A *COACTION Model* to Explore Remote Teacher and Learning Support Educator Collaboration during COVID-19 School Closure in Malta

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Abstract: It has become the norm for primary classrooms in Maltese state schools to host a primary school teacher and one or more Learning Support Educators. Although these two roles are distinct in their nature and description, they are equally important for effective classroom management. The most successful and inspiring scenarios, enabling all students to succeed, occur when both roles within the teaching team collaborate successfully (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, schools in Malta were closed until the end of the scholastic year. Teaching and learning processes saw a shift from the four walls of the physical classroom to remote classrooms in the online world. The purpose of this study was to explore remote teacher collaboration during the physical closure of schools in Malta through the lens of a model which was identified for the purposes of this work – the *COACTION Model*. This model was developed through a systematic literature review grounded in evidence-based exemplar characteristics for teacher collaboration. A qualitative study based on the experience of six teaching teams was conducted through semi-structured interviews. A deductive thematic analysis followed the interviews. This paper discusses the experiences of teachers and Learning Support Educators working remotely, and shows whether and how they implemented the elements outlined in the *COACTION Model*.

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The findings suggest that having a robust working relationship, sharing a common goal and devising the teaching and learning process together led to a positive collaborative experience. Recommendations for policy and practice to sustain and support such collaborations are identified.

Keywords: COACTION Model; COVID-19; Learning Support Educators; Malta; Teacher Collaboration; Teaching Support; Teamwork; Remote Collaboration.

Introduction

Teams in the workplace are common across numerous industries, including healthcare and education. Within educational systems, teacher collaboration has always been key for successful outcomes. For decades, such collaboration has been crucial to offer the best possible educational alternatives and opportunities for students within their classrooms (Friend et al., 2010). In international scenarios, such as Italy and England, teaching teams have become the norm in primary school classrooms. Most teachers are now sharing their classroom with at least one other adult (Devecchi et al., 2012).

The Maltese educational system includes an experience similar to existent international scenarios. It is becoming the norm for two or more educators to be present in primary school classrooms in Malta. This scenario generally includes a teacher and one or two Learning Support Educators (LSEs). Although the teacher's and the LSE's training, salary scales and qualifications upon recruitment are distinct, some elements in their job descriptions are similar (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2007). Both job descriptions stipulate that they need to provide instruction according to the abilities, achievement and educational needs of all the students in the class.

Nevertheless, having roles outlined in a job description manual is not enough. Mac Rory (2018) argues that 'job descriptions' are documents against which individuals are recruited. However, these descriptions do not necessarily define the role which members have within the team (Mac Rory, 2018).

The role of team members is identified when collaboration between them takes place. Ideus (2012) argues that collaboration is not something which is done by the individual, but it is 'a way of being' (p.299). It is a way of working with and being considerate of others despite them being competitors

(Ideus, 2012). However, this is not an easy process. Team members are continually struggling with redefining their roles, relationships and responsibilities, in order to collaborate more effectively (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016).

On the 12th March 2020, the health and governmental authorities in Malta unexpectedly closed down all educational institutions to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This decision was taken a few days after the first reported cases of COVID-19 infections in Malta. In this unprecedented situation, where no educator or student was allowed to attend school physically, the alternative was to shift the teaching and learning process outside the four walls of the physical classroom to the online world. Similar measures were adopted by countries around the world, including European countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy and France (Di Domenico et al., 2020; Esposito & Principi, 2020; Pietrobelli et al., 2020)

A thorough search for literature which sought to explore the methods of collaboration used by teaching teams composed of class teachers and LSEs in inclusive classrooms during the COVID-19 school closure and subsequent shift to remote teaching gave no results. There is no information available on how collaboration amongst teaching teams has taken place during this period. Due to this gap, the authors of this paper carried out this research with the intention of exploring the experiences of these teams. The following research question guided the study:

How does the remote collaboration between teachers and Learning Support Educators during the COVID-19 pandemic align with the *COACTION Model*?

Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature

At the initial stage of this research, the authors carried out a systematic literature review to learn what characteristics are required for teams to function effectively. These characteristics have been retrieved from literature which explores and evaluates the concept of collaboration within the classroom. Following this systematic review, several traits of the required attributes for effective collaboration were identified. These elements are represented by an acronym; the *COACTION Model* (Table 1).

Following the aforementioned stage, this study applied a qualitative methodological approach where six teaching teams were interviewed to

capture their experience during such extraordinary times. Interview transcriptions and a deductive thematic analysis followed. The data elicited from the interviews were compared to the elements of the *COACTION Model* to demonstrate whether and how teams implemented each element, as well as to identify recurring patterns.

The COACTION Model
Clarity in roles
Open Communication
Accountability
Conflict Resolution
Trust
Intrinsic Motivation
Optimistic Approach
Nurturing Attitude

Table 1 - The COACTION Model

Collaboration: A Mindset for Effective Teamwork

Collaboration is a process by which individuals willingly work together to realise a task which benefits one or more people (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). It is a powerful tool that provides opportunities for team members to learn from each other, share their skills and improve their practice (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). It is also an integral approach to planning and delivering services related to teaching and assessment (Friend et al., 2010; Pellegrino et al., 2015). Research suggests that collaboration amongst educators enhances student learning and leads to improved student achievement (Moolenaar et al., 2012). Collaboration is a process which is beneficial for learners and educators alike (Borg & Drange, 2019; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; OECD, 2013).

The COACTION Model - Elements within a Teacher/LSE Team

In the past, teachers were assigned their own classrooms and worked autonomously (McCray et al., 2014). Nowadays, with the increase in acceptance that all students, irrespective of their diverse learning needs, can be supported in mainstream settings rather than in special schools, educators are required to collaborate in order to accommodate the needs of the students

(Shephard et al., 2016). LSEs typically have aptitudes related to curriculum adaptation. On the other hand, teachers are knowledgeable about pedagogy and curriculum matters (Dettmer et al., 2005).

Although literature demonstrates how valuable collaboration is, teamwork cannot be established if the team does not exhibit several traits. Trust, mutual respect and the valuing of expertise are some of the aspects which are crucial to success within teams (Borg & Drange, 2019; Daniel et al., 2013; Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010; Murawski, 2010). However, research shows that the skills necessary for collaboration are not always instinctive (Pellegrino et al., 2015). Given that these skills may not always be developed intuitively, providing clear instructions is crucial.

 The authors of this paper explored several scholarly articles to present a collective and organised model. Eight key elements have been found to be critical for teaching teams to be successful and are presented as the *COACTION Model.* This acronym represents the following elements: clarity in roles, open communication, accountability, conflict resolution, trust, intrinsic motivation, optimistic approach, and nurturing attitude**.** The term 'model' has been added to the acronym as it refers to a conception or an approach which is intended to be taken as an example (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2012). The purpose behind the *COACTION Model* is to provide teams with clear instructions and an awareness of the salient elements required for effective collaborative practices. If the elements within this model are implemented, these may enhance the level and quality of collaboration.

C- Clarity in Roles

The term 'role' is defined as the approach with which an individual is involved in an activity, situation or status in a group (MacRoy, 2018). Diverse roles within a team also measure the level of influence that each team member has on the activity, situation or status of the team (MacRoy, 2018).

A crucial element which contributes to effective collaboration and eventually to positive support systems is that of having teachers and LSEs who clearly understand each other's distinct but complementary roles. An external review which evaluated inclusive education in Malta reported that both the teacher and the LSE do not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of one another (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014). There is evidence that within the Maltese educational scenario, this issue

tends to have a greater effect on the LSE rather than the teacher. In fact, the review saw that many LSEs working in Maltese schools have reported that they often feel isolated and lack clear guidance from class teachers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014). This situation may lead to repercussions concerning the performance of LSEs in the classroom. There is evidence that in the case of teaching assistants, role clarification is a contributing factor to their effectiveness within the classroom (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; O'Brien, 2010; Sharma & Salend, 2016). McCray et al. (2014) argue that teams with role clarity are significantly more efficacious. Having clearly defined roles removes the confusion which is associated with each team member's respective duties (Warhurst et al., 2013). Hence, if guidelines regarding job responsibilities are inconsistent and unclear, the performance of the educator in the classroom could be hindered (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Docherty, 2014).

O - Open Communication

Communication is a social interaction process which is used to express information and network ideas to influence specific activity within a collaborative situation (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2012). Hence its purpose is to reach common agreements to fulfil the main goals of the team.

Within teaching teams, open communication is crucial. Docherty (2014) found that open communication between educators is required for sharing information, distributing roles and clarifying any difficulties which may arise during the process. Open communication also serves as a means for feedback and evaluation. Teaching teams could use open communication to acquire input about each other's performance, and the quality and presentation of lesson material. Research by Devecchi and Rouse (2010) demonstrates that both teachers and LSEs agree that seeking feedback from one another is crucial throughout their daily practice. Being 'open' and 'approachable' (p.97) are aspects which contribute to a successful collaboration (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

Research also shows that although adequate open communication has its benefits, a lack of it creates several challenges. Docherty (2014) declares that poor communication leads to wasted learning prospects and unsuitable task setting for students, in particular those with Individual Education Needs (IEN). A similar finding has been outlined in a study by Webster et al. (2011),

which explored the role of teaching assistants in Scotland. This demonstrates that a lack of communication in relation to lesson preparation has a bearing on the outcomes of learners (Webster et al., 2011).

In light of the findings above, open communication must be constant within teams as this would facilitate the process of information sharing, clarify any challenges arising within the team, and ensure that the instruction given to learners is in line with their needs.

A – Accountability

Accountability is a quality whereby an individual within an organisation, team or group takes on the responsibility of the results and outcomes of a task or an activity, irrespective of whether such outcomes are positive or not. Accountability is a value which should be taken on instinctively by individuals and is not assigned by leaders or team members (Ware et al., 2013). Hence, it is entirely the responsibility of every person within a group, team or organisation. Literature outlines that members of resilient teams feel accountable for the entire body of effort and not only for their input (Browning, 2019).

In the field of education, research demonstrates that educators view accountability as a quality which enables them to effectively collaborate with other team members (Pellegrino et al., 2015). Literature on teacher collaboration shows that the concept of accountability necessitates members to commit themselves to decisions and action plans, and to feel dutiful towards the team for its growth (Sparks, 2013). This would allow educators to work together to solve teaching and learning challenges, and potentially increase student success (Marshall, 2013).

In order for teams to achieve accountability, it is required that members of the teaching team not blame each other for mistakes and failures. Whilst any successes should be celebrated together, facing failures should also be done collaboratively.

C - Conflict Resolution

Troen and Boles (2012) argue that teams who are successful 'do not shy away from conflict' (p.17). Instead, such teams appreciate that there are valuable outcomes from conflict resolution (Troen & Boles, 2012).

It is common for team members not to address conflicts, as they believe that this would affect the smooth functioning of the team. Educators tend to limit collaboration to safer and less threatening aspects by avoiding conflict (Vangrieken et al., 2015). This leads to what Troen and Boles (2012) call 'artificial harmony' (p.40). Literature argues that artificial harmony does not increase value within a team as it does not address the significant issues within a team. Such a situation would impact the level and quality of the work being produced by team members (Troen & Boles, 2012).

The application of skills such as the ability to negotiate, compromise and seek the best alternatives would lead to effective conflict management and resolution (Xavier, 2005). Such aptitudes would allow members within teaching teams to reach a common understanding of how to solve problems and to find a solution for ethical and practical dilemmas (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

T – Trust

Within our social worlds, trust is a universal aspect of the social relations between human beings (Fehr, 2010). Complexities related to trust increase not only because of the number of individuals within the team, but also because of the need for synchronised social action for members to achieve their goals (Lusher et al., 2013).

Although it is a complex and multifaceted construct, trust is key to developing meaningful relationships. Relationships which are built on trust are based on interdependence, and this generates vulnerability (Hoy & DiPaola, 2007). Trust involves taking risks and making oneself vulnerable to the other whilst feeling assured that the other will behave in ways that do not harm the trusting party (Hoy & DiPaola, 2007). Where trust is present, collaborative behaviours such as sharing of information and feelings are more likely to happen (Costa & Anderson, 2011).

Reciprocal trust between members is an essential feature of effective classroom collaboration (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). There is evidence that teachers tend to trust LSEs with ensuring that students in the class are on task and that their behaviour is appropriate (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). Such a level of trust is further confirmed by research, as occasionally teachers act upon the

suggestions of the LSEs following observations of students' behaviour (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). Without a high level of trust, educators may not share student achievement data or teaching approaches with the members of their team (Harris & Jones, 2010). Not sharing such critical information in relation to student progress and instructional strategies could limit the professional growth of educators, consequently impacting the effectiveness of the team (Hallam et al., 2015).

I - Intrinsic Motivation

It is commonly known that team members function best within a team when they are motivated (Whiteley, 2002). Work motivation often has been based on two drives: either biological motivation based on survival instinct or extrinsic motivation which avoids punishments and pursues rewards (Pink, 2011). A third drive was added later on, that of intrinsic motivation, and this is linked to the satisfaction derived from executing an action.

One important aspect of promoting intrinsic motivation is when individuals are less controlled and are provided with further choice and positive feedback (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This results in increased optimistic approaches within the team, improved well-being and higher job fulfilment (Gagné & Deci, 2005). When team members work within a positive collaborative climate, a shared perception of collaboration is created. Amabile (1998) argues that this has a positive effect on the intrinsic motivation of the individual members, because they may feel that there is a degree of relatedness amongst them and this may increase satisfaction. Moreover, when team members are intrinsically motivated, they share opinions and ideas, and enrich the knowledge base of the other team members, thus increasing the competences of the team (Carmeli et al., 2015).

O - Optimistic Approach

There is a correlation between the inclusion of optimistic interactions of team members and the increase in energy for more creative action within a team (Conoley & Conoley, 2010). Optimistic approaches allow individuals to develop 'thought-action repertoires' (Fredrickson, 1998, p.300) to construct their own permanent resources which include knowledge, determination, optimism, and empathy (Fredrickson, 1998). When team members are optimistic in their thinking, they are in a better position to ask for support, be

appreciative of the help received, and notice that other individuals need assistance. This allows members to feel happier within the team (Conoley & Conoley, 2010).

Research which has evaluated the motivation and work attitude of teachers and teacher assistants in an Early Years setting shows that optimistic approaches within collaborative relationships can be facilitated by structuring the physical working layout (Wagner & French, 2010). Although a number of Maltese classrooms lack physical space, planning their layout in collaboration with all team members could create a sense of belonging.

N - Nurturing Attitude

Nurture is a 'vehicle through which possibilities are converted into potentials' (Bolea & Atwater, 2014, p.311). Educators can nurture collaborative relationships by being confident models of hope (Lumpkin et al., 2014). Through hope, educators can cope with challenges by firmly believing that they can still be agents of change.

Evidence shows that relationships can be nurtured through empathy. Empathy is defined as an understanding of the world from the perspective of others in relation to their feelings, experience and behaviour (Brockbank & McGill, 2013). Empathy towards colleagues is an aspect which is beneficial within teaching teams (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). A study carried out by Pellegrino et al. (2015) outlines that educators view empathy as a quality which facilitates effective teamwork. Team members must consider the views and the feelings of one another and attempt to respond to them in a manner which is considerate and supportive.

To this effect, the eight identified elements within the COACTION Model serve as a conceptual framework to create boundaries for the literature review, as well as to explore remote teacher collaboration in Malta during the COVID-19 pandemic. This helps to extract recommendations for teaching teams to nurture strong, collaborative relationships.

Methodology

Systematic Literature Review

A systematic search of major scientific journals in education, psychology, human relations and social sciences published between 2010-2020 via the scholarly portals Google Scholar, ERIC and EBSCOhost was conducted. Searches on scholarly databases were conducted using the keywords outlined in Table 2. Given that other nomenclatures are used in international educational scenarios for the term LSE, these were also used to identify articles.

Scholarly Search Portals	Terms
Google Scholar	Collaboration
EBSCOhost	Co-Teaching
ERIC	Characteristics of teamwork
	Classroom Assistants
	General Education Teacher
	Instructional Assistants
	Learning Support Assistant
	Learning Support Educator
	Learning Support Staff
	Mainstream Classrooms
	Networking
	Paraeducators
	Partnership
	Professional collaboration in schools
	Regular Education
	Special Needs Assistant
	Teacher
	Teacher Assistant
	Teacher Aide
	Teamwork

Table 2. Keywords and strings of word used to conduct the literature review

Literature was included if it: (a) was related to mainstream education; (b) focused on the role of in-service teachers when working in primary or secondary schools; (c) focused on the role of instructional assistants/learning support assistants/learning support educators/learning support staff/paraeducators/teaching aides/classroom assistants/special needs assistants when working in primary or secondary schools; (d) discussed key aspects of

collaboration between educators; (e) appeared in full text in peer-reviewed journals from 2010 to 2020. An analysis was performed to ensure that the replications of the studies identified were reviewed only once. The titles and abstracts of the identified literature were then evaluated to assess whether the content was likely to meet the inclusion criteria in the review and warranted further examination.

Using the aforementioned search process, a total of 53 papers were initially identified from the databases (Appendix 1). After eliminating 9 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 44 papers were then evaluated to verify that the content had relevant information which addresses the aim of this research. After screening for validity and relevance, a total of 30 papers fit the criteria for inclusion and were examined for this literature review.

Semi-structured Interviews

The Research Tool - Both the purpose and the research question which underpins this study aimed to produce recommendations based on the experiences of the team members. Hence, a qualitative methodology was preferable to focus on the depth of the experience and to carefully select exemplary lessons learnt. The use of semi-structured interviews as a research tool was chosen as the sole data collection method. Such a mono-method qualitative methodological choice was made to achieve depth in the experience of members within teaching teams. Such an approach was taken because the perspective of various teachers and LSEs on such an unprecedented occurrence within schools in Malta would be more beneficial. The researchers sought to extract individual as well as collective experiences.

The interview schedule was designed with five specific sections. The first section was to gather demographic information about the members of the teaching team and their general viewpoints on collaboration. The second section was focused on day-to-day collaboration prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The third and fourth sections addressed the benefits and challenges of collaboration during online teaching. The final section of the interview aimed to elicit potential recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, giving a voice to the actual online teaching front-liners during the pandemic.

The Participants - To have a diversified experience, the researchers sought to recruit participants from different geographical catchment areas. Maltese state schools are gathered into ten college networks (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014) which are then subdivided into three sets, referred to as the Northern, Central and Southern clusters (MEDE, 2020). These subdivisions are divided according to where the ten college networks are geographically located and the researchers aimed to recruit 6 teaching teams - two teams from the Northern cluster, two teams from the Central cluster and two teams from the Southern cluster.

The sample consisted of 15 educators (6 teachers and 9 LSEs) who work in primary state schools in Malta and these were recruited through random sampling. Other educators working in non-state schools were interested in participating, but unfortunately their interest had to be declined. Those interested in participating in the study had to be working within a teaching team during the scholastic year 2019-2020. A total of 6 teaching teams were recruited (Table 3).

Pseudonym	Teachers	LSEs	Location	Class
Team 1	1	2	Southern	Kindergarten 2
Team 2	1	2	Central	Year 1
Team 3	1	2	Northern	Year 2
Team 4	1	1	Northern	Year 4
Team 5	1	1	Southern	Year 5
Team 6	1	1	Central	Year 6

Table 3 - The six teaching teams

Participants were given a participation information letter and a consent form. These explained the aims of the research, all ethical procedures including the right to withdraw at any time from the study, and how the data was going to be used and disseminated. The participants' anonymity was ensured by using a pseudonym for the teaching team rather than individual pseudonyms for each participant.

Analysis of Data - The semi-structured interviews were held online and were audio-recorded. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred data collection method as they gave the researchers the flexibility to use probes to gather further data, and it allowed the interviewees to delve deeper into

team-specific situations that occurred during the period of school closure and subsequent shift to remote teaching. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and a deductive thematic analysis approach was used, whereby the predetermined *COACTION Model* and its elements were used to analyse the data.

The coding scheme which was used to analyse the data was aligned with the literature used when presenting the *COACTION Model*, as well as the emerging patterns from the semi-structured interviews. The codes were then grouped in several categories. The final part of the deductive thematic analysis was to assemble key concepts to further strengthen the alignment with the elements of the *COACTION Model*.

Results and Discussion

The *COACTION Model* allows teacher/LSE teams to identify which elements have been mastered and others which need further strengthening within the teaching team. This section of the paper will discuss the results extracted from the data collected, through assembled key concepts which were aligned with the *COACTION Model*.

Clarity in Roles

Warhurst et al. (2013) argue that when members of a teaching team have defined roles, their duties are clear and straight-forward. Four teaching teams explain how although the roles of a class teacher and an LSE are different, these were highly complementary during online teaching. Three teams explain that while the class teacher was delivering online lessons, the LSEs were performing behind-the-scenes tasks and this seems to have been agreed upon naturally amongst the members. The class teacher of Team 4 argues that there is no distinction between the two roles, *"we are both professionals and we are both helping students to learn"*.

The teams unanimously agree that a degree of flexibility was necessary for online teaching to be successful. The three participants from Team 2 stress the importance of how, *"we would instantly agree on who would be doing it, irrespective if it was the class teacher or one of the LSEs"* when something had to be done. It seems that these team members are very knowledgeable about each other's roles and this contributed towards their efficacy (McCray et al., 2014). Curiously, this was the first experience working with another adult in

the classroom for the class teacher of Team 2 and she remarks that she *"would have been lost without them [LSEs]"*. The majority of the teams also explain how at times, roles were swapped – for example, one educator would be 'sharing the screen' while the other would be explaining it. The class teacher of Team 4 explains, *"there were instances when she [the LSE] was delivering the online lesson while I [the class teacher] was observing the students while they were doing their assessment"*. This same team describes how during a particular day of the week, the LSE would conduct informal online activities such as cooking, while the teacher would be participating in such activities with the students. The teacher adds, *"We needed each other to make it work"*.

The LSEs of Team 2 clarify that at times, *"a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) member would ask her [class teacher] for an individual one-to-one session so we would automatically take over the lesson"*. Team 5, on the other hand, argue that although it was not a utopian relationship because of the shift to online classrooms, both educators managed to keep communication channels open and they managed to overcome all obstacles to give the students their educational entitlement. The class teacher of this team remarks, *"the LSE was continuously supplying resources to all students in the classroom"*. It seems that these 6 teaching teams have mastered role clarity; the class teachers are providing clear guidelines and LSEs are not feeling sidelined, contrary to what was identified in the external audit carried out in 2014 (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014).

O - Open Communication

While Microsoft Teams® (MS TEAMS) was the preferred and provided platform by The Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) to be used for synchronous online teaching, some teams note how online lessons were delivered using other platforms such as WebEx Cisco® and video calls on Messenger®. Team 5 mentions the use of the iLearn platform, a MEDE-provided teaching portal which is currently being phased out, while Team 2 used Google Classroom® as an online repository. It is evident that all six teams had established very strong online communication channels, at times extending into after school hours and during weekends. Apart from the platform used to deliver lessons, all participants explain how they mostly communicated amongst themselves via other applications such as Messenger® and WhatsApp®, as well as through phone calls. Team 2 and Team 6 note that since the online dimension limits the physical relationship, it

was important for all team members to communicate daily to keep up the momentum.

Four teams also mention how they would first circulate teaching resources via email, give feedback to one another, and then use such resources during lessons. This resonates with the research carried out by Devecchi and Rouse (2010), where they explain how the process of educators seeking feedback from each other is essential to day-to-day practice. Most participants argue that being provided with a second opinion is useful as this helps to polish the work being prepared and provides different perspectives on the teaching material. This is in line with Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez (2012), who explain how communication influences specific activities within a collaborative situation. On the other hand, all teams explain how they would provide ongoing feedback to one another after the synchronous online lessons to ameliorate their doings. Team 2 mentions, "*Sometimes we gave them recorded lessons and we three … we would set up the same scenario in our homes … and record different parts of the lesson and then she [LSE] collates the video recordings into one clip.*" This same team also narrates how in previous years, "*When the school was led by a different SLT, it was implied that the LSEs were a threat to the school and this affected the communication channels between the teachers and the LSEs*". This led to various issues, especially with regards to students with IEN (Docherty, 2014).

All six teaching teams note how open communication was also established with the families (parents or guardians) of the learners. In the majority of cases, all team members communicated with the parents while in two particular teams, the class teacher would be the educator communicating with the families and the LSE/s would be copied in the communication.

Accountability

Five of the six teaching teams express how they managed to liaise together and made sure that all team members were present during all online synchronous lessons. It is interesting to note that several members explain that on days when the students with a statement of needs did not attend online lessons, the LSE would still be available and participate during the lesson, very much in line with Ware et al. (2013)'s take on accountability as an instinctive value. This breaks a popular unfounded belief that the student with a statement of needs is the (sole) responsibility of the LSE, and instead shows that all team members feel accountable for all the doings in the (online)

classroom. This aligns with Sparks (2013) who explains that commitment is also linked to wilful duty. Half the teaching teams also explain that if, for instance, an educator would be unavailable for an online synchronous lesson, the other educator/s would make sure to be available so that the online lesson would not be cancelled or postponed, and students would have been given their educational entitlement. As Marshall (2013) asserts, when educators work together to solve challenges, this increases student success. Four of the teaching teams also describe how after online lessons, they would remain online and give feedback to one another about the delivery or the adaptation of the lesson. Most of the LSEs noted that the class teachers involved them from the very beginning of the shift to online teaching and sought their advice throughout. One particular team mentions, *"there was a lack of issued guidelines by the SLT, which resulted in disagreements with other educators in the same year group"*. This team expresses that such clashes within the year group, *"disoriented the team as not all parents' expectations could be fulfilled"*.

Conflict Resolution

When it comes to conflict resolution, all six teams agree that the compatibility between the personalities of the team members is a crucial factor for a positive collaborative experience, as well as for conflict resolution. Most teams note that conflicts often arise, especially in such an online teaching scenario and hence affinity between team members is a must. Team 5 notes that a fruitful collaborative experience extends beyond the affinity between members – *"this is like a relationship; you have to tolerate the other, in good and in bad times"*. An educator from Team 4 emphasizes, *"although we have complementary personalities, this does not mean that our lifestyles are the same"* and they both giggled. This educator explains how these two team members lead a very different lifestyle, *"but we are very open to accepting each other and deal with conflict in the best possible way … she [LSE] has accepted me the way I am and I [teacher] have accepted her the way she is"*. All participants agree that conflict is natural, happens regularly and when it arises, they solve it as quickly as possible to bring back harmony within the team. This contradicts Vangrieken et al. (2015) who argue that team members often limit collaboration to more safe aspects by avoiding conflict. This may indicate that these participants do not support 'artificial harmony' (Troes & Boles, 2012, p.40); on the other hand, they appreciate the opportunities for growth brought about by conflict.

When asked about scenarios where there is more than 1 LSE in the teaching team, only Team 6 notes that this would *"create more conflict"*. The other teams believe that the more adults present in the (online) classroom, the better the situation is and the fewer conflicts would arise. While a class teacher states, *"I would have been lost without them [the LSEs]"*, an LSE says that *"this was my first time working with another LSE in the same classroom and it was an enjoyable experience"*.

Teams unanimously agree that when a team is functioning well, keeping the team members working together for more than one scholastic year would be an additional resource for SLTs. Since team members would have already collaborated during the previous scholastic year, they would have already handled conflicts and would be in a position to resolve conflicts faster or more effectively. Four teams argue that this rarely happens as somehow they are of the idea that SLTs are not in favour of keeping team members together if there is affinity, *"possibly due to power struggles"*.

Trust

The six teaching teams unanimously agree that a culture of trust was instilled between the team members. The participants repeatedly use keywords such as trust, honesty, respect, loyalty, and clarity while talking about the teaching team and the collaborative online experience. A participant in Team 2 explains, *"before the school closure, we were already very comfortable with each other"* and clarifies how collaborating online maximised this culture of trust. Another participant from this team says, *"it was beautiful that we planned everything together; all team members were allowed space to share their opinions and we all had an equal voice"*. The behaviour of this team seems to resonate with Lusher et al. (2013)'s synchronised social action for members to achieve their goals based on a culture of trust.

A widespread team-teaching approach is that of 'One Teaches, One Observes'. All six class teachers clarify that there were instances where the LSE/s took on the role of observers during the online lesson, as explained by Devecchi and Rouse (2010). A participant says, *"It takes a lot of trust to ask a colleague to observe the lesson delivery, prepare feedback and then report back"*. Hoy and DiPaola (2007) argue that when a team member trusts another team member, there is a degree of risk and making oneself vulnerable, while still feeling fully assured that no harm would be done. The class teacher of Team 3 notes, *"the LSEs were always on the alert for the smooth running of online lessons"*

while the class teacher of Team 4 adds, *"at the end of each lesson, I would ask the LSE for feedback about the delivery of the lesson because I trust her judgement"*. Moreover, the class teacher of Team 5 explains how the LSE was crucial in the running of online lessons -*"I trust her blindly … she helped me a lot with online teaching logistics, reading to a group of students, and asking questions to the whole class while I was taking note of their comprehension level"*.

Intrinsic Motivation

Five out of six teams note how ideas for online lessons were sourced from both the class teachers and the LSEs as they were highly motivated to do so (Whiteley, 2002). Interestingly, the Team 4 members explain, *"we are fully aware of each other's strong points and we divided the work according to our own strengths and talents"*. This was based on the intrinsic motivation of the team members. Moreover, the class teacher of Team 2 notes, *"I would ask them [LSEs] to prepare some activities that they're better at doing than I am, and which they enjoy preparing"*, hence more intrinsically motivated to do so. Five out of the six teams describe that a culture of shared skills was instilled within the team. For example, the class teacher of Team 4 explains, *"she [LSE] is more proficient in the Maltese language so the preparation of the MFL [Maltese as a Foreign Language] adaptations was done by her"*. Then she continues, *"She [LSE] is just as capable as I am, if not more so"*, and this is aligned with Amabile (1998)'s shared perception of collaboration and its positive effects on intrinsic motivation.

A member from Team 5 also notes, *"the weakness of one of us is the strength of the other, and this motivates the team"*. An LSE from Team 2 adds, *"I had difficulties with providing online support to my student [student with a statement of needs] but they [teacher/LSE] really helped me and explained how to use MS TEAMS"*. This reflects what Carmeli et al. (2015) assert when they explain that intrinsically motivated team members enrich each other's knowledge base.

Optimistic Approach

A positive atmosphere is crucial for a team to function properly. Such an optimistic approach stems from the diverse collaborative process within the team which make the members feel like they belong. The six teams agree that each challenge was tackled and discussed internally within the team before being shared with the SLT. This helped the team members to cultivate a more

optimistic atmosphere while tackling a particular challenge. A participant from Team 2 notes, *"Decisions were all made together as we feel safe asking each other first before asking the SLT"*.

A participant from Team 5 argues that having a positive atmosphere amongst the team members was important, so that it could be reflected in the atmosphere in the classroom, *"We wanted our students to be happy, so we were happy too"*. The members of three teams explain how they continuously encouraged one another to come up with positive, fun activities. An LSE from Team 2 argues, "*Sometimes I feel frustrated because there is a limit to what can be done online with a class of 5-year olds when compared to the hands-on [activities] in class"*. However, she adds, *"My colleagues helped me all the time by sharing resources, activities and ideas"*. Conoley and Conoley (2010) explain that when team members think optimistically, they are more appreciative of the help received and are also aware of other team members who need support.

When asked about family involvement and engagement, the teams share instances where it was evident that an optimistic approach was also present within the families of the students. Team 3's class teacher explains, *"It was beautiful to see families participating in online lessons",* while the class teacher of Team 4 says, *"The families seemed happier to have two adults with their children, maybe because of safety reasons"*. Later on, this educator adds, *"We were like one person to them, one entity"*. The class teacher of Team 5 explains, *"My colleague is very charismatic and I think that families used to join us during lessons because of her happy character"*. She goes on to explain how on one particular day of the week the LSE would prepare online cooking activities for all the family. This aligns with Conoley and Conoley (2010) who explain that when there are optimistic approaches within a team, there would be an increase of more creative activity. An LSE from Team 2 notes that the optimistic approach present within the team was also derived from the fact that *"We were online with the students so we could understand their [students'] home situation better and this brought us closer as a team"*.

Nurturing Attitude

When discussing the shift from teaching in the physical world to the online world, the majority of the participants share personal experiences linked to how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their professional (teacher) or personal life. It was very evident that all team members were continuously showing empathy towards one another and were trying to understand each

other's situations (Brockbank & McGill, 2013). *"Sometimes I would take over as I know that she [teacher] has a young boy who needed to be home-schooled"*, notes one educator. Another one says, *"I would feel upset knowing that she had been explaining over and over again and the students would say that they were understanding, when in reality they were not – I would feel for her"*. Another educator notes how she wanted to help her colleagues further but could not, because in her household the internet bandwidth was being used by 3 adults simultaneously and at times the connection would be limited or lost. Many participants also describe how the other members of the team were continuously working and that their workload had been stretched. The researchers were impressed by the way the class teachers were celebrating the LSEs' work, attitude and disposition to online teaching, and vice-versa. This resonates with Pellegrino et al. (2015); empathy aids effective teamwork.

Participants also narrate how they preferred to focus on the positive aspects of online teaching despite the extraordinary situations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three teams argue that they were thrown in at the deep end, without clear guidelines on how to tackle the online teaching scenario, while the other three teams describe how their respective schools quickly responded to the situation and the SLT provided proper guidelines about structure, context and frequency of online teaching. One particular team crossly explains, *"We received the first email from the SLT during the second week of May 2020, nearly 2 months after the school closure"*. Another two teams clarify that they started online teaching before MEDE published the official guidelines by its Working Group.

The nurturing attitude was consistent throughout this turbulent time. In fact, one participant notes, *"we used to always encourage each other and this was our best tactic"*, while another participant says *"the wellbeing of our students was crucial and so we needed to take care of our wellbeing too"*.

Recommendations & Conclusion

In the final section of the interview, the researchers asked the participants for practical recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The participants recommend that practitioners develop a robust team identity by making decisions and acting together, being present for all online lessons

and design a framework where teaching material/resources are brainstormed and prepared together. Within such a framework, lessons delivered are evaluated together while keeping communication channels as open as possible. This is done by initiating collaboration from the start, being sensitive to each other's realities, instilling a culture of trust, and motivating one another. When common goals are set, a synchronized mindset helps the team members to flourish and behave as role models for students in the classroom.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The participants recommend that policymakers suggest a common platform for online teaching, provide mandatory (not optional) training for all educators, digitize as many resources as possible, and provide further access to them as numerous educators felt panicked because of a lack of readily-available resources. They also suggest the issuing of guidelines outlining clear responsibilities, timeframes, expectations, and frequency of lessons. They also recommend that policies are provided with regards to the use of MEDE-supplied and personal devices, and to revise existing policies in a way that ensures they are translated and applied to the digital world. It is also suggested that upskilling courses about digital literacy skills, the online teaching platform and the process of online teaching are provided for families (parents/legal guardians).

On a separate note, participants urge SLT members "*to involve all staff members when sending an email and not only the class teachers, as this shows that LSEs are not as important*". At times, LSEs are not informed of such emails by the respective teachers.

Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought about instability and uncertainty within educational systems. The shift from physical to remote teaching had various implications on several stakeholders, including the class teachers and LSEs who had to shift their collaboration to the online classroom. This study focused on the experience of six teaching teams who worked in Maltese primary state schools during the scholastic year 2019-2020. It aimed to analyse how the teacher and LSE teams collaborated during the COVID-19 school closure period and subsequent shift to remote teaching in light of the *COACTION Model*, and provided recommendations which strengthen collaboration between the team members. It is recommended that further

research linked to collaboration in the Early Years and in Secondary Schools in Malta, as well as other international scenarios is conducted, using the *COACTION Model* as a conceptual framework based on existing evidence-based practice in the field of teacher collaboration.

This research also wanted to address the almost total lack of research evidence on the collaboration between teachers and LSEs in Malta. This stems from the fact that both researchers worked as a teacher/LSE team in a primary school some years ago and it was a very positive experience. Moreover, the researchers believe that this research is especially timely following the publication of A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (MEDE, 2019), which promotes collaboration when stating Whole School Development Planning and Whole School Inclusive Environment as two of its ten themes.

Within this context and with these aims, this study hopes to shed light on the positive experiences of collaboration within primary schools in Malta, and the way forward for teaching teams to flourish and maximise their potential. Such encouraging collaboration between teachers and LSEs ought to be appreciated, celebrated and replicated, as often as possible.

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Appendix 1: Prisma diagram outlining the process of the systematic literature review.

Identification	Records identified through database searching (n = 53)
	↓
Screening	Records after removal of duplicates (n = 44)
	↓
	Records screened (n = 44) → Records excluded (n=14)
	↓
Eligibility	Full-text literature fitting into criteria (n =30)
	↓
Included in-text	Literature included in-text (n =17)