



Learning Support Zones: Former students' experience and perceived Impact on Home and Work Environment

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This study explored how past students who attended the Learning Support Zone (LSZ) in Maltese secondary schools perceived their attendance at the LSZ and its impact on their home and work environments. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven adults who attended the LSZ when they were in secondary school. Thematic analysis was used to elicit a set of themes. The findings highlight the multiple struggles that students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) face. The narratives highlight the positive impact of the LSZ and its staff, but the families of these students were hardly involved. Social skills, independent living skills, and emotional literacy taught at the LSZ are believed to have helped these youths enhance their motivation and perceived self-worth and deal with adversities more effectively both at home and at work. The key recommendations of the study are the re-evaluation of inclusive policies within schools, consideration of the perspective of the students, better understanding, and monitoring of students with SEBD within schools, and more active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, especially families.

Keywords: Learning Support Zone, SEBD, youth, family, work

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Introduction

Our interest in socially excluded children and how their journeys unfold, led us to study the impact the support provided within the Learning Support Zones (LSZ) in Malta is having on students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) within their home and work environments. The first author worked as a teacher

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within a LSZ for several years whereas the second author has a special interest in children and families living in poverty and social exclusion (Abela & Berlioz, 2007; Abela & Renoux, 2013). No previous research investigated the perceived long-term effectiveness of the LSZ, or the impact that these have on the other environments the students pertain to. Nevertheless, long-term outcomes are a major indicator of success (Farrell and Humphrey, 2009).

What are Learning Support Zones?

LSZ is the name allocated in Malta for Nurture Groups (NG) within secondary schools. They offer in-school programmes assisting “in promoting inclusion, tackling disaffection, improving behaviour and reducing the number of exclusions” (Wilkin et al., 2003, p. 3). This service has gained popularity, with similar versions being offered in several countries, including the UK, Australia, and America. The name might vary slightly amongst countries with some areas in the UK using the term Learning Support Unit. The term Nurture Groups is also used for such services in secondary schools (Colley, 2009; Garner and Thomas, 2011).

The LSZ are set up as “a safe, welcoming and caring environment for learning” (Colley, 2009, p. 291). Run by two staff members, the LSZ offer programmes such as anger management, behaviour modification and emotional literacy on a withdrawal basis from mainstream classes (NG LSZ Guidelines, 2016). The Boxall Profile is used to identify difficulties of referred students and monitor progress (Cooke et al., 2008). Guardians are expected to be informed of the work being done, possibly providing feedback to sustain consistency between home and school. This, in turn, may provide support through parental education, empowerment and support (NG LSZ Guidelines, 2016). Reintegration into the mainstream system is the ultimate aim and is suggested after three to four terms (NG LSZ Guidelines, 2016). Students are then meant to function positively and independently through the skills taught (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007).

Very limited research is available on this service and there is no official system that can help “monitor young people’s progress and transferability of skills” (Kourmoulaki, 2013, p. 72), making it difficult to appraise the work being done (Garner & Thomas, 2011). Such research is however crucial for the identification of both good and weak practices to ensure that all students flourish beyond their school years (Boxall & Lucas, 2010).

In Malta, LSZs started being introduced around 2009 and now cater for about 7% of secondary school students, with the number being on the rise in the last few years (Ghirxi, personal communication, 2019). Borg (2013) found that within the local LSZs, during the scholastic year 2011-2012, anger management and behaviour modification were the most implemented programmes in local LSZs, with the primary referral reasons being ‘Family difficulties’ (13.08%) and ‘Poor Anger Management Skills’ (12.47%).

Students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties as the target population

Many students with SEBD “describe their mainstream school experience as unpleasant and unhappy” and perceive the educational system as having somehow failed to reach their needs, “putting them even more at risk for social exclusion as young adults” (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, p. 192). Cefai et al. (2008, p.1) reported that “taking the widest definition” of SEBD, between 10% to 20% of students experience such difficulties, with

students in secondary schools, students with high rate of absenteeism and/or low attainment level, students coming from one parent families and those of a lower socio-economic status, among those at a greater likelihood of SEBD. Sparling (2002) explains that the lack of visibility of these difficulties enhance negative perceptions, with students with SEBD often being perceived as undeserving as “of all disabilities, emotional/behavioural difficulties were considered the most controllable” (Smith & Williams, 2005, p. 486). Not only are these misguided perceptions believed to hinder social inclusion (Sparling, 2002), but they also trigger a “blaming and punitive approach” (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, p. 188).

Challenging realities at home amplify the need for a collaborative approach between schools and parents/guardians although such an alliance is believed to be rare, particularly within the SEBD population (Farrell & Humphrey, 2009). This highlights the need for parents to be more involved (Cefai & Askill-Williams, 2017). Borg (2013) identified how parental involvement is very limited in Maltese schools, along with collaboration with outside. Moreover, meaningful and noteworthy inclusion of the students’ voices, especially of students with SEBD, is still significantly limited in Malta (Cefai & Cooper, 2009).

Perceived effectiveness of Learning Support Zones

Research suggests that the LSZ helps fulfil developmental attachment needs of vulnerable adolescents (Garner and Thomas, 2011), and as such offers a safe and secure base for students. It also aims to improve their emotional wellbeing (Hughes & Schlösser, 2014) and their school performance (Becker et al., 2004), through a sense of safety and belonging (Kourmoulaki, 2013). Local research, though limited, also offers a promising perspective on the service, with it being perceived as pivotal in helping students with SEBD cope effectively (Borg, 2013). Zahra Lehtonen (2012) suggests that most LSZ students are reintegrated into the mainstream through the acquisition of self-help skills. On the other hand, Darmanin (2012) argued that only some of the staff in mainstream schools felt that the service left a positive impact on the students.

The transition into adulthood for students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Students with SEBD frequently become adults linked to “erratic occupational histories, criminality, mental health problems and chaotic personal relationships” (Cefai & Cooper, 2006, p. 20). Their own children then follow the same trajectory, what Cooper (2010) refers to as the “cycle of disadvantage and difficulty” (p.6). Farrell and Humphrey (2009) therefore emphasize the need to make sure that “the good work that was done at school, [is not] left behind as these young people struggle to adjust to adult life as well-adjusted citizens” (p. 70). On the other hand, Spiteri (2009) reported that work, even if within working-class jobs, helped former SEBD students feel productive while Tellis-James and Fox (2016) explained how in spite of negative experiences, some of these individuals bounced back from adversity.

In light of the above literature review and these research gaps, the ensuing research question will be explored:

- How helpful was the students’ LSZ experience, particularly on its impact on their home and work environment?

The study will also be looking into the following sub-questions:

1. How is the overall experience offered by the LSZ retrospectively perceived by students who used this service?
2. How could the service be improved to increase the students' chances of leading a positive fulfilling life as adults?

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

The search for the link between experiences lived in schools and the impact they had on other environments that students experience is strongly associated with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cefai et al., 2018). This framework allowed us to identify and understand how the experience the students obtained within the LSZ impacted their realities at multiple levels of their lives, including their home and work environments. Another theoretical framework considered was Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) since it informs the principles and practices adopted by the NG and LSZs (NG LSZ Guidelines, 2016). It allowed us to look at the consequences rooted in unmet needs for safe and secure attachments with supportive and trusting adults and the impact of finding these within a school setting. The epistemological stance study also adopted a social constructionist stance, seeking to elicit the views of past students regarding their 'reality' (Maxwell, 2011).

Research Tool

Semi-structured interviews were the main research tool used in the study. All necessary ethical approvals were obtained from all stakeholders prior to the commencement of the study, including the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, the University Research Ethics Committee and the participants themselves. A pilot interview was carried out to evaluate the questions and probing comments to determine any necessary amendments. Throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation, measures were taken to ensure the anonymity of participants.

The initial question was a background question about the participants and their family, followed by some generic questions about their secondary schooling experience. Next were a set of questions pertaining to their LSZ experience. Subsequently, questions on the link between the LSZ and their family were asked, inquiring any contact with and support to the parents/guardians, and its perceived value. Subsequent questions focused on the impact on their current lives especially within their employment. The support from the general schooling system and LSZ were also explored.

Recruitment Process

Eligibility criteria were set on two principles; participants needed to be ex-LSZ students and be 18 years of age or over. Purposive sampling was used and a total of twelve interviews were conducted (see Table I below).

No official records were found on the students who used the LSZ service in the past years. Heads of schools and LSZ staff members were thus asked to act as intermediary persons and explore willingness to participate in the study. Six schools and five LSZ staff members contacted the first author with potential participants.

Table I. Profile of Participants

Participants (Pseudonym)	Age	Main difficulties experienced in school	Num. of years attending LSZ	Current Work Status	Current Family Circumstance / Living Arrangement
Ela	22	Low academic achievement, behavioural difficulties	3	Full-time clerk	Lives with both parents.
Chris	22	Behavioural difficulties	3	Full-time delivery person, part-time mechanic	Lives with both parents and siblings. Wishes to move out in own dwelling to gain independence.
Mary	19	Behavioural, emotional, and mental difficulties	5	Unemployed – looking for work	Lives with both parents. Is a single parent of one child.
Tania	19	Behavioural and emotional difficulties	4	Full-time shop assistant	Mother with mental health problems. Married and is the guardian of younger siblings. Lives with husband, siblings, and some relatives.
Emma	18	Low academic achievement, behavioural difficulties	3	Full-time in a factory	Parents separated, and lives with father.
Scott	18	Behavioural and emotional difficulties	4	Full-time shop assistant	Lives with mother and her partner and siblings.
David	22	ADHD and depression	3	Full-time with automobile company	Parents separated, and lives with mother.
William	20	Behavioural difficulties	4	Full-time – Armed Forces	Lives with parents and siblings.
Megan	19	Mental health difficulties	3	Unemployed – looking for work	Lives with parents and siblings.
Jake	23	ADHD and Dyslexia	3	Full-time – Armed Forces	Lives with parents.
Victoria	19	Low academic achievement, behavioural and social difficulties	5	Unemployed – housewife	Cohabits with partner and their two children.
Martin	19	Behavioural difficulties	4	Full-time journalist	Parents separated. Lives with mother and siblings.

Data Analysis

The gathered data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consistent with the constructionist approach, themes were developed based on the participants' interpretation of their experiences,

offering a deep understanding of their constructed realities and their effect now. The eliciting of themes was peer reviewed by the second author and a high level of agreement was reached with regards to the themes that emerged. Moreover, we were aware of our own views in the area when examining feedback and a journal was kept by the first author to enhance reflexivity. Caution was also taken to control bias, even in non-verbal gestures throughout the interviews. The pilot interview was a great help to instill an even stronger sense of self-awareness in this respect. Creswell and Poth (2017) recommend at least two of the above strategies when embarking on a qualitative study.

Findings

A total of eight overarching themes were identified (Table II). Each of these themes incorporated a number of related subthemes. The themes were organised in this way because the findings permitted rich descriptions under every theme. At the same time, the themes were interrelated and led us to answer our research agenda.

Table II: List of identified themes

Overarching Themes
1. Challenging circumstances the youths were experiencing during their secondary school years
2. An experience of disengagement and struggle within Secondary School
3. An experience of belonging in LSZ
4. Negativity towards the self as the basis of identity formation by respondents
5. The LSZ teacher as a secure base
6. The lack of parental involvement
7. Recommendations for schools and LSZ
8. The impact of skills acquired on employment and Work Environment

Theme 1: Challenging circumstances the youths were experiencing during their secondary years

The subthemes identified within this theme focused on the difficult familial circumstances all respondents had as well as social, emotional, behavioral and mental health difficulties experienced within schools.

Difficult family circumstances were a very common denominator amongst respondents, with issues varying from marital trouble between parents, abandonment issues from parents, mental health difficulties experienced by parents and being put up into a children's home:

"...when you see, [...] sorrow maybe and them [parents] rebelling, [...] there is an emergent side effect, collateral effect on you." (Martin)

Social difficulties were identified by the participants, including poverty, feelings of social inferiority, unhealthy friendships and peer pressure:

"When you are different, they perceive you as [...] a bit crazy." (Martin)

All participants made references to emotional struggles, and even though some did identify these emotions; namely anger and impulsivity issues, extreme timidity and low self-confidence, most recalled a lack of understanding of what were the triggers:

“First, it feels like sadness, but then, it becomes anger. But I have no idea where it comes from.”

(Megan)

Mental difficulties, though varying in type and severity, were common among the participants, with participants recalling incidents of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, extreme mood swings and depression. Four were prescribed anti-depressants and tranquillisers. They all felt it hindered their normal functioning:

“... I took medication. It disoriented me. I used to sleep in class.” (Victoria)

Difficulties such as rebellious and anti-social behaviours were perceived as *“part of [their] character”* (Chris); something which they could not control or change.

Other behavioural difficulties included defiance to norms, expectations, and/or authorities especially when respondents felt that they were being treated unfairly. All participants recounted violent incidents with peers, family members, or school staff members. Many participated in high-risk behaviours included drug use and abuse, smoking in school, hiding in unsupervised spots within the school and even escaping from school without being caught. One participant had a relationship with an abusive drug addict. Two referred to self-harming practices, one of whom had suicidal thoughts, and one recalled locking herself in school bathrooms.

The participants explained how a sense of sorrow and helplessness pervaded them during these moments and often explained that they would hide such situations from peers and teachers:

“I never disclosed that I had trouble with one or the other... with mum and dad. Nothing, nothing.”

(Victoria)

Theme 2: An Experience of disengagement and struggle within Secondary Schools

The predominantly negative experience respondents had at school was the first identified subtheme, followed by the likely negative academic experience. Next was the role of relationships with peers and staff that seemed to enhance their misbehaviors. Another subtheme highlighted the defiant behaviors students adopted and the ineffective disciplinary measures that ensued. The last sub theme looked into the perceived ineffectiveness of support services and alternative programmes offered.

Positive recollections of school revolved mainly around social aspects, such as, the availability of friends and the mischievous things they did that were perceived *“a good adventure”* (Jake). On the other hand, academic demands were perceived to be too difficult, disciplinary measures as too harsh and the lack of empathy from school staff as unpleasant. Common negative descriptors included phrases similar to *“I did not feel comfortable”* (Martin).

Skipping lessons and giving little attention to academic content was common amongst participants. Demands for work completion were perceived unfair and there was a common belief that schools did not adapt to their needs, with most alluding to their years in school as a *“waste of time”* (Emma) as they were simply left out when unable to keep up:

“Not all students are highfliers... We need to give a chance to struggling students too”. (Emma)

The absolute majority had a good group of friends. However, most acknowledged that they were not true friends and had lost contact with most of them. All the interviewees acknowledged the reality of peer pressure, and how this steered them into more trouble:

“I had a lot of friends, but I didn’t have real friends.” (Scott)

The participants’ relationship with staff varied, depending on how they felt perceived. Feeling unwanted by teachers triggered negative behaviours:

“I loathed those teachers whom I didn’t feel friendly with. I made their lives a misery”. (Emma)

Some recalled feeling labelled or given up on by school staff. A common belief was that teachers cared very little beyond covering the syllabus and some questioned the quality of teachers being employed. There was a common belief that they needed to be more empathic and understanding:

“they should check what teachers they are employing. Not only their ability to teach [...] but also their attitude with children.” (Victoria)

Disciplinary measures directed towards the participants were common and included being sent out of a classroom, break-ins, after school, and suspensions. They were unanimous that such measures were useless, ineffective, and unfair especially since they all felt that they had little control over their difficulties:

“what is the use of giving him a yellow sheet and sending him upstairs to spend the break writing, what is he gaining?” (Martin)

In certain cases, such disciplinary measures were manipulated by the participants themselves to skip school. Jake, for instance, explained how he would make sure to misbehave enough to get a suspension:

“I had two days suspension? Two days off running around. I had a rest. That is what I wanted, and that is what I got!” (Jake)

Support from additional services were scarce. School guidance teachers and psychologists were occasionally mentioned. The need for an appointment for such services was believed to reduce their effectiveness and approachability. Moreover, there was a common sense of lack of trust towards these authorities.

Theme 3: An Experience of belonging in Learning Support Zones

The reasons for attending the LSZ, the curriculum followed and the frequency and types of sessions provided were some of the subthemes that formed part of this overarching theme. Positive aspects of the service followed by significant life lessons and skills acquired were also described.

Reasons for enrolment at the LSZ included aggressiveness, violent and rebellious attitudes, academic difficulties, and self-harm. Though assigned lessons were typically two a week, all participants went there more often especially when sent out of the classroom, or when they got fed up during lessons.

Sessions included circle time, cooking, fundraising activities and volunteering experiences. Other recollections included making lunch, watching films during breaks, being provided help with homework and using the class computer for research. Respondents identified independent living skills they acquired including

preparing a CV and mock job interviews, shopping, cooking and cleaning skills, and skills related to self-care and money management. Furthermore, they recalled learning social and emotional skills, such as, the control of anger and impulsivity, problem solving, communication and relationship skills, skills related to self-esteem, and motivational skills. Several were able to recall specific phrases taught that they still keep in mind today such as *“I breathe in and out and calm myself down”* (David).

The LSZ was perceived as a source of unconditional support, where students could open up without feeling judged. It was described as a place that welcomed students “like them”; those that didn’t seem to fit anywhere else. Consequently, the staff were perceived as trusted confidants:

“...I didn’t trust anyone, and I felt that [...] connection with Ms Galea. [...] I trusted her; I would tell her everything. So I felt kind of safe with her.” (Tania)

The LSZ was a place where they could go instead of going to a lesson to calm down and have fun, whilst learning about real-life matters:

“...I see it helpful [...] for the life you face when you leave school. For those without a mother and father, who are alone, they would face life well.” (Emma)

None of the participants were ever reintegrated into mainstream.

Theme 4: Negativity towards self as the basis of identity formation by respondents

This theme was divided into two subthemes and included the students’ positive and negative perceptions they had of themselves.

Respondents’ focus lied primarily on their lack of ability to fulfil social expectations and related implications, making such comments as *“I wasn’t good [...] a total disaster!”* (Chris). The absolute majority referred to themselves using such phrases as *“children like me”* implying that they fit within a specific category. When asked to describe this further, an array of negative descriptors were given including *“troublemaker[s]”, “rude” and “really bad”* (Mary) *“rebellious” and “short-tempered, mischievous, and carefree”* (William). The prevalence of negative labelling in schools was believed to have exacerbated negative approaches towards them. All the participants expressed a sense of acceptance of these negative attributes, making comments like *“this is how I am”* (Victoria).

Though limited, some did outline positive aspects of themselves, including *“bubbly”* and *“independent”* (Emma), *“outgoing”* (Chris), and *“strong”* (William). There was a common belief that as the participants grew older, they matured.

Theme 5: The Learning Support Zone teacher as a secure base

The two sub-themes within this theme were the appreciated qualities of the LSZ teacher which the students found helpful, and the meaningful bond that was built with the staff members.

All participants made solely positive remarks on the staff working within the LSZ, describing them as calm, trustworthy, patient, *“good-hearted”* and *“emphatic”* (David). There was a common understanding that this support made a positive impact in their lives through comments such as *“he picked me up and did something good with me. He turned me into something good”* (David). Furthermore, participants appreciated

feeling wanted, recounting how the LSZ teacher would follow them even when not at the LSZ. This approach was believed to trigger positive change in their behaviour and attitude:

“[we were] the most troublesome students, right? But you notice that, when we were at the LSZ, everyone behaved well...” (Scott)

Most participants described a stronger connection with one of the LSZ staff members, describing him/her, *“like a brother”* (David), *“mummy figure”* (Chris, Mary and Tania), *“best friends”* (Martin and Emma), *“the only person who loves me”* (Mary) and feeling treated *“like his own children”* (William).

In some instances, this relationship was extended beyond the school walls. One participant recounted that the LSZ teacher would visit him at home when he was expelled, while another one paid a home visit when she endured a domestic violence incident. One participant’s family became so close to the LSZ teacher that they were all invited to her wedding.

Theme 6: The lack of parental involvement

The first sub-theme focused on the lack of involvement of parents within schools and the LSZ followed by the long-term impact of the interventions provided at the LSZ on the family environment.

Participants only recalled their parents being contacted by the school when they got into trouble or during parents’ days. In certain cases, they were not even contacted when the student got suspended from school.

Most participants were unsure about the LSZ’s level of parental involvement beyond the initial contact to get parental consent to start using the service. Most believed there were other communications, yet there was very little awareness of how often any further contact was attempted, and whether the limited communication was due to lack of effort from the school or from the parents.

Overall, there was a common belief that such communication is beneficial to help parents be aware of what is happening, especially from the LSZ to help parents feel better as they were the only persons saying positive things about the student. Moreover, a participant believed that communication with parents helped them get less in trouble and consequently avoided trouble for her parents as well.

Most participants lived with their families of origin. In these cases, the identified impact revolved mostly around emotional literacy and communication skills, implicating that these were possibly lacking at home:

...certain emotions which maybe I had hitherto found hard to control, I control them. Instances where I didn’t feel comfortable saying certain words, I try to say them, and where before I didn’t talk, now I try to find people to talk to. (Chris)

Those living on their own and those caring for their families of procreation identified the acquired hands-on skills that impacted their families today such as financial literacy, cooking and cleaning skills:

It helps because then you start realising that you are no longer in school. Now, you are growing up [...] you need to wash clothes, [...] you need to go shopping, figure out from where to get money to eat... (Victoria)

Theme 7: Recommendations for schools and Learning Support Zones

This theme was divided into two sets of recommendations, one set focusing on schools in general and the other directed towards the LSZ.

Suggestions towards school revolved around the need for flexibility and empathy towards students. Less pressure on academic work, elimination of streaming classes, more adapted work and alternative programmes were also recommended, along with the elimination of meaningless punishments and the need to reduce emphasis on ‘irrelevant’ issues such as wearing of piercings. They highlighted the need for a disciplinary system based on understanding, empowerment, and support.

Seven out of the eleven participants had no recommendations for the LSZ as they felt it was good enough as it is. The others suggested an improvement in the premises and additional resources such as a small gym and to possibly add more staff to increase both number of students and number of sessions. One suggested the introduction of one-to-one sessions to get to know students better individually and another one highlighted the need for ‘good’ staff within the LSZ.

Theme 8: The impact of skills acquired in the work environment

The first sub-theme was about how respondents felt about the work that they did. This was followed by their perception on how interventions at the LSZ had positively impacted their work environment.

Eight out of the eleven participants were working full-time (see Table I further up). Overall, all those who were employed showed a level of contentment with the job they had. Some felt that lack of academic qualifications did not affect them highlighting the importance of personal qualities such as “*how able you are, and how good of a speaker you are*” (Martin). Others felt that having qualifications would have enabled them to get a better job; “*in order to find a good job, you need qualifications*” (Emma).

There was a consensus that the social and emotional skills learnt at the LSZ helped them in their work environments through anger and impulse control, self-esteem and empowerment and working effectively within a group and respecting others. One respondent highlighted how crucial the mentoring of the LSZ teacher was in enhancing self-confidence in his abilities:

I think that if it weren't for the LSZ, today, I probably wouldn't be working as a journalist [...]. Probably, today, I am a caretaker somewhere because I think [Mr Borg] helped me a lot to take certain steps. (Martin)

Discussion

The present study aimed to find out from past students how helpful their attendance at the LSZ was and what was its perceived impact on their home and working life. It also sought to explore from the students themselves their experience of the LSZ and their suggestions on how the service could improve to enhance its impact on their life as adults.

The impact of school in their transition into adulthood

There was an overall general sense of achievement and positivity when the participants talked about adulthood. Most participants felt they outgrew most of their difficulties as they matured and gained a level of independence. A few moved out of their home of origin, most achieved autonomy through work whilst academic difficulties were eliminated as they took up hands-on jobs they felt good at. Emotional improvements were also noted through better emotional and impulse regulation. All participants were unanimous that the security and attachment offered by one significant other (in this case, the LSZ staff member they were closest to) had helped alter their odds once outside school. This resonates with the similar findings by O’Riordan (2015).

Impact of Learning Support Zone on their home life

It was very evident that students faced adversity in the context of their family that influenced their development and wellbeing. Triggered by their sense of feeling ‘othered’, they often reacted in negative and anti-social ways, which consequently put them at a significant disadvantage. A distinct tone of sorrow commonly marked narratives recounting such difficulties, often accompanied by a sense of shame and helplessness. These experiences seemed to leave an impact on their self-esteem and their behaviour was typically marked by emotional dysregulation. Self-harm, suicidal thoughts and drug use seemed to be typical ways how they would attend to their emotional dysphoria. Anger, frustration, and sadness were by far the most prominent emotions, echoing Cefai and Cooper’s (2006) findings.

Despite the well-researched benefits of parental involvement (Cefai et al., 2018), and despite having the local relevant authorities promote such involvement (MEDE, 2014), participants claimed that this is still severely lacking by both the schools and LSZ. In certain instances, the lack of communication between the parents and school allowed for the students to trick both. This highlights the need to move away from one-dimension interventions to an ecological systems approach, which tackles the multiple layers of the students’ systems, including parents, friends, and schools (Burns et al., 2015). This study suggests that due to the lack of parental involvement, the impact on the whole family was minimal.

Despite this possible gap in provision, the participants identified several emotional and social skills that they learnt at the LSZ, which they believe helped them improve their situation at home, or their own approach in dealing with the situations at home.

The impact on the work environment

During the present study, two participants were seeking employment, one was a stay-at-home mum, and the rest were employed in jobs that they seemed to enjoy. All, but one, had manual, hands-on jobs. To some extent, this contradicts arguments presented by the European Commission (2019) that lack of academic achievement has a negative impact on employment. However, it might be worth noting that this research was conducted during a time when the country was going through an employment boom and the identified jobs may be among those lowest paying and easiest terminated should the country experience an economic downfall. Some of the participants mentioned the importance of qualifications to find a good job, however, while most referred to

personal abilities as more crucial qualities. Participants maintained that the social and emotional skills taught in the LSZ helped them obtain the job they had. Personal motivation, support and empowerment by LSZ teachers in enhancing self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities were also considered as crucial in the participants' journey from school to employment.

The Learning Support Zones perceived as a safe base

Whereas the mainstream school experience was predominantly perceived negatively along with being a direct cause of several difficulties, participants felt understood and supported by the LSZ staff, and this seemed to encourage a positive relationship through a sense of belonging, consistent with findings presented by Borg (2013). Students attended the LSZ regularly, behaved well, and respected rules, contrary to what happened in mainstream classrooms where they struggled to adhere to norms and fulfill expectations and academic responsibilities. Respondents valued the consistent and immediate personalized availability of support at the LSZ, offering, what Colley (2009) defines as a 'safe base'. Almost all participants also mentioned being given food, something which was significant enough to mention, possibly implying their lack of these basic needs.

LSZ staff were appreciated for going the extra mile, and as affirmed by Garner and Thomas (2011), this relationship played a crucial role in the effectiveness of the service as it provided security and protection. All participants forged a special bond with one staff member of the LSZ, which Neander and Scott (2006) believe, is crucial in helping 'othered' students flourish.

None of these past students were ever reintegrated into the mainstream, and because they strongly felt that they did not fit in, they clearly showed no interest in being reintegrated. It might be argued that the LSZ was unable to successfully fulfil its ultimate goal of reintegration (NG LSZ Guidelines, 2016). Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the perceived hostile attitude from mainstream staff and peers. The ongoing support at the LSZ was a genuine need for students since their main difficulties were still very much present. An exercise evaluating the frequency and degree of reintegration may be necessary to help evaluate this aspect. The views of students and professionals in mainstream schools may provide insights on why reintegration could not be achieved, suggest changes that would support such process and identify whether they feel reintegration would have a positive impact in the long term. This might suggest the need of a complete overhaul within the educational system for the mainstream to be able to offer support and inclusion to struggling students along with a systemic approach to assist all stakeholders meaningfully (Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research and policy

The recruitment of participants relied on the schools and LSZ staff as intermediary persons. Due to this connection, it was possible that only past students who had a positive relationship at the LSZ were interviewed. It would be interesting to recruit past LSZ students through other ways in future research to discover whether new findings would emerge. Triangulating the data with families and other professionals involved would also provide rich and useful data that would inform policy.

These narratives strengthen the need for policymakers to give a voice to the first-hand experiences of vulnerable students in order to constructively revise policies and practices to ensure genuine applicability and effectiveness, especially around the notion of inclusion. This highlights the necessity of evidence-based research that supports and understands the needs of vulnerable students and finds ways of providing an educational experience that addresses their needs meaningfully. The need for additional support and training for schools and staff working with students with SEBD is crucial. The data also suggests the need for multi-disciplinary professional teams in schools to provide timely intervention to all stakeholders including students, teachers, and parents.

Disclosure

This paper is based on Master's dissertation presented to the University of Malta.

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