Autism and mainstream education: The parental perspective

Natasha Attard*, Nichola Booth

Queen’s University Belfast, University Rd, Belfast BT7 1NN, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Autism
Autism education
Parent perspective
Inclusion

ABSTRACT

Malta has one of the highest rates, across Europe, of children with a statement of special educational needs receiving their education in mainstream schools. Research has suggested that to be successful with achieving inclusivity, the contribution of the family must be considered. This study aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of parents of autistic children who attend mainstream education settings in Malta in relation to their perception of educator’s knowledge about autism, satisfaction or concerns with their child’s progress, perception of support received and their feelings relating to their child’s school experience. A mixed methods research design was utilised involving a questionnaire comprising 10 questions, as well as 10 parent interviews to yield qualitative data. Results showed that the majority believed that the teachers did not have the necessary knowledge to effectively adapt and teach their autistic child in a mainstream setting. While positive elements in their experience emerged, there were reports of feelings of anxiety and worry and lack of support. There is work required within the Maltese education system to embrace the parental experience and use it to help guide additional supports to benefit the autistic child’s educational placement.

1. Introduction

Malta has one of the highest rates of children with statements of special education needs placed in mainstream schools with only 0.2-0.4% placed in special learning provisions, when compared to other EU member states (EASIE, 2020). This is a promising move towards a better inclusive community. In 2019, the Maltese authorities released a policy on inclusion that encourages a shift between current methods of integration to a more effective and truly inclusive education system (Policy on Inclusive Education, 2019). Creating education systems that are effective while also meeting the needs of children on the autism spectrum can be a challenging and complex process. This process should, according to Muijs et al. (2010), include the contribution of various individuals such as autism professionals working in autism research, educators, stakeholders and authorities, (Muijs et al., 2010) but also the families of autistic children (Clark & Adams, 2020). Research has identified the importance of the contribution of the family in the journey towards creating effective education environments for children on the autism spectrum (Guldberg, 2010; Clark & Adams, 2020; Hasson et al., 2022). To increase the likelihood of successful inclusion, researchers and educators must consider that parents are primary stakeholders in the lives of their children. Their input into educational systems can enhance the necessary child-specific approach (Reupert et al., 2014). The objective of this study is to explore the perspectives and experiences of parents of autistic children who attend mainstream education settings in Malta. It was envisaged that the findings will provide valuable insight into parental experiences of their child’s engagement with education in Malta which may help inform educational practices and policies in the country.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: nattard01@qub.ac.uk (N. Attard).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102234
Received 6 October 2022; Received in revised form 31 July 2023; Accepted 14 August 2023
Available online 25 August 2023

0883-0355/© 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
Autism is characterised by difficulties in social interaction and communication, and repetitive and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Impairments vary across individuals resulting in a heterogeneous group (Frith, 2003). Due to the difference in profile across autistic individuals, the type of supports that may be required within educational settings and wider will differ (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5, 5th Ed, 2013). Barriers within society can result in autistic individuals facing unnecessary challenges and restriction of life choices. Within a school environment these barriers can often result in exclusion or bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2013) and high reported absences (Totsika et al., 2020). Facilitators or adaptations can be introduced to make learning accessible. These could include changes to the environment (Leifler et al., 2020), to learning materials (Stokes et al., 2017) and to specific teaching approaches (Lindsay et al., 2014). All changes can be done to make the environment as inclusive as possible. Many autistic individuals can integrate fully into a mainstream educational setting with great success, and these are often considered the most beneficial settings for those on the autism spectrum (Myklebust, 2006; Falkmer et al., 2015). Both the Convention on Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2023) and the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) stress the right of children with disabilities to an inclusive education experience.

Parental perspectives on their autistic child’s experience in education has been a focus of research across many countries such as Sweden (Anderson, 2020), the United Kingdom (Hasson et al., 2022), Ireland (Stack et al., 2021) and the USA (Nguyen & Hughes, 2012) to name a few. This perspective can be considered a good measure of determining the quality of inclusion within schools. Anderson (2020) found that approximately 1800 parents of 6–21 school attendees with ASD preferred their child accessing education via a special educational setting, yet the study of Nguyen and Hughes, found that parents felt their children with additional needs should be educated in the same classroom as their neurotypical peers. Hasson et al. (2022) reported that parents expressed that education for their children was difficult, with inaccessible provision. A study from Ireland in 2020 found that 6 parents of transitioning students (primary to post-primary education) found that the post-primary setting was more positive than the primary setting.

Within the Maltese context a casestudy by Azzopardi (2013) on a parents’ self-advocacy group suggested that parents view themselves as being in a continuous power struggle with professionals who encourage “disabling barriers rather than providing parents with the right type of support” (p.3). However, another study from Malta, with young adults with intellectual disabilities, reported Maltese parents as obstacles to the living of their own lives on their own terms and active participation in the community (Callus et al., 2019). These findings support the wider research that parents of autistic children and other disabilities are advocating across many areas, not only within education, but can, at times prevent independence due to “overprotection” (Callus et al., 2019, p.347).

What is evident from the findings presented is that there does not appear to be a clear consensus across parents from different countries on their experiences with education provision for students with additional needs and long-term independence suggesting that much more research in this area is required. What has emerged from the research, and is common across countries, is that a number of factors have been identified that have been known to either enhance or inhibit the progress of autistic children in mainstream schools (Reupert et al., 2014). In a study from South Africa, parents in a focus group gave their views on elements that hindered their child’s educational success (Mithimunye et al., 2018). Elements such as limited teacher knowledge on autism, and a lack of correct information provided to parents and society about autism limited the possibility of true inclusion. This second point was also identified by Mithimunye et al. (2018) and Larcombe et al. (2019) as one of importance so that peer understanding and positive attitudes towards autism and autistic individuals is developed. The understanding of an individual’s diverse needs would create a greater level of acceptance and therefore better potential for an effective inclusive environment.

Another barrier often identified is the lack of teacher training in effective classroom strategies to encourage inclusion (Van der Steen et al., 2020). It is held that specialised teacher training in the instruction of autistic learners is essential and currently lacking. Teacher training in strategies that are effective in the classroom is crucial (Hendricks, 2011) if we are to expect staff to meet the needs of children with varying educational needs (Van der Steen et al., 2020). Parents feel that this ultimately affects the potential of their children to develop and learn (Mithimunye et al., 2018; Hendricks, 2011). This was reiterated by Larcombe et al. (2019), in which all participants communicated that ongoing training and professional development for school staff was imperative and should focus on the implementation of teaching strategies that will ensure school success for children on the autism spectrum.

Additional barriers that pertain to the lack of involvement of parents in the decision-making process around elements involving their children’s education have also been identified. Common barriers that have emerged include, time and economic constraints, lack of confidence in schools setting up systems, language barriers, and difficulties understanding the school decision-making process (Stacer & Perrucci, 2013). This suggests that parental involvement in the school process may not only serve to support teachers but also the reverse is true and necessary. Parents may feel a better sense of community if a school is equipped with the resources to support the family with strategies that may help them care for their children in their home life.

The lack of funding made available to schools can also result in a financial burden for parents (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents reported having to fund additional professional services such as speech and language therapy or behaviour supports privately, an expense not necessarily required of parents of neurotypical children. The justification for seeking these external and private supports by parents was voiced as a fear that their children would not have the adequate supports in school without them (Larcombe et al., 2019). Similarly, participants in the study by Mithimunye et al. (2018) discussed the financial burden and personal sacrifices the families make to ensure that the educational needs of their children are met, this was linked directly to a lack of autism training and teacher knowledge on creating an inclusive environment (Mithimunye et al., 2018).

As with barriers to inclusive educational environments, there are also a number of facilitators that have been identified across studies as being necessary components for autism education. Reupert et al. (2014) carried out several parental focus groups and reported that participants were supportive of their children attending mainstream education but emphasised the importance of an individual approach, stressing that a ‘one size fits all’ mandate is not effective. This individualised support is seen as necessary and the effectiveness of this to the attitude and culture of the school personnel is linked. They held that preconceived ideas about autism,
particularly around the perception that challenging behaviour is inevitable, was at times unhelpful and negatively impacted the children’s school experience. Similarly, another parental perspective study identified the positive attitude of parents and teachers as a catalyst for making the inclusive classroom work (Nguyen & Hughes, 2012). A positive attitude towards inclusion pertains to the willingness of school staff to undertake the challenge to make the necessary adaptations and the commitment required to create a learning environment that is accessible to the diverse needs presented by children in an inclusive setting.

Other areas that emerged as important facilitators to inclusiveness include targeted support, specifically around the availability of ‘safe’ or alternative spaces, timetabling, staffing flexibility and curriculum structure. Parents suggested that good teaching practices for children on the autism spectrum may very well apply to all pupils (Reupert et al., 2014). These views are in line with a body of research that suggests that good and effective pedagogy is not based on diagnostic differences, but what is likely to work for children with additional needs, may very well make learning more accessible and enjoyable for the whole student cohort (Davis et al., 2004). Participants in Nguyen and Hughes (2012) also emphasised the importance of adaptations to the curriculum as being an essential component of a high-quality inclusive program, particularly individualised instructional support.

Parent participants in these focus groups also identified environmental adaptations that they considered important for supporting their children. One example was being flexible with time across the school day such as staggered lunch time periods or establishing special interest groups that would allow for focus during unstructured free time; something that autistic children may find difficult. Technology was identified as a potential catalyst to help increase social participation, not only by making the technology available but by creating a framework where learner objectives are targeted and learning opportunities are created (Reupert et al., 2014).

A collaborative approach is also considered an essential component for creating an effective inclusive system. Participants held that a reciprocal relationship was needed between school staff and parents in order for information to be shared back and forth and support to be available both ways. Parents are in a position to provide specific information about their children, while teachers are in a better position to advise and support from a professional perspective. Further, collaboration with other professionals in the field was identified as useful to strengthen the school’s capacity to respond to diversity within the school setting (Reupert et al., 2014). This sentiment was shared in the study conducted by Larcombe et al. (2019) who found that parents perceived collaboration between school and families to be a major factor that contributes to the readiness of their children to transition into school and have a positive experience. Nguyen and Hughes (2012) identified communication and collaboration as a primary enabler that is necessary to ensure that children receive individualised attention within the inclusive classroom. Chen et al. (2020) found that a lack of collaboration between stakeholders was found to have particularly damaging effects on the experience of autistic children transitioning into mainstream primary schools. This was linked primarily to the lack of communication and inconsistency in approaches amongst teaching staff. While parents were identified as playing a crucial role in successfully settling their children into school, the study also showed that parents require a clearer understanding of a school’s processes and systems to help reduce stress and anxiety around their children’s school experience (Chen et al., 2020).

In this study, we explore the knowledge of parents of children on the autism spectrum who attend mainstream education in Malta. No similar research, at the time of publication, focused on this participant group with the following objectives. The objectives are to understand whether, from their own experiences, the current inclusive movement is sufficient for meeting their children’s needs and if they feel supported by these schools. We also seek to understand if they believe that their children are making educational and developmental progress as well as their stance on the provision of specialised support within schools. The overall objective is to identify any factors which could contribute to future legislation and decisions by stakeholders on developing truly effective inclusive settings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

Approval for this study was sought and acquired through the ethics committee of the associated University. A five-point Likert scale (Tullis & Albert, 2013) was used in the design of a 10-question questionnaire intended to elicit qualitative data regarding the experience of parents of autistic children who attended mainstream settings. Data was collected via two pathways. The first participant group completed an online questionnaire. Here, respondents were asked to answer each question based on their degree of agreement with the statement by selecting one option from a five-point categorical scale.

The Likert procedure, originally developed by Rensis Likert in 1932 (Tullis & Albert, 2013) was utilised because it is described to be subject-centred rather than item-centred and its purpose is to scale the respondents as opposed to the statements. All variations in the responses were therefore attributed to differences in the respondent’s experiences and this was considered a good technique for measuring attitudes and experiences. A second participant group was formed, and data was collected using the same 10 questions in an in-person interview format with parents who have children with an autism diagnosis attending mainstream education.

The content questions addressed a number of key areas pertaining to parent perspectives on inclusion of autistic children including: a) perceived level of educators’ knowledgeability about autism, b) concerns or satisfaction with their child’s progress, c) perceived support received, d) views on in-school specialised support, e) feelings related to their children’s school experience. The final statement in the questionnaire was open-ended and the respondents were asked to describe their feelings in relation to their child receiving education in a mainstream setting. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix I.
2.2. Participants

For the first group (N = 62), the questionnaire was designed on the online survey platform Survey Monkey™. The purpose of the study was explained and a link to the survey was generated and shared via email to mainstream school management teams. The school was asked to share the link with parents of children with a statement of special education needs related to an autism diagnosis. In order to generate more responses, the survey link was shared further via a social media platform within a specific interest group for autism in Malta. Once participants accessed the provided link, they were led to a participant information sheet and consent form page that explained the criteria for participation.

In the second participant group (N = 10), participants were recruited through an autism education centre who agreed to disseminate a call for applicants together with the participant information letter via their emailing list. They were asked to respond only if they were interested in being interviewed and participating in the study and submission of a signed consent form.

For both groups, criteria for inclusion included being parents of children who have a diagnosis of autism who currently attend a mainstream educational setting. The respondents were informed that all responses were anonymous and could not be traced back via any identifying information. They were informed that information would be used solely for the purpose of the study, and they could withdraw their participation at any point until the completion of the survey or interview and submission of results and responses.

2.3. Data analysis

Participant responses from the online questionnaire were translated to numerical scores and presented in a table for analysis (Tables 1-6).

In-person interviews were transcribed using Otter, an application for recording and transcribing data. To analyse results, a thematic analysis approach was used as described by Guest et al. (2012). This approach led to a rigorous and thorough set of procedures to ensure that common and opposing themes were extracted and explored in a way that is transparent and reliable. This allowed for an interpretive phenomenological element to the analysis which was an effective way of capturing the subjective experience of parents. The interview responses allowed for the identification and description of implicit and explicit ideas. Codes were applied to the various themes that emerged within the transcripts and the statement was coded according to whether it implied a positive, negative or neutral interpretive phenomenological element to the analysis which was an effective way of capturing the subjective experience of parents. The final question presented to both groups invited participants to describe their feelings and experience as parents of autistic children attending mainstream education. Key illustrative phrases that were identified within the responses were categorised to give a clear visual of the parental experience.

The final question presented to both groups invited participants to describe their feelings and experience as parents of autistic children attending mainstream education. Key descriptive words were displayed in the form of a word cloud (Fig. 1) where word size reflected frequency of uses. This allowed a visual representation of the adjectives best describing the participants’ experience.

3. Results

The data collection tool was designed to gather information around the following areas: the parents’ perceived level of educators’ knowledgeability about autism, their concerns or satisfaction with their child’s progress in school, their perception of support received, their views on in-school specialised support, and finally their feelings related to their children’s school experience. Sixty- two individuals responded to the online questionnaire. In-person interview participants were recruited through the emailing list of an autism education centre and ten participants (Table 1) were interviewed. The data were analysed, and the results are displayed below.

Question 1 (Table 2) addressed the participants’ perception of knowledge exhibited by their child’s educators about autism, 40% (N = 25) of participants felt confident that teachers were well informed about the traits of autism and barriers to learning that are associated with the diagnosis. The majority, 59% (N = 37) of parents did not agree that teachers have the necessary knowledge to adapt and effectively support their children with autism with 11% (N = 7) of participants strongly disagreeing that educators are sufficiently knowledgeable about autism.

In-person interview participants shared similar perspectives regarding teacher knowledge. Just under half of participants (<5) felt that teachers tried their best but were not prepared and sometimes did not have the knowledge necessary to work with their children;

Table 1
Group 1: Interview participants demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Child age</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“they tried a lot specifically to accommodate him…but they were not prepared”. Other parents reported that they have been happy with the teachers assigned to their children this year or are happy with the school in general, “…there are challenges, yes, because obviously they have to follow the curriculum…but they are knowledgeable yes, and they try to meet with the children’s needs”.

Questions 2, 4, 5 and 10 addressed the parental experience of having their autistic child in a mainstream school setting. The general consensus was a positive one, yet some participants did report feelings of anxiety, worry and lack of support in relation to their child’s school experience. Results from question 2 (Table 4) show that 21% (N = 13) of participants receive reports from school a lot or a great deal, stating that their child’s behaviour is unmanageable and 72% (N = 45) of participants are contacted by the school at some point to report on behaviour concerns. Only 27.4% (N = 17) of participants have never received communication regarding unmanageable behaviour displayed by their children in school. Similarly, one parent reported in an interview that her son’s teacher would call her as she was at work, crying that she was unable to cope with her son’s behaviour. A few interview respondents communicated that they felt it was their responsibility to teach and empower educators to cope with their children; “…you have to support them. You have to encourage them; you have to empower them”. Another parent felt the same burden of responsibility with supporting her son’s teachers; “…everything me- they don’t do their own learning. I had to solve any problem, everything me”. The obstacles parents may have to overcome when their children attend a mainstream school may at times lead to anxiety for various reasons.

Results from question 4 (Table 3) showed that only 6.5% (N = 4) of participants in the online questionnaire claim to not experience feelings of anxiety when thinking about their child’s school experience. 93.5% (N = 58) of participants reported having experienced anxiety at some point with 48% (N = 30) stating that they always or usually experience feelings of anxiety when thinking about their child’s school experience.

Parents in the in-person interviews, also reported feelings of anxiety, generally around what could happen in subsequent years as

---

**Table 2**

Results from Group 1 participants to questions 1 and 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1. My child’s teachers have been knowledgeable in the understanding of traits/barriers associated with autism and of supports required to teach</th>
<th>Strongly Agree % (N)</th>
<th>Agree % (N)</th>
<th>Neither agree Nor disagree % (N)</th>
<th>Disagree % (N)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 (5)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27 (17)</td>
<td>21 (13)</td>
<td>11 (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. I agree with integration within a mainstream classroom with partial withdrawal for specialist interventions</td>
<td>63 (39)</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
<td>8 (5)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Table 3**

Results from Group 1 participants to questions 3, 4, and 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q3. I often worry that my child is not making progress across IEP targets</th>
<th>Always % (N)</th>
<th>Usually % (N)</th>
<th>Sometimes % (N)</th>
<th>Rarely % (N)</th>
<th>Never % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 (8)</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
<td>32 (20)</td>
<td>23 (14)</td>
<td>8 (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. I feel anxiety and stress when I think about my child’s school experience</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
<td>24 (15)</td>
<td>34 (21)</td>
<td>11 (7)</td>
<td>6 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. I feel supported internally by the school in order to help my child reach their potential</td>
<td>31 (19)</td>
<td>23 (14)</td>
<td>29 (18)</td>
<td>15 (9)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their children get older and whether the mainstream setting will adapt to meet their needs. One parent reported; “I suffer from generalised anxiety…. Panic attacks… it affected all the family”. When asked to describe her experience within mainstream education for her son, another parent said “…anxiety galore. And stress, because I know that while he suffered, I suffered as well”. Another parent held that she is very satisfied this year, but in the past encountered many problems with her daughter’s school and as a result she suffered stress; “…the fact is two years ago, I was really depressed. I was really depressed, even the comments were…. today we don’t have the negative comments”.

On a positive note, participants from both groups feel they receive support internally from school to help their child reach their potential. In response to question 5 (Table 3), in the online group, only 3% (N = 2) of participants report never feeling supported by the school but only 30.6% (N = 19) of participants report always feeling supported. 66% (N = 41) seem to have access to support on some level or somewhat infrequently. During in-person interviews, a few parents spoke highly of their child’s school, and feel supported by personnel specifically over recent years; “…I’ve seen a big improvement… the last two years have been fantastic“, “…we’re very supported and they keep me updated”.

In the final open-ended question, participants were asked to describe their feelings in relation to their child receiving education in mainstream school using 3 words. The following word cloud (Fig. 1) was generated and the word size reflects the frequency of the descriptive word being used to describe participant feelings.

The most frequent word used by participants in the open-ended question was happy, and was used as a descriptor of feelings by respondents 13 times. The most frequented words following this were; worry, stress, anxious and hope. Overall, participants’ responses and descriptions of their feelings can be seen to reflect a mix between positive and negative connotations. 37% (N = 23) of participants used descriptive words such as happy, comfortable and supported, helpful understanding, equality, acceptance and professional to describe their positive experience with mainstream education. During in-person interviews, one parent held that she is content with her son achieving a mainstream education and held that he is able to learn in his own time and space. Another parent feels “satisfied and excited” about her son’s experience so far. However, other participants did not shed such a positive light. 51% (N = 31) of respondents responded using only words that described a negative experience such as; battleground, worried, stressful, discrimination, judged and helpless to describe their feelings in relation to mainstream schooling. Similarly, an in-person interview participant reported that the thought of her daughter in a mainstream setting is “terrifying” and another reported “anxiety galore” when asked to describe her experience. One participant responded that it broke her heart to see her daughter struggling and that more training and resources are needed for school staff.

Questions 6, 7 and 8 addressed the participants’ perspective on the mainstream school model. The results from question 6 (Table 4) show that 82% (N = 51) of online participants reported having sought input from external professionals to support their child’s educators at some point with 40% (N = 25) responding that they engaged with external support a great deal or a lot. Only 18% (N = 11) of participants have never had to bear the extra expense of engaging with an external professional to support their children’s educators.

Incidentally, a high majority of participants would be happy if their child’s school would consult with specialists in the field of autism. In question 7 (Table 5), 90% of respondents (N = 56) held that they would definitely welcome the support internally in school while only one respondent replied that they would probably not welcome the service of a professional in school supporting their child’s educator. One parent in an in-person interview commented that schools will benefit from having specialists present in mainstream settings; “…if I was managing a school, I would have an autism specialist full time”. Another parent held that the school does not have the resources necessary to provide the level of specialists her son needs to have his education supported; “…they don’t have any resources. No OT, no speech therapists, no ABA therapists, they don’t have anything”.

In question 8 (Table 2), participants were asked whether they agree with partial withdrawal for specialist support interventions for their children. Interestingly, 87% (N = 54) of online respondents either agree or strongly agree with this model of educational support. Only 5% (N = 3) disagreed with the approach and would prefer their children are not withdrawn from the mainstream class at any time and 8% were undecided as they neither agreed or disagreed with the suggested model. An interviewee commented that a hybrid model of partial withdrawal from the classroom would be the ideal for mainstream education; “Yeah, I think it is the only way out. It is the way forward”.

Question 3 (Table 3) and 9 (Table 6) addressed the participants’ perspective on the learning experience of their children. In the online group, only 8% (N = 5) of parent participants reported never having concerns about their child’s progress. 92% (N = 57) of participants have felt some concern over their child meeting IEP targets at some point with 37% (N = 23) of parents always or usually worrying about whether their child is making progress in school. Incidentally, when asked if they are happy with progress their children have made in school, a majority responded in the affirmative. 52% of parents (N = 32) were satisfied with their child’s progress while 48% (N = 29) were either unable to say, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with progress their child made in school.

### Table 4

Results from Group 1 participants on questions 2 and 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>A great deal (%)</th>
<th>A lot (%)</th>
<th>A moderate amount (%)</th>
<th>A little (%)</th>
<th>None at all (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q2. I often receive reports of my child’s behaviour being unmanageable in schools</td>
<td>8 (5)</td>
<td>13 (8)</td>
<td>23 (14)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. I have had to bring in external professionals at extra expense in order to support the school team work with my child</td>
<td>16 (10)</td>
<td>21 (13)</td>
<td>21 (13)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18 (11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results from the online questionnaire showed that parents regularly receive reports from school stating that their child barriers if this principle is to be put into practice. Bloom et al. (2013) stated in their study that training content—which is vast if it is to meet and address the needs of the diverse learner. However, steps must be taken to address the potential shortcoming of implementation of the National Framework (2019) as it is intended. Variables that are missing may be linked to the availability of appropriately skilled professionals or the intensity of the training requirements needed to provide effective as a reason for temporary or permanent exclusions of autistic children as well as reductions of opportunity to participate in general other measures that parents must take for peace of mind that their children are learning in school. In the local context, this highlights Education Framework outlined the training of all educators as a priority and stated that inclusive education is the responsibility of all essential element to the development of inclusive settings and these perspectives highlight the need for training on autism and effective teaching methods as being essential if we are to expect children to thrive in a mainstream setting. In 2019, The National Inclusive needs is imperative for their children to succeed in school. The willingness of teaching staff to receive training and support is an that school educators possessed about autism and held that ongoing training in effective strategies to support children with diverse needs is imperative for their children to succeed in school. The willingness of teaching staff to receive training and support is an essential element to the development of inclusive settings and these perspectives highlight the need for training on autism and effective teaching methods as being essential if we are to expect children to thrive in a mainstream setting. In 2019, The National Inclusive Education Framework outlined the training of all educators as a priority and stated that inclusive education is the responsibility of all educators involved, and not just the specific learning support assistant assigned to the child (National Inclusive Framework, 2019). Incidentally, a couple of parents in the interview group (Group 2) commented that they felt responsibility with having to support their children’s education is significant and their opinions and wishes for the outcome of their children’s education needs to be considered.

The results of this study are very much reflected in the literature on parental perspectives. Lack of teacher knowledge and training on autism and effective strategies to support such learners has been addressed in the literature (Mithimunye et al., 2018; Larcombe et al., 2019) and was also a concern of the majority of participants in this study. Parents expressed concern over the level of knowledge that school educators possessed about autism and held that ongoing training in effective strategies to support children with diverse needs is imperative for their children to succeed in school. The willingness of teaching staff to receive training and support is an essential element to the development of inclusive settings and these perspectives highlight the need for training on autism and effective teaching methods as being essential if we are to expect children to thrive in a mainstream setting. In 2019, The National Inclusive Education Framework outlined the training of all educators as a priority and stated that inclusive education is the responsibility of all educators involved, and not just the specific learning support assistant assigned to the child (National Inclusive Framework, 2019). Incidentally, a couple of parents in the interview group (Group 2) commented that they felt responsibility with having to support their children’s educators themselves, to empower them, to provide specialist support and to provide resources. This burden that parents feel was tangible in the responses of the interviewees;

“you have to support them. You have to encourage them; you have to empower them…. You become the advocate of your son and all the time fighting, fighting for his rights”.

“...the problem is that they knew absolutely nothing. Everything me- they don’t do their own learning. I had to solve any problem, everything me”.

The lack of educator knowlegable seems to lead to parental concerns about whether their child’s needs are being met and to other measures that parents must take for peace of mind that their children are learning in school. In the local context, this highlights the potential shortcoming of implementation of the National Framework (2019) as it is intended. Variables that are missing may be linked to the availability of appropriately skilled professionals or the intensity of the training requirements needed to provide effective training content- which is vast if it is to meet and address the needs of the diverse learner. However, steps must be taken to address barriers if this principle is to be put into practice.

An aspect that must be addressed in educator training is the presence of behaviours of concern amongst students with diverse needs. Results from the online questionnaire showed that parents regularly receive reports from school stating that their child’s behaviour is unmanageable. Bloom et al. (2013) stated in their study that 10–15% of individuals with developmental disabilities engage in challenging behaviours. The link between children with an autism diagnosis and problem behaviour has been highlighted in the literature (Koegel et al., 2012) and schools seem to struggle with managing complex behavioural needs because problem behaviour is indicated as a reason for temporary or permanent exclusions of autistic children as well as reductions of opportunity to participate in general

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Results from Group 1 participants on question 7.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitely would % (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7 I would be happy if the school consulted with trained specialists in autism</td>
<td>90 (56)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6</th>
<th>Results from participants in Group 1 on question 9.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very satisfied % (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.9 I have been satisfied with the progress my child makes in school</td>
<td>26 (16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
activities with peers (Devlin et al., 2011). In the local context, the National Framework highlights the use of Positive Behaviour Support and the expectation is that schools are equipped to adapt to the behavioural needs of their learners, manage and maintain a secure environment for learners (p.40). Further, attention is given to the need of behaviour plans for learners who exhibit behavioural challenges, (National Inclusive Framework, 2019) intended to ensure consistency in the management of behaviour. A potential barrier to putting this principle into practice with effect, is the lack of professionals with specific qualifications in behaviour management present in local schools. As a ripple effect, the weight put on parents to shoulder the responsibility of their children’s behaviour while at school may lead to stressors and anxiety as well as feelings of helplessness. The specific reasons for the anxiety and stress exhibited by parents were not explored in detail in this study, however, 93.5% of participants in Group 1 reported having experienced anxiety at some point when thinking about their child’s school experience. Parents in an interview mentioned that while they were content at the time of the interview, they worry about whether following years would be manageable or more complex;

“…at the moment, because their attitudes changed completely, it’s going well, now the problem is that she is going to change school for senior school. So, I don’t know what’s going to happen…I don’t know how that’s going to go”.

“…my questions are like what will happen now as subjects get even more difficult and maybe out of reach for him? … You want him to be functional at the end of the day… he can do a lot of things but I don’t know how we’re going to get there. You know, that’s always on my mind”.

The Policy on Inclusive Education (2019) clearly outlines the commitment to teacher training and the structures in place to support educators and parents. However, the parent responses in the study suggest that barriers at implementation level exist. A local study conducted in 2018 revealed a gap between research and practice when it came to Evidence Based Practices (EBP) and it was recommended that policy makers outline in their formulated policies not only that EPBs be utilised, but also the necessary elements needed to sustain implementation (Sciberras, 2018). To address the need for skill development in the area of behavioural needs of children with complex learning profiles, a commitment to implementation of evidence- based practices such as Positive Behaviour Support and Applied Behaviour Analysis interventions as a school-wide approach is necessary. Supported by professionals qualified and trained specifically in these areas, research tells us that the approach can be successfully implemented by teachers in mainstream educational settings (Bloom et al., 2013; Koegel et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2012).

As a ripple effect, if training in specific learning and behavioural areas is not prioritised, educators may at times find themselves at a loss when the needs of the learner are significant and the environmental barriers have not been identified and addressed. In this study, 82% of participants reported to have brought in external professionals to support their child’s educators at some point or another with 40% stating that they brought in external support a great deal or a lot. This comes at an extra financial expense to parents and may add strain to a family who may already have to fund their child’s therapy services outside of school hours. This was reflected in Larcombe et al. (2019) when participants communicated that they sought external and private services of professionals as they often feared that their children would not be adequately supported in school. A supportive measure that mainstream schools may consider would be to include professionals on a consultancy basis or in-house who are specialised in behaviour analysis and trained in evidence-based practices in order to provide ongoing support with environmental adaptations and consultation around the education of children with significant needs.

Parental concern over whether their children are succeeding in school is not only linked to behavioural needs and reports of unmanageable behaviour but also whether their children are learning and making progress across identified learning targets. Only 8% of parents reported never having concerns about their child’s progress, while a majority, (92% of participants) have experienced concern over their child meeting IEP targets at some point or another. However, while parents seem to worry and express concern regarding progress, 52% of parents were satisfied with their child’s progress in school. Efforts need to be increased in order to ensure that a greater majority of parents are able to see the progress their children are making and feel confident and secure with the education experience they are receiving. Open communication between parents and school personnel is outlined in the National Framework and a priority for effective inclusion (National Inclusive Framework (2019)). Correctly executed, parents would be an integral part of their child’s learning experience and have an open platform to voice concerns and suggestions for learning targets that are socially significant in the family context.

Research shows that teachers often feel overwhelmed with the diversity of their learners in the class (Cassady, 2011), yet with the right resources and training there are ways that inclusion can be achieved successfully. Different models of support may be explored in a mainstream school to ensure that the needs of the diverse learner are being met. If we consider inclusion to be the appropriate adaptation of the environment in order to meet the learner’s needs and not fully emphasise physical placement at the expense of progress, as is outlined in the National Inclusive Framework (2019), we may find some flexibility in the adaptations and systems put into place. In the current study, parents were asked whether they would agree with a model whereby their children had full access to the mainstream classroom with occasional pull-out for individualised and specialised support. A large majority of parents in this study agreed with this model of educational support. One parent said that this hybrid model would be an important step towards ensuring children’s needs are met; “I think that’s the only way out. It is the way forward”. This is reiterated in the literature where parents of autistic children were in favour of mainstream access with partial withdrawal for specialised support (Kasari et al., 1999). Having parents on board with a hybrid model is a step towards planning for an inclusive education system that meets the needs of the learner on all levels including; access to social opportunities, access to learning in the mainstream classroom as well as access to individual support and learning targets that serve a social significant purpose and not just an academic one. In this last point, educators would emphasise the development of learning to learn skills, independent living skills and employability skills- imperative in the education of all children but specifically for those children who require systematic teaching of these skills.
Schools have systems in place to offer parents support and the National Education Framework identifies systems designed to ensure open communication between parents and educators. In this study, more than half of participants held that they received support on some level at one point or another. The results are promising, however, support for families is necessary on a more consistent and readily available level. A collaborative approach between school staff and families has been identified as an enabler for inclusion in the literature and participants in parent studies have communicated that they value the potential to have open communication and support from their children’s teachers for a professional point of view (Reupert et al., 2014; Larcombe et al., 2019). If schools are successful in creating systems of consistent communication between families and school staff and have an effective model of inclusion that is holistic in its approach, this may contribute to an overall better educational experience for children with an autism diagnosis. Parents were asked to describe their feelings about their child’s school experience using three words. The most frequently used word was happy, used as a descriptor of feelings by respondents 13 times. The most frequented words following this were; worry, stress, anxious and hope. This reflects the literature on parental experiences, demonstrating that parents are hopeful and willing to explore mainstream education for their children (Mithimunye et al., 2018), even though reservations about the effectiveness of the system, progress their children make and the ability of the school to adapt to their child’s needs are still emerging themes. In this study, just under half of participants in the first group used descriptive words such as happy, comfortable and supported, helpful understanding, equality, acceptance and professional to describe their positive experience with mainstream education. This is indeed promising however the data shows that it is a minority of participants that can communicate a positive experience. In contrast, 51% of respondents used only words that described a negative experience such as; battleground, worried, stressful, discrimination, judged and helpless to describe their feeling in relation to mainstream schooling. One participant responded that it broke her heart to see her daughter struggling and that more training and resources are needed for school staff. The survey did not explore variables such as severity of needs related to autism or intensity of behaviours or whether participants’ children attended state funded or private schools, which may have an effect on the experience parents have had. In spite of information on these variables that is lacking, it is clear that the majority of participants were unable to communicate a positive experience and this might reflect the experience they perceive their children to be having in school. Therefore, in the local context, if the parental experience were to be shifted to be more positive for a greater majority, it may indicate or reflect that the systems are working in Malta towards the inclusive education of autistic children in mainstream schools.

Limitations of this study pertain to the small participant size and therefore generalisations of their experiences to the entire parent population of Malta cannot be made. Further research is required to determine how parents can contribute to the pathway towards an effective inclusive system in Malta and what areas currently act as obstacles in this pathway to be identified. Further, the study does indicate the need for research around evidence-based approaches that can be implemented to meet learner’s needs and systems that involve professionals who may contribute to the support schools need to meet the diverse needs of the learners they serve. This study sought to explore the experience and perspective of parents who choose mainstream education for their autistic child and the variables that are responsible or contribute to that experience. The data revealed that parents are hopeful and feel that an inclusive system is what their child deserves, but the reservations they have and the difficulties of their journey as they support their children is evident. It is imperative that the path towards an inclusive system for those with an autism diagnosis continues to develop in schools across the island with some main ideologies at the forefront; that parents are involved with and supported through their children’s education experience, that pupils make progress across identified learning objectives and that learning objectives are socially significant to the individual and their families. It is crucial to keep in mind that parents are the primary experts of their children and giving them a voice in this process can only add value to the journey of inclusion.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix I

1. Over the last 3 years, have your child’s teachers been knowledgeable in the understanding of traits and barriers to learning associated with autism? And knowledgeable of the adaptations and supports needed to teach a child with autism?
2. Do you ever receive reports about your child’s behaviour being unmanageable in school?
3. Do you worry that your child is not making progress across IEP targets?
4. Do you ever feel anxiety and stress when thinking about your child’s school experience?
5. Do you feel supported by the school and by professionals in helping your child reach their potential?
6. Have you had to bring in external professionals at an extra expense in order to support the school team to work with your child?
7. Would you be happy if the school consulted with trained specialists in autism?
8. Do you agree with integration within a mainstream class with partial withdrawal for specialist support interventions?
9. Have you been happy with the progress your child makes in school?
10. Using 3 words, could you describe your feelings in relation to your child receiving education in mainstream school.