

## **Self- and community perceptions of the Learning Support Educators in Malta and their role in promoting inclusion.**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of the study was to delve into the self- and community perceptions of the Learning Support Educators (LSEs) and their role in promoting inclusion. A qualitative study was carried out, in which ten participants, five males and five females, were selected to share their experience as LSEs. The participants had different levels of experience and training, and had diverse school backgrounds. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used in this research. In-depth semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect data. The analysis yielded twelve themes: the experience of the participants' first year in their role; the circumstances that led them to choosing the role; the complex duty roles LSEs take on which differ greatly from the job description outlined in policy documents; segregation, powerlessness and gender stereotyping that come with the role; the dynamics of the school community and the role that LSEs have within this community, as well as their relationship with other staff members, namely teachers, SMT and the school INCO; the issue of disconnectedness from, as well as belongingness to the school; the perception of the Maltese community of LSEs; their own relationship to the role; barriers to inclusion, along with the factors that make a school inclusive; and good practice in the field. The last-mentioned theme was developed to recommend the way forward. A number of recommendations were suggested, namely: the implementation of a structured training programme; the opportunity to specialise in specific areas of disability; the granting of a warrant; the opportunity to work in close collaboration with teachers and the possibility of being trained together to improve practice for both parties; and regular training opportunities and reviewing to ensure a high level of professional practice. In the final analysis, this study uncovers the lack of respect and esteem that LSEs encounter, while exposing LSEs as an underutilised resource, whose efforts often go unrecognised.

**Keywords:** Learning Support Educators, Powerlessness, Inclusion, Community

## Introduction

In 2006, the Education (Amendment) Act set in place the college structure. This development was meant to bring about change from a top-down system to a horizontal, networked and dialogical approach to education (Education for All, 2014), thereby facilitating inclusion. In 2014, a new Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 was launched by the Ministry for Education and Employment. This framework, which is about to expire, aimed at improving the learners' lifelong experience by nurturing creativity, innovation, critical literacy, and entrepreneurship (Education for All, 2014). The National Curriculum Framework for All (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) was also promoted as an important tool for inclusion.

While policy makers provided the documentary backdrop for inclusion, and governments as well as the private sector invested appreciably, students with learning difficulties and disability continue to face educational exclusion and segregation (Impact Initiative, 2018 as cited in SEN Policy Research Forum, 2019). A major obstacle relevant to this paper is the ongoing recruitment of untrained, minimally or poorly trained, low-status 'assistants' in a context where demand is overwhelming. This translates into unqualified and untrained individuals taking up the role of assisting children who require specialised attention and care (Bartolo, 2010). Education authorities continue to play catching-up in an area that calls for an immediate supply of highly-specialised personnel.

Learning Support Educators (LSE) are generally seen as the in-class educational guardians of children with disability, further limiting the scope of inclusion within the classroom as children are physically, mentally and pedagogically isolated from the rest of the class for most of the scholastic time.

Lack of opportunities for professional growth in the area of inclusion has been further exacerbated by training that is largely informed by the medical-deficit model and little importance is given to inclusive pedagogical practice (Education for all, 2014). Moreover, while one can write about a continuum of educators' engagement with inclusion, two visible ends are easily identifiable. There are educators who feel that the implementation of inclusive education is mainly the responsibility of the LSE, while others genuinely believe in inclusion and undertake specialised studies and courses overseas to inform their practice (Education for all, 2014). This often leads to fragmentation and a lack of co-ordination in professional development (Education for all, 2014).

Another concern of teachers is the inherent contradictory nature of the system – advocating for inclusion while remaining heavily dependent on coverage of content, and largely driven by high-stakes exams (Bartolo, 2010). Schools are often torn between an image of excellence and that of genuine service to all

before results, with stakeholders often in conflict as to how schools should best serve inclusion.

Acknowledging the complexity associated with provision in inclusion, Tanti Burlò (2017) argues that while there are no easy routes to inclusion, oftentimes attempts at addressing inclusion resulted in practices of segregation. Inclusive education is a process, not a destination (Ainscow, 2002), it is a motivational ideal that educators, irrespective of their rank, need to work towards by adopting a commitment towards a quality education for all (Bartolo, 2010).

### **The Role of the LSE in the Maltese Islands**

In July of 2007, the Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment (MEYE) issued a job-description handbook which outlined the duties of the LSEs. This document started off by stating that untrained personnel are obliged to attend a compulsory course in professional development. The same document also stated that LSEs are expected to take part in any in-service programmes which will inform their practice (MEYE, 2007). Additionally, the document emphasises that new applicants are expected to complete an introductory training course before they become employed (MEYE, 2007). The full list of duties related to the role of LSEs is summarised below:

- Support and collaborate with the class teacher and other co-workers.
- Assisting in the education of all students under the guidance of the class teacher.
- Full participation in Making Action Plans sessions (MAPs).
- Collaborate with the teacher to develop and implement an Individual Education Programme (IEP) as well as attend the IEP meeting.
- Adapting lesson plans and resources together with the teacher.
- Reviewing the IEP and reporting on the students' progress of the IEPs implementation.
- Assisting the class teacher in writing the IEP document of each statemented student in the classroom.
- Preparing education materials which will facilitate learning, under the guidance of the class teacher.
- Together with the class teacher take part in the observation, assessment, and documentation of the progress of the students which are statemented.
- Taking part in individual transition programmes to ensure the smooth transitioning from one school to another or from school to employment.
- Collaborate with INCOs, specialists, parents, and other stake holders.
- Participating in sessions such as hydrotherapy outside of the school when necessary.
- Promote the school's ethos and policies while being an active member of the staff team.
- Support students in activities held outside the school.

- Support students in their personal hygiene needs such as toileting, cleaning and washing, including escorting a student to the toilet, dressing and undressing, showering, changing sanitary towels and incontinence pads.
- Lifting students up to 27 kilos unaccompanied, lifting students up to 54 kilos between two people and using a mechanical lift if the student is more than 54 kilos.
- Pushing a wheelchair up to 45kgs occasionally and up to 28kgs frequently.
- Provide assistance during physical education, games, outings and therapy sessions, as well as taking part in normal feeding.
- Assist in the boarding and un-boarding of students into transport vehicles. (MEYE, 2007) In the conclusion of this document it is stated that the teacher is responsible for educating students following the NCF guidelines, while teaching according to the educational needs and abilities of the students within her/his care.

(MEYE, 2007).

### **Obstacles faced by Support Staff**

With the increasing number of learners with multifaceted needs, there is a constant need for support staff who are appropriately qualified to meet the needs of the learners within their care (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). The only way of ensuring this, is to provide training, support, and clear career progression (Titmuss, 2015). Historically, the role of support staff has been gendered and one of low status, which is often associated with low pay and unskilled employment, regardless of the increased diversity and professional development. This stigma persists (Cooke-Jones 2006 as cited in Slater & Gazeley, 2018).

Locally and internationally, there are many obstacles that support staff must endure that discourages them from wanting to pursue this professional path. The profession is often seen as a stepping-stone to study for further qualifications while in employment (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). Those in the profession possibly see it as a temporary job, due to unattractive work conditions, lack of respect, lack of appreciation and mounds of useless paperwork (Cachia, 2019). Although LSEs wear many hats - teacher, psychologist, mother, nurse, carer and so on - their role is hardly ever given the recognition it deserves (Cachia, 2019).

Moreover, LSEs are not seen as professional educators. They feel isolated, with limited guidance from the class teacher (Cachia, 2019). Although LSEs can contribute towards the learning of all learners, their capabilities are often disregarded and overlooked (Education for All, 2014). This is partially a result of the teacher and LSE having been trained separately, and are unable to understand the roles and responsibilities of each (Education for All, 2014). Although it has been stated that all parties would benefit from this

collaboration, to date the two parties often work independently of one another to the detriment of students with SEN and the rest (Bartolo, 2010). LSEs often take up the role of the expert and thus assume all responsibility for the students they are meant to assist (Bartolo, 2010).

LSEs are often seen as care givers rather than educators, and this could potentially have a negative effect on the discourse of care (Education for all, 2014). Regardless of the qualifications one might have obtained, the role of support staff has always been seen as subordinate to that of the teacher (Devecchi et al., 2012). Moreover, support staff experience marginalisation, isolation and overall professional dissatisfaction, according to studies carried out with support staff in Italy and England respectively (Devecchi et al., 2012).

Another detriment to inclusion is that teachers often do not like having another adult in the classroom, and compensate this by assigning the responsibility of the care of students with different educational needs to the LSE (Bartolo, 2010).

There has been a situation in England where teacher assistants (TAs) have been employed as substitute teachers or administrative assistants to carry out paperwork related duties, because there was no nationally recognised professional qualification (Devecchi et al., 2012). This hindered the quality and content of training and professional development, but after the signing of the National Agreement in 2003, the situation improved, although not fully (Devecchi et al., 2012). TAs in England now have the opportunity to read for Foundation Degrees and courses to become HLTAs (Titmus, 2015). In various cases they go on to gain fully qualified teacher status. They are also able to further their qualifications to work with children with specific disabilities, and can choose to work in literacy and numeracy interventions (Devecchi et al., 2012). Regardless of these opportunities for specialisation, TAs described their work as unqualified teacher's work, and cheap labour because the pay gap between teachers and TAs is significant however, some employers recognise this and pay the TAs an extra allowance (Devecchi et al., 2012).

In many cases, TAs become less skilled teacher replacements rather than act as additional support (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). Additionally, the working conditions and the unfair treatment brings TAs to the realisation that their work is not acknowledged, and although they take on the same role as the teacher and produce the same results, their work is not rewarded in the same way (Devecchi et al., 2012).

A study conducted in Finland by Ervasti et al., (2011) found that support teachers have reported mental, verbal as well as physical violence, especially in special schools. Moreover, it was concluded that support teachers are at a higher risk than regular teachers of experiencing violence on the workplace, while men are more at risk than women (Ervasti et al., 2011). Overall, studies

show that reality is a far cry from the ideals of inclusion, since marginalisation and exclusion of both adult support staff and the children under their care is evident (Devecchi et al., 2012). These usually stem from vague roles and responsibilities, and inconsistencies in expectations between teachers, support staff, other professionals, and parents (Devecchi et al., 2012).

Research suggests that support staff's pay structure needs to reflect their training, ambition and worth within an organisation, since this would improve the overall quality of their work and self-esteem (Titmus, 2015). Moreover, LSEs not only need to be qualified but also undergo structured, relevant, and ongoing professional development to keep up to date with the necessary knowledge and skills that inform their practice (Titmus, 2015).

The classed and gendered location of the majority of LSEs is often overlooked. Inclusion cannot be achieved in a context where those who are responsible for including disadvantaged students are disrespected and deprived from an adequate livelihood (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009 as cited in Mchale, 2018). Working class women do not enter a level playing field with their male counterparts in the labour market, this is because women carry the burden of care work, both paid and unpaid, because it is culturally assumed that it is their duty to do so (O'Brien, 2005). People who are employed in low-status jobs, of which assistants are a typical example, are already economically disadvantaged and vulnerable thus they are not given importance in decision making, even when it directly affects them, resulting in poor working conditions and uncertain employment (Lynch & Lyons, 2009 as cited in Mchale, 2018).

In a society divided by class, a caring role is seen as a low status job which is generally performed by low status people (Lynch and Walsh, 2009 as cited in Mchale, 2018) As a result, SNAs do not have the power to be in positions that can influence change (Mchale, 2018). Since LSEs occupy low status and low-income jobs, they do not have the power to influence change and often feel that they are unable to improve their situation (Mchale, 2018). Nonetheless, those individuals who identify the structural forces that are adversely influencing their lives frequently feel that there is very little they can do to make their situation better (Andersen & Collins, 2004 as cited in Mchale, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The study was informed by the following research question: How do Learning Support Educators (LSEs) perceive their role and how they think the Maltese community envisages their role in promoting inclusion within schools?

The goal of this research was to delve into the ways LSEs experience their role, their perception of inclusion and how they go about implementing it.

Moreover, participants were asked to describe how they think the Maltese community, as well as different members of the school community, perceive their role within the educational system.

A qualitative research method was chosen to answer the research questions presented above; the qualitative research method which was used for this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is informed by phenomenology (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Phenomenology involves close analysis of a particular phenomenon to gain understanding of the meaning of the participants' lived experience (Tuffour, 2017). Phenomenology is about reading in-between the lines to try and get to the core of the phenomenon and reach what is usually taken for granted (Lavery, 2003). For the purpose of this study a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen. The choice responds to the researcher's belief that her own experience may influence the phenomenon and thus enrich the study (Alase, 2017).

Hermeneutic phenomenology suggests that interpretation is central to humanity; 'we cannot not interpret' (Shaw, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology is the art and science of interpretation and meaning; in this context meaning is fluid and it is constantly open to revision and reinterpretation (Tuffour, 2017). Meaning is created from context, and thus the context of each participant is valuable (Lavery, 2003). The aim of the study is to delve into the lived experience of LSEs while keeping in mind that the context of each participant influences the meaning they give to their lived experience; for this reason, a hermeneutic approach was ideal.

Hermeneutic phenomenology suggests that descriptions have a form of interpretation; our world is culturally coded and historically specific (Shaw, 2018). Nonetheless, we make preliminary assumptions about the concepts we are trying to understand. Before embarking on this research, I had my own assumptions of what LSEs experience and the way they perceive their role since I have been an LSE since 2012, thus I have my own experiences and foreknowledge about the phenomenon.

The practice of understanding involves a circular progression from assumption to interpretation and back, this is called the hermeneutic circle (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger states that the task of the researcher is never to interpret data according to popular assumptions or a researchers' own foreknowledge; rather scientific themes must be developed through focusing on the experiences being narrated (Shaw, 2018). The concept of appearance of being states that there is a phenomenon that has to be explored by the researcher who uses his/her own prior knowledge, experience and presumptions to make sense of the experiences as they are being revealed (Tuffour, 2017). As a result, the individuality of the researcher and the fact that the researcher has the same role as the participants may have influenced the participants' responses;

participants might have been inclined to respond to the researcher in a particular way because of their own perceptions of the researcher.

### *Participants and recruitment*

Since IPA focuses on in-depth analysis, the study had a small sample size which allowed the researcher to focus on the detail of the experience being narrated and the sense the research participants give to their experiences (Tuffour, 2017). Ten participants were selected for this study, each participant had to be working as an LSE, and thus participants were selected from a homogenous sample pool (Alase, 2017). The participant's homogeneity stems from their role - they were all LSEs. However, they were also different in terms of gender, type of qualifications obtained, years of experience, background and the school in which they work. Moreover, participants working in both primary and secondary schools were interviewed in order to ensure that both educational settings were represented in this study. One female participant who is employed in a resource centre was also interviewed in order to ensure a representation of different school settings in this study.

It was also ensured that no two participants came from the same school. Purposive sampling was used in order to recruit participants. In order to recruit research participants a post was written explaining the scope of the study on the Facebook group called 'Learning Support Educators Malta'. Those who were interested in forming part of the study were asked to send the researcher an email. Thus, social media was used as a gatekeeper to ensure an opt-in method in which potential research participants were autonomous in deciding if they wanted to participate in the research (ESRC, 2015).

Those participants who contacted me were given further information about the study, the interview process, and the approximate duration of the interview. Once the participants agreed to be a part of the research, a detailed information letter as well as a consent form were sent to them, and a time and place which were convenient for them was agreed upon. The interviews were held in different locations, such as public gardens and quiet public places.

One obstacle that was encountered during the recruitment phase was the recruitment of male LSEs, since only one male LSE opted to be a part of the study after the initial post on social media. In order to recruit male LSEs I used snowball sampling to help attract participants to the research (Alase, 2017). The female participants as well as the one male participant helped me attract four male participants by encouraging them to join the research project.



### *Data collection*

Data were collected in the form of ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Alase, 2017). The lived experience of the research participants was shared through a dialogue with the researcher. Smith et al. (2009) describes this as a conversation with a purpose (as cited in Alase, 2017). During the interview process the participants were initially asked to give a general background about themselves. When the participants experienced difficulty expressing themselves they were prompted with specific questions to encourage them to open up and talk about the topic (Smith and Osborn, 2007).

The one-to-one nature of the interview created the right environment for the participants to feel that they were being listened to and it gave the researcher the opportunity to explore in detail new information that emerged (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006 as cited in Alase, 2017). However, trust was a fundamental aspect of the data collection process. Participants were more comfortable disclosing information if they felt that they could trust the researcher. Thus, it was important to build a rapport with the participants before the interview commenced (Alase, 2017).

Throughout the interview process it was noted that during the course of conversation the research participants became more comfortable and disclosed personal opinions that would not have been possible to gauge had the participants filled in a questionnaire for example; it was during those key moments of the interview that the participants disclosed information that was pivotal for the study. To facilitate the flow of the conversation I had a set of questions to guide me. However, I generally went where the participants wanted to take me while showing empathy towards what they were saying by allowing them to talk freely with minimal interruption (Smith and Osborn, 2007). Specific questions were asked within the flow of the conversation to allow the participants to express themselves, thus giving participants the opportunity to tell their story (Smith and Osborn, 2007).

While the interviews were taking place, the researcher took note of non-verbal behaviours that would not be captured in the audio-recording. This step was important because certain non-verbal language may be important when analysing the interview transcripts. Moreover, a reflexive diary was kept during the interview process in which the researcher took down notes on personal thoughts as they were occurring, this process helped the researcher become aware of ways in which she might be influencing the data.

### *Reflexivity*

To attend to the detail of the lived experience, a researcher must approach the meaning of the phenomenon with a sensitive and open mind; this is known as

bridling (Shaw, 2018). Bridling, allows a researcher to restrain his/her pre-understandings, such as personal beliefs and assumptions that could mislead understanding and limit the researcher's openness; a researcher must be disciplined and self-aware when interacting with the phenomenon so as not to carelessly make assumptions based on their own bias (Shaw, 2018). Researchers must distance themselves and allow the necessary space for the phenomenon to show itself (Shaw, 2018). For Researchers to do this, they must embark on an ongoing journey of self-reflection. Personally, reflexivity helped me become more open to listening to the participants and allow them space to talk while checking with them for understanding every now and then during the process of the interview.

I found myself becoming upset and angry when I heard stories of students being excluded from mainstream schools because of their behaviour or inability of keeping up with the classroom curriculum. Moreover, I experienced shock and astonishment while stories of physical abuse and mistreatment towards LSEs were being described, and I needed to write my own personal feelings down in a post-script reflection in order to describe my own journey as a researcher (Alase, 2017). When I processed these distressing feelings, I was able to comprehend the experiences of the participants. This reflection facilitated the analysis process since I was able to empathise with the point of view of the participants. As a result, I felt that this research helped me understand the hardships as well as triumphs of other LSEs, their coping mechanisms and how they make sense of their experiences', which in turn contributes to the way they perceive themselves.

### **Main research findings**

This study set out to explore the way LSEs are treated in schools, the way they perceive their role and what meaning they assign to their different experiences. Moreover, this research explored the way that LSEs feel others - the professional community (teachers and the senior management team) as well as the Maltese community - perceive them. The process of data collection produced twelve superordinate themes which were discussed thoroughly in light of the available literature.

Since two participants had been LSEs for twenty years it was interesting to listen to their narratives and note how things had evolved since the late 90s. The first theme also delved into the experience of the other eight participants during their first year as LSEs. Most participants noted that they initially felt lost, ill-prepared and overwhelmed. They described different coping strategies they used, such as asking colleagues or family members for help and reading up information online.

The second theme dealt with the complex duty roles that LSEs perform. Here, the participants described what their role entails. This theme exposed how flexible, versatile and compassionate LSEs need to be to carry out their role effectively. This theme revealed that LSEs perform duties far more complex than those outlined in the job description handbook (MEYE, 2007) however these roles often go unnoticed, and LSEs are seldom rewarded for their work and dedication (Cachia, 2019).

The third theme, the babysitter, dealt with how LSEs feel others see their role. Nearly all participants disclosed that they are perceived as babysitters or student-sitters (Veck, 2009) by the school community as well as the Maltese community. This theme delved into how this stigma is embodied and the participants mentioned various scenarios in which their main duty revolved around student-sitting rather than assisting students academically to enable them to fully experience the curriculum, as outlined in the MEYE (2007) handbook as being their primary role.

The fourth theme dealt with the issue of segregation. This study revealed that LSEs are just as segregated as the students within their care. Many LSEs revealed instances in which they were completely cut off from the classroom and the school community. The participants' narratives indicated that often one to one LSEs are on their own since they struggle to belong within the school community because they are seen as belonging to the student, rather than the school. Moreover, two participants mentioned the room; a place where LSEs go together with their students when they do not follow certain lessons or when they have no other place to go. This room is described by these two participants as bare, dull and unwelcoming; a dumping station for those students who do not belong.

The fifth theme - powerlessness - yielded the most depressing issues. A sense of powerlessness was echoed in each participant's interview. The participants explained that they know they are at the bottom of the hierarchy. One participant mentioned that he feels he belongs to the lowest tier within the school, while another participant mentioned that he feels that he is treated like trash. Overall, the participants feel that they are not treated as professionals. Despite this awareness of maltreatment there was a uniform sense of acceptance and an unwillingness to take action to improve their situation.

Theme 6, delved into the gendered role. Most female participants revealed that the profession of the LSE is family-friendly because of the hours and school holidays. Some schools even allow mothers to take their children to work with them when they do not have school. This is the reason why many women leave other professions to become LSEs because this job allows them to juggle the double-burden that is bestowed upon them once they become mothers. This theme also revealed that there is a stigma attached to the role of LSE, where

some participants revealed that they passed through a phase of being embarrassed to state what their occupation is. One participant disclosed that he comes from a family of doctors and lawyers, and as a result his occupation was looked down upon by the family as not being good enough. Another female participant who had previously worked in a bank, faced backlash from her in-laws for working beneath her capabilities. Lastly, this theme revealed that certain LSEs, usually male LSEs, are given challenging cases year after year. One female participant also asserted that schools know their staff well, thus, they choose their staff according to who is the most apt at handling challenging situations, resulting in some staff members being given challenging cases every year while others being favoured for less challenging ones.

Theme 7 revolved around the school community and how a sense of belonging allows members of the school community to give their utmost for the whole community to thrive. Wenger's theory of Community of Practice (CoP) was discussed, with examples given by the participants of when they collaborated with other LSEs or teachers to form a CoP, which collaboration proved to be very fruitful, when different professionals set out to collaborate. Many participants disclosed that they were reluctant to share their work and resources because they did not always trust their colleagues, unless they were friends, which shows that there is a waste of human resources because each LSE has to create his/her own resources instead of collaborating together to create a pool of common resources everyone can use.

Theme 8 looked into the perception of the Maltese community. Most of the participants disclosed that the Maltese community views LSEs in a negative light, as caretakers and not educators. Some participants mentioned that the same is done with teachers. However, some participants pointed out that the stigma surrounding LSEs is fading and LSEs are gaining respect, especially from those individuals whose son/daughter have received assistance from an LSE. The participants agreed that there needs to be more awareness about the role of LSEs to inform the Maltese community that it is not simply a babysitting role.

Theme 9 depicted the barriers to inclusion that LSEs experience, namely being burdened with all of the responsibility of the statemented students, especially when the student has a one to one statement. Participants also raised their concerns about the system. They felt that it is a one-size-fits-all structure. They argued that inclusion cannot thrive in a system geared towards finishing an extensive curriculum with an end result of achieving good marks on a single exam. Many participants explained how their students are often ignored by teachers and the SMT because they do not follow the curriculum and they do not sit for any exams, so they are not deemed to be important. Two participants

who work in government schools noted that since the college system was implemented and the school size increased, inclusion is not feasible in these large schools because students become just a number and they subsequently become lost.

Theme 10 revealed that many participants see their profession as a dead-end job. As a result, they see it as a temporary occupation until they can move on to something better. The participants attributed a lack of structure within the LSE career development path. Moreover, the nature of the training was described by the participants as being repetitive, influenced mainly by theory and, overall, the training was described as mediocre, allowing for little aspirations to better oneself. Most participants disclosed that the only reason they follow the courses available is to secure an increase in their wage once the courses are completed.

Theme 11 was dedicated to describing a truly inclusive environment. The participants agreed that the ingredients necessary for a school to achieve inclusion include factors such as: the willingness of the Head of School to be receptive to the needs of the students and the LSEs, thoughtful pairing between LSE and student, as well as the fruitful collaboration between colleagues who are willing to work as a team.

Lastly, theme 12 depicted the way forward for the profession to thrive. The participants mentioned that a structured training programme needs to be set in place. Ideally, training should commence before employment to minimise instances of bad practice. Some participants suggested that LSEs and teachers should be given the opportunity to train together, as this would facilitate their collaboration since each party would understand the role and duties of the other. Moreover, LSEs should be given the opportunity to specialise in a particular area, similar to the model of specialisation at Weston College, England which was described by Titmus (2015). Most participants agreed that an opportunity to specialise will give them a sense of professional fulfilment and improve their feelings of self-worth. Nonetheless, these improvements to the LSE system merit a warrant and should be vetted with continual opportunities for professional development and regular external reviewing.

## **Recommendations**

This study was able to bring to light different experiences of LSEs and the way that they perceive these experiences. Despite the relatively small sample size many participants shared common experiences. An interesting study would be to carry out a similar study using a bigger sample size. The study could shed light on various issues and could perhaps give a voice to LSEs who are seldom taken into consideration when studies are conducted. Moreover, a study with LSEs during their first year to see how they adapt to their new role and how

their attitude and practice change once they start receiving training would also be beneficial for developing the profession of LSEs. Lastly, a study focusing on community development, through different channels, mainly online communities which allow LSEs to share their resources, to have a voice and to discuss matters would not only be beneficial for LSEs, but for all the schools in Malta, because effective collaboration can help LSEs go on a journey of self-improvement.

## Conclusion

Throughout this research it was a struggle to be constantly analytical and to allow the participants voices to be heard. It was very important for me to suppress my own beliefs and my own voice to stay true to the experience of each participant. The experiences that each participant disclosed with me helped me to reflect upon my own practice. The research journey served as a moment of reflection on my own practice and on the power, privileges and oppression that I have experienced throughout my years as an LSE. It was a process of conscientisation, in Freirean terms, one which helped me come to terms with my own identity as an LSE, sparking a new chapter in my professional journey.

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