter course, she also received no formal training specific to autism. Much of what she learned about autism has come from self-sought training and first-hand experience working with these students.
- **Sasha** has the longest teaching career, with 25 years of experience. This lengthy career has given her vast experience teaching and working with students with autism. Despite this, like the other participants, Sasha admitted not always feeling trained or prepared to work with these students. She also noticed quite a few teachers who lack a general understanding of autism, believing that this lack of knowledge, including hers, creates a greater struggle for these students.

- **Stella** worked with some students with autism during her seven years of teaching experience. Despite also not receiving training, she came to understand the importance of including students with autism when her cousin was diagnosed with autism. This gave her a strong understanding of the unique needs of each student. Stella mentioned that before working in a mainstream classroom, she expected that the behaviours of students with autism were like those of every other student, but she admits that this belief changed when she noticed they were more challenging than she had anticipated.
- **Tara** worked as a pharmacist but was motivated to become an educator after her son began school and started exhibiting characteristics common to students with autism before being later diagnosed with autism. This first-hand experience and her dedication to education and inclusion resulted in a strong desire to love students with autism and strive to meet their individual needs. Tara emphasised that knowledge obtained through training is key, so she attended several workshops and is a member of various groups of parents of students with autism on the internet.

### **5.3 Research Analysis**

Adopting mixed-methods research has gained popularity as researchers realised that integrating quantitative and qualitative data in a single study could yield a more holistic and enriched understanding of the subject (Alarfaj, 2018). The following section will combine the strengths of questionnaires and interviews to present a detailed examination of Maltese primary teachers' perceptions.

### **5.3.1 Quantitative Research Analysis**

After the demographic data, the second section of the questionnaire included 35 closed-ended statements that examined Maltese primary teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism. Participants could share their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale. They could also elaborate on their chosen answers in a comment box at the end of each section of the questionnaire. These participants' comments are merged with those drawn from the qualitative analysis in the following sections to ensure a deeper investigation of the perceptions of those educators close to students with autism. Moreover, mixing these methods offers a way to ask additional questions when needed, digging deeper into the participants' stories, social values, and will for social change, which would not have been possible given that the questionnaires were anonymous. Following the successful collection of the questionnaires, the quantitative data was analysed and assessed as described in Chapter 4 (Section 4.6).

### **5.3.2 Qualitative Research Analysis**

In the interviews, each participant was posed with the same questions, but additional questions were asked when further clarification or elaboration was required. A transcription followed each interview, which was then verified for errors using the audio recordings. Following transcription, data was considered as a whole, and I started to look for consistency and recurrence bias via a holistic approach. A word frequency tool on NVivo was utilised to seek other words/phrases that appeared across multiple instances and represented broader concepts and patterns. A word cloud was generated to visualise their frequency of usage, as shown in Figure 9.



question, whereas the last two will be used to elaborate on the factors of ‘discourse of labelling’ and ‘teachers’ training and resources’. Three additional themes were also constructed from the open-ended questionnaire and interview data: (i) severity level of autism, (ii) teachers’ personal and professional experiences, and (iii) responsabilisation. These will be addressed in the first and last research questions. This process involved continuous refinement and validation to ensure that the codes accurately captured the nuances and patterns within the dataset. These themes construct the below headings and feed into the analytical questions constructed at the start of this chapter.

#### **5.4 Responses to the Mixed-method Approach**

The below sections meticulously analyse the data gathered from the five-point Likert scale and participants’ comments. Using a frequency distribution table on SPSS, descriptive values such as mean and standard deviation were calculated. Tables 10 to 15 present the statements from the questionnaires and the teachers’ level of agreement or disagreement with each statement, which is highlighted in bold. For ease of reading the below tables, interviewees’ answers for the ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’ keys were amalgamated with ‘Disagree’ and ‘Agree’, respectively. The ‘Frequency’ column provides a count of strongly agreed/agreed and strongly disagreed/disagreed choices within each category, effectively quantifying and summarising participants’ responses to specific statements.

Conversely, the ‘Mean’ and ‘Standard Deviation’ columns provide quantitative insights into the central tendency and variability of numerical responses to statements within the table. The ‘Mean’ column represents the average point around which

participants' responses cluster, with a higher mean suggesting a more favourable or agreeable response on average and a lower mean indicating a less favourable or disagreeable response. The 'Standard Deviation' (SD) column measures how dispersed the responses are to the mean, with a standard deviation greater than 1 suggesting variability among responses. These quantitative findings are then combined with the data gathered from the open-ended questionnaire items and the responses generated from the interviews to further investigate each analytical question. In this chapter, all accounts and reflections mentioned below are accurate as derived from the participants' statements in both phases of the study. To differentiate between the comments left in the questionnaires and those discussed during the interviews, the participants from the first phase will be referred to as 'Participant' followed by their respective questionnaire number (for instance, Participant 1). In contrast, teachers who continued with the second phase will be referred to by their pseudonyms, as indicated in their profiles. Both types of comments are written in italics and enclosed in speech marks to emphasise and distinguish them from other elements.

### **5.5 To what degree do the Maltese primary teachers perceive mainstream classrooms as addressing the comprehensive educational needs of students with autism?**

Grounded in CDT, this study seeks to share the voices of Maltese primary teachers who serve students with autism and investigate their beliefs on the benefits of teaching and including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Table 9 presents the questionnaire's initial statements, offering insights into these teachers' perceptions

about the benefits, challenges, and ideal learning environment for all students, including those with autism. Each statement will be elaborated upon in subsequent discussions.

**Table 9:** Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perceptions Towards Inclusion

Statements	Keys	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
All students, irrespective of their abilities, have the right to receive education in mainstream classrooms.	Disagree	47	23.7%	3.63	1.167
	Uncertain	34	17.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>117</b>	59.1%		
Inclusion in a mainstream classroom is beneficial for all students.	Disagree	60	30.3%	3.37	1.167
	Uncertain	32	16.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>106</b>	53.5%		
Mainstream classrooms are too challenging for low-functional students with autism.	Disagree	22	11.1%	3.76	.973
	Uncertain	39	19.7%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>137</b>	69.2%		
Including students with autism in mainstream classrooms can positively impact their social development.	Disagree	11	5.6%	3.93	.800
	Uncertain	34	17.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>153</b>	77.3%		
Including students with low-functioning autism in mainstream classrooms will positively impact their academic development.	Disagree	55	27.8%	3.22	.976
	Uncertain	58	29.3%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>85</b>	42.9%		
The needs of students with low-functioning autism will be better served if they are placed in special education classrooms rather than mainstream classrooms.	Disagree	22	11.1%	3.68	.937
	Uncertain	50	25.3%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>126</b>	63.6%		



Students with autism should be the LSE's sole responsibility.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>165</b>	83.3%	1.87	.992
	Uncertain	14	7.1%		
	Agree	19	9.6%		
It is more difficult to effectively discipline students with high-functioning autism compared to their peers.	Disagree	54	27.3%	3.33	1.066
	Uncertain	40	20.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>104</b>	52.5%		
Successful inclusion of students with autism depends on the teachers' perceptions of these students.	Disagree	42	21.2%	3.43	1.087
	Uncertain	48	24.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>108</b>	54.6%		
Students with low-functioning autism require a lot of adaptations in the teaching material to be successful in a mainstream classroom.	Disagree	11	5.5%	4.26	.919
	Uncertain	10	5.1%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>177</b>	89.4%		
Teaching a student with autism creates a number of challenges.	Disagree	6	3.0%	4.22	.768
	Uncertain	23	11.6%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>169</b>	85.4%		
Including students with autism increases the teachers' workload.	Disagree	37	18.7%	3.61	1.097
	Uncertain	41	20.7%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>120</b>	60.6%		
Despite my hard efforts, I often feel unsuccessful in effectively including students with autism.	Disagree	60	30.3%	3.26	1.141
	Uncertain	42	21.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>96</b>	48.5%		
Including students with autism in primary classrooms sounds good in theory but not in practice.	Disagree	40	20.2%	3.39	1.016
	Uncertain	63	31.8%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>95</b>	48.0%		

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Teachers should be allowed to choose whether they would like to have students with autism in their classrooms.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>141</b>	71.2%	2.04	1.117
	Uncertain	34	17.2%		
	Agree	23	11.6%		

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Mainstream classrooms should be a place where all students, irrespective of their needs or abilities, are educated, catered for, and accepted by their peers and educators (Marić, 2018). According to teachers' responses to the first item in the questionnaire, 59.1% (N=117) of the Maltese primary school teachers affirmed equal opportunities for all students to have the right to receive education in mainstream classrooms as *"all students deserve to be in a mainstream setting that values inclusivity and mutual respect"* [Participant 92]. These teachers' agreement aligns with the premise of CDT, namely that every student has the right to fit into society and its schools, with scholars calling attention to the need for inclusive education to encompass more than just physical placement and shift to a sense of belonging where all students can embrace and benefit from a diverse learning environment (Marić, 2018). This implies that educational stakeholders are obliged to ensure this happens and help transition from the *if* or *why* of including all students to *how* best to engage them without discrimination. Teixeira et al. (2017) claim that teachers who value the idea that all students, regardless of disabilities, should be included in a mainstream class tend to have more favourable perceptions and are more likely aware of the benefits of inclusive education. In agreement, Torenvliet et al. (2023) also consider these teachers to be open-minded, empathetic and have a positive attitude.

This prevailing agreement among most Maltese teachers accentuates the far-reaching advantages that inclusive education can bring to educational contexts, nurturing a rich and dynamic environment where diverse students can thrive. As noted earlier, the literature suggests that by allowing all students to learn in a mainstream classroom, students can develop a strong sense of unity, help break down barriers, and eliminate stereotypes. In this study, slightly over half of the Maltese teachers (53.6%, N=106) also acknowledged that mainstream classrooms provide several positive benefits to all students, albeit meeting different challenges in terms of access and needs. *“Placing students with disabilities in mainstream classes creates a sense of community and awareness about the diversity that exists in the world, enriching the education experience of all students”* [Participant 24].

While embracing the inclusion of all students was praised for its potential benefits by the majority of the participants, the percentage of the rest of the participants (40.9%, N=81) who expressed scepticism about its practical implementation and were either against or unsure about the inclusion of all students in mainstream classrooms was still high. This, as will be elaborated upon in the following subsection, raises higher when it explicitly concerns the inclusion of students with low-functioning autism, i.e. those students showing severe symptoms of autism. This preference for including students only when it coincides with existing structures and minimal disruption contradicts the fundamental tenets of inclusion – that all students, regardless of ability, merit equal access to learning within mainstream classrooms. In spite of their theoretical support for inclusion, these participants indicated that this differential acceptance towards certain students stems from perceived challenges and barriers associated with teaching

and including these students, which might lead them to default to segregation. This case was also noted in Ellingsen and Thormann's (2011) research where these authors refer to educational policies, including the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the *Education for All*, and the *Salamanca Statement*, and emphasised that although these policies focus on the right for equitable access to education, they include conditional clauses such as "where feasible" or "to the extent possible" that allow for expectations and can result in inconsistent implementation.

### **5.5.1 Discrepancy between Theory and Practice**

In the search to create equitable and accessible educational environments for all students, the inclusion of students with autism has emerged as a fundamental aspect of education. Close to half of the participants (48%, N=95) agreed that while the inclusion of students with autism may sound good in theory, it falls short in practice, with only 20.2% disagreeing with this. *"There is a HUGE difference between what's taught in theory and the actual practice!"* [Participant 89]. The word 'huge', written in capital letters by the participant herself, highlighted the significant difference that this participant, together with the other 94 participants, indicated exists between theory and practice. Indeed, while teachers may have positive and ideological views about acceptance and inclusion, scepticism arises when they start facing numerous challenges within the classroom or school setting and see these students as *"not capable of participating"* [Participant 45] or *"too difficult to include"* [Participant 53]. As a result, they might regard them as the 'problem' because

*"I mean, heads and the Ministry should come to class and see that what they teach us differs from what we find and go through. It's much more difficult*

*to do than the theory aspect. This makes the situation more stressful and can result in negative perceptions” [Jane].*

This can make it even harder to teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms, diminishing the notion of maintaining positive perceptions for all.

The high percentage of participants agreeing that inclusion sounds good in theory but is challenging in practice reveals a shared dilemma in education and an apparent gap between the idealised notion of inclusive education for students with autism and the practical realities teachers face in the mainstream classroom. Results indicated that nearly half of the participants acknowledged the benefits of an inclusive educational experience from a theoretical standpoint but encountered obstacles when translating what they have learned into actionable applications during their practice. These challenges align well with the concept of CDT, which scrutinises and seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, inviting a deeper examination of the root causes of teachers’ beliefs and the challenges they face (Marić, 2018). It indicates that although this process is challenging, it is an integral component of the educational field (Ayers et al., 2024). CDT also acknowledges that even though teachers might agree with including all students in mainstream classrooms, their attitudes and learned theories shape decisions and practices, making it challenging for all students to feel included. It, thus, urges critical consciousness to be integrated into teachers’ everyday practical applications that aid in challenging inequalities (Ayers et al., 2024).

*“Everything depends on the perceptions we create as teachers, school and the whole educational system” [Participant 39].* CDT strives to advocate for a cultural shift

in perceptions and suggests emphasising what students can do rather than what they cannot. Christiana's comment that the *"Maltese society needs to be more accepting and accommodating to students with autism... but everyone must help"* implied that the gap between theory and practice could only be bridged if there are collaborative and ongoing efforts from all stakeholders to support and transform perceptions and bring about a positive change. This further emphasises the need to explore the factors influencing teachers' ideas and help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Thus, this study, being carried out in Malta, can expand the literature on CDT on a broader scale, providing evidence of what influences perceptions and how Maltese teachers recognise the complexities and varied experiences with students with autism in practice.

### **5.5.2 Mainstream Classrooms or Special Schools**

Notwithstanding the push for inclusive educational practices within the Maltese context, 126 participants (63.7%) agreed with the statement that students with low-functioning autism will be better served if placed in special schools rather than in mainstream classrooms as *"unfortunately, children on the low-function end of the spectrum tend to find big challenges in our classes"* [Participant 55]. *"My general feel is that when a student is highly autistic, non-verbal and tends to become aggressive out of frustration, I take this as a sign that the mainstream class is not his/her environment"* [Participant 115]. A slightly higher percentage of 69.2% (N=137) also agreed that Maltese mainstream classrooms are too challenging academically for students with low-functioning autism, making them struggle to keep up or grasp the mainstream material. *"Mainstreaming is challenging. Some are not able to sit down, focus, stay silent, and*

*learn academically*" [Christiana]. This was reinforced by a number of other participants throughout the interviews, underscoring the discrepancy between the idealised concept of inclusive education and participants' perceptions of including students with autism, in particular those with low-functioning autism, in mainstream classrooms.

In the discussions, participants also mentioned the sensory overload and social challenges these students might face in mainstream classrooms, with teachers believing that mainstream classrooms might not always foster an inclusive and supportive environment. *"Maladaptive behaviour increases when those with low-functioning autism face unpredictable situations or experience too much sensory stimulation in mainstream classrooms. This, and having to deal with them alone, unfortunately, but honestly, make me exclude them"* [Jenny]. Anchustegui-Vila and Ustrell-Torrent (2017) also confirmed that mainstream classrooms with bright lights, loud teachers' voices, and colourful unstructured environments can exacerbate anxiety and hinder learning for students with autism who struggle with sensory processing. Russell (2021) further argued that such environmental triggers, social environments full of activity, strong odours and uncomfortable temperatures can all cause discomfort and anxiety in students with autism and provoke stimming episodes. Jenny's quote further suggests that she is hesitant or feels challenged to include students with autism who experience social challenges. She pinpointed the need for more support in mainstream classrooms so that classroom teachers can effectively address students' social needs and create a more inclusive learning environment. This was also confirmed by Participant 95,

*"I have agreed with the first statement about the inclusion of all students, but with direct regards to students with low-functioning autism, I believe that*

*these are better placed in special schools as they impose a number of challenges for us to successfully include them”.*

Such comments of teachers believing that students with autism need ‘special’ or ‘segregated’ attention as opposed to acknowledging that these students can meaningfully participate in a mainstream classroom, might reveal that some teachers might be, consciously or unconsciously, conflating inclusion and integration.

*“Mainstream schools are not equipped to give these students a quality education”*

[Participant 55] *“as our schools lack the resources to help them learn in a multisensory environment and flourish”* [Participant 52]. Some participants indicated that students with low-functioning autism experience significant advantages by attending separate educational settings outside mainstream education environments, referred to by the participants as ‘special schools’, as these help them develop their talents and learn necessary life skills. They *“are happier when taken to a special school where they have different educational activities that they like rather than learning challenging academic subjects in mainstream schools”* [Christiana]. In the interview, Sally mentioned a particular student with low-functioning autism about whom she used to wonder whether mainstream education was the right place for him, as she thought that he was getting nothing out of mainstream school. During the interview, Sally elaborated that she had never spoken about her concerns with any educational stakeholder and had regretted it ever since. She continued by saying that once this student finished that particular year, his mother *“did enrol him in a special school. So, I think she also had the opinion that at school, he was getting nothing”* and that the mainstream classroom might have been too overwhelming for him. The idea that students with low-functioning



autism get 'nothing' out of mainstream classrooms was also expressed by Participant 53: *"These students are not getting anything in a mainstream classroom"*. However, Paraskevi (2021) strongly argues that claiming that students get 'nothing' from being taught and included in mainstream classrooms is an oversimplification and does not accurately represent the rich experiences they can gain. The examples provided in his study suggest that, with a supportive environment and effective teaching strategies, mainstream classrooms can indeed be a platform that positively impact students' development and learning (Paraskevi, 2021).

Other participants commented that although they strongly disagree with the isolation of students with autism, they believe that for students with low-functioning autism, there should be a balance between spending half of their school days in mainstream classrooms with their peers and the other half in sensory areas within special units. Hehir et al. (2016) suggest that such special units be located within mainstream schools where students can attend for a short period before returning to their classes. In the interview, Sasha claimed that balancing mainstream education and special units significantly affects students' development and well-being. Jessica also noticed that some *"autistic students feel bored during lesson explanations, so I feel it is harmful to them to spend six hours sitting in silence, which makes them bored and leads them to start disturbing the class."* Jane added that although she has favourable perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism, she had cases where these students got overstimulated in class and hardly functioned.

*"Even though there's the inclusion aspect of how we should deal with it, in some instances, it was much more of a benefit that we 'exclude' [gesturing*

with both hands to indicate quotation marks around the word 'exclude']  
*them... It would be ideal if the child is taken for some time into special schools, given breaks, or do different things to calm down his stimulations before returning to our classrooms because that's the first thing that one should address" [Jane].*

Participant 53 also affirmed that placing students with low-functioning autism to learn full-time alongside those without autism in a mainstream class is a "disservice" not only to them but also to "other students who go home with headaches and have a generally disruptive and unhappy year". Participant 89 continued to demonstrate scepticism by indicating that these "students, unfortunately, have to deal with the challenging behaviour of a student in the mainstream classroom just because he has autism." Jenny also commented that "everyone has the right to learn, not only autistics". These quotes reveal that some Maltese primary teachers, whether advertently or inadvertently, do practise ableism. These ideas that accommodating students with autism might detract from the learning of their peers, appear to blur the distinction between inclusion and integration, raising questions about teachers' understanding of inclusive education. This notion is argued against by CDT, which advocates for the need to act on social causes by fostering a deep understanding of autism and inclusive education, and addressing underlying issues that may contribute to such behaviours and thoughts (Ayers et al., 2024).

While it may seem that negative ideas may outweigh the positive ones, it is worth mentioning that 77.3% (N=153) of the participants endorsed that including students

with autism in mainstream classrooms, even for a short period of time, positively impacts their social development as they can interact with other peers. Another 42.9% (N=85) also agreed that this educational context helps the academic development of students with low-functioning autism. Although a number of participants raised arguments against the full inclusion of students with autism, at the same time, their responses are contradictory when it comes to the social benefits that these settings provide to students with autism, holding the belief that such a setting provides a myriad of benefits for these students and help them *“grow and develop alongside other students, making the long-term effects worth it”* [Sally]. This might reconfirm that Maltese primary teachers value the principles of inclusion and the benefits of mainstream classrooms but find the practical implementation challenging due to the barriers faced when teaching these students. *“It is a challenge having children with autism all across the spectrum. It is a challenge. It can’t be denied that having these children in your class is a challenge, but I feel that most of them benefit from being in the classroom”* [Gail].

Some interviewees also agreed that inclusive education presents a learning space which provides great benefits not only for students with disabilities but also for their peers. According to them, these benefits for both students with autism and typically developing peers extend beyond academics and include improved empathy and communication, encouraged innovation, and enhanced cohesion, as will be referred to later in the discussions raised by the interviewees. Tara stated that in a mainstream class, students with autism are given a chance to develop strengths in particular areas,

*“I strongly believe that children with autism, also those with low-functioning, benefit a lot from mainstream classes not only because of their academic improvement in the long run but even socially, emotionally, and psychologically. In mainstream classrooms, they can also learn a lot about things they are interested in. The same applies to the other students”.*

Teachers like Tara maintain that students with autism can benefit from being integrated and included in mainstream classrooms, arguing that inclusive education helps to promote diversity, empathy, and a richer learning environment for all students, including those with low-functioning autism. This is in line with what was previously done by Spirko (2015), who listed a number of reported benefits that mainstream classrooms provide to students with autism and their neurotypical peers, including increased social interaction, having more friends, and mutual relationships.

### **5.5.3 The Idea of Normalcy**

Participants who were against or unsure of the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms argued that while the concept of inclusive education aims to include students with autism, paradoxically, its implementation can sometimes inadvertently result in the exclusion of those students not on the spectrum. *“While we focus on including one student with autism in mainstream classrooms, we are, in fact, excluding the other 24 normal students”* [Participant 89]. Along the same lines, Jenny argued that if every student has the right to learn, teachers should exercise caution not to focus on including one student and overlook the needs of *“the other normal students in class as it can become unhealthy for them”*. The ‘normal’ and ‘others’ rooted in the medical model of disability, used to differentiate between students with autism and

their peers, were mentioned by several participants in this study, indicating that some are still using the lens of normalcy rather than considering how to provide positive and inclusive learning environments that maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses. This idea of 'normal' inherently contradicts the spirit of the inclusion of all students and carries a negative connotation, often resulting in segregated provisions (Snipstad, 2020).

Although these participants' comments allude to the fact that students with autism are indeed being included in Maltese mainstream schools, the word 'normal' suggests that there are ideal expectations that everyone should conform to, with students with autism being considered as 'abnormal'. This idea of normalcy and labelling is challenged and heavily criticised by CDT, indicating that this impression of the ideal or the expected 'normal' standards is constructed by society to discriminate or exclude students who do not fit the perceived desired standard, in this case, students with autism (Migliarini & Stinson, 2023). CDT highlights that disability is not an individual problem but rather a result of the barriers and discrimination created by societal constructs. It emphasises the importance of moving away from segregated and exclusionary practices perpetuating ableism and refers to those who do not meet the 'norm' as being more at risk of being labelled as 'abnormal' (Migliarini & Stinson, 2023). CDT also argues that classrooms socially construct disability as a deficit instead of a value, leading to the failure of those students who fail to match this social expectation. Since it acknowledges and welcomes students' differences within a framework of diversity and disassembles policies and methods that encourage normative thinking and behaviour, it recommends shifting the burden from the child onto the teacher, as the sole person responsible for students' learning experience (Sweetapple, 2022).

#### 5.5.4 Students' Uneven Profiles

School life in itself poses certain challenges both for students with autism and for the educational system. Student behavioural challenges and their severity level of autism were identified as the most difficult components of inclusive education among participants, with teachers expressing a lack of knowledge about how to satisfy these students' behavioural needs, especially with regard to low-functioning students with autism. These students' uneven profiles emerged as a recurring theme that was discussed multiple times in the interviews, with teachers conveying a range of emotions about the behaviours of these students.

Although slightly more than half of the participants (52.5%, N=104) agreed that it is more difficult to effectively discipline students with high-functioning autism compared to their peers, participants specified that they feel mostly challenged when they have to teach and include students with low-functioning autism in their classes, with only 3% (N=6) of the participants not agreeing with this. A teacher with fifteen years of teaching experience, Participant 64, indicated that he had taught several students from across the autism spectrum. He noticed that those with high-functioning autism easily integrated and adapted to the mainstream system but that it was challenging to teach and include those with low-functioning autism with their peers. Sasha also concurred with this and specified that teaching is a challenge, but even so, *"having students with low-functioning autism in class is an additional factor at play"*.

Participants expressed that the behaviour of some students with autism seems challenging when delivering a lesson or during an explanation.

*“If there is a child with autism whom you can’t tell to sit, to obey and to do anything, he’s a problem ...it’s a huge problem for the teacher when these children cannot, you know, sit still for one second, then they shout, and they bang, and they do things all the time. I mean, they are a problem”* [Sarah].

Participant 62 also commented that she had taught several students with autism and had noticed that even in the last years of primary school, some students with autism still do not conform to sitting down in class for long periods but tend to throw tantrums, run around the classroom, and hurt others. Sally also revealed how, at times, the varying needs and challenges of students across the autism spectrum shed light on the complexity of inclusion and become *“too overwhelming for us”*. This led her to suggest that students with autism take a walk or run in the playground with their LSE to self-regulate their behaviour and regain focus, allowing her to continue with the lesson explanation. In such case, LSEs are seen as a resource to ‘manage’ students with autism, highlighting a mindset of accommodation rather than inclusion. Christiana expressed that she and her colleagues also adopted a similar strategy where students with autism go spend some time out with an LSE in a multisensory room or resource centre away from their peers. While these units were initially designed to provide specialised support for students with autism, it is still important to consider that spending a significant portion of the school day there can unintentionally reinforce stigmatisation and segregation (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). This reliance on such units, once again, might reflect underlying presumptions that mainstream classrooms cannot fully accommodate all students, challenging the principles of equity. Since Elaine is the youngest interviewee and is still new to the teaching profession, she lacks extensive experience teaching students with autism, except that she has taught two students with autism. One of

whom followed the same curriculum as the rest of his peers, and at times, it was challenging to discern if he even had autism, whereas the other was on the lower end of the spectrum and possessed behaviours such as *“roaming all over the classroom, dropping things, breaking things, eating everything that he came across...”* [Elaine].

Among the behaviours of students with low-functioning autism that participants mentioned as influencing their perceptions and actions were that these students have a very concise attention span in class, find it challenging to communicate with peers or educators, throw frequent tantrums throughout the day, and tend to become aggressive with other students and adults around them. Attard and Attard (2023) argue that the distractions encountered in a mainstream classroom and the way students with autism experience things around them influence their behaviours, which teachers and peers can misinterpret as a deficit in attention or misbehaviour. Additionally, these authors continue that some students with autism have a comorbidity disorder, i.e., having other conditions apart from autism, which will undoubtedly have a greater impact on their attention span and activity, potentially exacerbating the situation (Attard & Attard, 2023).

Feeling disheartened in teaching such students can potentially create negative predispositions or biases, influencing teachers' practices and the learning environment (Valenti, 2020). Although not showing direct disappointment, in the interviews, all participants wholeheartedly agreed that the challenges teachers face regarding students' behaviour could not be ignored. This is reflected in the below interview excerpts. Participants were unanimous that students' behaviours also influence their



experiences, teaching strategies, overall classroom dynamics, and, eventually, their perceptions. *"I know that severe autism has this effect on everyone"* [Jane]. Jane stated that people desire things to be smoother and less stressful by remarking that no teacher would exclaim, *"Yay, I have two challenging boys with low-functioning autism in class. I'm so happy this year"*. She continued to say that she is confident that nearly all teachers would express disappointment before the beginning of the scholastic year when they are informed that they will be having students with low-functioning autism in their class.

The same emotions were expressed by Sally, who already feels apprehensive about teaching a student with low-functioning autism in the coming year due to the intensity of his behaviour. *"His behaviour is too much, which is my biggest concern"* [Sally]. Sally continued explaining another reason she feels wary about this student by referring to one of her colleagues who taught this student in the last scholastic year. Sally mentioned how she was known for her bubbly and cheerful demeanour but that the staff observed a shift in her character due to this student's presence in the class.

*"One of the teachers who I usually see happy and funny and preparing lots of activities for children, this year, I don't know what happened to her. She blames a particular child. She had a difficult class altogether. She was always saying that they were all very low academically, and to top it all, she had this low-functioning autistic child who just wanted to eat everything. And it was very tiring"* [Sally].

Jenny's argument could be further added to this point, as she maintained that having to deal with the behaviour of low-functioning students with autism for a long time *"while not giving attention to the other students is not recommended and can become an*

*impossible mission day after day, with the result of all concerned parties becoming discouraged, irritable and negative*". She further specified that the behaviour of these students significantly influenced her perceptions towards all students on the spectrum.

In the interview, Stella also declared that at the beginning of her career, she thought it would be easy to include all students with autism. Yet she continued that it became clear quite quickly that including these students was more challenging than initially thought. Along the same lines, Sally indicated that before teaching students with autism, *"I was under the impression that autistics are genius students, but well, that went out of the window because they are really challenging"*. It was noted that these two participants were referring to all levels of autism in their comments. However, given that autism is a spectrum and students with autism have unique patterns of behaviours and levels of severity, *"each case is different; thus, one cannot generalise"* [Participant 55].

Gail emphasised that teachers should remember that not all students with autism are the same, as some exhibit remarkable talent and intelligence. She referred to some students with autism who have a knack for creating tapestries and beautiful paintings and stated that for someone like her, who is not skilled in producing artistic works, these students amazed her. Similarly, other interviewees mentioned how, throughout their teaching careers, they had encountered uneven profiles of students with autism, with some having excellent social skills but very little sitting and writing tolerance, whereas others have excellent academic skills but 'zero' social skills. So, teachers should not base all their experiences and outlooks on one child because *"not every student is the same,*

*not every case is the same, and not even the environment and the background they bring to class are the same” [Jessica]. In the interview, Gail agreed with this, but her positive outlook towards students with autism made her think of the other students. She confirmed that, for her, students with low-functioning autism are a challenge,*

*“For me, it's a challenge. It's useless saying they are not, but again, different children can be challenging, not only children with autism... However, the teachers' and LSEs' roles are to stay with these students in the mainstream classroom and help them learn how to behave in this environment. Their job is to teach them how it's done, how to share, how to communicate, how to ask for something without snatching, maybe how to be polite, and how to have a circle of friends to be loved and accepted” [Gail].*

CDT recognises that not all disabilities are treated equally and thus specifies that students should not be differentiated or ranked depending on their conditions (Sweetapple, 2022). It critiques how traditional educational systems and practices can stigmatise the behaviours of students with disabilities, calling for more inclusive, respectful and supportive learning environments. This connection and the observation of some teachers expressing disappointment in teaching and including students with low-functioning autism in their classrooms further underscore the importance of examining teachers' perceptions, emotions, and initial reactions when having students with autism in their classrooms and the need to address these dynamics to foster a more empathetic and open-minded approach in Maltese society.

Castrodale (2017, p. 59) uses 'dis/ability' as a disruptor to teachers' conventional thinking and actions, indicating that rather than seeing the limitations of dis/ability on classroom practice, teachers should shift their perspectives and understand themselves "as those who live in the midst of others". This quote implies the importance of teachers trying to cultivate a mindset that values students' diverse experiences and perspectives in mainstream classrooms and does not perpetuate differences between these students and their peers. CDT emphasises how disability is constructed by society and the barriers created by societal norms and structures. Although it does not address autism or its severity levels, in this context, severity levels can be viewed as a construct influenced by social, cultural, and medical factors (Eilers, 2020). This highlights the importance of recognising students' individuality, challenging social constructs that sustain exclusion or discrimination, and tailoring educational support accordingly (Valenti, 2020).

However, allowing teachers to opt out of teaching and including students with autism may undermine the principle of inclusivity. This consideration of teachers' preferences in deciding whether to assist students is challenged by CDT, with this theoretical framework disputing that such ideas may influence students' educational experiences and outcomes (Castrodale, 2017). Nevertheless, it was good to point out that when asked if participants agree that teachers should be allowed to choose at the beginning of the scholastic year whether they would like to have students with autism in their classrooms, only 11.6% (N=23) of the participants responded positively, with 71.2% (N=141) rightly disagreeing with this statement. This finding indicated a commitment among most Maltese teachers to inclusive education, understanding that it is their responsibility to teach and include diverse students and provide them with

equal educational opportunities, regardless of the challenges faced with their uneven profiles. However, one still cannot overlook the fact that a large number of teachers still tend to become frustrated or irritable when they sense indirect pressure, especially concerning the behaviour of students with low-functioning autism. This emotional response can then significantly influence their perceptions towards including students within the autism spectrum (Sweetapple, 2022).

The Salamanca Statement and the Maltese inclusive policies consider mainstream education as a fundamental right for all students, claiming that segregating students with low-functioning autism is a denial of their rights. Given that some teachers still see having students with autism in their classrooms in a bad light, in this context, CDT recognises a need to shift systemic reforms and some teachers' mindsets to create more inclusive educational settings. It advocates for challenging such ableist norms, disrupting segregation, and advancing an inclusive educational model that accommodates all students with disabilities, including students with low-functioning autism (Eilers, 2020). Having such favourable ideas not only leads to acceptance and better inclusion for these students but can also contribute to improved well-being among students and educators alike.

#### **5.5.5 Educators' Mental Health**

Another participant (Participant 55) also turned her attention to herself and her colleagues and referred to how the inclusion of students with autism, in particular those with low-functioning autism, and their behaviours have an adverse impact on educators' mental and physical well-being. *"It's unfair that we spend more than 5 hours a day being*

*treated as punch bags as we have to juggle between including these students and teaching all the other students”* [Participant 55]. Similarly, a veteran teacher with 27 years of teaching experience elaborated that teaching students with autism *“is unfair on the teaching team who are expected to perform miracles with inclusion and teaching”* [Participant 198]. In the interviews, Jenny continued on the same line of thought and gave reasons why she opposes the full inclusion of students with low-functioning autism by commenting on how these students exert additional pressure on teachers and their classmates, with the classroom

*“...becoming a very challenging place and a dangerous one for everyone... The learning experience will become a nightmare and a war zone. In such cases, I am opposed to the total inclusion of students with low-functioning autism since one cannot forget our needs and health and the needs of other students”* [Jenny].

The concerns raised by Jenny and other teachers with similar beliefs, who describe mainstream classrooms as a ‘nightmare’ and ‘war zones’ for neurodiverse students and educators, are indicative of a perspective that sees the inclusion of students with autism as disruptive or detrimental to the learning environment for ‘normal’ children and their teachers. Jenny’s comment, as well as the comments by Participants 55 and 198, was, however, opposed by Gail. In the interview, Gail moved a step further and noted that inclusive mainstream classrooms give a two-way learning opportunity, where creating a sense of community in schools not only helps students themselves but also provides numerous advantages to teachers. Gail turned the lens towards herself and depicted teaching in an inclusive classroom as a growing, dynamic experience, expressing that *“teaching different students also helps me grow and become a better version of myself.”*

### 5.5.6 Conclusion

In line with CDT, this first part of the study showed that the majority of the participants acknowledged the importance of providing all students, irrespective of their needs, with the opportunity to learn in a primary mainstream educational setting alongside peers without autism. This is rooted in the belief that apart from being part of their job, inclusion provides numerous benefits for all students, helping enhance their social, emotional, and academic development. However, despite this agreement with the placement of all students in mainstream classroom settings, when it specifically pertains to the inclusion of students with autism, in particular students with low-functioning autism, a different perspective often emerges. The majority of the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions shift in this context, with participants feeling less confident and somewhat reluctant to embrace the idea of full inclusion for all students with autism. They uniformly agreed that specific challenges play a significant role in shaping their perceptions and actions towards the inclusion of students with autism. This initial agreement with inclusion followed by reservations by the same participants about including certain students – those posing more challenges to traditional classroom structures, who may not 'fit well' within the mainstream classroom – uncovers a potential gap in their understanding and a conditional perception toward inclusion. This signals that their idea of inclusion may be more about accommodating certain diversities who are considered 'deserving of inclusion', and less about transforming the learning environment to meet all students' needs. Prioritising convenience over equity can reinforce segregation and perpetuate stigma against those with low-functioning autism. This finding of inclusion as an abstract ideal rather than a practical commitment to equity might suggest that inclusion may not be fully embedded within the Maltese culture or

more specifically in the participants' respective institutions and is challenged by systemic barriers, as also indicated below.

Although CDT does not directly discuss the inclusion of students with autism, it rejects the traditional framing of disability and normalcy, advocating for a shift from the medical model of disability to a more inclusive, socially informed, and accessible approach for all. It strongly stresses the need to deconstruct segregating students with autism in special schools based on the notions of 'normal' and 'others', indicating that these perpetuate ableism and social divisions. In contrast, CDT emphasises the re-examination and transformation of societal values and structures and fosters an environment that accommodates and supports the learning and development of all students, regardless of their level of abilities or needs.

"Perhaps the question now is not so much how we move 'towards inclusion'... but what we do to disrupt the construction of centre from which exclusion derives" (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 279). This quote, aligning with the central aspect of CDT, drives this whole thesis, helping me examine teachers' perceptions and determine the factors from which the exclusion of students with autism may derive. It thus becomes exceedingly important to probe further and confront the interplay of factors contributing to exclusionary practices and these negative perceptions. This section provided four additional themes derived from the data gathered from this mixed-method study to answer the first analytical question. These were (i) the discrepancy between theory and practice, (ii) the idea of normalcy, (iii) mainstream classrooms and special schools, and (iv) educators' mental health. To this end, the following sections



explore the four outlined factors derived from literature and additional ones identified by the participants, shedding light on the dynamics shaping the local Maltese teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom.

**5.6 To what extent and how do the four specific factors (power and support from SLTs, the curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and teachers' training and resources) identified from the literature review allow us to uncover the way Maltese primary teachers perceive the inclusion of students with autism?**

This research employs a theoretical framework grounded in CDT. CDT and its advocated principles were thoroughly presented and validated by the participants in this study, helping to strengthen the credibility and applicability of this theory to the Maltese context. The table below (Table 10) comprises the four preliminary factors from the literature that formed the basis of the coding process and the sub-codes emerging from participants' comments and interviewees' responses in relation to the factors. Nevertheless, I remained receptive to new codes that arose from participants' responses. Each of these sub-factors will serve as a sub-heading in the analysis below to provide a more methodical approach and nuanced exploration of the data, shedding light on the intricacies of inclusive education and the factors potentially influencing teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism. These will be addressed sequentially, following the order in the table below.

**Table 10:** Codes for the Four Factors

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Sub-factors</b>
<b>Power and support from Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- SLTs' support to teachers</li><li>- SLTs' power over teachers</li><li>- Communication and collaboration between SLTs and teachers</li><li>- SLTs' and MEYR's pressure on teachers</li><li>- Communication and Collaboration with educational stakeholders: LSEs, Colleagues, INCOs, and Parents</li></ul>
<b>Curriculum, tests, and assessments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Individualised success for students with autism</li><li>- Access arrangements</li><li>- Challenges to accommodations</li><li>- Collaborative efforts with LSEs</li><li>- Assessing the progress of students</li></ul>
<b>Discourse of labelling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Labelling of students with autism</li><li>- Societal influences</li><li>- Classroom environment and inclusion culture</li><li>- Inclusion or exclusion from school-related activities</li></ul>
<b>Teachers' training and resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Undergraduate courses on inclusion and autism</li><li>- In-service courses</li><li>- Teachers' resources and strategies</li><li>- Spaces available at school</li></ul>

Two new themes, derived from the participants' comments, were presented to extend the preliminary factors. These include (i) classroom interaction and inclusion culture and (ii) restrictive spaces and high student-to-teacher ratio. These will be addressed under 'discourse of labelling' and 'teachers' training and resources.'

### 5.6.1 Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Power and Support of SLTs

Based on previous literature reviews, power and support from SLTs were considered crucial when teaching students with autism, as these could potentially impact teachers' experiences of inclusion and eventually influence perceptions. Table 11 below shows the descriptive statistics for the five questions presented in the questionnaire, which assessed teachers' views on the power and support from SLTs.

**Table 11:** Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Power and Support from SLT

Statements	Keys	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
The SLT gives me a lot of support to effectively meet the educational needs of students with autism.	Disagree	49	24.7%	3.46	1.097
	Neither	35	17.7%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>114</b>	57.6%		
In my school, there is a genuine collaboration between the SLT and teachers to establish clear and compelling goals that help and include students with autism.	Disagree	29	14.6%	3.75	.969
	Neither	27	13.6%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>142</b>	71.8%		
The SLT puts direct pressure on me to effectively include students with autism in a mainstream classroom.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>105</b>	53.0%	2.69	1.100
	Neither	42	21.2%		
	Agree	51	25.8%		
The SLT promotes the philosophy that students with autism are the teachers' responsibility.	Disagree	53	26.8%	3.30	1.002
	Neither	48	24.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>97</b>	49.0%		
I feel frustrated when given a class with students with autism without being consulted by the SLT	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>93</b>	47.0%	2.72	1.179
	Neither	35	17.7%		
	Agree	70	35.3%		

### 5.6.1.1 *SLTs' Support to Teachers*

Administrative support is extolled as an impactful and significant factor in improving positive perceptions and creating a successful, inclusive education (Woolridge, 2021). A total of 57.6% (N=96) of the participants feel that their greatest asset in effectively meeting the needs of students with autism was the support they received from SLTs. This entails having a Head who “shows appreciation, takes an interest in teachers’ work, provides constructive feedback, and lets teachers know what is expected of them” (Conley & You, 2017, p. 529). Participants agreed that SLTs should support classroom educators in creating an inclusive environment that addresses the diverse needs of all students, including students with autism, mainly through guidance and feedback. This active role can help teachers gain confidence, skills, and experiences to overcome challenges and improve their instructional practices when teaching students with autism, making inclusion more likely to be successful (Woolridge, 2021).

Although the results show that most of the participants in the questionnaires received this support, this is not the case for a sizeable minority who typically feel under-supported by their superiors, leading to feelings of overwhelm and stress. Although the number of those receiving support outperforms those not receiving support, there were numerous comments from those who felt unsupported by SLTs. This stark lack of support experienced by 42.4% of the participants was further highlighted and underscored during the interviews, with eight of the ten interviewees expressing their concerns about the insufficient support from their SLTs. This inadequate support by SLTs is not a mere inconvenience but a substantial hindrance to effective teaching. Gail and Jane’s experiences, who reported an appreciation and positioned the SLTs in their schools as

part of their social support network, are not representative of the overall findings. This has also been aligned with the findings of AlWadaani (2019), who also presented that several teachers in her study faced difficulties in including students as they lacked the necessary support from their administrators. AlWadaani confirmed that this absence of support leaves teachers overwhelmed and segregated. Hettiarachchi and Das (2014) also found that SLTs who possess an authoritarian and demanding style, instead of supporting teachers, make the latter feel powerless and put way for more negative perceptions of inclusion.

While CDT does not explicitly discuss the role of SLTs in the day-to-day running of educational settings, it does deliberate on the importance of support and power dynamics within educational institutions. It also acknowledges that limited support from SLTs or failure to actively engage in the development of inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms can reinforce the medical model of disability within the educational system, which can perpetuate inequalities and exclusion (Alves, 2018). The participants' comments on the roles of SLTs and their support extend this theory, offering a broader understanding of the intricacies of leadership within Maltese educational contexts. Participant 70 shared her personal experience, recounting that in her last scholastic year, despite having quite a large number of students on the spectrum and no Learning Support Educator (LSE), she still did not receive any assistance or guidance from SLTs,

*"...Disgracefully, none of the SLTs ever came to class to support me, offer their assistance, or even inquire about my well-being. It was like I did not exist. They made me feel unsupported and unappreciated ...so that year, I had to revert to the traditional teaching method".*

This quote starts to illuminate practical and emotional challenges that teachers face due to a lack of support exercised by SLTs, which impacts their perceptions and capacity to create inclusive learning environments. Participant 70 expressed how this forced her to return to traditional teaching; in other words, a teacher-centred method that imparts the same book knowledge to all students, regardless of their needs.

Other participants asserted that, in their opinions, the primary factor influencing teachers' perceptions revolves around the deficiency of support they receive from SLTs. Jessica added weight to Participant 70's argument by similarly stating that in her school, this level of support and engagement is not even given in situations where there is a shortage of LSEs or classroom assistants. Participant 4 also confirmed how, in situations when her LSE was occasionally absent from class, she attempted to seek assistance from the SLT, especially when students with autism threw tantrums in class. However, after expressing her frustration that this support was never provided, she stated that the SLTs' responses consistently followed a pattern of *"you have to stop and wait until that particular moment [the tantrum] is over"* [Participant 4]. Yet, she raised the question of how long a teacher can endure waiting for 'that particular moment' to pass and for the student with autism to calm down when considering that she is also accountable for 27 other students in the class. Elaine continued to share how even when one of her students *"fell and got hurt, you wouldn't find them to help you, let alone when asking for guidance and support to teach and include students with autism"*.

This apparent lack of proactive engagement and support from SLTs and the lack of inquiry about teachers' well-being were critical concerns discussed a number of times

during the interviews. Apart from the lack of inquiry about students with autism, Christiana and Tara both referred to the consistent failure of SLTs in their schools to ask about teachers' well-being. Similarly, Jenny commented that the stark reality in Malta is that students with autism are entrusted to teachers who find themselves uncertain about how to provide these students with effective inclusion practices and education and *"where or whom to ask for guidance and support"* [Jenny]. Stella also raised the importance of SLTs demonstrating an active interest in mainstream classes as, in her case, this proactive engagement seems to be lacking. According to her, her SLTs

*"...leave us fend[ing] for ourselves, which, in that case, is negative because they should show interest in our class and ask us questions such as, are you okay? How are you dealing with this class? Are you finding other support?... Unfortunately, in my case, the Head doesn't do that"* [Stella].

This finding resembles Hettiarachchi and Das's (2014) findings, who found that a lack of support makes it easier for teachers to feel stressed and more emotionally exhausted, thus impacting their well-being and ultimately influencing students' inclusion.

#### **5.6.1.2** *SLTs' Power over Teachers*

Brushing aside teachers' voices and efforts reflects a power imbalance and can shape teaching experiences (Alves, 2018). While CDT encourages the empowerment of educators from various educational settings and their active participation in decision-making processes that involve traditionally marginalised students (Alves, 2018), this was not the case in this study. Participants shared instances when they felt powerless. Participant 40 asserted that decisions about what happens in the classroom are solely taken by SLTs or other educational stakeholders high up in the MEYR without genuinely

engaging in consultations with teachers directly confronted with these students. *“We are either not consulted or, often, when consulted, our opinions and suggestions are ignored”* [Participant 40]. Although participants want to be involved in the inclusive process, they feel they lack the power to make a change. Participant 115 also explained that the SLTs in her school do not follow much of what happens in classes where there are students with autism and tend to engage with the situation only when there is a *“direct confrontation brought up by parents.”*

Undermining teachers’ voices might also thwart them from actively shaping inclusive policies and practices. Elaine deliberately referred to an anonymous questionnaire conducted by her school, which involved a section on the support received from SLTs. She stated that all teachers in her school collectively agreed that the SLTs do not offer them adequate assistance when needed. Elaine highlighted her astonishment at the disregard for teachers’ responses and expressed her disbelief at the SLTs’ response to the questionnaire’s outcome, where they cited having a substantial workload as justification, so *“you cannot pretend that we also help and support you [teachers] with students with autism”*. AlWadaani (2019) expresses that such powerlessness can make teachers withdraw emotionally and create an incongruity between their personal beliefs as primary teachers and their teaching practices.

CDT emphasises the importance of policies and practices that promote inclusion and equity for students with disability. Yet, it also implies that the problems start when the educational system focuses on rigid policies that do not have students with disabilities at their centre (Sweetapple, 2022). During the interview, Elaine continued



her discussion by alluding to her school's ethos, emphasising its principles of supporting all staff members and students. Still, she stated that her SLTs are not injecting disability interests into their school policy arenas. Referring to the school's questionnaire, she further argued that the teachers' cry for help and support fell on deaf ears, with those in positions of authority within her school holding their resolve. Consequently, she indicated that teachers in her school tried to seek mutual support and assistance from colleagues to comply and perform their duties of including all students to the best of their abilities. However, given the evident absence of support from SLTs and the power put over them, *"not every teacher would adopt it [an inclusive approach], particularly when observing the negative attitudes of our SLTs. This discourages teachers from making an extra effort and ensuring inclusive education for all"* [Elaine]. Alves (2018) confirms that SLTs' negative actions, paired with power over teachers, might demoralise teachers from embracing an inclusive approach in the classroom and, instead, encourage them to act on their own accord.

### **5.6.1.3**      *Communication and Collaboration between SLTs and Teachers*

While support implies a one-way relationship with teachers receiving assistance and guidance from SLTs to meet the needs of students with autism, collaboration involves both the SLTs and teachers working together toward a shared objective within their schools. This study demonstrated that while 57.6% of the participants agree that they receive support from their SLTs, although only those with a lack of support left comments, this percentage increases to a total of 71.7% (N=142) when asked whether the school they currently teach at fosters genuine collaboration between SLTs and teachers, with only 14.7% (N=29) disagreeing with this. The reason for this sense of a

strong spirit of collaborative efforts between them and their SLTs is rising from these stakeholders sharing the pursuit of common inclusive educational goals: to provide a more coordinated and holistic approach to inclusive education for students with autism. This high percentage resonates with CDT, which advocates for meaningful participation and cooperation between stakeholders to create inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Despite this high percentage of participants answering in the affirmative during the questionnaires, the opinions shared differed when a subset of them elaborated on their chosen answers. Indeed, some participants commented that there is communication and collaboration with SLTs on students with autism but that this only happens at the beginning of the school year or during Continued Professional Sessions for Educators (CoPE) meetings or Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) that occur a maximum of once a term. Other participants agreed that the cooperation between these two entities *“is there only on paper”* [Participant 24] and that the SLTs rarely schedule or prioritise time for meeting with educators. *“We call or talk to the SLTs several times during the year about these students, but it is all in vain as they often ignore us”* [Jenny]. Several participants in both data collection phases vehemently stated that when they voice their concerns with SLTs about students with autism, they rarely receive any help. Instead, they *“get asked to send an email with my concerns. I don’t see this as very helpful. On the contrary, it means more work for me”* [Stella]. Sally agreed with Stella and added that such a response becomes even more futile when the emails sent to SLTs are *“disregarded, or no feedback is ever received in return.”* This conundrum that leads to no action towards inclusion is shaking off any responsibility for inclusion from the SLT

and putting the responsibility on the teachers, who are unprepared for the realities of working with students with autism. Indeed, there was a consensus among most interviewees, echoing that in-person communication was a much more effective form of communication than communication through email as they prefer to release their exasperation by venting rather than composing an email. Sasha recommended that all SLTs in every school around the Maltese islands should display a greater level of interest, ask more questions, and lend a receptive ear for learning instead of adopting an

*“It’s your problem, handle it approach. They don’t say it outright, but their actions – you know, because they never appear interested – directly reflect their intentions and attitudes” [Sasha].*

The participants uniformly expressed a desire for more communication to address their feelings of unsupportiveness, indicating that frequent and open communication may eventually contribute to what they describe as *“more successful inclusive practices.”* According to AlWadaani (2019), this can further lead teachers to develop beliefs that inclusive education is beneficial not only for students but also for themselves.

#### **5.6.1.4** *SLTs’ and the System’s Pressure on Teachers*

SLTs must be mindful of not putting undue pressure on teachers to ‘fix’ or ‘normalise’ students with autism so they can fit in mainstream classrooms. When under pressure, expecting teachers to include and provide all students with rich learning experiences is a challenge that nobody benefits from (AlWadaani, 2019). In this study, slightly more than half of the participants, 53% (N=105), indicated that the SLT in their school does not pressure teachers to include students with autism in mainstream classrooms. While CDT underlines societal change, it does not appoint ‘action’ or

'pressure' over another. Instead, it advocates for critical scrutiny of policies, societal norms, and practices that sustain discrimination and exclusion towards students. Christiana has recently changed schools. She differentiated between the school where she is currently teaching and the one where she previously taught. In the latter, she experienced significant pressure from SLTs because they held the authority to dictate what transpired within the classroom. In contrast, SLTs in her new school let educators learn about individual students and *"do not pressure us, but they expect us to ensure the contentment of students with autism while keeping them quiet without causing disruptions to the class"* [Christiana]. Although Stella agreed that SLTs in her school do not impose excessive pressure on teachers to include students with autism, she was clear that, to a certain point, *"assigning students with autism to my class is already a way of automatically pressuring me to include them."* Gail and Jane, on the other hand, shared a counter-narrative by indicating that in their schools, all students are treated equally and *"there's no greater pressure for including children with autism"* [Gail].

Tara and Jessica moved a step further and expressed their frustration at the pressure put on them, not by the SLTs but by the Maltese educational system. Indeed, both participants shared similar comments that the decisions to pressure teachers to teach and include students with autism are coming from higher up in the educational hierarchy. Participant 20 criticised the current Maltese educational system because its stakeholders are *"too occupied to come to school and discuss the needs of students with autism, so they never do, although they still pressure us."* Participants further argued that most of the time, the educational individuals making the decisions have been long gone from the classroom or *"have hardly observed the students in question"* [Sasha].

This might result in SLTs or the system setting goals that are good in theory but challenging in practice. This lack of communication and support by these stakeholders and pressure can lead teachers to experience burnout, stress, or decreased productivity, leading to adverse effects. Based on CDT, this study thus recommends clear communication and a supportive, non-pressured environment from all educational stakeholders involved.

This dual dynamics of the pressure placed on classroom teachers by some SLTs and the Maltese educational system and their integral role in fostering accountability for students with autism draw further attention to the complex challenges that educators face in inclusive classrooms. Participants dissented against the undue pressure imposed upon them and the overwhelming responsibility. Although *“SLTs should be responsible for every child in the school, including children with autism”* [Participant 91], nearly half of the participants (49%) in the quantitative phase stated that the SLTs in their schools promote the philosophy that students with autism are *“the teacher’s responsibility, full stop”* [Participant 52], with only 26.8% (N=46) disagreeing with this statement. Sally also outlined that the SLTs’ approach implies a perspective of *“now that the student is in your classroom, it is your problem and responsibility.”* Such beliefs can make teachers doubt their teaching practices and feel incompetent in managing and including all students in mainstream classrooms, especially if they are not supported (Alves, 2018).

The successful integration of students with autism in the mainstream classroom underscores the essential role of collaborative consultations with different stakeholders. Teachers claimed that they were not always asked for their input prior to students with

autism joining their classes, yet 47% (N=93) of them indicated that they do not feel frustrated when given a class with a student with autism in it without being consulted by the SLT. Participants 3 and 114 elaborated that they do not expect the SLT to ‘ask’ them if they are ready to accept a child with autism, but that they have every right to be notified in advance about students with autism joining their classes, *“so I can be adequately prepared for the year to come”* [Participant 114]. Some teachers further argued that they are not being provided with information or profiles of students with autism prior to the scholastic year and have to learn about their characteristics through classroom practices during the year. Other participants, however, had more vigorous comments and argued that all students with autism are as precious as other children, raising the question of *“Who am I to choose who should be in my class or to feel frustrated or pressured when not consulted by SLTs?”* [Participant 48].

#### **5.6.1.5 Communication and Collaboration with Other Educational Stakeholders**

*“The teacher alone cannot do miracles”* [Jenny]. As discussed above, most teachers concurred that although teaching and including students with autism is integral to their job, they recognised the need to collaborate with other stakeholders to create equitable and inclusive educational environments. Collaboration among different educational members is a key aspect of CDT since it facilitates knowledge exchange, generates possibilities for collaborative activities and learning experiences, and supports teachers in developing inclusive practices (AlWadaani, 2019). Another theme that cut across most of the cases in the interview was collaboration with other stakeholders, including LSEs, colleagues, INCOs, and parents/guardians. Participants emphasised the importance of all these stakeholders collaborating to enhance inclusive practices, which

aligns with CDT. Teachers reported that when such collaboration happened frequently, it positively impacted their perceptions regarding educating and including students with autism in the mainstream classroom.

As more students with autism are included in mainstream classrooms, primary teachers must serve as facilitators and work together to ensure that each student has an appropriate learning environment (Sweetapple, 2022). This confirms CDT's emphasis on working as a team, with 83.3% indicating that students with autism are the responsibility of both the LSE and the teacher. Sasha voiced her opinion that a successful inclusion programme entails sharing responsibilities and collaborating with others. *“Working as a team provides continuous support where situations that seem impossible to overcome alone will be overcome together”* [Sasha]. Participant 31 elaborated that, from her experience, this collaboration between teachers and LSEs led to students with autism being positively affected. Additionally, Sally specified that without a good relationship and cooperation between these stakeholders, everything would become significantly more challenging for classroom teachers *“as even during break time, we are asked to observe and take care of children with autism”*. This is especially true when there is no support from SLTs. In fact, having good relations with LSEs is considered effective in helping teachers overcome certain challenges and become accustomed to their responsibilities (AlWadaani, 2019).

‘You cannot pour from an empty cup’. This is a well-repeated phrase similar to what participants believe – teachers cannot handle everything alone, but collaboration with LSEs is needed. CDT emphasises working hand-in-hand with these educators as

contentious to tailor educational approaches to students' specific needs and strengths. Individuals who work together will manage to reach and accomplish goals much faster than when working alone (Alves, 2018). In fact, several teachers referred to the LSEs who support individual students or the entire class as 'key classroom assistants' and reference points. All interviewees mentioned favourable overall experiences with LSEs and agreed that having an LSE in class was associated with more successful inclusive practices. Teachers expressed how, together with the LSE, they "*devise a plan based on the students' reports and feedback from previous LSEs and families*" [Sasha] and try to plan different ways and strategies they could use throughout the year with students with autism. Teachers stated that LSEs help to tackle this "*very stressful situation*" [Stella] of having diverse students in a mainstream classroom by working and communicating with them often during the day and allocating time during break or during a peripatetic lesson to discuss the way forward. Jane further confirmed that this communication is crucial as LSEs hand over aspects from their observations that inform teachers about what children can benefit from. Nonetheless, Sally does not forget that sometimes opinions between the teachers and LSEs might clash or that some LSEs do not do the required job. So, once again, she referred back to the SLTs and recommended that they "*should frequently check that there is a healthy relationship between teachers and LSEs and that they both want the best for the child*" [Sally].

Teaching is a mentally and physically exhausting job, making other educators, apart from class LSEs, invaluable sources of support (Cosier & Pearson, 2016). When supported, teachers become more capable of including and educating their students. Given the lack of support from SLTs, Sasha relies on her fellow colleagues for help "*since*



*they would be able to refer to their experiences with dealing with students with autism”.*

These colleagues do not necessarily have specific knowledge or expertise in the areas of autism or inclusive practices but try to empathise and suggest ways to help. Stella also frequently turns to her colleagues, especially teachers of previous years, *“since we are all in the same boat, and we help each other by referring to our own experiences and sharing ideas and resources”.* This was also echoed among other interviewees, commenting that they usually debrief with teachers for strategies or resources that best work with a particular student and which strategies need to be eliminated.

Yet, Sally was the only interviewee against this, disagreeing with teachers asking for strategies from previous-year teachers because *“I have come to believe that students change”.* To make her point stronger, she referred to two experiences: one where a student initially struggled to adapt in the mainstream classroom but eventually managed to develop a fondness for the class by the end of the scholastic year, and another student, who initially did not raise concerns but who underwent a transformation into a difficult situation and became a *“little monster in my class”* [Sally]. Sally said that she further embraced the concept that students underwent changes from year to year when she conferred with the SLT on these two occasions about the students’ changed behaviours from previous years. As SLTs hold a higher position than teachers, Sally listened to and acknowledged their input. *“Twice, their reply was ‘because students change’, so as they know more than I do, and they have more experience and knowledge than I do, I adapted their same idea”* [Sally].

Christiana, like the other participants, would appreciate increased interaction with Inclusive Education Coordinators (INCOs) regarding the inclusion of students with autism, as often she and the LSE are left to manage the situation on their own. In Malta, the INCO is responsible for supporting staff in implementing inclusive practices and monitoring issues related to diversity, equality, and inclusion (Rizzo, 2021). Christiana suggested that there should be regular meetings with INCOs to discuss and tackle matters with regard to students with autism throughout the school year. *“We need more support and input from INCOs. Our INCO just comes once a week at school, and she goes straight into the office without looking at our class”* [Christiana]. Jessica agreed with this and continued to explain her reasons for the need for communication with INCOs by strongly arguing that *“The INCO need to frequently come to school to give us advice, not come and visit us once in a blue moon just to judge us without asking how we feel and helping us with these students”*. Gail was the only participant who stated that her school has a school-based INCO who is always available to give a helping hand and maintains a daily open line of communication with educators. This INCO’s constant support and presence, as Gail described, was a true morale booster for her and her colleagues.

*“She was on speed dial this year, and whenever I called for her, she came, she helped, erm, she gave us a 5-minute break, she let us see, you know, have our little meltdowns and everything, so there I was supported a lot”* [Gail].

This makes her an invaluable presence *“and a true blessing”* [Gail] in the school. It is quite evident from Gail’s comments that the services of these educational stakeholders make the teaching process easier. Gail recommended how, like hers, all other INCOs should offer their service to different schools by promptly responding to educators’ requests and offering support and advice, stepping into the classroom to assist and cater

to students with autism, allowing teachers to navigate meltdowns, providing demonstrations, and also sharing ideas and resources to effectively plan strategies.

Additionally, frequent communication with parents/guardians was another critical factor often referred to by the participants. Overall, nearly all the participants received positive feedback regarding inclusion from families of students with autism, which served as evidence of their dedication.

*“Usually, the parents are very understanding. I mean, at least the parents of my students know that there are limits. So, the feeling I get is that they are usually satisfied. I don't think that they expect a lot. At this stage, I teach the early years sector, so they don't really have high academic expectations. Mostly, what they are concerned about is that they are happy in class”.* [Sally].

Daily or frequent communication with parents/guardians was mentioned among most interviewees as important. Stella states that every year, she organises an online group chat with the class LSE and the parents/guardians of students with autism who would be in her class, which she states is typically led by the LSE, while she occasionally provides her contributions. Stella continued to say that in this chat, the LSE maintains daily communication with the student's parents/guardians to update them about the school day and inquire about any feedback, *“especially if the student displays signs of rebellion or frustration due to events at home or school”* [Stella]. Jenny also mentioned the daily chat between herself, the LSE and parents/guardians but argued that the latter would usually tend to give more heed to the LSE's input rather than the teacher's *“because sometimes I think they tend to forget that their child still forms part of the class, and the teacher is still also responsible for that child”*.

Gail also alluded to the invaluable role of having parents/guardians on board to provide insights and take teachers' advice and input into consideration. *"I'm not infallible, neither our LSEs, but when parents do not cooperate and give us information, it is nearly useless because you would be, erm, 'tagħzaq fl-ilma' [a Maltese metaphor that translates to 'toiling in vain' since it yields no tangible results]"*. Gail shared some tips she had received from parents/guardians in her teaching career, which further demonstrated the importance of collaboration with these stakeholders, contributing to increasing awareness. She often shares this learned information with other educators, acknowledging the significant role parents/guardians play in shaping the learning environment. Gail mentioned how she has taught students with autism who work better when barefoot, when they keep their feet tucked in under, or when constantly chewing or playing with something. Upon receiving this feedback, her immediate response was to instruct these students to remove their shoes before entering her class or to give them different types of chewable or fidget things. She pointed out that if collaboration is achieved and there is a willingness to find the middle ground with parents/guardians, these students would enter the class feeling calmer and more relaxed, facilitating teachers in including and instructing these students more effectively.

In the interview, Tara referred to a negative experience with a student's parents where there was no cooperation, collaboration, or trust from home. She had learnt that what she and the LSE were doing at school with the student was not being continued or reinforced at home. Tara expressed her disappointment, stating that, regrettably, since that particular year, the first thing that she asks teachers of previous years, *"unfortunately, is not how the children are but how the parents are because it has been*

*a very negative experience” [Tara]. Alarfaj (2018) argues that an absence of positive experiences with parents can not only impact teachers’ emotions and professional knowledge but can also make it less likely for teachers to want to include students with autism. Jane also reinforced how it is beneficial to work with parents/guardians, especially in the upper years of primary school (Years 3-6), as she thinks that parents/guardians of younger students would still be in the process of evaluating their acceptance or denying autism as a condition.*

*“So, I had very grateful parents, especially from year three onwards, because the younger ages, there's a lot going on in parents because they would either be in the process of accepting or deny it, denying the whole issue” [Jane].*

Jane assumes that parents of students in their junior years would have already passed through anger, grievance, and acceptance and would be in the process of collaboration. Sasha also highlighted that, in her opinion, collaboration between teachers and parents/guardians also depends on the latter’s occupations. She noticed that parents working in the health sector took up the matter earlier. *“I had parents working as nurses; they were all out to sort of, erm, not heal, as such, but to tackle the issues earlier” [Sasha].*

#### **5.6.1.6 Conclusion**

While more than half of the participants expressed feeling adequately supported by SLTs, a significant number of participants still held a different view. These participants recommended that SLTs reevaluate their support structures and adopt a more proactive engagement to address teachers’ needs and concerns. Participants agreed that a lack of support and the philosophy that including all students is solely the responsibility of teachers is disheartening and negatively impacts teachers’ perceptions. This

underscores the importance of effective communication, collaboration and sustained efforts between teachers and other educational stakeholders, including LSEs, other colleagues, INCOs, and parents/guardians. It is through this collaborative effort that a consistent and supportive environment can be fostered, where teachers can feel empowered, connected, and better equipped to meet the challenges of inclusive education for all students with autism. In conclusion, within the realm of education, the power and support from SLTs, as well as the communication and collaboration with other educational stakeholders, have shown that they play a pivotal role in shaping teachers' perceptions. In situations where teachers feel supported by the SLTs, and there is a good collaboration among themselves, a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment could be provided where all students, including students with autism, can thrive in a mainstream classroom.

### **5.6.2 Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Curriculum**

It is every teacher's duty to cater for all students within his or her classroom, irrespective of their individual needs. CDT advocates for inclusive education practices that recognise, reasonably accommodate, and support students with disabilities, including students with autism, so they can fully participate in the educational process (Valenti, 2020). CDT's goal is to provide a learning environment where all students can access the curriculum, demonstrate their knowledge, and reach their full potential. Table 12 illustrates whether participants agreed or disagreed with the five statements regarding the adaptations and modifications in tests, curriculum, and exams to accommodate students with autism.

**Table 12:** Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding the Curriculum

Statements	Keys	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
Students with high-functional autism should be assessed in different ways and by different means than their mainstream classmates.	Disagree	29	14.6%	3.79	.995
	Neither	27	13.6%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>142</b>	71.8%		
I frequently adapt the curriculum, tests or assessments to meet the needs of high-functioning students with autism.	Disagree	43	21.7%	3.58	1.014
	Neither	26	13.1%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>129</b>	65.2%		
The academic level of students with autism should be compared with their classmates' results while using the same tests or assessments.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>144</b>	72.7%	2.22	1.022
	Neither	24	12.1%		
	Agree	30	15.2%		
The results of tests, exams and assessments obtained by students with autism directly impact my perceptions of these students.	Disagree	42	21.2%	3.54	1.045
	Neither	39	19.7%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>117</b>	59.1%		
I don't have time to adapt the curriculum, tests and assessments to meet the needs of students with autism.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>78</b>	39.4%	2.84	1.140
	Neither	54	27.3%		
	Agree	66	33.3%		

### 5.6.2.1 *Individualised Success for Students with Autism*

“In the early days of the social model, disabled activists often claimed that no impairment was disabling: Only the failure of society to accommodate difference limited an individual’s life options” (Hosking, 2008, p. 7). Recognising that every student in a

mainstream classroom is inherently different is a crucial aspect of effective teaching. Salter and Liberman (2016) argue that if teachers do not alter their strategies and approaches for students who need them and continue to require all children to achieve normative standards, they will be doing them a disservice. Inaccessible practices and a lack of accommodation '*disable*' students and provide the "temperature and nutrients for disablism to grow" (Goodley, 2014, p. xi). This, Goodley claimed, is the greatest barrier to inclusion. As autism is a broad spectrum and as students with autism often have uneven profiles of strengths and challenges, one cannot assume that a one-size-fits-all approach to adaptations will suffice. In fact, such an approach can be detrimental, as it may exclude and highlight students' conditions. Ellwood (2023) alludes that simply providing the same adaptations to everyone does not address all students' fulsome needs. Thus, as students exhibit diverse abilities and needs, which can significantly impact their academic performance, classroom teachers must recognise and appreciate this diversity as it can inform their perceptions of students with autism. During the interviews, Gail remarked that she does not force normalcy upon students with autism, but she embraces the idea that each student is unique and strives to provide opportunities for individualised success.

Accommodations, the engine of educational reforms, ensure parity of access to resources, facilitate greater participation and motivation of students, and reduce school exclusions (Wood & Happé, 2023). While accommodations aim to provide a fair opportunity for students to excel in tests and exams, the overreliance on accommodations discloses how disabilities reinforce the medical model of disability, which sees disability as an individual deficit that needs to be cured, accommodated and



fixed (Wood & Happé, 2023). CDT does not deny the effects of the impairment itself but shifts the focus of the arising challenges to the disabling barriers within society, focusing on how society determines what impairment means (Salter & Liberman, 2016). This implies that educators should give less focus on students' impairments and, in turn, accentuate social barriers that potentially impact their development (Savage, 2017). CDT also advocates for inclusive education practices, regardless of students' conditions and needs, that recognise, reasonably accommodate, and support all students to participate in the educational process. Its goal is, therefore, to provide learning environments where all students can access the general education curriculum, demonstrate their knowledge, and reach their full potential, "not as simply 'best practice' but a basic civil right for students with disabilities and other marginalised groups of students in schools" (Cosier & Pearson, 2016, p. 3).

Stella recommended that it is imperative for every primary teacher to invest time in getting to know students on a personal level and gather information about their interests and strengths. *"This can help us understand and assess whether the student requires adaptations or support and to plan accordingly"* [Stella]. As teachers' perceptions play a pivotal role in their teaching methods, supporting Stella's idea can lead to effectively tailoring the curriculum, tests, and assessments to accommodate the needs of individual students. Jenny continued that this could be done if educators focus more on explicitly designing and implementing *"an IEP with the help and feedback of all concerned parties"* and referring to it often. MEDE (2014a) emphasises that IEPs [refer to Section 2.2] measure progress in areas that are additional to or that differ from the curriculum plan that is intended for the provision of all children. *"IEPs are always*

*beneficial for such students' diverse needs"* [Participant 52]. In the interviews, participants frequently referred to the IEP as a crucial document that outlines specific personalised modifications, helps to further practice inclusion, and supports teachers in meeting students' learning styles and abilities by utilising their strengths. Evidently, Attard and Attard (2023) also argue that when making modifications, examining and adhering to the recommendations outlined in IEPs that revolve around students' interests, not only fosters increased attentiveness but also encourages active participation in lessons and improves students' grades. This student-centred approach, in turn, can positively impact students' behaviours and subsequently shape teachers' perceptions.

#### **5.6.2.2**      *Access Arrangements*

The objective of CDT is to emphasise the value and importance of students with disabilities, including those with autism, while going beyond the traditional teaching methods. It sheds light on how tests, exams, and assessments not only measure students' skills but also support learning. However, this task will be impossible to achieve if Maltese primary teachers disregard students' ability levels and force them to engage in the same curriculum and instructions that do not effectively evaluate their progress and improvements. In fact, in its true spirit, inclusion means deeply understanding the needs of students with autism and providing accommodations to address them (AlWadaani, 2019). The innate ability to understand and accommodate students can lead to profound positive effects on students' educational experiences while fostering a more inclusive and supportive classroom learning environment. Attard and Attard (2023) claim that students with high-functioning autism become frustrated if presented

with a 'normal' curriculum that they cannot handle. In this study, 71.7% (N=142) of Maltese primary teachers agreed that students with high-functioning autism need to be assessed in different ways and by different means than their classmates. From these, 129 (62.7%) participants indicated that they frequently accommodated tests, exams, and assessments for these students.

Incorporating assessments that encompass a range of learning styles not only fosters a greater sense of inclusivity where all students can succeed but also allows teachers to gain a more holistic understanding of students' strengths and challenges. Attard and Attard (2023) argue that some students with autism dream big and expect big results, leading to disappointment and challenging behaviour if they do not do well in a particular subject. Although, to date, no autism-specific access arrangements exist for students with autism (Wood & Happé, 2023), teachers can still draw from existing arrangements to help students with autism complete tests, exams and assessments in school. Tara indicated that presenting materials in different formats is especially important in tests and exams, giving the example that texts should be adapted, simplified, and printed with larger fonts on yellowish paper rather than stark white paper. Participants also mentioned that handwriting might be another challenge students with autism face, so they referred to other flexible approaches to assess students that help them thrive academically and show their capabilities in class. Among these, they listed asking students to draw, create something hands-on, use oral techniques, highlight or fill in instead of writing, or use technology. Participant 48 argued that, in her opinion, such access arrangements should be given to all students and not only to students with autism *"because when I reason out, I say to myself, who is perfect?"*

Indeed, Wood and Happé (2023) argue that presenting students with autism with suitable access arrangements is considered a vital component of these students' educational inclusion. Nonetheless, given the benefits that adaptations can provide students, questions arise as to what barriers prohibit the other 37.3% of the participants from actively planning and providing adaptations when necessary. It is thus crucial to unpack *why* and *how* teachers sometimes fail to provide accommodations in tests, exams and assessments.

### 5.6.2.3 Challenges to Accommodations

Rita Jordan, a professor who made a solid contribution to the education of students with autism, shows us the concept of inclusion by eloquently asserting that teachers must build the capacity to see things differently: "To treat people equally, you need to treat them differently and not the same... wouldn't such a system be one in which *all* could flourish?" (Jordan, 2008, pp. 13–14). As specified by CDT above, each student is unique and has his/her strengths, interests, and challenges, which may add complexity to the task for teachers. Yet, assuming that students with autism require adapted work every time just because of having autism "*would be a way of excluding them and highlighting their condition*" [Participant 53]. So, "*adaptations should only be used when or if necessary*" [Participant 43] as "*it depends on the severity of autism. Autistic students might be able to carry out 'mainstream' tests/assessments, so they would not need any adaptations. However, other extremities might need plenty of adaptations*" [Participant 9]. This necessity for adaptations becomes more pronounced when there are students with low-functioning autism in class. 89.4% (N=177) of the participants agreed that these students require many modifications to succeed in the

mainstream classroom. *"I believe that the way they learn is different, so tests, exams and assessments should be adapted. In the case of low-functioning, even the syllabus and things learnt need to be adapted"* [Participant 40]. Participant 39, however, further argued about the challenging situation of adapting assessments for those with low-functioning autism,

*"...not because they [teachers] don't care about them but as they might be overwhelmed, not supported enough, demands are huge, especially to reach curriculum targets in a short time, meet deadlines and meet parents' demands who might not realise how hard it is to cater for these students"*.

The issue of teachers having a vast syllabus to cover was a recurring factor among the participants. *"It's impossible for the teacher to adapt everything"* [Participant 19]. Some participants mentioned how they sometimes prioritise covering the curriculum instead of providing individualised accommodations.

*"The poor teacher has to cover all the curriculum, whomever she might be, with all her knowledge; her main thing is to cover the whole curriculum with all the socialist aspects going on rather than adapt all the curriculum because a child with autism would not be the only child with issues in class, so you cannot adapt everything"* [Jenny].

Other participants concurred that, regrettably, the Maltese Learning Outcomes Frameworks (LOFs), the recently introduced statements that aim to provide stakeholders with an understanding of what children should know and be able to do during the school cycle, further exacerbated the challenge of making adaptations for students with autism, with Participant 39 admitting that he feels *"too overwhelmed with this whole situation"*.

Similarly, Jane refers to herself and her other Maltese colleagues as ‘msieken’ [translation to ‘pitiful’], implying that local teachers have to juggle several things at once,

*“The curriculum doesn’t help ...the disruptions and the syllabus, with the learning objectives, LOFs going on, and everything else, is against this whole system. I believe that the whole Maltese system is against inclusion ...actually certain types of inclusion, we can't say all inclusion, but for example, in the case of students with low-functioning autism, this system surely does not go hand in hand”* [Jane].

Due to the emphasis on covering the curriculum rather than adapting it to students’ needs, the school curriculum has now “become a market commodity and the ‘best’ education a prize to be competitively sought, not a democratic right” (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 176). This education system that values uniformity over inclusivity, as described by some participants, is criticised by CDT, advocating for a systemic change and prioritising the needs of all students.

This showed a dissonance between rhetoric and practice. While there was an agreement among the participants on the importance of implementing and following the IEP to address students’ individual needs, some teachers still prioritise covering the syllabus. This might reveal shortcomings in teachers’ inclusive teaching practices, with pressure to cover the syllabus taking precedence over differentiation and accommodation, inadvertently excluding students with autism who require adjustments. Since the 1980s, nations have seen an amplification of shifts in the governing of educational systems globally, with curricula being reshaped by neoliberalism. In neoliberalism, in contrast to training students to be empathetic citizens

and critical thinkers, the educational system's purpose is to make students competitive in tests and exams (Savage, 2017). This neoliberalism has transformed the operation of schools and how educational stakeholders manage and control them, how policymakers decide on what to include in the curriculum, and how SLTs and teachers operate with students in mainstream schools (Savage, 2017). CDT questions such notions of educational neoliberalism and performativity from the point of view of people with disabilities or those 'deviating from the norm' and inquires about society's response to it (Minich, 2016). It argues that neoliberalism has limited compatibility to measure success for students with diverse learning needs who are 'expensive to serve', eroding students' experience and teacher agency (Ellwood, 2023).

Tara also noted that the lack of adjustments might be due to the factors limiting Maltese teachers' options, making students with autism bear the brunt of this situation. She is convinced that numerous possibilities could be explored within the classroom if she had less pressure, more time and materials, and if teachers were given more leeway to tailor their approaches according to students' interests and needs. *"Unfortunately, these things with these new LOFs and these syllabi make time even more restricted and very often, it is the autistic children and others in the mainstream who suffer"* [Tara]. Other participants agreed that *"although I sometimes adapt the curriculum to include pupils with autism, time is very limited for us to cover the whole syllabus and still cater for the needs of all students in class"* [Participant 4]. Participant 53 also referred to her teaching experience and stated that in a mixed-ability class, it becomes exceedingly challenging for a primary teacher to allocate additional time for direct engagement and customisation of lessons for students with autism. In fact, of the participants, only 39.4%

(N=78) indicated that they have time for adaptations that meet the needs of students with autism. Several teachers perceived these time constraints as barriers to providing the necessary accommodations for all students, with *“the teacher always racing against time to finish everything”* [Gail]. Moreover, *“apart from the lack of time in our tight schedules, I don’t have materials to adapt for students with autism”* [Participant 189]. The constraint of limited time, especially in the primary years, can lead to a negative perception that teaching to the standard curriculum is more important than addressing students’ diverse needs, with insufficient materials further hindering the implementation of effective accommodations. Gail’s comment and the one by Participant 189 reflect the broader underlying challenges where institutional policies endorse inclusion but fail to furnish teachers with the essential means to realise it fully.

Some participants also have unrealistic expectations of how quickly and easily inclusive practices can yield positive results. Teachers with this idealistic perspective, spurred by the need to see immediate changes when teaching the curriculum, may assume that just introducing inclusive approaches will result in an instantaneous shift in various settings. However, *“showing progress even though one is doing so much can be challenging and difficult at times”* [Jenny]. *“It is good to note that students with autism take longer to show progress compared to other students, so you would believe that what you are doing is in vain and wasting time with them”* [Gail]. In fact, research by Attard and Attard (2023) shows that students with autism do not provide the traditional benefits of quick learning or affection that their peers provide, making some of the Maltese teachers feel more at a loss and further discouraging them from adapting



resources and instructions. This idea often ignores the complexities inherent in creating truly inclusive mainstream classrooms.

Although for some students, quantifying their learning progress and understanding might prove challenging, and results might not be immediate, some participants agreed that over time, they had observed discernible changes in the academic development of students with autism. Gail voiced how, when one of her students with autism who also had learning difficulties first joined her class, she described feeling “*terrified*” and that, for her, the initial months of the scholastic year “*were a nightmare not only because of his behaviour but also because I couldn’t cope with his adaptations*” as she experienced a sense that her efforts to teach him were futile. However, she remarked that when she was on the verge of giving up on this student and stopping adaptations, she started seeing an academic improvement in this student. She remembers how, after discussing the way forward with his parents and other stakeholders in the inclusion sector, she felt that her inclusive educational practices became more successful, and the change in him was incredible. Today, she continued, even after a considerable amount of time has passed and this boy is now attending secondary school, he remains the same child who comes to her mind when she feels that she is giving up on a student with autism. “*It’s so rewarding to remember that I was there to make him better, that with my adaptations and determination, I was there to make him feel more accepted and find his way*” [Gail].

“Disabilities are not to be viewed as conditions needing to be cured or healed, but rather as differences to be accommodated and accepted” (Kashikar, 2021, p. 140).

Asking teachers to implement modifications and accommodations to meet students' diverse needs can add to their already demanding workload, with some viewing it as a challenge or an obstacle detracting from their primary teaching duties. In fact, 60.6% (N=120) of the participants came to an agreement that the presence of students with autism augments teachers' workload, which can potentially lead to negative perceptions. This is especially true when considering that *"sometimes no amount of adaptations and changes to the lesson delivery can mitigate the behaviour of students with autism"* [Jessica]. Jessica's comment can reveal how such adaptations normalise students with autism to achieve just like their peers who are not on the spectrum, holding them responsible for change rather than letting their personality be shown in the assessments. This shows disablism in action, which might physically and socially lead to the division of students with autism from others (Kashikar, 2021).

Stella referred back to her last scholastic year, which for her was one of the most challenging years in her teaching career, as she had a student with low-functioning autism who *"refused to participate in anything academic"*. She shared some episodes where the student tore the papers, threw them around, pushed his desk, hit others, screamed, and threw tantrums every time his assigned LSE provided him with a worksheet or a workbook. *"Most of the time, we used to end up not knowing what to do with this child and how to academically adapt things to make sure that he is included in some way"* [Stella]. Similarly, Participant 39 said that having students with autism in her class makes her feel *"unsuccessful, mostly because no matter how hard you work to adapt resources to teach or include them and how much you try to cater to their different abilities, it is never enough, not like the other students"*. These teachers feel they are

unable to provide their students with autism with the right accommodations they sorely need. Participants frankly remarked how this significantly impacted their perceptions, making them uncertain about the appropriate teaching approach and ending in daily questioning of these students' inclusion. Elaine also felt *"appalled because I don't understand what they want and how to adapt for these students. My accommodations were all in vain"*. While accommodations aim to provide further care, support and empowerment, these participants' comments reveal ableism in how students with autism had to operate and achieve predetermined categories similar to their peers.

#### **5.6.2.4 Collaborative Efforts with LSEs**

A number of students with autism experience difficulties with their communication skills, both when communicating with others and also when receiving information (Attard & Attard, 2023). A teacher's instructions are usually packed with information, possibly even with long sentences. So, for some students with autism, even though they might follow the mainstream classroom, it will be much more challenging for them to process everything that is being said due to communication difficulties. This is especially much more challenging for students with autism who reside in Malta, where all students are introduced to two languages as soon as they enter formal education.

When adaptations in teachers' instructions and curriculum are integrated thoughtfully, they become a powerful tool to enhance students' educational experiences, helping to provide them with the cognitive tools necessary to adapt and be integrated into the community. Given the obstacles mentioned above, it becomes clear that to successfully integrate adaptations into the curriculum, collaborative efforts with

LSEs and adherence to IEPs are crucial to further differentiate instruction and meet the needs of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Several participants mentioned how they collaborate with LSEs to adapt resources for students. Participant 20 stated that she and the LSE meet frequently to discuss the adaptations needed for the student with autism in their class. *“We discuss giving the student less writing, more visuals, word banks, social stories, or more hands-on experiences. If these fit the student’s needs, I ask the LSE to do the adaptations herself”* [Participant 20]. Nah and Tan (2023) assert that as teachers are not trained enough, the burden of planning and adapting the curriculum should not be put entirely on their shoulders but that SLTs and LSEs must step in and share professional responsibilities equally. CDT does not, as such, discuss the role of LSEs with regard to curriculum adaptations but highlights the important role of interaction, collaboration and support between these educators to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms (Eilers, 2020).

Educators have a key role to play in ensuring student success. A large number of interviewees confirmed that it is usually the LSEs’ job to adapt instructions for students with autism in the class.

*“I usually rest my mind that the LSE is helping get the message across. So no, I don’t prepare different instructions... even if I wanted to, I don’t have time to repeat the same instructions in different versions more than once”* [Sally].

This, once again, confirmed the importance of collaborative efforts between educators within the same class. Participant 53 also stated that teachers have to rely on the LSEs to implement these modifications, *“as I have to deal with all the rest of the students on my own”*. This comment shows that it is integration rather than inclusion that is being

practised in such classrooms. Sasha was also on the same page and said that she delivers instructions or explanations to the entire class collectively, including any students with autism, but that it is then, the LSEs' responsibility to work on a one-to-one basis with students with autism and reexplain using the best ways that they can learn. Christiana further argued that,

*“It’s very easy for the teacher to forget and lose track of these students because there are other students that need your help, and this autistic child who doesn’t want to or cannot communicate or participate, who needs adaptations all the time, has the LSE and she is taking care of him or her. So there I find the tendency that, as the school year goes on, I tend to forget about them because they are taken care of, and I have my own problems”.*

These quotes confirm that, among certain teachers, the reality within Maltese classrooms is that the transfer of the responsibility for adaptations is being shifted onto LSEs rather than taking shared responsibility. This might reveal that while having LSEs in the classroom is a positive step, even with their presence, having them work one-on-one with a student at the back of the classroom to ‘keep up’ with the mainstream curriculum might still be another hallmark of integration. In contrast, true inclusion demands collaboration, commitment and systemic changes to ensuring that the learning environment is a shared space that fosters equity and belonging for all students. In line with this, CDT urges for a critical examination of societal structures and perceptions, scrutinises power dynamics among educators themselves and their students, and calls for a collaborative, holistic approach to address the root causes of disability-related inequalities (Nah & Tan, 2023).

#### 5.6.2.5 *Assessing the Progress of Students with Autism*

In the interview, participants also mentioned that assessing students' progress is a multifaceted process that deeply influences their perceptions. Although CDT does not negate and discuss assessments, in its context, it calls for critical examination of practices that accommodate the diverse needs and experiences of students with disabilities, aligning with the principles of inclusivity and equity (Hosking, 2008). Some teachers reasoned that it is easier to assess students with high-functioning autism compared to those with low-functioning because *"with proper guidance throughout the year, those with high-functioning can be assessed in the same way as their mainstream peers"* [Participant 198]. Yet, while Participant 198 continued to express that she had never encountered students with high-functioning autism who required adapted work, Participant 53 specified that she had extensive experience working with students with high-functioning autism who *"always needed arrangements in their assessments"*. These diverse experiences further underscore the wide spectrum of autism and the breadth of student differences. Participant 198 further elaborated that students with low-functioning autism, on the other hand, *"might have nothing in common with their peers, and so these obviously require adaptations in their assessments"*.

Adapting assessments and exams to accommodate students with autism is important; however, doing well in tests, exams, and assessments is not merely about students with autism achieving good results but about improving their knowledge and understanding. This, argued Participant 37, depends on the ideas and beliefs flowing in teachers' respective schools. Of the total number of participants, one hundred seventeen (69.1%) agreed that the results of tests, exams, and assessments obtained by

students with autism directly influence their perceptions towards them. Participant 39 explained that the Maltese educational reality is that marks from formative assessments are only being tackled as summative assessments. She stated that this unfortunate climate is still dominant in Malta and suggested that, as Maltese citizens, we should start shifting our focus from this *“obsession with marks and never-ending curriculum content to adaptations needed for students with autism by focusing on students as individual human beings with various abilities and needs”* [Participant 39].

Although participants considered assessments as important ways of tracking students' progress, 72.8% of them (N=144) were against comparing the academic level of students with autism with their classmates' results. There were still, however, those who had arguments against this, for instance, participant 91, who argued, *“I believe that, like everyone else, if they take the same assessments or exams, they should get compared with the whole class”*. Nieminen (2022) debates that anti-ableist tests and assessments need to disrupt this ableist ideology of normality and objectivity, or otherwise, marks will continue to influence teachers' perceptions and hinder them from successfully implementing assessment design in practice. Jane is strongly against the idea of exams and assessments altogether, as she believes that students get anxious when given an exam, even if it is an adapted paper.

*“This is not fair. Exams or assessments never give a full description of the child's knowledge because he would have had an LSE sitting next to him, giving full descriptions and structured instructions throughout the year and then for the exams, there's nothing except maybe a reader or a prompter... I*

*prefer formative assessments... But, as teachers, we have to abide with the Maltese education system” [Jane].*

Assessing students’ progress goes beyond mere academic achievements. Yet, this *“depends on the perception we create as teachers, school, and as a whole educational system”* [Participant 39]. Participant 39 continued that when the emphasis shifts from grades to skill, hard work, commitment, perseverance, and embracing learning, neurotypical peers would not perceive students with autism differently, regardless of their needs or conditions. Conversely, Christiana and Jessica referred to how, unfortunately, they believe that teachers in our Maltese mainstream schools focus more on students’ academic development than on social, emotional, and psychological needs. These participants uniformly expressed that educational stakeholders are not giving these needs much attention and importance, although *“they should be part of the curriculum and given the same importance”* [Jessica], especially in the junior years. Gail, who teaches a Year 3 class, stated that as students do not have exams or tests in the early years, teachers assess students through observations and questions. She continued to shift her focus to her ideas about inclusive education, which should nurture students to develop holistically and become more empathetic and socially responsible than when they began their educational journey.

*“One child that comes to mind had excellent social skills but very little sitting tolerance, so we tried to work on those. So, by the end of the year, when he could sit for, um, seven minutes compared to the four he came with at the beginning of the year, that was a task I think I achieved brilliantly, a big success. There was another boy who had excellent academic skills but*



*disastrous social skills. The fact that by the end of the year, he could name and look for two boys in class and seek to be with them, and during outings, he would go to them, for me, it was another way, you know, to measure success with this child. I mean, in Year 3, we don't have exams, so I focus more on the social and the personal aspects. For all children in my class, my mantra is that I would like them to be better when leaving in June than when they came at the beginning of the scholastic year in September. If I can see some growth, I will be happy. They don't need to grow in the same way or at the same time or, you know, be all geniuses by the end of the year, but if there is growth and improvement even with children with autism, I am happy" [Gail].*

#### **5.6.2.6 Conclusion**

The majority of the participants generally concur on oversimplifying and adapting material when assessing the educational progress of students with autism, even though this study showed that they may not always implement them consistently. Participants indicated that adaptations are thwarted by external factors, including lack of time, a vast syllabus, and inconsistent application of access arrangements for students with autism. While some are still in doubt regarding the benefits of tests, exams and assessments, there is a consensus among most participants who disagree that comparing the academic level of students with autism with their classmates' should be the sole focus of education, especially when considering that these students' results significantly shape teachers' perceptions. Nonetheless, the majority of the participants understand that making the necessary adaptations for students with autism, especially for those with low-functioning autism, is an inherent aspect of their teaching role. In fact, a large

number of participants affirmed that, in practice, they try to make adaptations for students with autism in collaboration with LSEs. When teachers adapt the curriculum, it demonstrates that they are flexible in their teaching approaches, have a sense of empathy, and hold strong values to find the best ways to facilitate learning for their students, all of which are valuable assets in effective inclusion.

This section revealed that students with autism are sometimes still classified as ‘othered’ and the liability of classroom teachers, even though they may lack the knowledge, support, or resources to efficiently adapt to and support students in mainstream classrooms (Tejpar & Butler, 2023). Tejpar and Butler (2023) continue that the ramifications of this kind of ‘othering’ perspective can negatively impact students’ performance, particularly if they are also deprived of equal opportunities or isolated from others, ultimately influencing teachers. This study also revealed that if teachers are left to fend alone, refuse to provide adaptations, or deliberately or unthinkingly employ practices that ostracise students, this may eventually result in poor academic outcomes and negative perceptions. It is, therefore, imperative for all educational stakeholders to pull on the same rope to shift ableist mindsets on adaptations and modifications and the quest for guidance from CDT. This can raise awareness about and tackle ongoing issues regarding the perceptions and behaviours of students with autism.

### **5.6.3 Discourse of Labelling**

Through the CDT, researchers not only focus on disability as a political, cultural, historical, relative, and social phenomenon, but through its values, theorisations, and convictions, it also analyses and deconstructs scenarios related to disability (Hall, 2019).

CDT emphasises that disability encompasses more than simply the actual impairment; it is also heavily influenced by how society views, accepts, or marginalises individuals with disabilities (Valenti, 2020). It involves taking into consideration the social norms that define impairments and the social conditions that bring about labelling and stigmatisation (Minich, 2016). The discourse of labelling, another key factor derived from the literature, is closely linked to CDT. It refers to how society categorises and assigns labels to people with a disability, which can influence how these individuals are perceived and treated. CDT and the discourse of labelling are two interconnected concepts investigating the social construction of disability and the effects of language and categorisation on students with disabilities and society. The participants in this study held different perceptions about autism, with certain teachers voicing misconceptions about students with autism in their questionnaire comments or during the interviews, as will be described below. Table 13 shows whether participants agreed or disagreed with the five statements presented regarding the discourse of labelling.

**Table 13:** Teachers’ perceptions regarding classroom conversations and labelling

Statements	Keys	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
My colleagues argue that it is difficult to effectively teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms.	Disagree	29	14.6%	3.61	.970
	Neither	30	15.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>139</b>	70.2%		
My colleagues often label a class with students with autism as a "difficult" class.	Disagree	76	38.4%	3.02	1.221
	Neither	30	15.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>92</b>	46.4%		

My colleagues believe that students with low-functioning autism should not be included in school-related activities.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>133</b>	67.2%		
	Neither	31	15.7%	2.36	1.065
	Agree	34	17.1%		
Hearing my colleagues negatively comment on students with autism directly impacts my perceptions of these students.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>111</b>	56.1%		
	Neither	30	15.2%	2.48	1.187
	Agree	57	28.7%		
I would stop my colleagues if I heard them making negative comments about students with autism.	Disagree	25	12.6%		
	Neither	56	28.3%	3.64	.996
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>117</b>	59.1%		

#### 5.6.3.1 *Labelling of Students with Autism*

“Disabled people have been and are portrayed as deficient, pitiable, wicked or malign, dangerous or valueless” (Hosking, 2008, p. 14). One challenge in the realm of education that has raised significant attention and can carry considerable weight with far-reaching consequences on a student’s academic journey is the practice of labelling. CDT deals with how ableist euphemisms and language, including both words and images, influence the concept of disability, render these individuals as depending on others, powerless, and vulnerable, and ultimately affect the social attitudes towards people with disabilities (Hosking, 2008). This theoretical framework thus acknowledges that teachers should speak positively in a way that respects and gives students with autism authority while acknowledging their agency and choices. CDT highlights that when referring to students with disabilities, it is not only the language that makes a significant difference and influences perceptions but also how language is framed.

The complex dynamics of the school environments reveal a web of misconceptions that navigate the educational surroundings and can impact the experiences of teachers and students. Among themselves, participants gave an array of negative descriptors, misconceptions, myths, and stereotypes that they often hear from their colleagues about students with autism. These include that they are *'emotionless'*, *'cannot reach the same outcomes'*, *'not intelligent'*, *'rebellious and troublemakers'*, *'disruptive'*, *'mischievous'*, *'aggressive'*, and *'take forever to understand'*. Whether said consciously or unconsciously, these labels should be noted, as they may be hindering the shift toward a just education system (Robasse & Reinhardt, 2023). AlWadaani (2023) has found that labels constructed around students with autism or their weaknesses are rooted in the medical model of disability and can lead teachers to practise integration rather than inclusion. Such discourses give the impression that students with autism are the problem due to their deficiencies and that teachers have the power to define and control their needs. Being assigned such labels makes students responsible for their difficulties and continues to result in ableist perceptions, with students with autism being spotlighted as different to peers without autism (Hodge et al., 2022).

Stella affirmed that while she used to share similar ideas with her colleagues, that students with autism *'do not care about the people around them'*, she now holds a different viewpoint, seeing these students beyond their labels. She expressed how her perspective positively evolved due to a personal experience with a student with autism, which led to a shift in her belief. Stella noticed that this particular student was forming bonds with others.

*“From experience, I have come to believe that children with autism do their best to build a relationship with the ones around them. Obviously, this takes time. But my colleagues still think this, but they might change their perceptions over time. For example, at the beginning of my teaching career, I was teaching a child with autism. I have to admit that my LSE and I had the idea that this particular student did not care about us and anyone around him because that’s what we heard colleagues say about him in previous years, but, erm, over time, we noticed that he was forming bonds with the closest people around him – the LSE, myself and two other particular girls in class” [Stella].*

Christiana reasoned that *“You can’t label, you can’t label anyone, because character, parents, teachers, and the education system all make a big difference on the students’ behaviours”*. Specialists dispute that negative labelling given to students leads to stereotyping, with these individuals being labelled as group members and not as a person (Thomson, 2012; Weedon, 2021). *“Giving a label to someone and providing help based on that label is a positive thing, but simply labelling someone to destroy them is another story”* [Elaine]. Participant 48 took this a bit further and stated that whenever she feels like talking about a negative experience with students with autism, she imagines herself talking about her own children, indicating that teachers should love these students if they want respect and understanding to be reciprocated. *“I would ask if my son/daughter was autistic, what should I wish to have at school for her/him? We are all human beings, so we should love for it to be reciprocated”* [Participant 48].

Labelling should be a tool for comprehending how the minds of students with autism function and enabling educators to identify and address the issues that need to be resolved and the resources that should be used to help students (Weedon, 2021). Thus, negative comments and labels given by educators need to be thoroughly analysed as sometimes teachers might label students in the heat of the moment, with such comments not being necessarily a reflection of their beliefs or feelings. Participants strongly indicated that such labelling is normally the result of other factors, including the overwhelming situation of covering a huge workload in a short period of time, preparations and adaptations based on students' needs, parental demands, and the ticking of LOFs, all of which, are "*becoming a never-ending task*" [Participant 39]. This is in line with Marić's (2022) study, which also outlined that a busy workload, pressure, and time constraints, along with the responsibility to give individual attention, are among the factors limiting accessibility in teaching and assessment and leading to labelling. As such, while CDT does not explicitly emphasise teachers' workload and other demands as a central objective, such factors can undoubtedly be used to widen this theoretical framework within the broader context of disability and society, especially when these contribute to the marginalisation or exclusion of students with disabilities, including those with autism (Robasse & Reinhardt, 2023).

Recognising that nearly half of the participants have heard colleagues labelling classes with students with autism, it becomes crucial for others to play an active role in stopping such destructive labelling and fostering a more inclusive educational environment based on respect for all students. 59.1% (N=117) of the participants affirmed that when they hear their colleagues negatively commenting about students

with autism, they try to stop them *“as labelling does nothing more than harm”* [Jane]. However, 40.9% of the participants chose the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ or the disagree tabs when asked whether they would stop their colleagues. Participant 25 was unsure of the best way to stop them. Teachers

*“...are also human beings, and everyone has his/her difficult days. So, if a teacher has had a difficult moment and she’s complaining, I think the best thing to do is listen and try to help her find solutions or assist her rather than blaming her or asking her to stop”* [Participant 25].

Participant 19 also gave reasons for her choice of ‘neither agree nor disagree’ by elaborating that although she tries to talk positively so as not to disparage students with autism herself, she feels awkward and lacks the confidence to stop other educators from voicing their opinions and reprimanding them. This was also agreed by Participant 40, who added that with some stakeholders, her concerns would not be taken seriously, *“I have tried to stop colleagues. However, with certain people, I know that if I did stop them, it would not make a difference in their attitude or behaviour”*. This quote further supports the fact that hidden elements of ableism still endure within the Maltese educational system, sustaining the segregation of marginalised students. Tejpar and Butler (2023) indicate that these negative perceptions overshadow positive ones as they are deeply seated, resulting in these educators refusing to change.

CDT’s main concern is to confront negative perceptions towards disabilities, including autism, typically exhibited by non-disability individuals and challenge and transform the broader societal norms and ableist attitudes to promote a more inclusive environment (Hosking, 2008). Another participant who gave reasons for choosing the



'neither agree nor disagree' tab indicated that it depends on who is talking negatively about these students, as *"I would like to stop colleagues, but I won't dare to stop an SLT from commenting and labelling classrooms, parents, or students with autism"* [Participant 80]. This last comment by Participant 80 might show that she might fear facing retaliation to speak out against the SLTs in the school who would be labelling students with autism or that she might be teaching in a school where the school's culture might not encourage teachers to voice their concerns in a safe and confidential manner. This fear of speaking in front of SLTs or of reporting labelling, coupled with the perceived lack of support that teachers receive, further contributes to discriminatory social practices and can impact students' overall learning experiences (Nah & Tan, 2021). This study thus showed that it is not only the labelling that causes disabling but also the fact that there are power issues in reporting it, which further exacerbates the problem.

Other participants chose the 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' tab. Participant 37 argued that we live in a democratic society where everyone can talk freely. She realised that sometimes, the more one tries to stop colleagues from talking negatively, the more they rebel. *"Everyone is free to think and say what they believe in. My motto is to 'lead by example', so I try to avoid negative comments about students with autism, hoping that others do the same"* [Participant 37]. This was also confirmed by Participant 20, who also tries to *"avoid using negative language – however, I do not feel confident enough to reprimand other educators if I hear them talking disparagingly about students with autism"*. This participant also observed that apart from negatively labelling students with autism, her colleagues also accuse these students' parents *"of mollycoddling or neglecting their students with autism. However, although I have never stopped them, I*

*think this is hateful, and we should all be more positive*" [Participant 20]. This confirms previous findings by AlWadaani (2019) that even in the present day, a number of teachers still believe and label students with autism as incapable of learning, putting the blame on these students and their families for their inability to progress. Yet, the author comments that cultural and societal contexts, rather than teachers' idiosyncrasies, influence teachers' perceptions and beliefs (AlWadaani, 2019).

70.2% (N=139) of the participants asserted that due to the varied academic, behavioural, and social needs of students with autism, their colleagues believe that teaching these students, especially those with low-functioning autism, is "*exceptionally difficult*" [Participant 7] and a "*constant struggle*" [Stella] that they have to face daily throughout the scholastic year. Gail stated that although it may sound blunt, she has heard the Maltese phrase "*jien ħa nibilgħu?*" [which translates to, 'regrettably, why should he be in my class, being such an unbearable burden?'] several times from her colleagues when they learned that they would have a student with autism in their class. Sweetapple (2022) argues that most mainstream classrooms put too much weight on labelling, segregating and remediating students with autism to fit an unrealistic norm. According to CDT, these connotations can result in students with different needs being excluded, discriminated against, and having a sense of otherness. Its concern is with the fortification of others' demeaning perceptions of students with autism that indirectly *disable* students and reinforce exclusionary and discriminatory social practices (Robasse & Reinhardt, 2023).

Yet, from the participants, only 46.5% (N=92) indicated that their colleagues refer to a class with one or more students with autism as a 'difficult' class. *"Colleagues sometimes label a class as 'difficult' when there are children with autism who disrupt the class, but to be honest, even the other normal students can sometimes make a class difficult"* [Participant 53]. The word 'normal', once again used by Participant 53 to describe students without autism who conform to a typical standard, carries connotations of judgement and makes students with autism feel abnormal and different from their peers.

Weedon (2021) clearly states that hearing negative comments and labels assigned to students with autism will change the landscape of one's views and encourage others to repeat these labels. Weedon continues that this is the reason why the issues of reporting labelling have become even more significant but, at the same time, challenging. Yet, although candidly, some participants stated that they sometimes tend to agree with colleagues and label students with autism themselves, this study showed that 56.1% (N=111) of the participants affirmed that the negative comments they hear from colleagues directed at students with autism do not affect their perceptions of the students.

*"I really hate it when I hear teachers labelling students with autism or the class they are in. Although it doesn't influence my perceptions, sometimes, I do feel their frustration because it is not easy to work in a mainstream class with students with autism"* [Participant 4].

In the face of negative comments and criticism, Participant 3 argued that it is important to maintain inner strength and resilience for the benefit of students with autism. *"I listen*

*to what my colleagues say, but then it is up to me to believe or take into consideration what they say”.*

Yet, this was not echoed during the interview, where most of the interviewees reasoned that *“I have to struggle not to take what they [colleagues] say into consideration so as not to affect my perceptions of students with autism”* [Sasha]. Unfortunately, *“most of the time, the comments of colleagues leave a bad impression on other teachers, including myself”* [Jessica]. Gail also said that the way educators talk about these students, at times, directly affects her perceptions. *“Although I believe that overall I have positive perceptions towards students with autism, I have to admit that some comments and labels given to these students do sometimes influence my perceptions in one way or another”* [Gail].

### **5.6.3.2 Societal Influences**

*“Society controls others by creating identities, categories and labels without realising that, after all, disability is part of human diversity”* (Marić, 2018, p. 214). During the interview, Gail brought up how even societal opinions can impact teachers’ perceptions and the inclusion of students with autism. She noted that, unfortunately, the reality still present among Maltese individuals is that hearing the word ‘autism’ is akin to a societal taboo, a jolting revelation. *“It’s a shock, and you have to have contact with children with autism to realise that autism is a wide spectrum”* [Gail]. Tara gave the example of when her son was diagnosed with autism. She said that whenever she told people about his condition, their reactions were a mix of astonishment, with some saying things like, *“Oh my god, what happened to you?”* [Tara] while others express

sympathy and question how she will manage to deal with this child. Tara mentioned how, even though there are several students with autism nowadays, the Maltese society, in general, is still not adequately informed of this condition. Such sociocultural beliefs among certain Maltese individuals hold autism as the product of medical conditions where these students are unable to meet societal expectations of normality (AlWadaani, 2019).

Furthermore, with regard to the lack of knowledge and awareness in Maltese society, Jessica brought up other terms or phrases that she hears outside of the school environment to categorise or describe students with autism. She mentioned how even when she was in public places, she often heard individuals pointing to a student with autism who would be throwing a tantrum and saying that he was '*obstinate*'. Yet, Sally warns against the use of '*obstinate*' to refer to students with autism. While going back to an episode that happened at her school, Sally explained how a girl with autism was always labelled as '*obstinate*' and wanted to get her way all the time. Yet, when this student was in Sally's class, Sally noticed that her colleagues were labelling this student whenever they showed particular cartoons or songs that had "*this deafening sounds that made this student go frantic. So, I mean, it's not because she was obstinate but because she minded and hated that sound*". This is reflective of CDT's general principles that society is disabling students with disabilities, including those with autism, by labelling them instead of accommodating them (Valenti, 2020). This might be happening because teachers and parents might be prejudiced or lack the knowledge to fulfil students' needs, being seen as a manifestation of ableism. This unequal distribution of power and agency adds an additional level of analysis to what CDT currently says. It

indicates that those students who fall out of the 'ideal' society or the 'norm' or waive away from the 'ideal' body or mind are then labelled and considered 'disabled', not so much by the condition itself but by society. Thus, CDT recommends respecting differences and accepting students with autism as part of human diversity and humanity (Valenti, 2020).

Negative labelling directed to students with autism does not only have detrimental effects on students and can influence teachers' perceptions, but it can also instil fear and concern in parents/guardians. Research by Nah and Tan (2023) shows that when parents of students with autism hear misconceptions and negative descriptors for students with autism, they might be reluctant to disclose their child's diagnoses over fears of negative judgements and rejection. Stella said that in the last scholastic year, she had a student with autism, yet his mother, although *"Deep down as a school, we believe she was aware of his condition, but, as she was afraid of labelling or that he will be excluded by peers, she denied the presence of autism in him"* [Stella]. This apprehension and concern in parents who are reluctant to disclose a child's diagnosis reflects a deficit culture about disability, which can exacerbate the negative experiences faced by students with autism and, in turn, have a ripple effect on teachers' perceptions.

### **5.6.3.3** *Classroom Environment and Inclusion Culture*

Students with autism will still come to realise that those having autism are 'different' (Torenvliet et al., 2023). Thus, educating them about autism conveys the message that they are part of society. The inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom was a widespread denominator among the interviewees. In

unity, they elaborated on the necessity of implementing strategies to foster positive relationships and interactions between students with autism and those without. The interviewees highlighted several notable moments of success in their inclusive classrooms as students embraced and celebrated each other's uniqueness. In fact, the 'classroom environment and inclusion culture' was a newly generated theme derived from the participants' comments that extended the factor of labelling. Participants reiterated how students without autism in their classrooms looked out for those with autism, were willing to help them, and did not segregate them. However, a scoping review of nearly 40 articles revealed that children and adults were more willing to interact or allow their children to interact with students who had a diagnostic label of autism (Hodge et al., 2022). In fact, Stella mentioned that when she has a student with autism in her class, at the beginning of the year, she asks the other students "*what they know about autism, and I explain this term to those who are not aware of this condition*". Together with her students, she identifies ways to include the particular student with autism both in the classroom and during playtime. Woolridge (2021) has also asserted that involving students without autism in classroom interaction about students' conditions increases the likelihood of successful inclusive practices.

Gail also mentioned the importance of being open with students about different conditions. She said that in the first few days of the scholastic year, she shows them videos about autism so that they will be aware of certain behaviours associated with the condition. She explains how she makes it crystal clear to students why certain behaviours are acceptable to students with autism but not others. "*I don't like to tell them that we just have to accept that student's behaviour... No, there is a reason why*

*we are all different, and I need to teach this*" [Gail]. This, she continued, makes students aware from a young age that a student is acting this way because of autism. Tara also gave an example of what she tells her students whenever a student with autism is throwing a tantrum:

*"Okay, listen, you are going to do some quiet work now till X calms down because he needs to calm down; this is getting too much for him. So, we'll give him 5 minutes to calm down, then we'll continue"* [Tara].

Tara is aware, however, that a tantrum can take a long time to melt down. In those cases, she continued by informing the student's peers that he needed to go out of class to calm down or use other strategies. Dr Melvin Attard, a Maltese specialist, refers to this exercise as the 'Peer Preparation Programme', where educational stakeholders teach students who do not have autism how their peers with autism experience the world around them (Attard & Attard, 2023). This depends on the students' ages and severity level of autism. Attard mentioned that this programme facilitates social inclusion for students with autism and tolerates diversity. In this Peer Preparation Programme, educators openly discuss autism and the behaviour of these students to help those without this condition understand them and bring out these students' potential (Attard & Attard, 2023). Jane mentioned that in her school, the Peer Preparation Programme starts informally from Kindergarten 1. She expressed how she and her colleagues noted that, at first, only the caring children would volunteer to play with students with autism during break time, but more students wanted to play with these students *"when the LSE was around because they get noticed, and every child wants to get noticed"* [Jane]. Yet Jane's comment might reveal that these students' play is driven by a desire to accept



and include students with autism just to be seen by adults and not as an intrinsic part of their social development.

In contrast, Jenny, who is currently teaching year four, indicated that although she emphasises that no student should be disrespectful towards students with autism, she prefers not to tackle it and teach students about others' condition. Instead, she tries to ignore the student's behaviour as much as possible and encourages the rest of the students to do the same "because they are young to understand, *and so the lesson can continue to be delivered even during a tantrum*". However, Sasha, who teaches in Year 2, strongly argued that in several Maltese schools, most students would be in the same class from kindergarten to Year 6,

*"...so, they have the groundwork to accept one another in a natural way ...when they arrive in my class, they teach me immensely how to act and behave towards a child with autism, rather than me teaching them"*.

#### **5.6.3.4** *Inclusion or Exclusion from School-related Activities*

67.2% of the participants (N=133) disagreed with the statement presented in the questionnaire that students with low-functioning autism should not be included in school-related activities such as outings and school plays, as *"these activities help students socialise with their peers"* [Participant 27]. Gail stated that in her school, there is *"an atmosphere of caring, loving, compassion, empathy, diversity, acceptance and everything that an ideal world would want"*, as all teachers include students with autism in school-related activities. Sometimes, she said, the teachers in her respective school even write whole scripts to adapt to everyone. Jane also shared how, in the last

scholastic year, a student with autism fully participated in the celebration day, *“and his mother was thrilled with how it turned out and how he contributed to the item that we had prepared”*.

Only 17.1% of the participants (N=34) indicated that their colleagues believe that low-functioning students with autism should be excluded from school-related activities in their respective schools. These participants elaborated that some of their colleagues do not include students with low-functioning autism because they are afraid that they will throw a tantrum on stage. Tara discussed how, in her opinion, maladaptive behaviour and tantrums can increase if students with autism meet unpredictable situations and experience too much sensory stimulation. She argued that teachers should adapt the environment to make students with autism feel more at ease participating in school-related activities. *“We should try to keep lights off and noises to a minimum in school-related activities to provide these students with the opportunity to participate”* [Tara]. Yet *“not everyone understands how hard it is to provide good experiences for these students”* [Participant 55]. Participant 55 gave the example that when there is a whole school activity, such as a concert or an outing, and a student on the spectrum is sensitive to sounds or lights, it is not always possible to accommodate the planned activity to include these students. Hodge et al. (2022) researched that if we focus on sensitivity, the information that a student with autism receives via their senses will often cause them a great deal of anguish and distress. They debated that if a person in a room hears an uncomfortable sound, he can ignore it, but a person with autism will focus on the sound and cannot eradicate it (Hodge et al., 2022). Thus, it will disturb him and lead to undesirable behaviour if not adapted properly. Stella referred to a student

with low-functioning autism who used to start throwing tantrums, crying, and screaming whenever she tried to include him in activities or songs prepared for special assemblies. She concluded, *“Obviously, number one, I don’t think that he appreciates what we were doing with him, and secondly, I don’t think it was fair on him to try to force him to participate in something he felt uncomfortable doing.”*

Elaine agreed with the inclusion of students with low-functioning autism in school-related activities but said that in her school, all the teachers in the same group plan the yearly Christmas concert together. She stated that her colleagues are against the participation of students with autism in concerts because they believe that they

*“...become upset because their daily routine changes. So, as these teachers have been teaching for a long time in my school, and we do the plays together, I have to abide by their decision and not include these students in concerts”* [Elaine].

In this comment, Elaine showed that since her colleagues had more teaching experience, she abides by their ‘reasonable’ ideas despite still recognising that it does not ‘satisfy’ everyone. On the same note, another participant stated that apart from the rehearsal waiting time, the costume, the venue, the light, and the sound could all affect students with autism. *“If these students overreact due to excitement and anxiety on the day of the concert, it could affect the whole school’s performance. Not to mention that it could be heartbreaking for parents”* [Participant 45].

*“In this world, we can’t accommodate everything for these children because, in real life, nobody’s going to accommodate everything for them”* [Sasha]. To put forward

her argument, Sasha gave the example of students with autism who become excessively overstimulated and responsive to certain stimuli, such as a bell, leading to distress and potential tantrums. She continued that in such a case, while many individuals might assume that inclusive measures entail removing the bell to accommodate them, she contended that such an approach would hinder the success of students with autism in their life journeys. In such instances, she holds the belief that this represents a transition from being inundated by the multitude of challenges a student with autism faces to engaging with real-world situations. As educators, Sasha emphasised that *“our primary responsibility is to equip students for the realities that they will encounter”* as, ultimately, once they complete compulsory school, they have to navigate the external realm.

#### **5.6.3.5 Conclusion**

This section of the analysis examined whether the preliminary factor of the discourse of labelling and conversations with colleagues impacts teachers’ perceptions toward the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom. Most of the participants have been in conversations with colleagues, where the latter argue that it is difficult to effectively teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Some participants also stated that they have heard their colleagues directly assign a negative label to students with autism. A significant portion of the respondents also admit that should they listen to their colleagues speaking negatively about these students, they would intervene and stop them. Although listening to conversations with negative comments about students with autism can shape others’ perceptions, even if they know that these remarks are incorrect, more than half of the participants indicated that hearing their colleagues negatively labelling students with autism does not directly

influence their perceptions. This shows that most of the Maltese primary teachers choose to focus on these students' qualities while deliberately resisting being influenced by labels given by others. Although participants are aware that students with autism, especially those with low-functioning autism, might throw tantrums and display other challenging behaviours in school-related activities, the majority of them were supportive and adapted school-related activities for these students with autism.

Whether we like it or not, and irrespective of how we speak of it, labelling exists around us. Acting as if disabilities were non-existent simply heightens stigma. This section discussed the power of reporting and the power driving fear to admit that students have autism. Labels are harmful when these make individuals "degraded, discriminated against, excluded from society or placed in classrooms without regard for their individuality" (Thomson, 2012, p. 163), but can conversely be beneficial when labelling puts students in categories for educational purposes. In conclusion, this section showed that participants affirmed that negative labelling and comments on students with autism based on their particular characteristics or traits is something real within both the education corridors and Maltese society in general. This negative labelling can be harmful and unjust when it is not used appropriately and can have detrimental effects on students and their communities.

#### **5.6.4 Teachers' Training and Resources**

CDT acknowledges the importance of teachers having the necessary knowledge and training to change ableist attitudes that may unconsciously perpetuate discrimination against students with disabilities. Valenti (2020) states that educators

with more training in inclusion and autism are more prepared and feel more capable of teaching and including students with autism, leading to stronger positive perceptions. Table 14 below shows the participants' overall responses with regard to their beliefs on the importance of training and adequate resources to help students with autism.

**Table 14:** Teachers' perceptions regarding their training and resources

Statements	Keys	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
I have received training on how to effectively work with students with autism.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>109</b>	55.1%	2.67	1.104
	Neither	29	14.6%		
	Agree	60	30.3%		
My undergraduate course has helped me to effectively handle and educate students with autism in mainstream classrooms.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>129</b>	65.2%	2.39	1.040
	Neither	31	15.7%		
	Agree	38	19.1%		
Primary teachers who haven't received training on effective ways to teach students with autism should not be expected to teach these students.	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>102</b>	51.5%	2.61	1.106
	Neither	47	23.8%		
	Agree	49	24.7%		
In my school, I can find abundant resources to help me include and support students with autism in mainstream classrooms.	Disagree	72	36.4%	3.10	1.173
	Neither	42	21.2%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>84</b>	42.4%		
I would willingly participate in training and professional development to learn how to effectively meet the needs of students with autism.	Disagree	6	3.0%	4.19	.708
	Neither	7	3.5%		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>185</b>	93.5%		

#### 5.6.4.1 Undergraduate Courses on Inclusion and Autism

Effective training programmes play a pivotal role in refuting prevailing views and shifting perspectives away from traditional attitudes to creating inclusive environments that enable all students to contribute meaningfully to society. In 2014, in England, it became mandatory for all teachers to attend specific training on autism (Hodge et al., 2022), resounding CDT's belief that training makes teachers aware of students' unique needs and creates a more culturally responsive and inclusive learning environment. Yet, although Malta has made great advances as a country when it comes to the inclusion of students with autism in school, the same cannot be said for the preparations given to teachers to teach and include these students in mainstream classrooms. Looking back at the only external audit carried out in 2014 (EASNIE, 2014) in the Maltese education system, despite acknowledging the unpreparedness of teachers during that time in educating students with special needs, including students with autism, it is disheartening to note that not much has changed since then, with local primary teachers still facing gaps in preparedness.

Despite the rising demands put on teachers to use inclusive educational practices, this fourth preliminary key factor indicated that only 19.2% (N=38) of the participants had received prior training in undergraduate courses to prepare them in the best way to teach and include students with autism prior to their teaching career. Agreeably, participants stated that their undergraduate courses only touched upon teacher pedagogy and content area expertise but provided no training on strategies to support students' diverse and individual needs, *"Not even at University are we given this necessary training"* [Participant 51]. Gail specified that in her bachelor's degree course,

*“all the training we got about autism was that ‘there’s this disorder called autism, children with autism are difficult, deal with it,’ that was all the training we got”,* making the course somewhat inconsequential when teaching students with autism. Sally could remember that at university, she had just one module that discussed inclusion in general but not one that involved students with autism. This lack of pre-service training makes teachers feel concerned about educating students through inclusive education, *“I feel that a lot of the negative outlook of teachers on autism is due to a lack of training and support”* [Stella]. Sasha continued

*“I mean, let’s face it, you spend four years at the University and do not receive training on autism, you know, it is a bit quite shocking when, in reality, if you evaluate those four years together, we were taught several useless theories when we could have been given extensive training on autism, especially when considering that more of these students are being placed in our classrooms”.*

Teachers feel that they have to accept students with autism in their mainstream classrooms, even though they are untrained and lack the knowledge to teach them. They recalled how they were taught to identify autism in students but not how to engage with them, with Sasha explaining that what teachers needed was intensive training workshops and not theories.

Elaine, the youngest participant who has recently graduated from the UoM with a Master’s degree in Teaching and Learning, shared that due to not receiving any training in her undergraduate course and thus not being prepared for the realities present at schools, she is unsure of how to deal with students with autism as *“I feel I am too green in this aspect. I nearly don’t know anything about autism”* [Elaine]. While Elaine’s



comment shows that some form of training is provided, teachers still report feeling unprepared to handle diverse classrooms. This lack of preparedness and confidence to reach out to students with autism can perpetuate ableism and hinder progress towards providing students with a more inclusive learning environment from the beginning of a teacher's career. This lack of training on autism among teachers also appears to be an issue around the globe. Teachers who participated in AlWadaani's (2019) study, which was conducted in Saudi Arabia, expressed that a lack of background or training on autism mitigated the benefits of inclusion. In Israel, Crispel and Kasperski (2021) have shown that teachers' perceptions towards these students' inclusion were influenced by their training opportunities prior to their careers. In alignment, teachers in Ireland also reported that the lack of training made them feel overwhelmed and frustrated, so they had to search for knowledge on their own (Leonard & Smyth, 2022). Christiana, the second youngest participant, felt similar feelings to Elaine, and because of this, she stated how she had to research, read, seek help from colleagues, and try to find better ways to teach students with autism of her own free will after a student with autism was placed in her class. *"So, you know, if you don't have the training, it has to be up to you to get the training you need from somewhere"* [Christiana]. Gail further commented that the lack of training does impact teachers' perceptions on teaching and including students with autism, but *"What I know I got from experience, from parents of students, and my initiative to look up information along the way"*. Participant 31, Participant 114, Sally, and Jane all agreed that as they had not received any training in their undergraduate course, they had to read for a master's degree in education and attend other training on their own initiatives to get the basics of inclusion for students with autism.

#### 5.6.4.2 *In-service Courses*

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities highlights the importance of providing educators with initial and continuous training to understand the environmental, social, cultural, and political barriers faced by students with disabilities, including students with autism (Migliarini & Stinson, 2023). Yet, to date, Maltese educators are still left with the challenge of making inclusive education work for students with autism despite lacking clear guidelines and training. *“Every staff member in class should be trained in how to work with students with autism, as you can say that most of them haven’t received any training whatsoever”* [Participant 55]. Despite teachers’ strenuous efforts, this lack of training could be the reason why nearly half of the participants (48.5%, N=96) feel futile and unsuccessful in their attempts to include and educate students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Being knowledgeable about autism and how to deal with the behaviour of students with autism is beneficial not only to teachers but also to these students and their peers. *“In return, teachers won’t feel constantly on edge and overwhelmed”* [Jessica].

Regular in-service courses influenced by CDT have emerged as a valuable resource to support and empower teachers with basic awareness and a deeper understanding of students’ individual aspects. *“Acquiring new knowledge is always beneficial”* [Participant 16], with regular in-service courses helping teachers keep abreast of different methodologies while ensuring that they “are not so spooked” when students with autism are enrolled in their classes (Slee, 2001, p. 173). CDT also suggests that attending training challenges ingrained ableist beliefs and equips teachers to actively contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society for students with disability,

including autism (Leonard & Smyth, 2022). Of the participants, only 30.3% (N=60) stated that they had received in-service training during their teaching career on how to work effectively with students with autism through CoPE sessions planned by SLTs and delivered by educators in the field. *“But these trainings are only for one or two school days”* [Jessica]. Jessica specified that although still being considered as training and was somewhat useful, training that spans one or two days lacks the necessary depth and detail for a comprehensive learning experience for inclusive education. Others confirmed that even though they ask for more courses, their plea falls on deaf ears. *“My colleagues and I have often asked SLTs for more training with regards to the inclusion of students with autism, but we never got it”* [Gail]. CDT argues that SLTs’ ‘passion for ignorance’ to recognise the importance of providing training to teachers can contribute to unintentional discrimination and stigmatisation of students, limiting these students’ opportunities and hindering their full participation in mainstream classrooms (Eilers, 2020).

Research shows that Maltese LSEs have undergone and are equipped with more extensive training in autism compared to primary classroom teachers (Attard & Attard, 2023). This difference between the training received by teachers and LSEs has led to a notable dynamic whereby, in some cases, LSEs end up teaching and informing teachers on a particular condition themselves. This was another factor mentioned by the participants that influenced their perceptions towards autism and students with this condition. Jane mentioned how,

*“I don’t think it’s fair that teachers don’t know, and LSEs do... teachers need to have more knowledge from the aspect of the education system because if*

*they don't know, they can inflict threat and they would be putting the responsibility entirely on the LSE, whereas the child is also the responsibility of the teacher".*

Providing teachers with training based on CDT can help foster a more inclusive mainstream environment that challenges traditional perspectives on autism and promotes social justice. Participants in this study repeatedly highlighted the importance of pre-service and in-service training for teachers, remarking on the need for these courses to address inclusive education of students with autism more rigorously.

In the questionnaires, there was near unanimity among the participants (93.5%) that, if given a chance, most in-service teachers were firmly willing to participate in training and professional development on the inclusion of students with autism. Of the participants who completed the questionnaire, only 13 (6.5%) were unsure or disagreed with attending further training on autism. These 13 participants presented reasons for their choices, indicating that in-service training is usually delivered by *"unprofessional educators who have a lack of experience with students with autism or who have been missing for a long time from a mainstream class"* [Participant 27]. Others specified that they might be interested in attending additional courses if they were sure that an expert in the field provided the training. *"Someone who has the experience and has worked with children with autism as an educator, not just knows and teach us a lot of theory and nothing practical"* [Participant 19] *"and someone who is always at hand to offer advice when need be"* [Participant 20].

Even though research shows that without proper training, teachers may find it challenging to educate students with autism (Valenti, 2020), only 24.7% (N=49) of the participants agreed that primary teachers who lack training in autism should not be expected to teach these students, with roughly the same amount of participants (23.7%) being unsure about this. Jenny was one of the participants who settled on the idea that teachers should not teach these students without attending any training and acquiring the necessary knowledge on autism as she believes that without this, *“teachers are limited, and it is a disservice to students with autism as they would be failed, and their needs would not be adequately met”*. One participant commented that stakeholders in the educational system need to ensure that professionals catering for students with autism need not only to be trained but also need to possess the necessary skills to effectively work with these students, as *“not everyone might have these abilities and skills”* [Participant 39]. However, Sharma et al. (2018) argue that this assumption that teachers possess the necessary abilities and skills to teach students with autism might express a belief that these students are incapable of receiving the same mainstream education as their peers. This, Sharma et al. continued, can lead to an ableist attitude toward students with autism, perceiving them as deficient compared with the ‘norm’.

#### **5.6.4.3** *Teachers’ Resources and Strategies*

Less than half of the Maltese participants, 42.4% (N=84), indicated that the school they are assigned to provides them with resources for including and supporting students with autism in the mainstream classroom. This low number shows the disparity between Maltese schools. The other participants who were either unsure or disagreed with this statement specified that *“we have absolutely no resources in our school”* [Participant

114] to help students with autism or other students who need support, even though they stated that they had raised this issue with SLTs several times. Elaine maintained that *“the population of students with autism is growing every year, but the resources provided to us to help them are not; our school is not contributing to helping us”*. Jenny continued, *“Working in difficult, restricted environments that are not conducive to learning and with minimal use of resources like our classrooms put a strain on everyone”*. Participants expressed feeling overwhelmed trying to include students with autism without the right tools provided by the school. This communicates a powerful non-verbal message on how certain Maltese schools welcome diversity and inclusion (Torenvliet et al., 2023). In this research, participants confirmed that students with autism are heterogeneous and have unique needs; thus, it is impossible to adopt a one-size-fits-all model and use the same teaching resources. Only Stella expressed that very recently, due to the pressure that she and the LSE put on the SLT, the Head bought some items for students with autism, giving examples of fidget toys and a lava lamp.

CDT calls for re-evaluating educational practices to ensure they are inclusive and accessible to all students (Eilers, 2020). In the interview, participants mentioned some resources and strategies they planned to ensure that classroom environments are inclusive and accommodating for all students, including students with autism. Among the list of resources presented, participants mentioned manipulatives, flashcards, visual supports, visual timetables, plasticine, and a class library. Nonetheless, six out of the ten interviewees expressed that they do not make frequent use of adapted resources or are unsure of what resources are best to address the needs of their students with autism. Although participants were not directly asked about whether they have ever come

across or made use of the Maltese Autism toolkit, the fact that most of them were unsure of what resources to use with students with autism clearly shows that a number of them are unaware of it or are not making effective use of it.

Interviewees, however, listed several strategies that they found effective with students with autism. *“It is your belief in the kids you have in front of you, who are different every year. You cannot be taught just one strategy, and you use it with everyone”* [Participant 48]. These include giving explicit and clear instructions, giving enough time for the students to process the information, remarking positively but constructively, minimising distractions, providing real-life examples, breaking tasks into smaller steps, and using clear and straightforward language. Sasha specified that two other very important things for these students are *“a routine that makes them feel comfortable and safe and clear information about what behaviours are accepted that should be clearly specified and rigorously adhered to”*. Participants also mentioned strategies they implement during the scholastic year to teach students the importance of working with and accepting others. Jenny frequently checks her classroom environment to ensure that it caters for the needs of students with autism as much as possible. Her class is divided into groups for almost all activities so students can discuss and work together. Sally also mentioned how she identified students with a more positive attitude towards students with autism and created buddy systems but did not force or insist that they play with them. She commented that nine times out of ten, her students were always cooperative and understanding with students with autism, *“Even those students who are normally the ‘bullies’ of the class are more gentle and emphatic with students with autism”* [Sally].

Although participants presented a number of good strategies directed to students with autism, there is still a general feeling among teachers that neither they nor the LSEs are equipped with enough resources and knowledge of strategies to teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms. *“We need more training and resources”* [Tara]. Participants specified that even if they have resources in their schools, they should be trained on how and when to use them so that successful teaching and inclusion of students with autism can be made doable.

#### **5.6.4.4** *Spaces Available at School*

“A culture of inclusion and social cohesion increases the propensity of developing a landscape of quality inclusive education that benefits all students” (Marić, 2018, p. 250). According to CDT, successfully encouraging and including students with autism in mainstream classrooms necessitates changing the environment to allow all students to participate in education. Scholars, such as Goodley et al. (2018), who have shaped the field of CDT, emphasise that impairments are not merely students’ characteristics but the failure of social and educational systems. As the needs of students with autism vary widely, teachers should strive to create a space where every student can feel empowered to express all aspects of their identities. Minich (2016) claims that at the core of CDT is the importance of clarifying the wrong in the present social reality, recognising actors for change, offering clear norms and goals for social transformation, and re-evaluating educational practices and attitudinal barriers. Yet, in this study, some participants claimed that Maltese mainstream schools are not properly equipped to adequately cater for the individualised needs of students with autism and help them flourish.



Two other themes that participants believe influence their perceptions were the teacher-student ratio and the small and ‘cramped’ spaces available in Maltese schools, where classrooms are usually *“just desks and chairs and are too small to accommodate all students who have different needs and challenges ...putting a strain on everyone”* [Sally]. This was another new theme emerging under the ‘Teachers’ training and resources’ factor. This comment shows that Maltese classrooms are not large enough to accommodate students with autism and their teachers. While Maltese policies do emphasise equitable resource distribution, this insufficient space and over crowdedness in Maltese classrooms affect both students and teachers (AlWadaani, 2019). Stella continued, *“As a teacher, I often feel like I cannot handle numerous challenges at the same time, with nearly thirty students to teach all by myself. It becomes too much”*. There was a general agreement among the interviewees that larger classrooms with fewer students can result in more successful, inclusive experiences.

Additionally, most of the participants referred to the importance of having multisensory rooms in schools. Multisensory rooms play a crucial role in providing soothing sensory experiences and reducing sensory overload or anxiety, reducing the likelihood of tantrums or challenging behaviours among students with autism, and enhancing students’ ability to succeed (Stephenson & Carter, 2011). These rooms contain equipment designed to provide sensory stimulation to students, including students with autism (Stephenson & Carter, 2011). During the interview, educators referred to the multisensory room several times, mentioning the benefits of this space, including for leisure, helping students with autism choose and control themselves, and building trust and relationships with others. These rooms typically include items “such

as projectors and effect wheels, bubble tubes, music equipment, fibre optics, vibrating devices, aroma diffusers and sound equipment” (Stephenson & Carter, 2011, p. 276). Yet, regardless of the known benefits, most of the participants referred to the lack of multisensory rooms in most Maltese mainstream schools, with no spaces where students with autism, who have short attention spans or throw tantrums, can be taken when necessary. The Head of Stella’s school *“believes having a multisensory room in every school is impossible as there needs to be a trained person who knows how to use all the appliances and be available for the whole day”* [Stella]. Stella expressed,

*“Personally, I think this is an invalid excuse because usually, the LSE assigned to the student stays with him in a multisensory room. No school has a trained educator for these spaces. But as you know, we don’t really have a say; they decide what happens”.*

Schools with better funding excel in fostering inclusion, while others with limited resources may lack this. From the interviewees, Gail and Jane stated that their classes are large, with large grounds, sand pits, resource rooms, computer rooms and quiet room. *“We are blessed to have a sizeable multisensory room that is very beneficial for timeouts and relaxation, for their proprioception, for them to, kind of reboot and motivate themselves”* [Gail]. However, they stated that in their schools, they have a timetable that *“LSEs have to follow to take students with autism in these rooms”* [Jane]. Gail stated that she had taught in the state before the church school sector, where there were no multisensory rooms in her previous schools. She specified and elaborated, *“I noticed that students with autism are somewhat calmer and can regulate their emotions*

*more in the school I am currently teaching in. I think that multisensory rooms play a crucial part in this difference” [Gail].*

#### **5.6.4.5 Conclusion**

As the prevalence rate of students with autism in Maltese mainstream classrooms continues to increase, the knowledge and training of educational stakeholders have become critical components in creating an inclusive classroom environment and positively responding to the characteristic behavioural manifestations of students with autism. The findings from this study show that the majority of Maltese primary classroom teachers have not been exposed to training on autism. This lack of training makes them feel frustrated and powerless to effectively teach and include students with autism. Although participants believe that experience is the best resource, they are strongly willing to receive extra training to develop existing practices and learn new skills on inclusion. However, they recommend that such training needs to be hands-on and provided by educational professionals with a wealth of experience in the autism field, who can also teach and inform them about practical ways, not theoretical ways. They also recommended that undergraduate courses in education, mostly in primary education, should start covering at least the basic practical ways to successfully teach and include students with autism in a mainstream classroom.

Teachers believe that regardless of whether they have had training or not on autism, they should not be provided with options on whether to decide on teaching students with autism, as, after all, it is their professional duty to teach every student placed in their classrooms, irrespective of their needs. However, they still expressed that

the lack of knowledge and training from their end is ultimately impacting the successful inclusion of these students. In conclusion, this section highlights participants' belief that training and resources are two important components influencing their perceptions when teaching and including students with autism. As has been mentioned above, CDT encompasses discussions about these factors and seeks to recognise and dispute ableism, systematic barriers, and discriminatory acts. Thus, addressing the issues of training, resources, and spaces is necessary to better equip teachers to provide students with autism with an appropriate inclusive education.

**5.7 Are there any other themes that could potentially impact Maltese teachers' perceptions of these students and their inclusion in mainstream classrooms? How are they manifested? How do they extend the core four factors identified in the literature?**

Apart from the four preliminary factors, newly discovered themes and sub-themes were generated in this study after being raised a number of times in the participants' comments and discussions. While CDT provides a valuable framework, these will add depth and context to its application, uncovering any dimensions not previously explored within the theory. The additional overarching themes identified as influencing the participants' perceptions were *(i)* classroom interaction and inclusion culture, *(ii)* restrictive spaces and high student-to-teacher ratio, *(iii)* teachers' personal and professional experience, and *(iv)* responsabilisation. While the first two additional themes were discussed in Sections 5.6.3.3 and 5.6.4.4, respectively, as extending the

core factors, the latter two themes will be separately discussed in further detail below as they provide the biggest contribution to CDT.

### **5.7.1 Personal and Professional Experiences**

Apart from understanding the influence of the behaviour of students with autism on teachers, it is also important to investigate how teachers' personal and professional experiences play a pivotal role in shaping their perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism. The experiences teachers encounter are paramount in influencing their teaching practices, with teachers' efficacy decreasing when they experience very little or no success (Hodge et al., 2022). As teachers' experiences are diverse and multifaceted, despite experiencing the same phenomenon, amplifying their voices and perceptions on the inclusion of students with autism can further help to understand their practices, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of inclusive education. This was another new important theme that emerged from the interviews, with participants expressing that, at times, personal experiences, both within and outside the classroom, have the power to transform practices and convictions and influence their perceptions. Although CDT does examine societal perceptions and norms shaping the experiences of individuals with disabilities, it does not focus on how teachers' personal and professional experiences contribute to the formation of perceptions towards disability. It is thus another conceptual theme that has been identified by the participants in this study to influence their perceptions, enhancing the theory of critical disability.

Participants also reasoned that at the beginning of their teaching careers, they might have been worried and frustrated about teaching and including students with autism without being informed, but experience, whether personal or professional, also serves as a teacher. After a rich teaching experience, some feel more self-assured in having students with autism in class. *“At the beginning of my career, I might have been worried, but now I’m used to it, so I just accept it”* [Participant 114]. Tara recalled how, at the beginning of her career, she held a stance against the inclusion of all students, irrespective of their level of severity, in the mainstream classroom. However, she candidly expressed that her perspective underwent a transformation when she came to recognise the value of inclusivity firsthand, driven by the realisation that her own child, who has autism, would greatly benefit from being included in mainstream classrooms. *“I soon realised that if I wanted my son to be included, I also needed to include other students. So, ‘bla ma trid’* [translated into ‘without desiring’], *you look into them, how you’re going to help them, and that makes all the difference”* [Tara]. Tara’s comment shows that she started to empathise and understand the importance and benefits of including these students with autism once she encountered a personal experience. Like Tara, Gail’s and Stella’s personal encounters have also led them to embrace and support all students, irrespective of their level of autism or needs. They dictated that their firsthand experiences have shown them the numerous advantages a mainstream classroom environment can offer all students. Although Stella confesses that teaching students with low-functioning autism is still challenging for her, she has developed a profound tolerance and acceptance of all students with autism.

This time, Sally referred to a professional experience with a particular student with autism. She mentioned how she had a negative experience with a student in a particular year to the extent that she openly conveyed that if it had been her first year of teaching experience, she would have fervently prayed never to teach another student with autism again. Today, Sally frankly stated that even though she is not so enthusiastic about teaching students with autism, she does not feel as bothered as she had been at the end of that scholastic year. Fortunately, she shared how she later encountered several positive experiences with other students with autism *“who weren’t all easy, don’t get me wrong, there were very difficult cases, some of them, but at least you see goodwill, you see support, you see trust in them”* [Sally]. Jessica similarly shared a challenging experience that she had with a particular student with low-functioning autism. She said that during that year, her previously positive perceptions of inclusion experienced a transition toward negativity.

*“I started looking at students with autism negatively, and at that time, I never wanted to have another autistic student in my class. Challenging experiences with these students or their parents are what gives me a negative impact”* [Jessica].

However, she continued that these negative perceptions eventually reverted back to their original positive state after teaching several other students with low-functioning autism and having favourable encounters with them.

*“Although I didn’t receive any training, what I know is from my experience and what I took along the whole years of teaching these students”* [Jessica]. Some participants mentioned that past experiences and information received from parents

and other professionals are far better than the practices they would have been taught in their training course. Looking back at the training received, some participants looked on the other side of the coin and stated that although it would have been beneficial to have training on how to deal with students with autism in their undergraduate course, they firmly support the idea that experience is the best tool when it comes to coping with and learning about students with autism, *“as each student with autism is different, and there is not one method that can be used with all students”* [Participant 25]. A veteran teacher with 27 years of teaching experience commented that *“no matter how much one may learn, every single case a teacher comes across is going to teach her something new, something that she would have never come across before”* [Participant 198]. Likewise, Jenny suggested that teachers need to be open to new cases every year and try to, first and foremost, understand the individual needs of students with autism and then work with LSEs in the best way possible.

*“A lot of trial and error is used in your experience as, in the beginning, a teacher doesn’t know what works best even though you have feedback from other teachers, LSEs and parents. Throughout my teaching experience, my personal awareness of autism has definitely changed and flourished”* [Jenny].

This study has found that Maltese teachers’ perceptions are shaped by a multitude of factors, among which are their personal and professional experiences with students with autism. Participants stated that while students’ level of autism may influence their perceptions and practices, repeated exposure to working with these students may lead to more positive attitudes that guide their responses to students with autism.



### 5.7.2 Responsibilisation

It was in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that classroom teachers started to be seen as pivotal stakeholders in mainstream classrooms, becoming responsible for creating a culture of inclusiveness where all students could thrive (Hofreiter, 2017). In 2017, McLeod analysed interviews with Australian teachers and mentioned how many of the participants saw the teaching profession as a sense of responsibility and a social mission. In her work, McLeod (2017, p. 45) explains the differences between this idea of responsibility for students in mainstream classrooms and that of responsibilisation that “is typically associated with intensified pressures on individuals to be self-governing”. Gupta and Zhao (2024) further describe the technique of ‘responsibilisation’ as the burden dictated and prescribed by society to the individual to accomplish a particular task without its help. Such acts of responsibilisation not only create a high-pressure workload for individuals but also reduce autonomy and change one’s relation to their work. In this study, ‘responsibilisation’ was another cross-cutting theme that emerged as a framing tool to interpret the findings of this study.

Although findings posit that Maltese teachers believe in the sense of teaching as a profession that encompasses caring and responsibility, placing the onus on teachers to meet students’ needs and address complex challenges in the context of inclusive education together with the curricular demands is criticised by Done and Murphy (2018). Participants in this study discussed responsibilisation in terms of their workload and the very nature of their work. They refer to how teachers are expected to adapt and deliver ‘efficiently’ designed content and, at the same time, “*create a better and more*

*efficient inclusive classroom environment*” [Sasha] while being responsabilised for students’ performance.

Done and Murphy (2018) claim that this issue of responsabilisation is putting teachers in an untenable spot to be unfairly judged, portraying them as both the problem when outcomes are inadequate and the solution for improvement. This was reaffirmed by one of the participants, *“We have to meet halfway, you know, SLTs cannot always put the blame on us when things go wrong but be first when something goes right ...but finding a balance is really hard”* [Sasha]. Regardless of the broader structural conditions and barriers faced, AlWadaani (2019) further argued that classroom educators are held responsible for implementing inclusive education but are then liable for any unsuccessful inclusion experiences.

Participants argued that responsibility for students’ inclusion and equity *“should be a goal shared among all personnel rather than leaving teachers to fend on their own”* [Tara]. The importance of consistency and shared responsibilities in inclusive education was discussed by several participants in this study, who asserted that education becomes more just when there is *“collaboration between professionals and everyone is responsible for all students... where there is collaboration from all parties, it works wonders. When there is someone who makes a full stop, it would surely not work”* [Gail]. Participants in this study also outlined that in order to deal with the responsabilisation created by the breakdown in communication and power distance between them and SLTs, they are actively seeking to share this responsibility with other educational stakeholders. Putting *“the ball of meeting needs in the court of teachers”* (Ellins & Porter,

2005, p. 188) and assigning responsabilisation to teachers without giving them the powers, support and resources necessary, makes the work more stressful and pushes the teaching profession into crisis. This, in turn, creates further power distance and leads teachers to feel more discouraged, ultimately influencing their perceptions of inclusion.

Taking it further, some participants have argued that some educational policies and SLTs fundamentally transform “*not only what we are expected to teach and do in our classrooms, but they also instruct us how we are expected to deliver the teaching content*” [Participant 35]. Due to the increasing rate of diverse students in the classrooms, teachers feel that they are now expected to have expertise in students’ diagnosed conditions, even though they were not trained about these conditions, while ensuring the adoption of appropriate teaching practices. This sense of personal responsibility put on teachers suggests how power in education reduces teachers’ ability to act freely, what Foucault (1982, p. 777) refers to as the “modes of objectification that transform human beings into subject.” In the move away from professional responsibility towards professional accountability, teachers are now becoming held accountable to specific standards and outcomes, significantly impacting the ‘who’ and the ‘why’ of teachers’ ethic of care (McLeod, 2017).

This is especially true when teachers are left to fend and adapt for students with autism outside school hours because “*at school, I don’t have time, so I have to do it at home after school*” [Participant 56]. These goals of creating new content and taking on responsibilities for students’ educational experiences and outcomes can, once again, inevitably result in an increased workload for teachers and put them under greater

pressure. Thus, the findings from this study reveal that while, to a certain point, responsabilisation can enhance motivation, when it comes to inclusion, this strategy leads to increased pressure on Maltese teachers. This makes them feel fully and solely accountable for meeting individual students' specific goals, reducing the potential for shared responsibility among them and SLTs and eventually influencing their perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. *"We need adequate resources, professional development and support to fulfil our responsibilities of inclusion effectively"* [Stella].

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings highlighted in this study, which were synthesised from the quantitative and qualitative phases, including both qualitative questionnaire comments and interviews. In the interviews, the majority of the participants spoke very fondly of students with autism and shared rich and positive narratives to support their placement in a mainstream classroom. There was a general agreement that regardless of their neurodiversity, all students should receive education in mainstream classrooms, as these settings provide a myriad of benefits that can contribute to each student's holistic development and academic success. Yet, one cannot ignore the strong and well-argued opinions of the other participants, who highlighted several challenges/barriers that are influencing their perceptions. While there is no one-size-fits-all conclusion to Maltese teachers' perceptions, varying broadly between teachers, several key themes that influence such perceptions emerged from this study and pointed to areas of conceptual contribution of this thesis. Among these, participants mentioned the behavioural challenges, pressure to conform to neurotypical

norms, overburdened teachers, the overreliance on minimal accommodations and resources, and teacher training. The additional themes outlined were the severity of autism, the personal and professional experiences as foundations of working with students with autism, and the responsabilisation put on teachers to effectively teach and include students with autism. The next Chapter will provide a summary and conclusion of these key themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework guiding this study. It will also include the implications for practice, recommendations, and limitations of this study.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter elaborates upon the findings outlined in Chapter 5 and presents the summary and conclusions of the study, answering the three analytical questions listed in Section 1.5. These are followed by the implications for practice, a set of recommendations for future research, the limitations of this research study, the contribution to theory, and general concluding remarks.

### 6.1 Summary of the Study

The focus of this study was to investigate Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Perceptions were sought to shape a more authentic perspective, as their "aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). As outlined earlier, this study provided participants with an environment free from judgement, where they could be open and express their feelings, thoughts and successes or failures. Thus, this approach offered a chance for them to share their personal and professional experiences through raw and honest approaches (Sweetapple, 2022).

Given the upsurge in the number of students with autism placed in Maltese mainstream classrooms (Calleja, 2023a) and the international research suggesting links and interdependence between perceptions and successful inclusion and development

(Gryskiewicz, 2019; Kielblock & Woodcock, 2023), it was imperative to amplify the voices of those who serve traditionally marginalised students through teaching. Therefore, this study aims to understand primary in-service teachers' perceptions of students' inclusion and the factors influencing them. Grounded in Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as a theoretical framework in this mixed-method study, I draw on these perceptions to answer the analytical questions, aiming to fill the knowledge gap in the current literature within the Maltese context, address the practical problem outlined below, and make a substantial contribution to the evolving discourse in the fields of inclusive education, special education, particularly autism education, and CDT.

## **6.2 Overview of the Problem**

One of the most important school reforms in nations worldwide has been the movement to teach and include all students in mainstream educational systems. Driven by this commitment to inclusive education, more and more students requiring special educational needs are nowadays placed and educated in mainstream classrooms with students without autism (Savolainen et al., 2020). In light of this, as the literature review in this thesis has suggested, it is imperative that classroom teachers embrace positive perceptions, recognise and address students' unique requirements, and cultivate a more inclusive and enriching educational experience for neurodiverse students.

However, according to Freitas (2020) and Sweetapple (2022), teachers deem themselves to be ill-prepared and not supported enough to effectively teach and include students with disabilities. Studies employing CDT as their theoretical framework confirm that this lack of preparedness can make teachers utilise practices that inadvertently

reinforce ableist assumptions or stereotypes created by societal norms (Castrodale, 2017; Eilers, 2021). As CDT delves into investigating the aspects that promote or hinder inclusion, this study has revealed interesting insights with respect to these aspects, critically analysing the factors influencing Maltese primary teachers' perceptions. Under the narrative shift from normativity to neurodiversity, this study places emphasis on 'severity', 'experiences' and 'responsibilisation', rendering them three important analytical CDT tools.

Although a body of existing work investigates the importance of embracing positive perceptions of inclusion (Salter & Liberman, 2016; Azzopardi et al., 2023), there is a lacuna in the existing literature, as no research has delved explicitly into primary teachers' factors within the Maltese milieu using CDT as the underlying theoretical framework. Filling in this lacuna is vital as teachers hold the key to inclusive educational success for students with autism. In addition, beyond the Maltese contexts, it seems that the scholarly perspectives on inclusion can be better understood through the incorporation of the themes that emerged from the Maltese contexts, suggesting that the severity of autism, past experiences, and how teachers are 'responsibilised' for dealing with inclusion are important factors. In that sense, focusing on these conceptual lenses within this study is not only instrumental to understanding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms but also in augmenting the general theory of CDT.



### **6.3 Discussion of Findings**

This section summarises insights from the various teachers' perceptions, challenges, and factors shaping the discourse on inclusive education for students with autism that have been gathered in this study. Each analytical question guiding this study is conceptually and systematically answered based on the quantitative and qualitative data presented in Chapter 5. These three questions will be used as sub-headings to structure this concluding chapter.

#### **6.3.1 How do Maltese primary teachers perceive mainstream classrooms as addressing the educational needs of students with autism?**

A historic moment in Malta that marked the right to education in a mainstream context was the shift from segregated to inclusive mainstream education for all students, including those with autism (MEDE, 2019). Recognising that societal, cultural, and personal factors can shape beliefs and perceptions towards inclusive education, this gradual change raised several arguments among educational stakeholders, also reflected by the variety of responses from this study's participants. Indeed, given the dynamic nature of education systems and the fact that perceptions are inherently subjective and may not represent a unified vision, the participants had a range of viewpoints, and each of these viewpoints should be considered valid.

Proponents of mainstreaming argue that positive perceptions of inclusion are intricately linked to successful, inclusive mainstream environments that facilitate students' acceptance and educational success, in contrast to ableist perceptions that hinder such a process (Eilers, 2020; Sweetapple, 2022). Most participants in this study

voiced positive beliefs in the principle of inclusion, possibly stemming from their sense of duty to welcome and accept students as individuals. Teachers agreed that including students in mainstream classrooms is their right, with these settings also providing a myriad of other benefits that can contribute to each student's holistic development, promoting social cohesion and comprehensively addressing their educational needs. These participants' positive perceptions resonate with the principles of CDT, which acknowledges that educational rights are statutory to promote equality and inclusion for students while welcoming and valuing their participation in a dynamic and supportive learning community (Akoto, 2021).

However, while most of the participants are in favour of including all students in mainstream classrooms and recognise its moral and ethical value, some of these teachers' perceptions start to shift when it directly concerns students with autism, in particular, students with low-functioning autism. Although participants still recognised these students' rights to be included, they held reservations when acknowledging the inherent challenges associated with this condition. These reservations tended to be related to teachers' own beliefs about the condition and its severity, with these participants expressing more willingness to teach and include students with high-functioning autism in their classrooms, as these are perceived to be less 'disruptive' to their overall goal of teaching, as opposed to students with low-functioning autism, which create unequal educational experiences. This finding that participants demonstrate a preference for some students but not others, since they align more with productivity and conformity, reflects institutional weaknesses that CDT seeks to address and a tension between policy and practice. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge that while

the challenging behaviours exhibited by the latter students, which negatively influence most teachers' perceptions, may appear as intentional disruptions or are an outcome of their condition, they could be partially caused by unmet needs or a lack of support.

While being mostly positive of mainstream classrooms addressing the educational needs of students with high-functioning autism, teachers expressed concerns about whether these settings yield beneficial results and adequately meet the needs of those with low-functioning autism, especially given that most primary schools in Malta have been reported to lack resources, trained staff, and adequate space for multi-sensory rooms. This inability to cater for students with low-functioning autism, participants voiced, is making their efforts futile. They expressed their opinions that special units ought to be located alongside mainstream settings to effectively address these students' holistic needs. This apparent contradiction between the majority of the participants agreeing with the inclusive rights of all students but still believing that autism does impact significantly on inclusion seems to stem when teachers favour the principle of inclusion in theory but have practical requirements or hesitations that affect their views in practice. In Malta, this perception might reflect an incomplete understanding of inclusion and its tenets. The reluctance of certain Maltese teachers to accommodate students with low-functioning autism who might 'not fit' into mainstream classes proposes that a more thorough understanding of inclusion is needed. Regardless of some students' needs being too challenging or resource-intensive, this understanding should go beyond the traditional lens and focus on meeting the diverse needs of all students, thus, bridging the gap between policy and practice. Indeed, teachers who embrace a culturally responsive approach acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all model

does not effectively address the individual needs of each student, and thus, they strive to provide support structures that accommodate a spectrum of learning needs.

In summary, this study's findings have shown that teachers' perceptions play a fundamental role in fostering a successful, inclusive learning environment where every student, regardless of their learning profile, is valued and supported equitably. Although there has been significant progress in the inclusion of students with additional needs in mainstream classrooms, with the majority of participants showing positive perceptions towards these students, there is still a long road ahead to make sure that Maltese classroom teachers are effectively working with and including students with autism, especially those with low-functioning autism. This study's findings indicate that the shifts in perception are not only a matter of challenges that these students were reported to pose in the classroom but are equally linked to other practical constraints around support or lack of support from Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), power differentials, and the responsabilisation of teachers to deal with inclusion issues 'on their own'. This is further discussed under the following two analytical questions. Teachers mentioned that communication with SLTs, the vast curriculum, and training and resources in schools are among the factors that make it even more challenging to meet the educational needs of students with low-functioning autism. In this sense, this study, in alignment with CDT, provides a further understanding of how the institutional, perceptual, and practice environment plays a more prominent role in doing justice to the inclusion of students with autism rather than solely looking at their individualised medical characteristics. Trying to understand these shifts through the additional conceptual lenses of power that emerged in this study can enable us to understand that

the inclusion and acceptance of students with autism are not only contingent on the severity level of their condition but also on how this is nuanced by contextual, institutional, organisational and societal factors that are separate from students' neurological characteristics.

**6.3.2 To what extent and how do the four specific factors (power and support from SLTs, the curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and teachers' training and resources) identified from the literature review allow us to uncover the way Maltese primary teachers perceive the inclusion of students with autism?**

Given the already identified link between perceptions and students' inclusion and development, it is crucial to recognise and critically examine the external factors shaping teachers' perceptions and influencing the provision of adequate teaching instruction for all students with autism. Based on the previous literature and guided by the CDT, *(i)* power and support, *(ii)* the curriculum, *(iii)* the discourse of labelling, and *(iv)* training and resources are among the factors that can potentially impact teachers' perceptions when teaching and including students with autism. In this study's methodologies, the participants' replies and comments were instrumental in uncovering the interplay of these four preliminary sets of factors and their effects within the Maltese context.

**i Power and Support**

With the right support, teachers can perform creditably in the inclusive education field and can help exhibit positive perceptions of inclusion (Eilers, 2021). This study showed that most Maltese primary teachers believe that power and support from SLT

play a crucial role in shaping the school's culture, which directly influences their perceptions. There was a near-even split (96 participants agreed whereas 84 were either unsure or disagreed) among participants regarding the support they receive from SLTs, with this division underscoring that despite the benefits of support, a number of teachers are still not clearly receiving the required support to effectively teach and include students with autism in their mainstream classrooms. This division appears to be closely tied to the SLTs' actions and how these stakeholders collectively respond to teachers' needs. In essence, most participants, including those currently receiving support, agreed that an absence of support, difficulties in obtaining it, unmet requests for SLTs' assistance, and undue pressure can all inevitably affect their perceptions and make them less likely to adopt inclusive practices, ultimately influencing students' learning outcomes and inclusion in practice.

The factor of collaboration and the lack of synergy between some SLTs and teachers was another strong aspect of inclusive practice that emerged from this study. While CDT does not explicitly focus on the relationship between SLTs and teachers, it asserts that "hierarchical leadership is old fashioned" (Elmazi, 2018, p. 1) and emphasises the need for open, collaborative relationships, where the latter can play a crucial role in establishing a professional community that offers a quality learning experience for all students. The 'power over' teachers rather than 'collaborative power-sharing' that has emerged in this study is making SLTs relocate away from the involvement of the classroom realities, making some Maltese teachers fear to report or admit that they need support. This leaves them with no guidance or motivation, leading to confusion and, once again, directly influencing their perceptions of inclusion.

In conclusion, Maltese teachers suggested that power and support influence their actions and perceptions of including students with autism in mainstream classrooms, and thus, they yearn for more support from educational stakeholders. The participants supported the idea that inclusive education should be a partnership and cultivated the importance of developing effective relationships and responsibility sharing not only with SLTs but also by engaging in discussions and nurturing a shared sense of purpose among students, parents/guardians, colleagues, and other concerned educational stakeholders. This aligns with CDT, which advocates for active participation in decisions and aims to promote inclusive support systems that enable individuals to attain fulfilling lives. As this is also the responsibility of SLTs, these educational stakeholders must participate actively and with great interest to inspire and encourage teachers. Maltese teachers also recommend that SLTs promote more inclusion at a whole-school level, assume a better role as listeners, consider teachers' opinions when designing students' education, and give them the necessary support to develop a more inclusive mindset based on their experiences, training, and insights.

## **ii The Curriculum**

CDT encourages educators to abolish a 'lock-step' curriculum, where all students complete the same lessons, and instead design and adapt a curriculum that recognises each student's needs and goes beyond the one-size-fits-all approach (Castrodale, 2017). It emphasises that educators should not change a particular student to 'fit' into the status quo of a 'neurotypical' classmate but must provide students at all levels with appropriate adjustments to be included and thrive in the least restrictive environment, offering them "a relevant education and optimal opportunities for development"

(UNESCO, 2005, p. 16). While a preponderance of participants hold the belief that the results of tests and assessments obtained by students with autism wield a significant influence on their perceptions, it is essential to emphasise that assimilating the academic grades of students with autism and comparing them to those having no autism may oversimplify the intricacies of education and “lose sight of the beauty in student variation” (Sweetapple, 2022, p. 112).

Most participants in this study believe that students’ responsibility rests on teachers and expressed how they frequently strive to transform and restructure the curriculum to support students’ unique learning needs, enforcing CDT’s principles. Participants believe that a lack of modifications might make it difficult for some students to keep up with their peers, which might result in the former being excluded from mainstream classrooms and leading to exclusionary practices. Yet, a considerable number still bluntly asserted that despite their strenuous efforts, they perceive modifications for these students as a challenge and an additional burden, making them feel overwhelmed and stressed. For these teachers, the commitment and additional effort required to modify and adapt the curriculum, tests, and assessments play a central role in shaping their practice of inclusion and impacting their perceptions. In addition, participants also mentioned additional themes that hinder them from modifying the curriculum for students with autism, with some notable ones being the lack of time, vast syllabus, student-teacher ratio, and inconsistent application of access arrangements for these students. These barriers, leading to the selective process of teachers to implement inclusive practices, signal that inclusion might be seen by some as a supplementary procedure to be applied only when feasible.



In this study, participants referred to the need for reform policies and practices within the Maltese education system that take their voices into consideration when selecting relevant curriculum content for students. Once again, they also specified the need for SLTs' involvement and for these educational stakeholders to be at teachers' disposal whenever they encounter challenges or need support in the teaching-learning methodologies, especially when a shortage of instructional support staff is well evidenced. Apart from acknowledging that students have different strengths and learning styles, such approaches can, in turn, positively influence teachers' perceptions of inclusion, demonstrating a collective commitment to helping all students thrive in mainstream classrooms.

### **iii The discourse of labelling**

Historically, students with autism have long been oppressed and marginalised in society due to the construct of disability, which has led to several negative stereotypes, biases, and assumptions (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020). The language directed to these students, however, has started to change over time, mirroring changes in societal perceptions of students' differences and disabilities. Akoto (2021) indicates that a society that engenders negative perceptions and behaviours towards students with autism ultimately impacts both these students and their peers. On this idea, CDT seeks to change misconceptions and the conventional notions that students with autism are 'pitiable', 'valueless', and 'deficient' and criticises those individuals who perpetuate inequality and label and discriminate against certain students, rendering them powerless and vulnerable.

Participants in this study did not ignore the fact that they have had conversations where colleagues labelled students and debated that it is arduous to teach and include those with autism with those without autism. They indicated that in these conversations that involved negative descriptors about students with autism or their parents/guardians, most of them would stop their colleagues from making such comments, taking the stand against labelling these students. Nonetheless, others, although mindful of the impact of labelling and the possibility of reproducing the same narratives and perpetuating the same exclusionary practices, prefer not to stop colleagues, especially SLTs, from expressing beliefs and experiences. Participants, once again, point to the lack of support and confidence to face educational stakeholders, confirming that power relationships in the learning environment are also a central theme under this factor.

Labelling is a double-edged sword which can greatly impact educational outcomes. Some researchers argue that labelling students is useful and helpful in providing additional support to improve educational and academic opportunities in inclusive classrooms (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020; Thomson, 2012). Nevertheless, counterarguments reveal that negative labelling could also be construed as disappointing as it predisposes some students to be excluded or stigmatised and, ultimately, may not be helpful for the inclusive nature of students' education (Berk, 2015; Nah & Tan, 2023). Yet, in contexts such as the Maltese contexts, where although a number of participants do stop others from labelling, this study still showed that some negative labelling goes unreported or unacted upon. In this regard, the effects on students with autism can be even more insidious, leading these students to make it more challenging to receive the support

needed, which can hinder their educational development and reinforce existing inequities.

All in all, even though they have conversations about and listen to others labelling these students, most Maltese teachers remain steadfast in their beliefs and principles in the face of differing opinions. This study revealed the high level of resilience and robust internal belief system held by a considerable number of participants who declared that colleagues' negative descriptors of students with autism are not a strong predictor that influences their perceptions towards these students' inclusion. Participants realised that each student is unique and that one cannot generalise, maintaining their independence in forming opinions. Thus, the discourse of labelling was not an influential factor in the perceptions of most participants in this study. Nonetheless, the fact that some teachers were afraid to report it or did not know how to act in the presence of labelling created by SLTs further strengthened the gap in power relations, as argued in the first factor.

#### **iv Teachers' training and resources**

Having favourable perceptions is one aspect of providing a thriving, inclusive environment for students, yet educators also need to gain knowledge, skills, and competencies to create successful learning experiences (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). It is disconcerting to see that most participants criticised the lack of attention paid within their undergraduate and in-service courses to effectively work with students with autism, in particular those with low-functioning autism. This lack of knowledge and training on autism created a strong sense of anxiety and a fear of failure among teachers, as revealed in this study, mostly in the interviewees' discussions. Participants

expressed that they feel ill-equipped to teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms, making the inclusive educational model more challenging. This lack of training and resources, according to CDT, underscores the Maltese education system's failure to prepare teachers to question ableist norms rather than individual shortcomings. By prioritising teachers' perspectives, a CDT-informed approach promotes the importance of training teachers beyond technical skills to also incorporate critical reflection on biases and power dynamics.

Regardless of this, Maltese teachers are still expected to plan and apply effective practices, sometimes without any support, to meet the needs of students with autism and that of their peers. This, once again, confirms further responsibility put on teachers. As some participants struggle to use diverse resources and, at the same time, implement specific strategies and interventions, they undoubtedly agree that training and resources are strong factors that highly impact perceptions and practices toward including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. To this end, almost all participants are decisively willing to attend hands-on training and professional development in inclusion and autism.

Since in Malta, SLTs plan most training to be delivered to in-service teachers, these stakeholders need to offer ongoing workshops and systematic and intensive training sessions about inclusive teaching strategies while ensuring that teachers can access appropriate resources and technology to meet all students' diverse needs. Training delivered by professional lecturers who have experience teaching in mainstream

classrooms can help bolster teachers' confidence and equip them with knowledge on effectively meeting the needs of students with autism.

## **v Conclusion**

While the study primarily investigated four factors that could potentially influence teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism, participants in this study feel that three of these factors, i.e., *(i)* power and support, *(ii)* the curriculum, and *(iii)* training and resources, directly impact their perceptions and can exacerbate negative perceptions, contributing to the already fragile teachers' abilities to teach and include students with autism in the mainstream classrooms. The rejection of negative labelling as a factor that plays a role in shaping their perceptions indicates that most participants have a solid basis to look at students holistically and empathetically as individuals without being influenced by these negative labels. Yet, although not directly influencing their perceptions of inclusion, teachers still feel they lack the courage to admit or report labelling. They felt that they needed to take responsibility for it themselves, which, coupled with the other three factors, led to the theme of responsabilisation that extends the CDT. Participants claimed that apart from these practical constraints, other undeniable factors within the local educational sector continue to influence their perceptions, often leading to the exclusion of students deemed to be disruptive or less likely to flourish within traditional frameworks. Maltese teachers believe that addressing these additional themes and receiving further support and training can be a stepping stone toward improving their perceptions and providing enhanced support for all students with autism.

**6.3.3 Are there any other themes that could potentially impact Maltese teachers' perceptions of these students and their inclusion in mainstream classrooms? How are they manifested? How do they extend the core four factors identified in the literature?**

The manifestation of teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism is intricately linked with challenges and barriers that collectively shape their perceptions. Participants mentioned that primary teachers face additional challenges and barriers in developing and implementing effective teaching strategies to include students with autism in mainstream classrooms. After analysing the comments and data responses to the individual interviews, additional overarching themes – *(i)* classroom interaction and inclusion culture, *(ii)* restrictive spaces and high student-to-teacher ratio, *(iii)* personal and professional experience, and *(iv)* responsabilisation – were identified as influencing the participants' perceptions and extending the core factors.

**i Classroom Interaction and Inclusion Culture**

When classroom teachers “embrace neurodiversity, they value the student, the disability, and the interaction between both in education” (Sweetapple, 2022, p. 115). A key finding highlighted among the interviewees that extends the core factors, mainly the discourse of labelling, is the dynamics of classroom interaction and inclusion culture. Participants expressed that if class teachers wholeheartedly accept students with autism for who they are, shifting from a deficit-focused medical model to a neurodiversity perspective, they will foster an accepting classroom environment of understanding and inclusivity and set a powerful example for those students without autism to do the same. Interviewees assertively conferred the importance of preparing

those students not on the autism spectrum and discussing 'differences' at the beginning of the scholastic year. This approach not only deepens students' understanding but also helps students with autism to be accepted and thrive academically and socially, enriching the overall experience for every student and educator in the class. Participants shared that this transition to prepare peers is done on teachers' own accord with no evidence of uniform recommendations by SLTs. They expressed their desire that SLTs ensure that their school's ethos, school-wide culture, and policies have clear expectations to be set within the school for inclusive education and that these are shared with educators and adhered to. By embodying inclusive principles and immersing themselves in positive and respectful learning contexts, SLTs can set positive examples for the entire school community and contribute to nurturing a cohesive and harmonious learning environment.

## **ii Restrictive Spaces and Student-to-teacher Ratio**

Other themes referred to several times among many interviewees and that extend the preliminary training and resources factor were the restrictive spaces in Maltese primary classrooms and the large student-to-teacher ratio. The participants stated that Maltese classrooms were built in the early nineteen hundreds, and only very few of them have been rebuilt or redesigned since then, posing barriers to a safe and inclusive environment. They refer to the class size and overcrowding of students within the classes that is impacting their relationships with students, increasing workload, and leading to feeling overwhelmed. Teachers in this study recommend that class sizes be kept small in mainstream classrooms with physically ample space and an adequate teacher-student ratio where students can be grouped appropriately and their individual

needs addressed. Participants also mentioned the importance of restructuring Maltese schools and classrooms and including designated spaces that provide for students' diverse styles and needs, including students with autism.

The absence of multisensory rooms in Maltese schools, where students with sensory processing difficulties can attend before transitioning back to mainstream classrooms, was a theme that emerged repeatedly in this study. Interviewees expressed that a lack of multisensory rooms makes them feel frustrated and unsupported and hampers their efforts to create an effective learning environment that meets students' needs. This situation ultimately leads to negative perceptions towards the inclusion of these students. Participants also stressed the importance of the Maltese government recognising the proven benefits of multisensory rooms in schools and investing in these spaces to foster a more enriching and equitable learning environment, particularly for students with low-functioning autism.

### **iii Conclusion**

In essence, apart from these two themes that extend the preliminary factors, this study outlined another two influential aspects that participants believe are pivotal in influencing their perceptions. Teachers' personal and professional experiences and what I analysed in this study under the concept of 'responsibilisation' were the pivotal conceptual lenses through which this study's data analysis was developed and which helped address the overarching research question. Despite the global nature of the importance of identifying and considering power differentials, experiences, and the responsibilisation of teachers, to date, I have not been able to find studies that have



incorporated them with CDT and focused on these elements in relation to students' inclusion and the professional lives of Maltese primary teachers. This unique focus in the context of inclusive education for students with autism within the Maltese region, where this study is empirically grounded, is of utmost importance. This will not only bring to the fore the global significance of this topic but also shed light on the relationship between teachers' perceptions and their professional work, as highlighted below.

#### **iv Personal and Professional Experience**

It is indisputable that the importance of training cannot be overlooked, as it could be instrumental in teachers' initial perceptions. A prevailing sentiment among participants was the belief that they were not adequately trained in their pre-service and in-service courses about working with and including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Yet, a considerable number of participants firmly assert that personal and professional experience is hailed as the best teacher, recognising it as equally fundamental in forming their skills and abilities and strongly influencing their perceptions. As CDT does not explicitly address teachers' personal and professional experiences with students with autism, this study presents a valuable extension of this broader framework with respect to its application to autism and inclusion in mainstream educational settings. The incorporation of firsthand insights and teachers' practical knowledge and experiences in this study has not only helped provide empirical data and bridge the gap between theory and practice but also made a profound impact on the field of CDT. It has the potential to make the field of CDT more widely adopted and refined and provide valuable perspectives on needed systemic policies and practical

changes that align with its principles. In this way, teachers' personal and professional experiences helped enrich the academic discourse and hopefully drive needed policy change in Maltese educational settings that is not only theoretically sound but also practically feasible.

The study's findings point to the role of experience or encounters as an influential contextual factor in shaping teachers' ability and confidence to deal with students' severity and behaviour. Interviewees shared a number of experiences that informed their plan of action and impacted their perceptions of teaching and including students with autism. They claim that power and negative experiences contribute to forming initial expectations about students and influencing how they are assessed, interacted with, and perceived. In contrast, positive interactions and personal or professional experiences with students with autism challenged preconceived notions and were a potent catalyst for change, transforming any negative perceptions into positive ones and contributing to a culture that values diversity.

#### **v Responsibilisation**

Although encountering barriers, most Maltese teachers carried a sense of social responsibility into their mainstream classrooms with key attributes to educate all students and encompassing responsibility for their well-being and academic success. Teachers feel that some SLTs absolve themselves of responsibility, but this does not empower teachers to take ownership. Rather, it fills them with fear, anxiety and a sense of vulnerability around how to do inclusion in practice. Teachers in this study felt that their ability to deal with students with autism, in particular those with low-functioning

autism, was further undermined when the full responsibility for this was placed on them, with SLTs disengaging in their planning and implementation. This meant that the teachers felt even more detached and ill-prepared to support these students. Once again, the responsabilisation solely and excessively placed indirectly on teachers, with SLTs being 'too busy' to get involved, created much pressure and worsened the situation on the ground for teachers. This was especially true when teachers admitted they did not have the training, experience, and resources to adapt to all students in their classrooms.

The issue of responsabilisation advances the field of CDT by accentuating the pivotal role Maltese teachers play as change agents within educational systems. Delving into this novel theme of responsabilisation can help foster a more inclusive community that acknowledges and respects a multitude of perspectives while upholding the rights and needs of students with autism. The commitment of Maltese teachers to responsabilisation is palpable in their eagerness to engage in training that deepens their knowledge of autism and inclusive pedagogies. This not only broadens the horizons of CDT but also enriches students' educational experiences and advocates for systemic changes that further promote the educational development and learning of students with autism.

Findings suggested that responsabilisation is manifested here by some SLTs or the Maltese education system allegedly giving teachers the authority to do what they want in the classroom but increasing pressure on them to act responsibly and teach with accommodations when they have no skills or knowledge of how to do this. Participants

confirmed that the whole pressure of education and inclusion seems to have shifted to them, making them further responsabilised and accountable, not only for delivering the vast curricular content in a short period of time but also for adapting it and delivering it in a way that facilitates academic excellence for all students. These additional themes to responsabilise teachers denote a mounting level of demands and expectations on these educators and their actions to include and adapt to all students' needs, influencing, in negative ways, their abilities to work with these students and ultimately their perceptions of students with autism.

Research using CDT to date does not explicitly address the above-mentioned additional themes of personal experience and responsabilisation. Yet, local Maltese teachers have identified them as factors that directly influence their perceptions around the practicalities of inclusion and play a crucial role in their decision-making processes towards the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom. These themes of experience and responsabilisation provided a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the environmental factors affecting teachers' perceptions and provided a useful conceptual extension to the four preliminary factors identified from the literature review. As CDT is a constantly developing discipline surrounded by blurry limits (Hall, 2019), these findings contribute new knowledge developed from studying the factors influencing primary teachers' perceptions within the Maltese context.

#### **6.4 Contribution to Critical Disability Theory**

“One can study disabled people and not be doing critical disability studies, and one can be doing critical disability and not be directly studying disabled people” (Schalk,

2017, p. 1). Schalk's argument resonated with the conceptual and methodological framing of this study. CDT served as the foundational theoretical framework for this study and the driving force in shaping every aspect of this mixed-method study, from the preliminary focus factors to the study design and data analysis. It primarily aims to give attention to students with disabilities and include their voices, yet this study goes beyond its traditional scope. Adopting CDT's core principles as a transformative paradigm, this study broadens its focus by placing a significant emphasis on autism, a topic covered by few studies that use this theoretical framework, and specifically addressing primary students with autism and advocated for their rights and inclusion. This shift in focus not only expands the 'theory norm' but is also a crucial step towards a more comprehensive understanding of disability-related issues. Additionally, by directing its attention to primary teachers, the front-line stakeholders who implement and impose educational practices on students and influence their development and inclusion, this study acknowledges the pivotal role of teachers in inclusive education and in shaping the social justice agenda, generally advocated for by critical theories such as CDT. As educators often have authoritative positions within classroom settings and as CDT underscores the role of power in shaping students' learning experiences, to this end, teachers' active voices in this study were deemed valuable expertise, presenting a more empathetic and accurate representation of school realities grounded in real-world contexts. Their conceptualisation as a lens for understanding disability, coupled with application to a context (Malta) not previously explored, underscored this study's rationale. In this respect, investigating Maltese primary teachers' perceptions and shedding light on other educational systemic issues that CDT frequently touches upon

helped extend and enrich the scope and applicability of CDT to notions such as personal and professional experiences, responsabilisation, and the associated issues of power.

Through the lens of CDT, the thesis reveals that teachers' perceptions are not formed in isolation but are reflections of larger societal structures. As perceptions can lead to social exclusion and influence students' academic performance, this study focused on four preliminary factors proposed in literature supported by CDT, which were thought of as influencing teachers' perceptions within the contexts of autism and inclusive education. Results showed that three of the four preliminary factors — namely, power and support, curriculum, and training and resources — were crucial in shaping Maltese teachers' perceptions. These confirm the findings of previous literature on this topic, thus helping to add depth to data and act as anecdotal evidence that affirms its trustworthiness. The factor of labelling, one of the critical tenets of CDT, was deemed by the participants to be less influential to their perceptions, with the celebration of neurodiversity being more prevalent among most participants. Yet, the power or the lack of it and the fear of reporting labelling became an additional factor to what we already know from the literature on the negative effects of labelling. However, the study did not stop at these known factors. During the data collection and analysis phases, it was evident that participants encountered other factors that made it difficult to adapt their practices to promote an inclusive learning environment. In this study, CDT accentuated the importance of educators being critically reflective of their biases and called for institutional reforms that upend traditional hierarchies and accept a variety of learning styles. The data analysis revealed that with the right support and resources

teachers do try to create an environment that promotes positive interactions with neurodiverse students.

This study provided two additional themes that contributed to knowledge – the concepts of personal and professional experiences and responsabilisation – and it is the nuance around these factors and the dynamics in which they influence teachers that provide an interesting conceptual extension to CDT. These novel themes not only build a body of knowledge and enrich the CDT field but also open up new avenues for research and understanding in the fields of autism and inclusive education.

As teachers are key stakeholders who play a prominent role in the journey toward more inclusive educational environments, the notion of personal and professional experiences served as a powerful analytical tool in the study to understand the multiplicity of factors that influence inclusive mainstream settings. This thesis, through the application of CDT, reveals how systemic and societal influences intersect with teachers' personal experiences to shape their beliefs and behaviours. By adding empirical research around the role professional and personal experiences played in their approaches to inclusion and change in perceptions, this study's findings offer yet another analytical sub-category under the CDT. The experiences reported by the teachers and their influence on decision-making in the classroom can help deconstruct, in more depth, teaching and autism, providing a more fulsome sense and an understanding of the factors influencing teachers' perceptions and affecting students' inclusion. This exploration helps CDT evolve toward revealing areas requiring systemic change as a response to an individual experience and evaluating more disability-related

practical and effective solutions within mainstream classrooms. A systemic change promoted by real-life experiences results in more pragmatic approaches to promoting inclusion. This study describes teachers' personal and professional experiences that are not available in previous studies published in Malta, which also provide a conceptual extension of CDT beyond its borders.

This study revealed that SLTs and the Ministry for Education, Employment, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) are putting an excessive burden on teachers to implement inclusive practices and address disability-related issues without giving them sufficient support, resources, or training required for success. This, then, impacts their behaviour and decision-making and influences students' inclusion. Through such responsabilisation, mainly manifested in support, collaboration, inclusive classroom practices and professional development, this study emphasises the need to alter power dynamics, demonstrating how vulnerabilities created in practitioners through making them responsible for the incompetencies of others, can reinforce systemic disadvantages. These actions exhibit a commitment to a more supportive and inclusive educational setting for all students, thereby emphasising this study's relevance and importance. With the new factor of responsabilisation, CDT is extended to the aspects of social justice and inequality that go beyond students and show how these impact the distribution of resources, modifications and adaptations and affect teachers. Exploring teachers' responsabilisation in this framework reveals the influence of a lack of responsibilities on the part of SLTs and MEYR on the actual practice of inclusion and development of students in mainstream classrooms. The burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed experienced by the participants, which have been reported to lead to



negative impacts on students with disabilities, suggests that systemic change is not just necessary but urgent to assist teachers in their role. Thus, the focus on responsabilising teachers becomes another useful analytical lens under the CDT, focusing attention on the power or powerlessness when teachers are responsabilised for achieving students' inclusion and promoting positive development.

Devlin and Pothier (2006, p. 27) indicate that “the biggest challenge comes from mainstream society’s unwillingness to adapt, transform, and even abandon its ‘normal’ way of doing things”. In this study, society is called upon to adapt and promote inclusion through social support, policy reforms, and the empowerment of students with autism. The study’s findings underscore the need for immediate and comprehensive system changes in inclusive education, including the need to mandate SLTs to be more involved. SLTs can bring a wealth of experience and strategic vision, and thus, their participation is not merely beneficial but crucial. Their insights and leadership are indispensable in ensuring alignment with the system’s goals and success. Their participation can help inspire teachers, nurture an apprehension of accountability and commitment, and contribute to the overall growth of the educational system.

In summary, CDT aims to highlight contextual factors which prevent social justice issues, in this case, factors that influence the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. Using CDT as a theoretical framework in this study helped outline themes influencing teachers’ perceptions and advocate for systemic changes within the social and environmental systems to enable marginalised, stigmatised and discriminated students to engage in the educational process. CDT also helped address

the gaps between policy formation and enactment and between theoretical knowledge and real-world context. The application of CDT to practice can help reveal factors that may be considered when making or redefining Maltese policy recommendations from the perspective of the people on the ground, in this case, Maltese primary teachers. This can promote a more holistic approach and effective strategies for all students, including those with autism, to achieve better inclusion and equity in education.

## **6.5 Limitations of the Study**

This study provided an in-depth analysis of the Maltese context, the first one of its type in Malta, on teachers' perceptions towards including students with autism in mainstream classrooms through the lens of CDT. It, therefore, provides an important direction for policy and analysis from the perspective of CDT to reveal factors beyond student characteristics that influence their inclusion. This thesis focused on teachers' perceptions, and thus, a natural limitation of this study was that no voices of students with autism were collected. However, as this study focused solely on teachers' subjective perceptions, including their voices as the closest educational stakeholders influencing students' learning, inclusion, and development was imperative and most appropriate, given the study's objectives and aims. Including students' voices alongside that of teachers may be a useful next step, yet critical ethical considerations will need to be considered, given the vulnerabilities of student participants.

A second limitation of this study is the number of questionnaires distributed to the Maltese primary teachers. This restriction was imposed by the MEYR because of the number of other studies being carried out at the time of this research. These limitations

undermined the potential for generalisability and the opportunity to draw broader conclusions because I was not able to target the total population. Another limitation was the small number of interviews, with only a few participants from the quantitative phase expressing a desire to continue with the interviews. However, both of these factors were beyond my control, and the aim of this study's interviews was not to generalise but rather to provide a deeper insight, which was achieved in this study.

Furthermore, although participants' demographic information was still presented in this study, given that this study did not make use of narrative and biographical research, there was no reference to participants' profiles during data analysis. Profiles were solely used to provide the readers with context, but were not pertinent to this study's research questions, which solely required a cross-sectional sequential approach. Nonetheless, the profiles and the gendered data could be valuable for future research.

## **6.6 Implications and Recommendations**

The recollection and articulation of the participants' experiences and perceptions in this mixed-method study spurred implications and recommendations that need to be investigated for the purpose of improving inclusive education for students with autism within the Maltese context. The first clear implication of this research is that within Maltese society, there is a need for more nationwide educational campaigns, through different channels, to create awareness among various stakeholders and improve the etiquette of teachers and SLTs to address the power relations and the vulnerabilities created by responsabilising teachers. At the forefront of policymaking, the Maltese education system is pivotal in formulating policy agendas grounded in research-based

practices that promote inclusivity at all levels of the education system. The foundation of educational progress lies in strong policy support; hence, this entity should be more responsible for setting overarching education policies and standards that address the needs of students with diverse abilities and reviewing and implementing laws to address discrimination.

Decisions in policy and practice should prioritise acknowledging primary teachers' voices, as stakeholders at the heart of the educational process who are directly engaged with students, to provide input and opinions based on their personal and professional experiences. These should subsequently be used to address areas of policy that can help address issues encountered by teachers and enforce the importance of inclusive education without conditional loopholes that expedite selective exclusion. This would, in the first place, establish a more cultural shift towards social inclusion and cohesion, reinforcing the right of students with autism to receive the same education as those without autism. Moreover, SLTs need to be aware of the current college and national policies and practices in inclusive education and set clearer and consistent expectations within their school culture that value diversity, celebrate differences, and create conducive and accepting learning environments for all students. These expectations should be for themselves and the teachers, outlining ways in which these two groups of stakeholders can stay in regular contact and support each other.

While it is well-known that policies shape the framework for inclusive education, its heart and success remain in its practitioners. As a complex endeavour, successful inclusive education practices depend on the combined efforts of various educational

stakeholders that shape effective educational policies and practices. Building upon educational policies and standards, another underlying implication is investing in more teacher education programmes that lay the foundation for inclusive education. Providing additional professional training and practice while teachers are studying for their teaching careers empowers them to identify symptoms of autism as early as possible and makes them eager to adapt and work collegially to meet students' diverse educational needs. This study's results pointed out that theory and practice must be fully integrated into mainstream classrooms. Pre-service teachers in Malta need to be more prepared for the realities they will face at schools, for instance, by spending some time during their training accompanying a professional teacher in class or seeing videos of educators in class dealing with LSEs and students with autism, helping to obtain a realistic demonstration of the needed pedagogy. Teachers could also benefit from concrete examples and case studies clearly distinguishing inclusive versus integrative practices and encouraged to engage in reflexive practice. This infers significant changes in teachers' educational courses that not only influence these stakeholders but also have implications that can transform mentalities within educational communities, portraying autism as an accepted part of normality. (Leiva-Olivencia, 2021).

Without adequate training, teachers have to rely only on experiential learning, leading to struggles when attempting to effectively address the diverse needs of students, particularly those with low-functioning autism. To overcome these challenges, the Maltese education system and SLTs should commit to planning national and school-level workshops and provide in-service teachers with professional development training where inclusive education and autism form the cornerstone, helping to shift to a more

neurodiverse paradigm. This research greatly supports the need for training that is ongoing, hands-on, and practical, to help teachers acquire the necessary knowledge and skills and become aware of different strategies and interventions that can be used to support these students. With more conceptual and practical knowledge, teachers would feel more confident to discuss autism or other conditions with the students themselves and their classmates at the beginning of a scholastic year, which could increase teamwork and develop resilience. Furthermore, with more training and experience, teachers could be consulted to give more crucial advice about creating more inclusive and accessible learning environments for students with autism. LSEs must also be further trained in autism to collaborate effectively with teachers and help meet students' needs. Besides this, SLTs must, first of all, be given badly needed training in the pedagogy used in class to educate students with autism in order to develop a sound understanding of the needs of students with autism and make executive decisions about appropriate adaptations. They should be trained to monitor the work being carried out by LSEs, classroom teachers and INCOs in implementing the inclusive education policy.

Another implication relates to the state of school provision for students with autism. Data resulting from this research shows significant barriers that are affecting students with autism in Maltese mainstream schools. The dispute between mainstream and special schools was contentious among participants. Participants indicated that more investments are needed to support mainstream institutions and ensure all students benefit from student support services. Maltese mainstream classrooms should also be redesigned with multisensory rooms in each school to incorporate flexible schedules and respond to the evolving needs of students with autism. As CDT in schools

shifts away from a deficit model approach and situates disability between individual embodiments of students and the learning design based on human rights principles, the education system should also discuss the importance of enforcing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles as an alternative format for inclusion that moves away from the medical model and into safe, secure and conducive learning communities that prioritise access for all students. Through the three UDL principles – multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement – UDL can offer educators hands-on tools to implement CDT in classroom practices and shift the focus away from the student's exceptionality onto the educator as a designer, making autism 'less daunting' (Fovet, 2023). Through these principles and taking UDL on a broader scale when designing the curriculum, UDL can transfer the importance of presenting information through different media, providing opportunities for communication, and bringing in students' personal experiences to engage and capture their interests during the learning process. The Maltese Ministry for Education should also provide equitable resource allocation and appropriate provision of human support in education opportunities, encourage the use of smaller, quieter spaces, and rethink standardised testing policies.

Furthermore, there needs to be a driving force that moves educators away from seeing diversity as a learning barrier towards the idea that diversity is an opportunity for all students to learn and achieve. A flexible curriculum and formative assessments should be holistically planned and implemented with inclusivity and responsive practices that help accommodate and accurately measure students' different learning styles and abilities. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of each

student's progress and inform instructional decisions. This flexibility can be evidenced by adapting lessons, changing the pace of instruction, providing breaks, fostering a culture of inclusion, and having multiple plans in the event that a student needs differentiation. The curriculum should be replanned or revised, with the inclusion of different educational stakeholders, to accommodate students with different conditions. Teachers should also have a website or some time to share knowledge, first-hand experience, and practical guideline opportunities to learn from others, like discussing with colleagues and professional in-service courses focusing on the practical side. Moreover, SLTs and education authorities must regularly review Maltese policies and practices, gathering feedback from students, parents, and educators to identify areas for improvement. This enables continuous refinement and adaptation, ensuring that inclusive education remains responsive to the evolving needs of students.

Finally, collaboration among different educational stakeholders across many hierarchies is crucial to improving the inclusive education experience for these students in mainstream classrooms. SLTs should consistently check in with teachers by maintaining open lines of transparent communication while actively fostering a culture of collaboration that includes frequent pre-scheduled meetings and ensuring fair and constructive teaching practices. SLTs should also provide timelines and clear guidelines regarding the implementation of inclusion and ensure that educators understand and effectively implement these policies, collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, and cooperative learning programmes. This can not only take their needs into account when requiring support but also ease their responsabilisation. SLTs should also be available to help address any issues and challenges promptly and efficiently, ensuring



teachers are provided with individualised support, flexible learning spaces, resources, and accommodations aligned with best practices throughout the year. SLTs and Inclusive Co-ordinators (INCOs) should also encourage teachers to make use of the Autism toolkit in the classroom. Based on the recently revised versions of the Maltese inclusion documents, the findings of this study warrant a paradigm shift in thinking and action to create a more holistic and adaptive Maltese learning environment. The whole school community should embrace and implement these changes, including policymakers, SLTs, teachers, and other stakeholders, as these imply a joint effort to integrate all students, including students with autism, into the mainstream education classroom.

From a CDT perspective, such attempts can support an education system that moves beyond seeing accommodation and inclusion as ‘kindness’, and alternatively purports to change the fundamental beliefs, methods, and systems of education to affirm the rights, autonomy, and dignity of students with autism. In summary, Maltese policies and practices should be rechecked and transformed to foster a more positive and inclusive educational environment while prioritising fairness and inclusivity. Adopting policies about inclusive education, studying the factors that cause the issues of power and responsabilisation, offering more opportunities for teachers to attend professional development sessions, and implementing real-world applications into a flexible curriculum can all help contribute to a dynamic and ever-evolving educational landscape within the Maltese context for the benefit of all students, including students with autism. By prioritising resources in school budgets, investing in meaningful and hands-on training, establishing structures for parents to seek support, and establishing

structures for reporting in safe and non-threatening ways, students with autism can feel more included and supported to flourish in mainstream classrooms.

## **6.7 Recommendations for Further Research**

This study used a mixed-method approach through questionnaires and interviews to foster an understanding of teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism. A possible avenue for future work would be to investigate whether the different demographic variables of the participants, including gender, age, school location and teaching experience, impact their perceptions. In an attempt to examine how first-hand experiences affect teachers' perception, a longitudinal study that captures how the perception of teachers shifts as they progress from pre-service to in-service can be conducted. These studies could also be carried out with other teachers, such as secondary teachers or those working in special schools, with results compared with this study's findings. Moreover, students' voices can also be used alongside teachers' voices to enrich the findings from the perspectives of influenced individuals, offering a more comprehensive view of inclusive education.

Instead of just listening to teachers' voices and sharing their success stories through questionnaires and interviews, future studies could also incorporate observations to apprehend teachers' experiences in practice within the classroom setting. Such research can provide a rich perspective of how these teachers interpret the students' behaviours and act in the mainstream environment and provide better insights into how teachers can better provide intervention techniques tailored to students' needs. It is also imperative to analyse the perceptions of LSEs towards

including students with autism, as this can provide a comprehensive understanding of the Maltese educational landscape. Moreover, as SLTs set the tone for the school culture and policies, including their viewpoints presents a more holistic and informed approach to meaningful improvements in the education system. Understanding the various perspectives of these educational stakeholders may offer important insight into how the inclusive mainstream setting can be adapted better and how potential stakeholders can collaborate together as a multidisciplinary team to strengthen relationships in inclusive education.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

Teachers have a unique insight into the benefits, efforts and challenges associated with the teaching and inclusion of students with autism. Approaching their insights through a CDT lens, it became apparent in this study that if teachers are to be prepared to effectively and inclusively teach students with autism, they need to challenge and resist ableism and any other prejudices in discourses, practices and educational systems. This is the activist part of CDT, which was met in this study with power differential and responsabilisation, creating vulnerabilities in some Maltese primary teachers to take any action.

While CDT encourages us to look at disability in a more inclusive and equitable manner, Maltese primary teachers still acknowledge that, in practice, one cannot ignore certain factors that contribute to the discrepancy between theory and practice and can make them feel less confident to teach and include students with autism. Participants in this study confirmed that the absence of proper knowledge and training, the

curriculum, the lack of support, engagement and resources, past experiences, and responsabilisation can all make it challenging for teachers to fully implement inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms, thus directly influencing their perceptions. Without the necessary support, collaboration, training and resources, teachers may find themselves ill-equipped to address the unique needs of students with autism and promote full inclusion, inadvertently leading to negative perceptions.

This study recognises that all students with autism should be entitled to the legal right to attend mainstream education at par with their peers. It recalls the importance of ensuring that all students with autism receive the inclusive educational support they need through individual learning plans, the provision of accessible contexts, reasonable modifications, and accessible and adapted materials and curricula. Furthermore, it calls for all primary pre-service and in-service teachers to receive comprehensive hands-on training on autism and inclusive education, continuing professional development, and a scheduled time for ongoing discussions with educational stakeholders to strengthen inclusivity within the mainstream classroom rather than perpetuate separation. These can lead teachers to seek new knowledge, improve their inclusive practices, hold more positive perceptions and eventually improve the holistic educational experience of their students with autism. By addressing these influencing factors, we hope to challenge ableist and normative practices and work towards achieving the inclusive ideals advocated by CDT. By broadening our horizons and empowering activism that converts theory into practice, we can start to look past a person's disability. It is fundamental to bear the idea that differences should never be a reason for direct or indirect discrimination against people with disabilities, including those with autism. This change

in perceptions allows us to envision a future where autism is not merely accepted by society but is acclaimed as a vital part of human diversity. Because in the end, as Hansel (2017, as cited in Jain, 2024) rightly observed, “There is no greater disability in society than the inability to see a person as more”. Such a vision, anchored in equity and empathy, highlights the enduring importance and relevance of CDT in the pursuit of a truly just world.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Keele Ethics Research Approval

16/11/2022

Dear Noella Saliba,

Project Title: The perceptions of Maltese primary teachers regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms

REC Project Reference 0235

Type of Application Amendment sub-form

Keele University's Research Ethics Committee reviewed the above Amendment sub-form.

### **Favourable Ethical opinion**

The members of the Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation, subject to the conditions specified below.

### **Conditions of the favourable opinion**

#### **Reporting requirements**

The University's standard operating procedures give detailed guidance on reporting requirements for studies with a favourable opinion including:

- Notifying substantial amendments
- Notifying issues which may have an impact upon ethical opinion of the study
- Progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

#### **Approved documents**

The documents reviewed and approved are:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Supplementary document	Change in methodology - amendments	16/11/2022	1

Yours sincerely,

Dr Shiva Sikdar

Chair / Lead Reviewer

## Appendix B: Research Approval from MEYR



**GOVERNMENT OF MALTA**  
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT, YOUTH  
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION  
DIRECTORATE FOR RESEARCH, LIFELONG LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY

Tel: 25982743

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

**Date:** 20<sup>th</sup> January 2023

**Ref:** R08-2022 1209

**To:** Head of School – Primary School

**From:** Senior Manager – Research Unit

**Title of Research Study:** *The Maltese primary teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classrooms.*

---

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Noella Saliba** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit [www.research.gov.mt](http://www.research.gov.mt).

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo

MA Ed (Open)

Research Support Teacher

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

## Appendix C: Research Approval from SfCE



16, The Mall, Floriana FRN1472, Malta  
Tel. +356 27790060  
[www.csm.edu.mt](http://www.csm.edu.mt)

The Head  
All Primary Church Schools

6<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Ms Noella Saliba, currently reading for a Professional Doctorate in Education at the University of Keele, requests permission to distribute online questionnaires to All Primary Teachers (years 1-6). Furthermore, Ms Saliba will be conducting audio-recorded interviews with those Teachers who would like to elaborate on the answer provided in the questionnaires at the above mentioned schools.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Ms Noella Saliba, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the schools concerned.



Rev Dr. Charles Mallia  
Delegate for Catholic Education

## Appendix D: Pilot Study Evaluation Form

### Evaluation Form

\* 12. Were all the statements in this questionnaire relevant to the topic under study?

Yes

No

If not, kindly specify which statement was not relevant.

\* 13. Do you think that the statements directly address the aims and objectives of the study?

Yes

No

\* 14. Did you understand all the presented statements?

Yes

No

If not, which question number was not understandable, and why?

\* 15. In your opinion, is there something that should be improved?

\* 16. Would you recommend this questionnaire to others?

Yes

No

If not, why?

\* 17. How long did it take you to complete this questionnaire?



## Appendix E: Email to Gatekeeper

Dear Ms Fenech,

Good afternoon, and I trust this email finds you well. I am Noella Saliba, a third-year student currently reading for a Professional Doctorate at the University of Keele. In partial fulfilment of the course, I am conducting a study entitled "*Exploring the Maltese Primary Teachers' Perceptions regarding the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Mainstream Classrooms.*"

I am writing to kindly ask you to act as a gatekeeper and to forward the attached information letter and the below link to all teachers in your school:

Link to the online questionnaire: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf-ofLeGDALn6\\_TKHuEVgzsh9383Lv-i2UIzFKEkE-3yJnBhw/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf-ofLeGDALn6_TKHuEVgzsh9383Lv-i2UIzFKEkE-3yJnBhw/viewform?usp=sf_link)

Following the anonymous online questionnaire, teachers can also opt to voluntarily participate in an interview to elaborate on their chosen answers. I assure you that all responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, as described in the attached information sheet.

The members of the Keele Committee gave favourable ethical opinions on this research, and the study has also been approved by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning, and Employability and the Secretariat for Catholic Education (an approval letter is attached).

I thank you in advance for your valuable time and consideration. If you would like additional information, please do not hesitate to reply to this email or call 99558881.

I appreciate your cooperation in this study and look forward to your positive reply soon.

Kind regards,  
Noella

## Appendix F: Information Sheet for the Questionnaire



### Information Sheet

**Study Title:** *Exploring the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom.*

#### **Aims of the Research**

Research widely acknowledges that teachers' perceptions about teaching students with autism impact successful inclusion and engagement in mainstream classrooms. In turn, successful inclusion directly influences students' development and learning. Given this established link, the increased number of students with autism, and the lack of local research on the subject, this study aims to investigate the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The study will adopt an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, with online questionnaires in the study's first phase, followed by interviews in the second phase. It intends to offer insights into the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms and comprehend the themes directly influencing teachers' perceptions. These themes include but are not limited to, pressure from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and previous support and resources.

#### **Invitation**

You are being invited to consider participating in this research study. This project is undertaken by Noella Saliba, a third-year student currently reading for a Professional Doctorate in Education course at Keele University. Before deciding whether to participate, you need to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read this information carefully.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

Your school was one of the schools randomly selected to participate in this study. You are a registered primary teacher in this school and, thus, in an ideal position to give me valuable first-hand information from your perspective and involvement with students with autism.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you are free to decide whether you wish to participate. If you choose to participate in the study's first phase, you will have to indicate your agreement to a consent form and fill in an anonymous online questionnaire. You are free to withdraw from the questionnaire at any point before the final submission by closing the link. Data you would have already filled in will not be stored or included. However, as the questionnaire will be anonymous, it will not be possible to identify or exclude your results from the analysis once you submit it.

#### **What will happen if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in the questionnaire, you will be asked to complete the online questionnaire hosted on Google Docs. This questionnaire, which takes approximately 15 minutes to complete, can be

filled in from any computer/laptop/mobile phone with access to the internet. The link to the online questionnaire will remain active for two weeks. To take part in this online questionnaire, kindly click on the below link:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf-ofLeGDALn6\\_TKHuEVqzsh9383Lv-i2U1zFKEkE3yJnBhw/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf-ofLeGDALn6_TKHuEVqzsh9383Lv-i2U1zFKEkE3yJnBhw/viewform?usp=sf_link)

If you decide to continue with the follow-up interview, you will be asked to elaborate on your questionnaire's choices and talk freely on questions about the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The interview, which can be conducted face-to-face or hosted on Microsoft Teams, will last approximately 35 minutes and will be audio-recorded using a Dictaphone with your consent.

#### **If I take part, what do I have to do?**

If you decide to participate in the questionnaire, you will be asked to read a short consent form that is found before the questionnaire, discuss any questions you might have, and press 'Next' in acknowledgement and by giving consent. In the questionnaire, you will be asked to choose your level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale, with a series of statements based on your perceptions of including students with autism in the mainstream classroom.

If you decide to participate in the follow-up interview, given that the questionnaire is anonymous, you have to send an email to [n.saliba@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.saliba@keele.ac.uk) expressing your interest in continuing with this study. This ensures that your questionnaire's results are not linked to you as a participant. Although I will not ask any sensitive questions during the interview, you can skip any questions that might make you uncomfortable answering. Care will be taken to ensure that you or your school will not be identified in any way.

#### **What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

Whilst no direct personal benefits or compensations will be received from participating, participating in this study will add knowledge and further understanding of the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. It might also embark on the journey of influencing those directly involved with the Maltese inclusion process and encourage advancement in justly inclusive practices.

#### **What are the risks (if any) of taking part?**

Participating in this study is not anticipated to cause foreseeable disadvantages or risks. However, if you feel upset while filling out the questionnaire, you can contact the emotional support services in the Ministry for Education and Employment at 25983494.

#### **How will information about me be used?**

Numerical data will be collected electronically from the questionnaires and inputted in SPSS to perform inferential tests. Data from the interview, including literal words, will be transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo.

All legal and ethical approvals will be considered and respected throughout this study under the EU General Data Protection Regulations. At no point during the study will you be asked to give personal

information or to mention your school's name. The data acquired from all the participants may appear in academic or other publications, conference papers, blog posts on the website and when I talk or write about the project. However, your responses will be combined with other participants' responses, and in no way will any information identify you as a participant.

**Who will have access to information about me?**

The questionnaires will be anonymous, and in no way can you, as a participant or your school, be identified by your responses. You will also be anonymised with a pseudonym in the interviews, which will be used throughout the thesis. The collected data will be encrypted and stored on Keele's secure server.

**Who is funding and organising the research?**

This study is self-funded and is carried out as part of the assessed work on the Professional Doctorate Programme with the University of Keele.

**What if there is a problem?**

This research has been reviewed by the University of Keele Research Ethics Committee to ensure that the dignity and well-being of participants are respected and has been given favourable ethical opinions. If you are concerned about any aspect of this study, do not hesitate to speak to me, Noella Saliba, at [n.saliba@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.saliba@keele.ac.uk), or my supervisor, Dr Aneta Hayes, at [a.hayes@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.hayes@keele.ac.uk), under whose academic supervision this study is being carried out.

**Contact for further information**

If you remain unhappy about the research and wish to complain about how you have been approached or treated during the study, please contact the Data Protection Officer ([dpo@keele.ac.uk](mailto:dpo@keele.ac.uk)), who will investigate the matter.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and accepting participation in this research.

## Appendix G: Consent Form for the Questionnaire

# Exploring the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom.

Dear participant,

I am Noella Saliba, a third-year student currently reading for an EdD programme at the University of Keele. I request your consent to participate in this study entitled 'Exploring the Maltese Primary Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Mainstream Classrooms.' The main aim of this study is to explore the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms and the theoretical constructs that might be influencing such perceptions. Your perceptions are fundamental to this study. To this end, I kindly ask you to dedicate approximately 10 minutes to answering the following questionnaire.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Do not proceed to the questionnaire if you do not wish to participate in this research. Confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly safeguarded and respected throughout the study. This questionnaire has thirty-five closed-ended statements that do not contain identifying information about you. Thus, in no way can your identity be revealed.

Additionally, this questionnaire will collect no IP data or URL source. You can abort the questionnaire at any point by closing the window without adverse consequences or repercussions. Your questionnaire will be treated as though consent has been withdrawn, and responses filled in will not be recorded. However, as this questionnaire is anonymous, removing data after submission will not be possible.

If you have read the above information and agree to participate in the study, kindly press 'Next'. If you have any queries, do not hesitate to contact me at [n.saliba@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.saliba@keele.ac.uk).

Thank you in advance for your participation!  
Noella Saliba.

## Appendix H: Questionnaire

### Section 1: Demographic Information

#### Gender:

- Male  Female  Other

#### Age:

- 20-30 years  41-50 years  60+ years  
 31-40 years  51-60 years

#### Years of experience:

- 1-5 years  11-20 years  
 6-10 years  20+ years

#### What is your highest degree earned?

- Bachelor's  Doctorate  
 Master's  Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### In the last ten years, have you attended any courses related to the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms?

- Yes  No

#### Have you ever taught a student with autism?

- Yes  No

#### Approximately how many students with autism have you taught in your teaching career?

- 1-3 students  4-6 students  
 7-9 students  10+ student

**Section 2:**

Please indicate with an 'X' to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. All students, irrespective of their abilities, have the right to receive education in mainstream classrooms.					
2. Inclusion in a mainstream classroom is beneficial for all students.					
3. Mainstream classrooms are too challenging for low-functional students with autism.					
4. Including students with autism in mainstream classrooms can positively impact their social development.					
5. Including students with low-functioning autism in mainstream classrooms will positively impact their academic development.					
6. The needs of students with low-functioning autism will be better served if they are placed in special education classrooms rather than mainstream classrooms.					
7. Students with autism should solely be the LSE's responsibility.					
8. It is more difficult to effectively discipline students with high-functioning autism compared to their peers.					
9. Successful inclusion of students with autism depends on the teachers' perceptions of these students.					
10. Students with low-functioning autism require a lot of adaptations in the teaching material to be successful in a mainstream classroom.					
11. Teaching a student with autism creates a number of challenges.					
12. Including students with autism increases the teachers' workload.					
13. Despite my hard efforts, I often feel unsuccessful in effectively including students with autism.					
14. Including students with autism in primary classrooms sounds good in theory but not in practice.					
15. Teachers should be allowed to choose whether they would like to have students with autism in their classrooms.					

**Please expand here on any of the answers that you have given above.**

**Theoretical concepts – power by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT):**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
16. The SLT gives me a lot of support to effectively meet the educational needs of students with autism.					
17. In my school, there is a genuine collaboration between the SLT and teachers to establish clear and compelling goals that help and include students with autism.					
18. The SLT puts direct pressure on me to effectively include students with autism in a mainstream classroom.					
19. The SLT promotes the philosophy that students with autism are the teachers' responsibility.					
20. I feel frustrated when given a class with students with autism without being consulted by the SLT.					

<p><b>Please expand here on any of the answers that you have given above.</b></p>	
---	--

**Theoretical concepts – curriculum, tests and assessments:**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
21. Students with high-functional autism should be assessed in different ways and by different means than their mainstream classmates.					
22. I frequently adapt the curriculum, tests or assessments to meet the needs of high-functioning students with autism.					
23. The academic level of students with autism should be compared with their classmates' results while using the same tests or assessments.					
24. The results of tests, exams and assessments obtained by students with autism directly impact my perceptions of these students.					
25. I don't have time to adapt the curriculum, tests and assessments to meet the needs of students with autism.					

<p><b>Please expand here on any of the answers that you have given above.</b></p>	
---	--



Theoretical concepts – the discourse of labelling:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
26. My colleagues argue that it is difficult to effectively teach and include students with autism in mainstream classrooms.					
27. My colleagues often label a class with students with autism as a "difficult" class.					
28. My colleagues believe that students with low-functioning autism should not be included in school-related activities.					
29. Hearing my colleagues negatively comment on students with autism directly impacts my perceptions of these students.					
30. I would stop my colleagues if I heard them making negative comments about students with autism.					

<p><b>Please expand here on any of the answers that you have given above.</b></p>	
---	--

Theoretical concepts – support and resources:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
31. I have received training on how to effectively work with students with autism.					
32. My undergraduate course has helped me to effectively handle and educate students with autism in mainstream classrooms.					
33. Primary teachers who haven't received training on effective ways to teach students with autism should not be expected to teach these students.					
34. In my school, I can find abundant resources to help me include and support students with autism in mainstream classrooms.					
35. I would willingly participate in training and professional development to learn how to effectively meet the needs of students with autism.					

<p><b>Please expand here on any of the answers that you have given above.</b></p>	
---	--

## Appendix I: Participants' Demographic Characteristics (N=198)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	14	7.1%
Female	184	92.9%
Other	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
20-30	31	15.7%
31-40	70	35.4%
41-50	71	35.9%
51-60	23	11.6%
60+	3	1.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Years of experience</b>		
1-5	16	8.1%
6-10	47	23.7%
11-20	57	28.8%
20+	78	39.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Highest degree earned</b>		
Bachelor's	136	68.6%
Master's	31	15.7%
Doctorate	0	0%
Other	31	15.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Courses related to inclusion</b>		
Yes	102	51.5%
No	96	48.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Taught students with autism</b>		
Yes	198	100%
No	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Number of students taught across all grades and years of experience</b>		
1-3	47	23.7%
4-6	71	35.9%
7-9	30	15.2%
10+	50	25.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Institutional sector</b>		
State	108	54.5%
Church	87	44.0%
Independent	3	1.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Appendix J: Email to Interviewees

### 1<sup>st</sup> email:

Dear Ms Sarah,

Good afternoon, and I trust this email finds you well. First of all, thank you for getting in touch and taking the time to fill out my questionnaire.

I really appreciate your willingness to participate in the semi-structured interview, which will take no more than 45 minutes and will be conducted via Microsoft Teams or an in-person meeting at a date and time that is most convenient for you. The interview will possibly be done around mid-March (after collecting and analysing data from the questionnaires). The goal of this interview is to better understand teachers' perceptions as it pertains to the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms.

Participation is voluntary, and your answers will remain confidential. Your insights will contribute significantly to our understanding of inclusive education. Over the next few weeks, I will contact you to determine the best date and time for this interview. I am thankful for your willingness to help me with this study.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me.

Kind regards,  
Noella

### 2<sup>nd</sup> email:

Dear Ms Sarah,

Good morning, and I hope this email finds you well. As you previously expressed interest in participating in my interview, I wanted to confirm whether you are still interested in being part of my research entitled "*Exploring the Maltese Primary Teachers' Perceptions regarding the Inclusion of Students with Autism in Mainstream Classrooms*". Your unique insights and experiences would be incredibly valuable and could significantly shape my findings.

The interview will be held online via Teams at a time convenient for you and should not take more than 45 minutes. If you are still available and willing to participate, please read the attached information sheet carefully, sign the informed consent form, and return it to me. I would be delighted to send you the interview questions beforehand. This will give you the opportunity to review the questions, understand the context better, and provide you with more time to prepare for the interview. You will be assigned pseudonyms, and any personal information will be handled with the utmost care.

Please let me know whether you would like to proceed with the interview. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to ask, and I'll be more than happy to address them.

Thank you, Ms. Sarah, for considering being part of my study. Your potential participation is highly appreciated, and I am grateful for your time and consideration.

I look forward to your response.

Kind regards,  
Noella

## Appendix K: Information Sheet for the Interview



### Information Sheet

**Study Title:** *Exploring the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom.*

#### **Aims of the Research**

Research widely acknowledges that teachers' perceptions about teaching students with autism impact successful inclusion and engagement in mainstream classrooms. In turn, successful inclusion directly influences students' development and learning. Given this established link, the increased number of students with autism, and the lack of local research on the subject, this study aims to investigate the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The study will adopt an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, with online questionnaires followed by interviews. It intends to offer insights into the Maltese teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms and comprehend the themes directly influencing perceptions. These themes include but are not limited to, pressure from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), curriculum, the discourse of labelling, and previous support and resources.

#### **Invitation**

You are being invited to consider participating in this research study. This project is undertaken by Noella Saliba, a third-year student currently reading for a Professional Doctorate in Education course at Keele University. Before deciding whether to participate, you need to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read this information carefully.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

Your school was one of the schools randomly selected to participate in this study. You are a registered primary teacher in this school and, thus, in an ideal position to give me valuable first-hand information from your perspective and involvement with students with autism.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you are free to decide whether you wish to continue with the follow-up interview. If you choose to participate, you will have to indicate your agreement to a consent form. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview up until August 21, 2023.

#### **What will happen if I take part?**

In the interview, you will be asked to elaborate on your questionnaire's choices and talk freely on questions about the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. The interview, which can be conducted face-to-face or hosted on Microsoft Teams at a time and place convenient for you, will last approximately 35 minutes and will be audio-recorded using a Dictaphone with your consent.

**If I take part, what do I have to do?**

If you decide to participate in the interview, you can elaborate on your questionnaire's answers. Although I will not ask any sensitive questions, you can skip questions that might make you uncomfortable. Care will be taken to ensure that you or your school will not be identified in any way.

**What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

Whilst no direct personal benefits or compensations will be received from participating, participating in this study will add knowledge and further understanding of the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding including students with autism in mainstream classrooms. It might also embark on the journey of influencing those directly involved with the Maltese inclusion process and encourage advancement in justly inclusive practices.

**What are the risks (if any) of taking part?**

Participating in this study is not anticipated to cause foreseeable disadvantages or risks. However, if you feel upset during the interview, you can contact the emotional support services in the Ministry for Education and Employment at 25983494.

**How will information about me be used?**

Data from the interview, including literal words, will be transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo. All legal and ethical approvals will be considered and respected throughout this study under the EU General Data Protection Regulations. At no point during the study will you be asked to give personal information or to mention your school's name. Your responses will be combined with other participants' responses, and in no way will any information identify you as a participant. The data acquired may appear in academic or other publications, conference papers, blog posts on the website and when I talk or write about the project.

**Who will have access to information about me?**

You will also be anonymised with a pseudonym in the interviews, which will be used throughout the thesis. The collected data will be encrypted and stored on Keele's secure server.

**Who is funding and organising the research?**

This study is self-funded and is carried out as part of the assessed work on the Professional Doctorate Programme with the University of Keele.

**What if there is a problem?**

This research has been reviewed by the University of Keele Research Ethics Committee to ensure that the dignity and well-being of participants are respected and has been given favourable ethical opinions. If you are concerned about any aspect of this study, do not hesitate to speak to me, Noella Saliba, at [n.saliba@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.saliba@keele.ac.uk), or my supervisor, Dr Aneta Hayes, at [a.hayes@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.hayes@keele.ac.uk), under whose academic supervision this study is being carried out.

**Contact for further information**

If you remain unhappy about the research and wish to complain about how you have been approached or treated during the study, please contact the Data Protection Officer ([dpo@keele.ac.uk](mailto:dpo@keele.ac.uk)), who will investigate the matter.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and accepting participation in this research.

## Appendix L: Consent Form for the Interview



### CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project:** Exploring the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream classroom.

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:** Noella Saliba [n.saliba@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.saliba@keele.ac.uk)

**Please tick the box if you agree with the statement**

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to end the interview at any time or to withdraw from the interview till the 21st of August 2023.
- 3 I agree to take part in this study.
- 4 I understand that data collected about me will be anonymised throughout the study.
- 5 I understand that these consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet and will be kept for a period of 5 years after the collection of data (the estimated date being October 2028).
- 6 I agree with the interview being audio-recorded.
- 7 I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects.
- 8 I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

NOELLA SALIBA  
Researcher

21/07/2023  
Date

## Appendix M: Interview Questions

### **Interview Questions - "Exploring the Maltese primary teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms".**

#### **General Perceptions:**

1. Please tell me about your experience teaching and including students with autism in a mainstream classroom.
2. Can you discuss any encounters that have shaped your perceptions of autism or influenced your teaching practices?
3. What kind of feedback have you received from students with autism or their families about their experience in your classroom regarding inclusion?

#### **Inclusion:**

4. Half of the Maltese teachers are either not convinced or are against the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. What are your thoughts about this? (Prompt: Why do you think that despite the large number of research showing the benefits of inclusion for students with autism and their peers, there is still a relatively high percentage of Maltese teachers who do not believe that students with autism should be included in the mainstream classroom?)
5. In your opinion, what can be done for a more inclusive and equitable education system for students with autism?

#### **Challenges:**

6. 85% of Maltese teachers who participated in the questionnaire agreed that teaching students with autism is challenging. From your experience, what do you think are the main challenges of teaching and including these students in the mainstream classroom, and how do you tackle them?
7. Do you think these challenges influence your perceptions? If yes, how?

#### **SLT:**

8. Do you feel the SLT is putting pressure on you to include students with autism in mainstream classrooms? If yes, how?
9. One in every four participating teachers believes they are not given support from SLT to effectively meet students' educational needs. In what ways do you believe schools can better support teachers working with students with autism in an inclusive classroom?

**Curriculum, tests and assessments:**

10. Do you regularly produce different instructions for students with autism in a mixed-ability classroom? (Prompt: How do you address the unique needs of students with autism in your curriculum, lesson planning and delivery?)
11. What strategies have you found effective in helping students with autism succeed in the mainstream classroom?
12. How do you measure and evaluate the progress of students with autism in your classroom? (Prompt: What are your thoughts about adapting tests and assessments based on the interests of students with autism?)

**The discourse of labelling:**

13. What common misconceptions or stereotypes do you believe exist regarding students with autism?
14. How do you foster positive relationships and interactions between students with autism and their neurotypical peers in your classroom?

**Support and resources:**

15. What resources do you use to ensure that your classroom environment is inclusive and accommodating for students with autism?
16. Only 20% of in-service teachers who participated in the study indicated that while studying, they had received training on how to effectively work with students with autism. Does this impact how teachers teach and include students with autism in their classes? (Prompt: In what way do you think training impacts how teachers teach and include students with autism?)
17. How do you collaborate with other educators and the SLT to ensure that students with autism receive appropriate accommodations and support?

**Conclusion:**

18. Are there any other factors that might potentially influence your perceptions of teaching and including students with autism in mainstream classrooms?
19. Would you like to add any further comments?



## Appendix N: An Example of a Transcription of Data

**Half of the Maltese teachers are either not convinced or are against the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms. What are your thoughts about this?**

*As I said, I've been teaching for 21 years. When I did my B.Ed., all the training we got about autism was that "there's this disorder called autism, children with autism are difficult, deal with it," that was all the training we got, and for teachers who are my age, you know, it was very daunting to have a child with autism in your class. Erm, I'm the type of person who looks for things; I have my own children who have learning difficulties. They're not autistic, but they have learning difficulties ...*

## Appendix O: Coding

### Structural, Descriptive and In-vivo coding

- Lack of training – the desire for training with children with autism is ignored – *“My colleagues and I have often asked SLTs for more training with regards to the inclusion of students with autism, but we never got it.”*
- Lack of support – teachers have to deal with children with autism on their own – *“There's this disorder called autism, children with autism are difficult, deal with it.”*
- Personal experience – makes you search for ways to help them more – *“You look into them, how you're going to help them, and that makes all the difference.”*
- Professional experience – feeling overwhelmed – *“It was very daunting to have a child with autism in your class.”*

### NVivo Coding

