

Msida Educational Hub

Msida Educational Hub



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

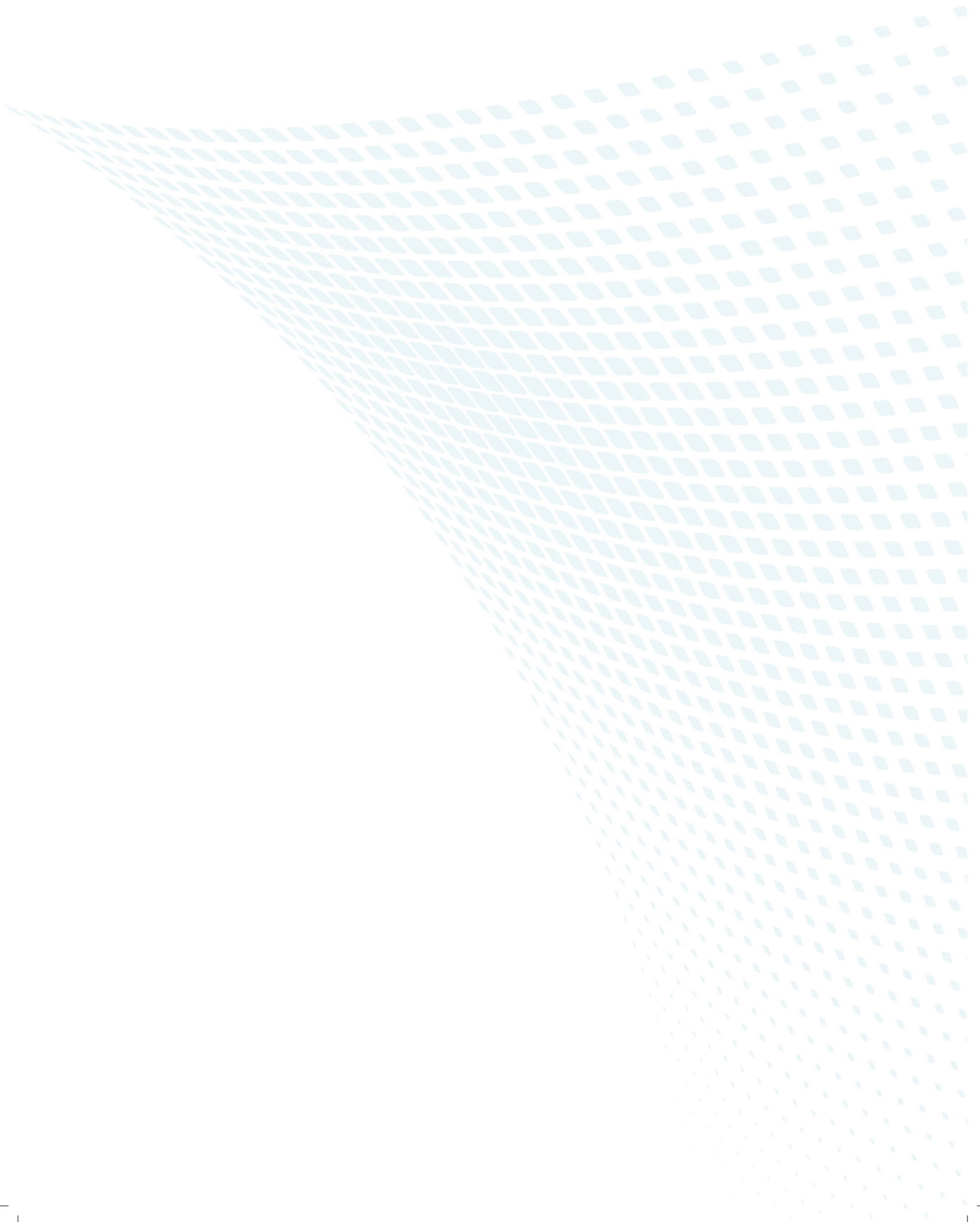
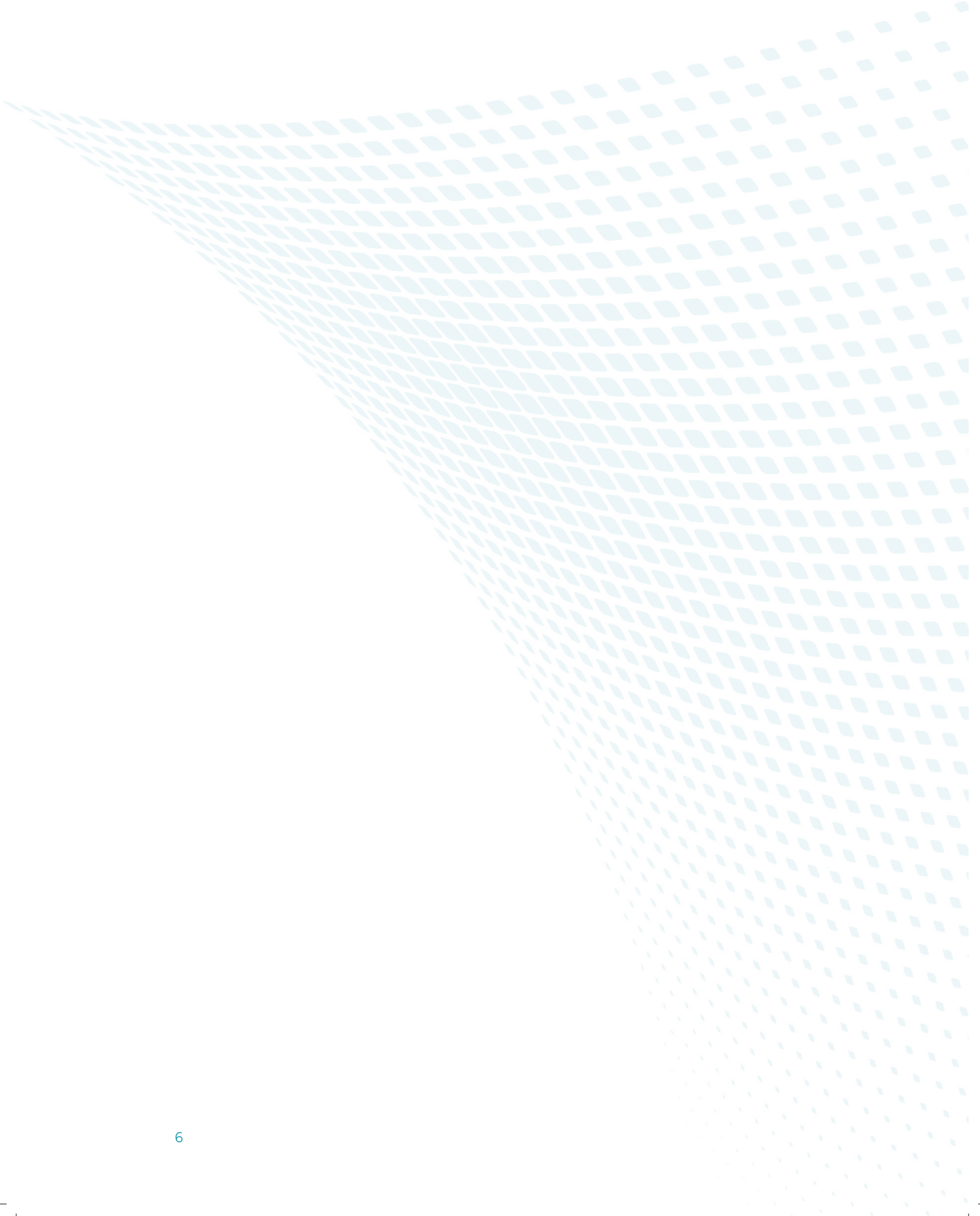


Table of Contents

Introduction	9
Overview of the literature	9
The local context	15
Providing alternative learning; a critical overview	17
Methodology	25
Research rationale	26
Terminology	27
Ethical clearance	28
Data gathering	29
Limitations of the research design	29
Findings	31
The Students	33
The Two Student-Cohorts	34
Student Profile	35
Attendance vs Absenteeism	36
Family involvement	36
Nutrition	37
Medication	37
Student Empowerment	41
The Teaching Relationship	42
Emotional Literacy and Educational Approach	46
Teacher to student ratios	48
Relationships with peers	49
The Flexible Learning Programme	51
The Premises	56
Reintegration	56
The Team of Educators	59
Teamwork and whole-school approach	60
Knowledge and Training	60
Behaviour Management Strategies	61
Leadership and Educator Empowerment	62
Support Services	62
Discussion	65
Limitations of the Research	71
Recommendations	73
Further Research	77
Conclusion	78
References	80
Appendices	86



Students always deserve another chance

This project is one of the first projects that the Faculty embarked on in collaboration with the Ministry for Education and also the Education Department.

This is a project I am particularly fond of because it is all about creating space for students who have been wasted by the system or rather rejected and the school they attend to is the final opportunity they have to prepare themselves as they transition to their adult life.

The research which was spearheaded by Dr Janice Formosa Pace, Principle Investigator and supported by the Research Support Officers Ms Olga Formosa, Ms Jamie Bonnici, Ms Catherine Smith and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan was an opportunity to listen to the stories of the students and attempts to re-dimension the school to meet the individual needs of these students.

The complexity of the stories and the relationship these students have with their community and their educators made it a very challenging piece of research. The tensions and pressures made it increasingly difficult to untangle the narratives of these students. This is a study which aims to deconstruct the school organisation and re-think its relevance in today's society.

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi

Dean

Faculty for Social Wellbeing

This research project was carried out as part of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta and the Ministry for Education and Employment. Creating a platform of structured communication and cooperation, this research and other future collaborations signal the desire of both parties to work in conjunction to achieve the common aim of developing an inclusive community for young people. In particular, this collaboration highlights the commitment and continuous desire of developing collaborative initiatives to attract and encourage students and support members of staff and in doing so, contribute to the benefit of students and society at large

Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Malta and the Ministry for Education and Employment.

INTRODUCTION

The project aimed to address a multifaceted investigation into the effectiveness of the alternative education programme for secondary-school aged youths with behavioural issues offered at the Msida Educational Hub.

This research presented in this document focuses on meeting the following objectives:

- To gain a comprehensive understanding of alternative educational programmes in international contexts, with reference to their applicability to the Maltese population;
- To engage in emancipatory action research together with students at the Msida Hub to identify their experiences of, and expectations from, education;
- To conduct a review of the objectives and practices of the Msida Educational Hub and determine potential areas for improvement; and
- To provide policy recommendations for the provision of alternative educational programmes for secondary-school youths with behavioural issues, based on the research findings above.

The section below provides the reader with an overview of the reviewed literature whilst highlighting the alternative learning programmes available in the local context.

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Supporting students whose behaviours have led them to being identified as having social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (SEBD) within mainstream schooling raises several challenges when it comes to the running and management of a classroom and an education set-up. The traits of young people presenting with SEBD have been outlined as being inhibited or isolated, disruptive and disturbing, hyperactive, lacking concentration, and typically having immature social skills (Visser, 2009). Overall, these young people appear to fail to behave acceptably, struggling to conform with the behavioural expectations and high parameters of behaviour and discipline placed on them in schools. Explaining that “students have a right to be in an orderly and safe learning environment”, the Ministry for Education and Employment’s Policy Guidelines on Behaviour and Discipline in Schools (2000) specifies that students “are expected to behave, both inside the school premises as well as on school buses, in a friendly and orderly manner and to show respect for all persons and property”. SEBD however, more often than not, manifest themselves in the classroom in the form of non-cooperative or oppositional behaviour, often posing a personal threat to the teacher as well as challenging their sense of competence (Cooper, 1999). They are characterised by disturbed and/or disturbing patterns of behaviour that are often extremely sensitive to social context and other environmental influences. Not only do students with SEBD challenge teachers pedagogically, they also often challenge teachers directly, for instance, through mockery, verbal and sometimes physical abuse. This means that without appropriate understanding and emotional support from colleagues, educators may find themselves becoming anxious and depressed and, as a consequence, increasingly unable to cope with the stress of such conflictual relationships with students (Cooper & Cefai, 2013). Visser and Dubsky (2009) also commented that students with SEBD typically needed more help with academic material than their peers, took more teacher time to manage and assist and nevertheless, were rarely seen to succeed. Cooper and Cefai (2013) in fact stated that SEBD is appropriately defined as a form of Individual Education Need (IEN), requiring adequate adjustments in the classroom,

techniques and/or pedagogy. The consequences of these factors on other students, teachers and the system itself are plentiful.

The leading mission of the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for Action (1994, p.5) is that schools “should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions”. Reaffirming the right to education of every individual, this framework invites the educational establishments and their policy makers “to endorse the approach of inclusive schooling and to support the development of special needs education as a core part of all educational programmes” (p. 4). The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD, 2006), echoes this sentiment, advocating for full and effective participation and inclusion in society and specifying that children, irrespective of their abilities, should be extended equal access with other children for recreational and leisure activities, include those in the school system. In practical terms of course, the conditions, abilities, background and variety of difficulties that come along with this, create a series of challenges to school systems. Educational establishments have to find ways to fruitfully educate all children, even those who come with serious disadvantages or learning difficulties (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, 1994). The framework clearly specifies that “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs” (p. 3).

But the argument bears the question what does this actually translate into when it comes to educational inclusion and the concept of inclusive schools? In educational frameworks, inclusion has been discussed from several perspectives, leading to diverging interpretations about the nature of its application. While the broadest interpretation of inclusion suggests bringing all learners into the typical mainstream schooling set-up, there are some severe obstacles restricting the default application of this principle to students who have been identified as having SEBDs. These young people are often seen as one of the most difficult to include (Visser, Cole, & Daniels, 2002). Many of those involved in their educational journey show negative perceptions and resistant attitudes towards them (Chazan, 1994; Visser & Dubsy, 2009; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010), and as a consequence of their challenging behaviours, these learners, more often than not, are found to have an increased risk of disciplinary sanctions and exclusionary measures (Blyth & Milner, 1996; Daniels et al., 2003; Kearney, 2011). For some young people, misbehaviour is the first step on the slippery slope that leads to more restrictive placement (e.g., detention centres, correctional facilities, treatment programs).

Warnock (2005, p.14) rejects the ‘all children under the same roof’ interpretation, and instead presents the concept as “including all children in the common educational enterprise of learning, wherever they learn best”. Warnock believed that education encompasses being supported “towards life after school” (p. 41) and therefore placed importance on ensuring that young people have access to the education they need in a setting that is appropriate for their needs, including them in the experience of learning towards adulthood. On the other hand, according to Farrell (2000), successful social inclusion for young people with different educational needs is established by allowing them to take full and active part in the life of mainstream schooling. The belief that attending special education leads to segregation from the community and decreases the opportunities for social inclusion still remains stands, believing in the premise that regular education leads to social inclusion (Fisher, Roach, and Frey 2002). According to The Salamanca Statement mentioned earlier “special schools or units

within inclusive schools may continue to provide the most suitable education for the relatively small number of children" (p.7) who cannot be effectively served in a standard classrooms set-up, while pointing out however that such cases should be the exception.

In the intricate reality of human behaviour, it is rarely the case that one-fits-all remedies can resolve or address the needs of a multitude of individuals. When it comes to Special Educational Needs (SEN) the premise that all students with SEN can be categorised as one and catered for globally is therefore naturally, fundamentally flawed. According to the House of Commons, UK (2005-2006) several young people with SEN have found alternative learning programmes (ALP) that were offered to them to be a helpful input to their education. They debate that the way forward should therefore also consider how to advance to an educational network based on a flexible variety of high quality, well resourced, provision to suitable address the abilities and potential of all learners.

The patterns of behaviour that arise from SEBD can be varied and make it easy for students with SEBD to find themselves perceived as being a problem rather than having one (Heary & Hennessey, 2005). From the students' perspective, students manifesting SEBD have often reported they find it difficult to engage in traditional teaching set-ups (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). It is also very easy for a system that struggles to cater for these students' needs to compound the problem as a consequence of its attempts or failures to address their needs along the way. Additionally, as students progress from primary to secondary school and through adolescence, the 'gaps' between the student with SEBD and his or her peers often increase, and young people are likely to face an accumulation of risk and mediating factors over the years (Formosa Pace, 2015; Ekblom, 2010). Behaviours which may have been tolerated within a primary setting are more likely to be avoided by the older student's peer group (Abrams et al., 2005) making it more likely for these students to find themselves isolated from their peers and feeling socially inadequate. Warnock (2007) argues that when placed in a mainstream school, students are the least 'included' and can suffer intense and enduring peer rejection which could be aggravated by labelling they suffered from within the schools' walls and the community, particularly those hailing from socially disadvantaged background (Visser & Dubsky, 2009).

Students who feel alienated, who do not feel they can fit in, who find themselves feeling misunderstood, or who for one reason or another struggle in a mainstream setting, will easily slip into exhibiting patterns of behaviour that might not be appropriate in an educational set-up. In a mainstream setting in fact, their rights and those of their peers could very easily be conflictual (Visser & Stokes, 2003). The delicate balance in the arena of 'inclusion' versus 'segregation' still brings about more questions and challenges to address.

On the other hand, a relatively small-scale 1999 research project which explored the perspectives of students attending off-site schooling about their quality of education (Toynbee, 1999) found that students did not feel disadvantaged or stigmatised by their placement. Rather, they described their educational experiences very positively. Similarly, in a research by Cooper (1993, a), respondents placed in off-site special provision schooling, felt their relationships with staff and other students as well as their educational opportunities had been enhanced by their attendance at the off-site centre. Likewise, Polat and Farrell (2006) noted that "despite some concerns, the former pupils that were on placement in a residential school for students with SEBD have very positive memories of the learning programme and found it had aided them to overcome their learning and behavioural difficulties". In a study by Sellman (2009) in the

Midlands of England, “students particularly welcomed the structure, regularity and consistency the provision brought to their lives. They felt that the more favourable staff–student ratios and activities in place offered some order in their lives, conceding that otherwise life would be less interesting and perhaps less fun also” (p. 39). Sellman (2009) in fact pointed out these students reported feeling valued.

In a 2008 study on students who have been described as encountering SEBD in Malta, taking 10% of the school population across primary and secondary schools, it was found that according to teachers, 9.7% of students exhibit SEBD (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008). Difficulties were noted to be increasing as students moved on from primary to secondary education, especially behavioural problems. The larger part of students with SEBD attended mainstream schooling, while about 0.2% of students with SEBD attending special schools or units (Cefai & Cooper, 2006). In 2013 (p. 9), Cooper and Cefai reported that “only a small percentage of the 10% of students with SEBD in Malta receive their education in special schools”. Students with more complex SEBD needs in the mainstream, such as those presenting ADHD, Autism and Oppositional Defiance Disorder were typically supported by a Learning Support Assistant (LSE) in the classroom.

The reasons for which a number of students feel disengaged in the mainstream schooling set-up are several (Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich & Chapman, 2009). In a review of literature related to SEBD students in secondary schools in Malta, Cefai & Cooper (2010) identified 5 themes that were frequently mentioned by students as causes for displeasure with their educational experience:

- **Unconnected – poor relationships with teachers**

One of the most common feelings expressed by students was the perceived lack of understanding and support by the classroom teachers. The students felt humiliated and inadequate when teachers shouted at them in front of their peers, ignored them or refused to listen to their views.

- **Victimised – sense of unfairness and injustice**

Being treated unfairly and picked on by teachers – and to a lesser extent by peers – was another major cause for concern expressed by students across the studies.

- **Oppressed – no voice, no choice**

The sense of helplessness and failure to be validated also emerged. ‘The teacher makes the rules’ (Bartolo & Tabone, 2002); ‘Nobody asks for my opinion’ (Magri, 2009). The sense of alienation, finding themselves in what feels like an undemocratic system that doesn’t validate them, led them to disengage from the system (Chircop, 1997; Clark et al., 2005; Dalli & Dimech, 2005; Magri, 2009)

- **Bored and frustrated – unconnected learning experiences**

Amongst the comments brought up by students with SEBD about their educational experience, was their feeling of the classroom and the work being taught at school as being useless and unrelated to the real world. Students felt like what was being presented in class was disconnect from knowledge that could be of benefit to them (Conchas & Clark, 2002). With the prospects of work, being engaged and earning an income, this feeling made sitting in a classroom even less appealing and often resorting to misbehaviour to make it more fun. It appears that notwithstanding the increasing need for alternative teaching approaches, many classrooms still come across as formal and hierarchical and are often founded around the untold understanding that the power lies with the teacher

when it comes to controlling the mood and direction of lessons (McFadden & Munns, 2002), as opposed to gauging these around the traits of the students in class.

- **Excluded – inaccessible curriculum**

The complex nature of the behaviours that arise when it comes to students with SEBD bring a tapestry of challenges in mainstream education. And true as this is for educators, it also very easily translates into an educational experience for students with SEBD where they easily are left feeling misunderstood by the system and alienated and detached from it. Being part of a forced system that does not understand them and that they feel does not cater for what appeals to them, very easily leaves them slipping into disengagement and consequent undesirable behaviour.

The section below presents a discussion on programmes and services implemented in local government education sectors.

¹ First LSZs opened their doors in 2008



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The local context

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

This feedback from the perspective of the learners, sheds light on possible areas for improvement and development in the services offered to young learners with SEBD and techniques that can be implemented to ameliorate their experience and their consequent performance throughout those years. Celebrating successes while reviewing areas for development can pave the way for further growth in the provision of education for students identified with SEBD.

Alternative educational programmes can take many forms. Following the changes brought about by the then Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment in its document “For All Children to Succeed” (2005), primary school students in Malta, can be referred to the in-school service of Nurture Groups. In secondary schools, students who present with SEBD can be referred internally to Learning Support Zones (LSZ)² which were introduced in Malta in 2009. These, as described by the Ministry for Education and Employment on their website as having the objective of minimising “disruption caused by challenging students, without excluding them” and “keeping disaffected students at school, addressing their behavioural problems and helping them to reintegrate into mainstream classes”. According to the NG and LSZ Guidelines (2016), these “provide a structured and safe environment” to “support learners who present with Social, emotional and behaviour difficulties” and aim “to help them remain engaged in mainstream education for as long as possible by providing them with the requisite social and emotional learning and resilience skills, from an early age, to enable them engage successfully and effectively in the academic and social activities together with their peers at school”. Amongst the services offered, the Ministry outlines “supporting students’ learning by identification of behavioural problems and then helping them develop strategies to manage behaviour better in the classrooms”, amongst others.

Once it is determined that a student should be placed in a LSZ, the student would attend a number of sessions at the LSZ during the week, while the remaining time would be still spent in the mainstream classroom. Some students are also offered “one-to-one sessions until they are ready to attend the necessary sessions with other learners” NG and LSZ Guidelines, 2016). Along the way, students are provided with “structured activities with the aim to help learners develop trust, communication skills, emotional literacy and resilience, and to enhance confidence and self-esteem. Learners usually have a battery of assessments carried out to identify the needs, upon which the intervention will be devised and have their progress monitored in various ways” NG and LSZ Guidelines, 2016). Along the way, the structure of support would be involved in the decision-making – the educational psychologist, SEBD-specialist, prefect of discipline, guidance teacher or counsellor, education officer for inclusive education and the respective service manager, together with the parent/guardian.

If, after attending the LSZ and the “school and college have exhausted their support services” (Ministry for Education and Employment website, 2020), the student still manifests behaviour that is deemed too challenging, then the student is placed in a Learning Support Centre (LSC)². This offers learners with SEBD a “temporary programme” “aimed at providing students with alternative educational provision and to offer mentoring during the reintegration process”. “Learners attending the LSC receive support to work on their challenging behaviour through in individualised ‘Behaviour Modification Programme’”. (Ministry for Education and

2 In 2010, the Naxxar and Marsa centres were launched, other were opened in the following years

Employment: LSC website 2020). The Ministry for Education and Employment defines the LSC's main aim as that of "helping the learner gain skills to cope in a school environment and better his/her future prospects". It is noted that LSZs since they are school based, unlike LSCs, belong to respective Colleges.

Currently, there are 5 national LSCs, 2 for secondary aged boys and 2 for girls, and 1 co-educational for primary students. In exceptional circumstances, learners who have been through the process of LSZ, support services and LSC yet still manifest very challenging behaviours, can be referred to a Young People's Unit located within a hospital for mental health, or, in some cases, appear to have been referred to the Msida Educational Hub. The Msida Hub, which was set-up in 2015, is described on its website as having an "innovative concept of education. It aims to enhance the students' right and ability to access a holistic educational experience whilst being empowered to exceed expectations and surpass any limitations that may encounter" (Ministry for Education and Employment website, 2020). As a school it "strives to provide the appropriate programme for each student and inspire positive change" and "emphasises on personal development and discipline, as well as employability skills" (Msida Educational Hub website, 2020). The Msida Hub pertains to the San Gorg Preca College. Being part of the College system in Malta whereby schools are assigned to a College that they are considered to be part of and can rely on for support services catered for by the college. Thus, in principle students at the Msida Hub should be supplied by a number of services through professionals including educational psychologists, prefects of discipline, social workers, guidance teachers, career advisors, counsellors, early intervention teachers, home tuition, anti-bullying services, anti-substance abuse teachers, access to communication and technology unit and youth workers. The Hub itself also provides the services of a guidance teacher, being the only psycho-social professional specifically assigned to the Hub.

PROVIDING ALTERNATIVE LEARNING; A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Some are critical of the provision of 'special schools', describing the local scene as "a more segregated education" (Tanti Burló, 2010, p. 205). Along the year, many have criticised the placement of students with specific requirements in 'special' classrooms or schools. However, the positive experiences of students who experienced ALPs show that there is still need for such interventions in some cases (Jahnukainen, 2001). Nevertheless, ensuring quality education is critical in the success of such programmes. By observing feedback that has been gathered from students who have attended ALPs, it is possible to shed some light on the elements that these young people feel have contributed most positively, while identifying areas that they felt hindered their progress throughout their educational journey.

Cooper and Cefai (2013) stated that SEBD is a form of Individual Educational Need (IEN) whereby behavioural problems (such as persistent disruptive behaviour) are viewed as being likely to emanate from a mismatch between the educational (including social-emotional) needs of the individual student and the educational environment. The IEN approach requires modifications to be made to the educational experiences offered to learners, and the implementation of appropriate adjustments to the environment, for example in terms of the social climate of the classroom, motivational techniques and/or pedagogy. Jull (2008) adds that students identified with SEBD raise a very particular

issue within special educational needs (or IEN) realm. He claims that SEBD is possibly the one category with the spectrum of IEN that exposes a student to higher risk of exclusion, as a function of the very same IEN identified as requiring special educational arrangements in the first place.

Notwithstanding their increasing presence, there appears to be little unanimity as to what constitutes an alternative educational programme (Gable et al., 2006). Fitzsimons Hughes et al. (2006) identified three different types of settings, each of which serves a particular population of children and youth. Type 1 served gifted students, those with substance abuse issues or who were pregnant, and students with a history of truancy. Type 2 served students, on a short-term basis, with serious discipline problems, typically following behavioural infractions that occurred in their home school. Type 3 served as a therapeutic centre, addressing the needs of young people who were seen as having serious emotional or behavioural problems. Quinn and Rutherford (1998) identified six characteristics of alternative educational programmes that they considered as essential: (i) procedures for carrying out the functional assessment of academic and non-academic behaviour, (ii) flexible curriculum centred around functional academic, social, and daily living skills, (iii) effective and efficient instructional approaches, (iv) transition strategies linking from the programme into mainstream schooling and the larger community, (v) comprehensive systems for providing students with both internal alternative educational facilities as well as external community-based services, and lastly (vi) suitable staff and resources to address these students.

Similarly, Fitzsimons Hughes et al. (2006) highlighted six main features common in alternative educational programmes: (i) an appropriate student evaluation and referral system, (ii) an educational program focused on functional real-world objectives and that is flexible, offering students non-traditional teaching and learning options, (iii) educational contact that promotes social, emotional, and behavioural development within a safe, positive and non-punitive environment, (iv) ongoing staff training and development, (v) transition programmes for students to progress towards less restrictive environments such as mainstream schooling or work placements, and (vi) ongoing program evaluation and evidence-based decision making.

Table 1: Key characteristics for a quality alternative educational programme

Emotional Literacy for students and staff
Teacher-Student Relationship
Positive Approach
A sense of Community
Training and Whole-School Awareness of SEBD

A significant overlap is evident between characteristics identified by Fitzsimons Hughes et al (2006) and Quinn and Rutherford (1998). In addition to these, across research, a number of researchers have outlined characteristics that they considered as key for a quality alternative educational programme (e.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2009; Kerka, 2003; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017). Outlined in Table 2 (above), these include:

Student Empowerment through listening to the students' perspective and aspirations, and Emotional Literacy

Cefai and Cooper (2009, p. 52) believe it is "clear that schools need to operate as caring, inclusive and supportive communities for all their members, including those with social and emotional needs. They need to engage in more frequent and regular dialogue with the students on what is helping or hindering them from learning and make the necessary adjustments accordingly. Students with SEBD need to be given more opportunity to give their views on the various facets of their educational experiences and need to be provided with skills to enable them to do so effectively". After all, inclusion is not merely obtained by placing someone inside a classroom (Armstrong et al., 2011; Pijl et al., 2008; Swain, Nordness, and Leader-Janssen, 2012). For true inclusion to be achieved within an educational context, it is essential for the student to be an actively involved participant in the classroom.

Involving students directly in the reviews, discussions and planning related to their educational plan, makes it possible for them to share an accurate account of their own learning processes and how these could be enhanced by classroom teaching practices (Fielding & Bragg 2003; Leitch & Mitchell 2007). Empowering them as active participants in their own journey, as valid contributors, while actively listening to them, and giving them the opportunity to express their views also provides an opportunity for the young people to gain an insight into their behaviour and its influence on their own and others' learning and relationships. This helps to prevent feelings of helplessness and alienation and empowers them to take more control and responsibility for their own behaviour (Hapner & Imel 2002; Kroeger et al. 2004; Norwich & Kelly 2006). Allowing students a degree of autonomy and choice in their educational experiences allows them to contribute and actively participate in the creating of a community with a shared purpose and fortifying their engagement. Clearly, the inclusion of the students' perspective is conducive towards a more effective learning experience and positive behaviour in school. Listening to the young people and getting to know them at a more personal level is fundamental and makes it possible to provide a better-tailored programme that can suitably cater for their needs and aspirations. Research is often critical of the 'one-size fits all' approach even when it comes to alternative educational programmes. Being able to provide students with a flexible and adaptive programme that reflects their particular interests and aspirations enhances the successful provision of the programmes (Martin & White, 2012, Kettlewell et al., 2012, Gazeley et al., 2013, Evans 2010) and get only be achieved through listening and getting to know the young people themselves.

Through the involvement of young people with SEBD in the resolution of their own difficulties, as well as through peer-mediated approaches, student engagement in behavioural issues would also better inform them about others' experiences that are different from their own (Cefai & Cooper, 2009, Erdley et al. 2004), yet be less didactic than a more typical approach, allowing them to learn and develop empathy and emotional literacy in a more approachable and safer route. Bartolo and Tabone (2002) found that from the perspective of young people who had experienced special education, these felt that their behavioural difficulties could be attributed to feeling a lack of fairness in the traditional mainstream setting, finding themselves

unsupported and met by unresponsive teachers. Through the inclusion of these learners in the discussions about their educational journey, and with actively listening and acting on their contributions, addressing possible hinderances can become a more immediate, proactive approach.

By involving and including learners in issues related to their and their peers' learning and behaviour, students can share their concerns and feelings about their educational experience and allows educators to understand what aspects of their approach are being considered to be most helpful by the learners themselves. First hand testimony from the students themselves is an invaluable source of data when attempting to assess the efficacy of an educational programme and teachers themselves should aid students to challenge the notion that teachers know best and guide them towards believing more in themselves (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

Inclusion, even for students who encounter behavioural difficulties, is a multi-layered debate that brings a multitude of backgrounds and experiences to it. Involving the students in its design and implementation makes it possible for students to provide a richly layered account of their experiences and makes it possible to observe the effects and consequences of inclusive schooling as experienced by the persons involved themselves.

Teacher-Student Relationship and Emotional Literacy development not only for students, but also for staff

Central to the on-going engagement in the learning processes of the young people attending alternative educational programmes is their relationships with their teachers and those running the programme. The impact that teacher approach can have on the students' social participation should not be underestimated (Cooper, 2011; Cooper & Cefai, 2013; De Boer et al., 2011; Poulou, 2005). Through the development of a trusting, nurturing and understanding environment, educators involved in alternative educational programmes, can create a foundation for healthy development and rehabilitative work that may allow these young people to re-enter mainstream schooling or the community (McCluskey et al., 2015, Mills et al., 2016).

Effective alternative programmes are built on the presence of caring, knowledgeable adults. These educators may take many forms, as teachers, counsellors, mentors "who understand and deeply care about youth and provide significant time and attention" (James & Jurich, 1999, p. 340). Disaffected students often feel that their educators are not interested in their well-being and success (Grobe et al., 2001). Caring adults help establish an environment founded on trust and support, allowing students to feel safe in knowing that someone is paying attention.

Cefai and Cooper (2009) highlighted the fundamental importance of emotions in students' social and academic behaviour, and shed light on the value of offering learners safe spaces to express their thoughts and feelings. They define actively listening to what the learners disclose as "vital for positive development" (p. 18). They go on to comment that oppositional behaviour is easily provoked or exasperated by traditional educational approaches, and find that the solution is to employ educational strategies that "encourage feelings of emotional security in students, and the development of high self-esteem based on trusting and supportive educational relationships. This, in turn, leads to student confidence and autonomy, which are essential qualities for healthy personal development" (p. 18). Happy and socially competent individuals are in the end more productive in schools and society (Layard, 2005).

Reid (2009) also echoes this and highlights the importance of the role played by teachers in investing emotional capital in their students, situating emotional capital at the very heart of education. Emotions experienced by students such as isolation, resentment and low self-esteem, may lead to early school-leaving, and, according to Gable, Bullock and Evans (2006), 60% of early leavers suffer various emotional problems. Reid (2009) calls for schools to facilitate 'networks of trust'.

Positive approach and a Sense of Community

Underpinning all the successful alternative educational programmes adopted was a positive approach by teachers and school leaders towards learners who had been found to have SEBD (Carroll & Hurry, 2018, McCluskey et al., 2015, Mills et al., 2016). The complex behaviours that may arise as a result of SEBDs make it easy for students to be seen as a problem in the classroom. The nature of their difficulties makes it easy for educators to perceive them as a threat towards the order and structure of a classroom and school. Massa (2002) found that students with SEBD identified negative attitudes by teachers and schoolmates amongst the factors contributing to their poor academic performance and behaviour difficulties. Gonzi (2006) too found that poor relationships with teachers / staff, bullying by peers, and lack of support for their academic and social difficulties, were amongst the most present themes brought up by the young persons with SEBD when asked to reflect on their mainstream school experience.

With the intention of facilitating teaching and learning for all, approaching young people with SEBD with a positive attitude, a more sympathetic approach, can make it possible to establish a helpful, nurturing, engaging relationship and can lead the way for trust and development of constructive educational methods. Consistently throughout research, it is observed that students respond positively when they feel they are being respected (Kendall et al., 2007; Martin & White, 2012). Young people in alternative learning programmes in fact, are found to value a facilitative and supportive approach offered to them by members of staff in which trusting and caring relationships are established (Quinn et al., 2006, Quinn & Poirier, 2006, Michael and Frederickson, 2013). Michael and Frederickson (2013) point out that the most frequently identified catalyst of success is in fact positive relationships between the students and their educators. Founding a respectful exchange with the young people attending alternative learning programmes on a youth work approach rather than a classroom approach therefore appears to yield better outcomes (Evans, 2010).

Additionally, several studies have highlighted the benefits that a small learning community can have on achievement and youth development (Castellano et al., 2001; McDonald, 2002; Raywid 2001; Secada 1999). Students who have been found to encounter SEBD are especially likely to struggle with social participation in the context of a mainstream classroom (Falkmer et al., 2012; Schwab et al., 2015). They have been typically noted to have fewer friends (Avramidis, 2013) and to overall, experience higher rates of loneliness (Bossaert et al., 2012). Grobe et al. (2001) reported that for young people who were previously excluded from mainstream schooling, one of the major factors that they felt aided them succeed when in an alternative educational programme was a feeling of belonging. Positive social participation leads to a sense of belonging and better academic performance (Bierman, 2004; Blum and Libbey, 2004). Furthermore, students with a negative social participation are at greater risk of contact with criminality (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). In other words, the school setting could serve as an activity field (Wikström, 2008) characterised by a number of risk and mediating which serve the role of crime promoters (Ekblom, 2010).

Training and Whole-School awareness of SEBD

Amongst the services offered by the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment's NG and LSZ is the aim of providing expertise for the training and support of teachers in improving behavioural management. This is a critical element in the approaches adopted when it comes to the inclusion and/or re-introduction of children with SEBD into the educational system. Alternative educational programmes require a backbone of specialist staff who are well trained, caring and knowledgeable. Recruiting, continuously developing and supporting quality staff, is the first step in leading the way for a quality programme.

According to Willmann and Seeliger (2017), research shows that the inclusion of young people who present with SEBDs requires a high level of personal engagement (e.g. 'support and containment'), as well as professional knowledge and expertise that, in the context of SEBD, is specifically bound to a preparedness to provide and sustain emotional support. Nevertheless, research indicates that schoolteachers effectively struggle when it comes to students with SEBD (Westling, 2010). Research often emphasises the necessity of having teams of staff that are committed and highly skilled. A positive approach to behaviour management, an attitude that encourages student participation in educational exchanges, being committed towards holistic learning and teaching, and nurturing classroom environments that feel safe (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014) are consistently evidenced as characteristics that are essential for successful provision of alternative education.

The provision of quality continuous professional development opportunities for staff is therefore considered to be key (Aron, 2006, Foley & Pang, 2006, Quinn & Poirier, 2006, Kendall et al., 2007, Martin & White, 2012; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2015). Essentially, staff working with young people in alternative educational programmes must be able to ensure that they have the necessary skills, knowledge and expertise that can make it possible for them to appropriately work with and support their students.

Not only in the case of teachers, in Malta, Spiteri et al (2005) noted that in 2004/2005, two thirds of another important part of the educator scene when it comes to young people with SEB or IEN, LSEs, it was reported that many who were being employed to assist young people in schools, were still untrained and they were typically assigned to students on a 'next-on-the-waiting-list basis' rather than matched to the needs of the learners. Garner, et al. (2014) debate that by defining SEBDs as difficulties belonging to the students, we divert our own attention away from ways in which schools can become more active catalysts for the creation of inclusive establishments. Through suitably-trained staff cohorts, ongoing staff development programmes and evidence-based decision-making, educational programmes can equip themselves to address the complexity of behaviours that students may bring.

Promoting whole-school awareness of SEBD is a widespread recommendation to improve acceptance and inclusion of students with SEBD (Watkins and Wentzel 2002; Westwood 2003; Highland Children's Forum 2006).

Adapted and flexible curriculum and educational approach

In addition to the characteristics outlined above, in a 2012 study, McGregor and Mills also found, amongst others, the following common elements in the nature of the educational programmes offered in a number of alternative schooling centres: (i) the opportunity to obtain vocational qualifications, (ii) work experience and the opportunity to engage in actual employment experiences, (iii) opportunities to do short courses to help with employment, e.g.,

barista training, first-aid courses and photography, (iv) courses and activities contributing to the students' personal development, such as art, music production, animation, photography, field trips, community service and a wide variety of life skills (e.g. cooking, sport, personal fitness).

Martin and White (2012) point out that in order for alternative educational programmes to be successful, it is important that they focus on the individual needs and interests of the students and their achievement of realistic and meaningful outcomes. In a 2013 study involving 16 students with SEBD in two alternative educational programmes in London, Michael and Frederickson found that students highlighted the deficiency of programmes addressing their needs and interests as a hinderance for their success. The need for flexibility and for tailored programme content based on the needs of the students consistently transpires throughout research (Bielby et al., 2012, Connor, 2006, Gallagher, 2011, Martin & White, 2012, McCluskey et al., 2015, Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Kendall et al. (2007) added that involving students in determining the content of their educational programme led to improved outcomes. Ultimately, educational programmes should focus on adapting to the needs of the students, rather attempting to change the student to fit into an approach.

From research carried out in Australia, McGregor and Mills (2012) also pointed out that students felt more comfortable with a hands-on activity, and where curricula were delivered in flexible and inclusive environments that nurtured supportiveness and respect. These qualities also reinforced the teacher-student relationships present in the sites researched. Interestingly, they reported that most students attending alternative educational programmes within structures that provided these alternative approaches, did talk of wanting to finish school. McGregor and Mills (2012) in fact, found that overall, the level of flexibility provided by the alternative educational programme, such as student involvement in decision-making, not having uniforms as well as being able to call the adults by their first names helped create an environment where students felt like equal partners in the teacher-learner relationship and were overall more conducive to positive outcomes.

A growing body of research (e.g., Elliott et al., 2002; Kemple, 2001) is noting that alternative school programmes focused on career-training seem to be most successful for at-risk students. The most positive elements identified refer to the special teacher and the small teaching group. The most common and significant negative element was the experience of being labelled (Jahnukainen, 2001). While retaining the characteristics that are being found to be most successful in alternative learning programmes, and conducive to positive outcomes, such as small learning communities and positive teacher-student relationships, these programmes also add a focus on students' career interests. Alternative learning programmes can only be effective if the educational programmes they offer realistically address their students' needs and aspirations (Bielby et al., 2012, Connor 2006, Kettlewell et al., 2012) and are therefore relevant and connected to their worlds (McGregor & Mills, 2011). Aside from providing young people with a choice of academic content that suits their aspirations and abilities (Bielby et al., 2012, Evans, 2010, Nelson & O'Donnell, 2013), Conescu et al., (2000) also added that amongst successful alternative learning programmes, the most successful are staffed with dedicated teachers with deep knowledge of and interest in their students.

When it comes to young people who present with difficulties functioning in mainstream schooling, as Farrugia et al. (2006 p. 141) point out "all in all, intervention tends to be too little too late". Cefai and Cooper (2006) express the crucial need for a structured approach that supports students along their educational journey, from kindergarten through to secondary schooling,



providing multilevel preventative and effective techniques towards the management of SEBD. At an educational level, this entails supporting schools, teachers and students, the whole educational community, to nurture caring, supportive and inclusive communities. By drawing attention towards the contextual issues of teacher–student relationships, curriculum content and teaching strategies, it is possible to reflect on the strategies that have proven to be more successful. By looking at what is working in alternative educational schooling for instance, at what the echoes of students attending these programmes have had to say about mainstream schooling, preventative, nurturing and flexible educational approaches that address the varying complexity of needs that young people may present with, can further encompass inclusion and support young people, even those with SEBD, through their development towards adulthood. As McGregor and Mills (2012) put it, there is much that mainstream schools can learn from alternative approaches to teaching so as to provide an education that is more inclusive of a diverse range of students. In the end, education needs to be not so much concerned with changing the student, but instead focused on changing the kinds of teaching and learning that young people engage in.

Through the employment of approaches and intervention programmes developed around the potential and nature of the young people, such as, improving their self-concept, the use of relaxation skills and the development of emotional literacy to enhance emotional well-being, increasing self-awareness and promoting self-regulatory behaviour, the employment of cognitive-behavioural anger management intervention, and by providing them with a flexible, alternative curriculum, educators can look into the provision of an inclusive, accepting platform. Ultimately, it is necessary to develop bespoke educational pathways in order for successful engagement, retention, development and consequent progression of young people in adulthood.

The next section shall look into the methodological design and the research rationale employed in exploring for the first time a particular setting: the Msida Educational Hub.

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Methodology

METHODOLOGY

This section presents a discussion on the tools used to gather data in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the alternative learning programmes offered at the Msida Educational Hub. It is noted that the process kicked off following a meeting held with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in October 2019 aimed primarily at setting the context. Also, another meeting was held in December 2019 wherein together with the SLT and the guidance teacher, the researchers discussed the data gathering strategy particularly focusing on recruiting participants, that is the past and current cohort of students; the distribution of information sheets, consent and assent forms to legal guardians as well as logistics related to class observations and focus groups.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Data gathering was planned to be 3-fold. A process exploring the lived experiences of the current cohort of students, staff's positions and views, as well as accounting for the experience of ex-students who represent the first student intake at the Msida Educational Hub.

1. Current scenario – a total of 16 students attending the Msida Educational Hub, males aged 14 who have been identified to have Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) and withdrawn from mainstream schooling³. Students attending the Msida Educational Hub will be observed during lessons at the Hub. Researchers' intervention will be minimal. Consent will be requested from students as well assent from parental/guardian. These were planned to take place following the interviews carried out with teachers so as to set the context.

Also, 5-6 students attending the Msida Educational Hub during the time of the research would be invited to participate in a focus group (refer to Appendix 1, p.63) of about 45 minutes where it was planned that they would be asked to discuss their experience and expectations at the Msida Educational Hub. Students attending the Hub and their parents/guardians were also asked for consent and assent respectively in order for focus groups to be held. In both cases, no undue pressure was to be placed on the students, participation was voluntary and students could end their participation at any moment should they wish. These were forecasted to take place post-class observations so that students would familiarise themselves with the researchers and were planned to take place following ethical clearance.

2. The research planned for professionals (a total of 22) employed at the Msida Educational Hub to be asked for informed, voluntary consent to participate in a face to face interview (refer to Appendix 2, p.64) about their experience at the Hub. Interviews would include semi-structured questions and were estimated to take about an hour. These were planned to take place first following ethical clearance. It is noted that during the first week of February, the research team together with a trained Counsellor working at the University of Malta, attended to a training session held at the school for staff only. This served as an ice-breaker so as to pave way for data gathering considering that researchers would be setting foot into the classrooms.

³ Hailing from different Colleges

3. Young people who previously attended the Msida Educational Hub (a total of 23⁴) will be asked to provide informed, voluntary consent to participate in a face-to-face interview (refer to Appendix 3, p. 66) about their experience at the Hub. Interviews included semi-structured questions and were estimated to take about an hour. These were planned to take place following ethical clearance, in a location mutually agreed upon.

In addition to the data gathered directly for this research, following is a table of the research meetings that were held throughout the project.

Table 2: Research Team Meetings

Introductory Meeting between SLT and Research Team	21st October 2019
Research Team Meeting with National School Support Services	15th November 2019
Research Team Meeting with Counselling Department regarding services to be offered to the students and team of staff at the Hub	27th November 2019
Data-gathering Planning Meeting between SLT, the Msida Educational Hub Guidance Teacher and the Research Team	10th December 2019
Introductory Meeting at the Hub to introduce the Counsellor who will be working directly with the Hub, providing services to the team.	7th February 2020
Research Team Meeting with Counsellor	7th February 2020
Research Team and Counsellor Meeting with Hub team of staff	9th March 2020
Research Team Meeting with Counsellor re: update on research and future proposals	23rd March 2020
Research Team Meeting with Counsellor re: future proposals follow-up	7th April 2020
Symposium organised by the Faculty to team of staff at the Hub Main Speaker: Ms Catherine Smith – Counsellor	26th May 2020

TERMINOLOGY

The variation in terminology across time and countries may pose lack of clarity in the presentation of findings. For the purposes of this research:

- The terms 'inclusion' or 'inclusive education' differs from 'integration' wherein a learner may be seen as adapting to a host setting (in this case, a school). The term 'inclusion' within this research is viewed as a scenario where the school is adapting in order to meet the needs of actual (and potential) learners. However, this distinction is not always clear in practice.
- The terms 'mainstream', 'mainstream schooling' and 'mainstream education' in this report refer to schooling systems as those which are distinct from alternative schooling programmes and which are typically offered to students at large. While the terms

⁴ In theory all should have hailed from the San Ġorġ Preca College

'mainstream' and 'inclusion' are sometimes used interchangeably in practice, there are potential significant differences between the two. As evidenced in this research, there are instances when 'mainstream' fails to cater for the needs of students such as those with behavioural difficulties, thereby failing on the 'inclusion' barometer in their respect.

- References to young people, learners and students in this report refer to secondary school-aged students (aged between 11 and 16), unless otherwise specified.
- Pseudonyms have been used for all student participants in this research in order to protect their identity in the presentation of findings and analysis.
- Codes following the pattern educator1, educator2, etc. have been used throughout this research to representation the different data gathered from educators at the Msida Educational Hub. This has been done in order to protect their identity in the presentation of findings and analysis and in order to maintain a gender-neutral approach to data from the mixed-gender group of educators at the Hub.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The process related to ethical clearance from the University of Malta initiated in November 2019. However, the approval to start the data gathering process was granted on the 25th February 2020. During these weeks since data gathering could not commence until end February, researchers used these weeks to distribute information sheets, consent forms and assent forms. These were distributed by the school to all current students and their parents/legal guardians (refer to Appendices 4 and 5, p. 68 and p. 72 respectively), during an activity held in December to launch the Christmas market. Also, in view of those legal guardians who failed to attend to this activity, the documents were sent through snail mail.

In view of face-to-face interviews with professionals and ex-students, such were planned to be audio recorded (if consented) for later written analysis. The information gathered would be anonymised upon transcription and used for the sole purpose of this study. Also, the material gathered will be destroyed following completion of the study, by February 2021. Any recordings would be deleted and any transcribed material will be deleted and shredded. Until then, any material would be stored at the Principal Researcher's office at the University of Malta. Also, direct quotes extracted from the transcriptions would in no way render participants identifiable.

Likewise, in view of class observations involving the current cohort of students, the researchers were aiming to adopt a passive role in the classroom setup, interfering the least possible with activities being carried out, in order to understand the daily activities held at the Hub. In view of focus groups, participants would be asked to discuss their experience at the Msida Educational Hub. The focus group would be audio-recorded for later transcription and data analysis. Also, brief notes may have been taken during both activities, which would take place at the Hub within school hours. Data gathered would only be accessed by the research team and kept securely, as per General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). All data would be destroyed by the end of February 2021 and stored at the Principal Researcher's office at the University of Malta until then. Any information used for publication of results was anonymised at transcription stage and students could not be identified (all names were changed) at any stage of the research. If, throughout the research, any student choose to stop his participation, he could do so for whatever reason until 31st May 2020.

Moreover, although no emotional or psychological harm was foreseen throughout participation, support was offered if necessary and/or requested. Thus, all participants were

provided with a list of services along with consent forms; psycho-social services that they could avail from if the need arises.

DATA GATHERING

In a matter of 2 weeks from being granted ethical clearance, all educational institutions were closed in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, as per legal notice issued on the 13th March 2020. Consequently, researchers were constrained to rethink and adjust their research strategy accordingly. All data gathering related to class room observations and focus-groups involving the current student cohort had to be omitted. This decision was taken since another legal notice specified that schools would be remain closed until end June. Thus, in no way could one recruit the current students as participants in this research.

Through virtual contacts made with staff pertaining to the Msida Educational Hub, 14 ex-students were reached out to through messenger. It is noted that the guidance teacher managed to reach out to 14 ex-students whom the researchers contacted. They were told the research project was being carried out and that if they were willing to know more about it, they would be contacted by the researchers. The contact details of a total of 14 ex-students who agreed for the researchers to get in touch with them where forwarded to the researchers. Subsequently, virtual interviews were held between April and May 2020. All of the 14 ex-students were contacted by the researchers and provided with information about the research project. Of these, 10 consented and participated in the research interview. Such proved to be very time consuming as interviews, from having to read through information sheets and consent forms virtually and connection issues, turned out to require often more than 1 hour as previously envisaged. Also, most often interviews were cancelled in the 11th hour and consequently re-scheduled. Researchers employed guidelines issued by the University of Malta in view of obtaining consent when conducting virtual interviews.

With regards to interviewing staff currently working at the Msida Hub, a google form (Refer to Appendix 6, p. 80) "questionnaire" was designed to replace the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. An email was sent to the Head of School who in turn forwarded the researchers' link to the google form. In summary, participants submitted the form anonymously and only those who were interested compiled the "questionnaire" on a voluntary basis. A total of 12 forms was submitted by the May 15th deadline.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

- The lived experiences of the current cohort were not explored
- No class room observations were held so the class-dynamics were not accounted for
- No documents were provided by stakeholders in view of referral process to the Hub even though requested
- No evaluation of programmes was carried out whilst being implemented during school hours
- No official information in view of attendance patterns was accounted for
- Face-to-face interviews with ex-students were replaced by virtual interviews and contacts were made through school staff so researchers are not aware what participants were told about the research, its aims and objectives
- The use of the google forms compiled by staff did not provide the depth that face-to-face interviews would have yielded



Findings

FINDINGS

Matthew, a former student of the Msida Educational Hub: “One was black, the other was white. Mainstream was black for me...Due to my behaviour, because I didn't use to behave there, I didn't find help as much. When there is someone who is struggling with his behaviour, he needs help. And instead of finding help, they used to give me extra work, or a detention or expel me, or this, this and that...And I never learnt a thing from there”.

MacDonald et al. (2019) posited that wellbeing practices in an alternative learning environment take on a particularly significant role as they aim to reengage young people who are disenfranchised from the education system. Thomson and Russell (2009) argue that school cultures, curriculum and practices are all implicated in student disengagement and behaviour.

One of the educators, educator8, described the Hub as a programme where “the teaching approach is characterised by practical and experimental education, tailored for each individual”, where “the teachers work together to address problems and issues arising from student performance, whilst analysing the root cause of the problems, referring cases to competent professionals when required”. S/he spoke of how “teachers and LSEs (Learning Support Educators) together with the SLT continuously strive to engage the students in every subject whilst constantly propelling the personal student development by identifying achievements and talents, however trivial they may be”. And pointing out how “these small yet important observations and assessments then allow the staff...to hone and harness the students' capabilities so that they will be employable in several of Malta's economic sectors”.

Table 3: List of Findings

The Students

- The Two Student-Cohorts
- Student Profile
- Attendance vs Absenteeism
- Family Involvement
- Nutrition
- Medication

The Learning Community

Student Empowerment

The Teaching Relationship

- Emotional Literacy and Educational Approach
- Teacher to student ratios

Relationships with Peers

The Flexible Learning Programme

- The Premises
- Reintegration

The Team of Educators

- Teamwork and whole-school approach
- Knowledge and Training
- Behaviour Management Strategies
- Leadership and Educator Empowerment

Support Services

Taking an individual approach, offering opportunities to be listened to and be valued, creating safe spaces for relationships to be built, and offering a flexible, practical learning programme with an accent on future work prospects seem to be principals at the core of the Hub's ethos. Educators and ex-students alike both talk of a "family" and overall, it appears to have been a platform for development and growth, at least for the group of students who were the pioneers at the Hub:

"The Hub gave me a lot, including the teachers", said Liam, continuing on to saying, "It was my home, my second family".

"I became well-behaved and turned into the man I am nowadays", said Pierre.

THE STUDENTS

Asked whether they felt the programme at the Msida Educational Hub was helpful to the students, educator2 replied, "They would not have attended mainstream anyway. Most of them were excluded regularly when they were in mainstream and School Leadership Teams (SLTs) clearly wanted to get rid of them. Others were regular absentees." James, an ex-student commented, "The teacher in mainstream used to tell me, 'I'll note you down as present and leave'."

In the local context, the educational routes catering for students that fall off the mainstream wagon due to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties usually divert these students towards the pathway of an LSC. However, the young people at the Msida Educational Hub were diverted towards this new structure. Reports in the media explained how "the situation had become out of control" and spoke of how "radical action was required" (Kevin Bonello, MUT President, The Malta Independent, 2015), however the selection process that went into identifying and recruiting these students and the reasons why they were diverted towards a

newly-created structure rather than one of the already-standing LSCs, or the on-site services of a LSZ were not clearly identifiable for the purposes of this research. Data gathered from ex-students evidenced that only two had attended a LSZ while one had spent a year and a half at a LSC before joining the Msida Educational Hub for his last year of schooling (Form 5). The students that attended expressed how they found the LSZ to be helpful, comparing it to the feeling of 'being cared for' that they found at the Hub. However, they felt that having to return to their regular classroom after sessions at the LSZ didn't help the way their experience at the Hub did. The student who attended the LSC expressed that while he found training elements in subjects he was keen on at the LSC, he felt the Hub addressed his needs better, explaining that the way he was cared for at the Hub meant a lot to him.

According to media reports, "a good number of students were coming from a difficult social context" (Kevin Bonello, MUT President, The Malta Independent online, 2015). This would resonate with McFadden and Munns (2002) proposition that schools are often the sites where students vent emotions generated elsewhere such as home, peers, social drawbacks, etc.

THE TWO STUDENT-COHORTS

While the first cohort of students who attended the Msida Educational Hub were almost entirely from the same mainstream school, those who attended the Hub at the time of this research, were recruited from a national platform. Amongst the first cohort at the Hub, within the group that participated in this research, one had joined during his last year (Form 5) at the age of 15-16 from an entirely different College and catchment area than the rest of the group. Another, who had also previously attended the mainstream school as the rest of the group, had ad interim been to a LSC for a year and a half and then was transferred to the Msida Educational Hub closer to Form 5 where he joined the group from there. According to data gather from educators working with these students, for some of the students in the second cohort hailing from different localities was an advantage and allowed them to make new friends in a new context. Other educators however pointed out that this may have caused higher friction between students at the beginning of the programme, requiring a longer time for relationships to be established and a potential increase in challenging behaviour ad-interim, and expressed concern about this.

Additionally, the second group entering the Hub may have been selected in a manner similar to that applied to LSCs, or maybe it was felt that their needs could be better catered for in this ad-hoc Hub. The latter would imply a distinction between a LSC and the Msida Educational Hub in the alternative education provision. The fact that a student was transferred from a LSC to the Hub, would accentuate some form of a distinction between the services even more. Meetings with the SLT at the Hub clarified how referrals for the Hub are mostly from mainstream schools when they typically feel that cannot handle a students' behaviour. Although referral requires parental consent, parents tend to comply once the situations reaches the point where there is need for such referral since the situation in mainstream starts becoming unbearable for them too. Meetings with the management in this realm however were inconclusive and the clear distinction as to which students are catered for by the Msida Educational Hub (and not by the LSCs) cannot be defined. The educators at the Hub shed some light onto this matter (discussed later in the sub-section titled Reintegration).

Irrespective of catchment area and recruitment process, most students attending the Hub entered the programme at Form 3, at the age of 13-14. All of them were males.

STUDENT PROFILE

Describing the clientele of students that the Hub caters for, educators claimed:

“Students, who require individual attention and an individualised, flexible programme to suit their particular and diverse needs. Students who have been misunderstood and not supported in the right manner in mainstream schools by most of their teachers. Students who lack the right support from home for one reason or another. Students with hidden or untreated conditions, who have struggled to try to fit in and compensate for their difficulties growing up for so long that it has frustrated them and induced challenging coping mechanisms. Most of our students have learning difficulties...undiagnosed conditions that have led them to be unable to fit in a box”, shared educator11.

“Mainstream rejects who have been failed by the system”, said educator2.

“Students with emotional and social behaviour [difficulties] who are not understood by many and don’t cope in the normal environment of a school”, claimed educator9.

“Students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural issues but at the same time, kids who need love and attention”, joined educator5.

Evident in the educators’ comments is a sense of not belonging and not fitting that these students experienced with mainstream schooling and maybe society in general. Many young people re-engaging in alternative learning environments have experienced these processes of disenfranchisement as ‘educational rejection’ (Best, 2015). Consistent is also the feeling of potential amongst the students that was noted by the educators. An understanding that the students may deliver better results under the right conditions. A sense of empathy also emerges, and with it, also a feeling that these students may have been misunderstood and short-changed in their experiences with education so far.

“These are students with social and behavioural difficulties that feel lost at a mainstream school. At the Hub they are contained and have the opportunity to work individually and as a result a lot of their abilities come out” shared educator12.

“Students who wish to succeed but before they came to the Hub, no one believed that they are able to”, said educator4.

“Challenging, different, outcasts that currently do not fit in society, having lots of (hidden) potential”, said educator6.

The educators’ comments, also acknowledge the network that the students form part of and the accumulation of experiences that they bring with them to school and that has brought them to where they are today:

“Students coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds, having traumas and challenging behaviour”, said educator3.

“The Hub’s clientele are students from different backgrounds and cultures along with their respective families. These families are the empowerment and baggage of each and every student in the Hub”, shared educator9.

Highlighting the stark range of skills necessary when working with young people with behavioural difficulties and the vast challenges that may come along are 2 comments from

educators. Asked to describe their clientele, educator7 commented, “Very approachable”. In contrast, educator10 commented, “Very difficult”. Educator1’s comment seems to have put it all in a nutshell: “I would compare them (the students) to fireworks: Dangerous during preparation but shine bright at the end of the day”.

ATTENDANCE VS ABSENTEEISM

Data gathered from students of the first Msida Educational Hub cohort shows the remarkable consistency amongst participants who all claimed to attend the Msida Educational Hub regularly. Most reported attending regularly during mainstream schooling too, however pointed out that at the latter, they would then skive classes and be absent for the larger part of their educational programme. Feedback from educators showed no concerns on the teachers’ part in relation to student attendance.

During an initial meeting between members of staff at the Hub and the research team, members of staff expressed concerns with regards to absenteeism at the Hub. Pointing out that these school years were compulsory for the students but that in some cases, some students still preferred taking up jobs with their families or finding their own way into the employment world. This contrasts with data gathered from the ex-students who resounded comments such as “they found me a job” and how the staff at the Hub had helped make connections with possible employers. All except for two of the students had completed the school year at the Hub and consequently found a job and remained in the labour market or in the case of one student, furthering their education. The two participants who had not completed their programme at the Hub explained that one had had a child and needed to enter the world of work due to financial responsibilities. The latter was provided, and attended educational sessions with who he referred to as ‘the discipline’ (maybe a prefect of discipline). The other student expressed how he had developed some issues and the Hub had helped him get in touch with a local agency that provides services in that area. The student also explained how an LSE from the Hub would pick him up and provide him with transport to the sessions that this agency.

Expressing concern for possible abuses in their employment at such a young age, the educators however expressed how for the current cohort of students disciplinary measures such as fines to families had to be sometimes resorted to, adding that SLT would contact students individually to improve their attendance. Staff members also pointed out how at times, attendance was bargained with students for fewer days a week in order to attempt to keep them involved in the system and sustain any positive achievements.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Initial meetings between the researchers and members of the SLT at the Hub informed us that the current administration valued reaching out to parents and involving them in their students’ education. The SLT expressed how he had in fact met all the current students’ parents. Throughout the research it transpired that families were at times hard to communicate with and that events like whole-school activities were the better opportunities to get in touch with them. Parents were described by educators as being sometimes aloof and issues with parental/guardian reluctance to pay for student’s expenses such as food items for a cooking activity were common.

With reference to the involvement of parents, data from educators showed that a number of them felt that involving family was important for the improvement of the programme at the Hub, stating the need for “someone to work solely with parents in a non-judgemental manner”, shared educator11, and that “it was a great challenge because their cooperation is limited due to various reasons”, said educator4. Educator5 shared:

“As a school we have been working with the families of these children as it is an integral part of their wellbeing especially how to have a healthy routine at home for the benefit of the children, and the importance of taking their medicine daily”.

The value of including the family in the students’ equation was also brought up once again by the team of educators during meetings with the research team, discussing possible contributors to this such as lack of interest in students, helplessness, issues of mental health, having given up, or family values and beliefs. Parents are recognised as having a key role to play in children’s learning and in the case of alternative learning programmes, should be involved at all stages. Encouraging family members to provide support to learners can lead to improved social and academic outcomes (Nelson & O’Donnell, 2013; Michael & Frederickson, 2013).

NUTRITION

Data gathered during meetings between the Msida Educational Hub and the research team, indicated the possible presence of issues related to unhealthy eating. According to educators, students tended to spend money on junk food and sweet from outlets around the Hub. SLT expressed concern about this and considered hunger and unhealthy habits to possibly be a contributor to the students’ attempts to run away from the school. In an attempt to address this issue and support the students towards healthier lifestyles, the Hub planned for students to be provided with a free lunch as part of their daily programme at the Hub. SLT reported this brought about a reduction in the number of students wanting to leave the premises to go to shops outside as well as in the amount of unhealthy foods and drinks they were consuming.

MEDICATION

Data gathered from students made no mention of medication, or the need for it. This is to be expected since the use of medication to regulate one’s behaviour does constitute a taboo even more so since the ex-students interviewed are relatively very young. Throughout data collection from professionals however, medication was brought up on more than one occasion. A number of educators expressed improving students’ independence as one of the objectives of the programme at the Hub. Educator11 included, “Better independent living skills, improved self-esteem”, while educator6 stated, “To be a fully functional, independent human being that gives his contribution to society” amongst the aims and targets of the Hub. Educator5 expressed concern on occasions when students fail to take their medication, stating that their experience at the Hub support students who “started on their holistic journey to well-being and some have cooperated in their medicinal regimen which some of them, officially diagnosed with ADHD, really need in order to function well and reap more benefits from their educational programme”.

The Learning Community

The 'system' presents itself as an unfriendly maze of rules and paperwork that can be overwhelming to students who are often already disengaged and/or alienated from schooling processes (McGregor & Mills, 2012). For students hailing from what the reports described as "difficult social contexts" (Kevin Bonello, MUT President, The Malta Independent, 2015), complying with many of the cultural expectations of mainstream may have turned out to be an obstacle. A number of participants in fact, lamented how their experience in mainstream left them feeling invisible, inadequate, like they weren't made for it and how easily they'd fade in the background unless it was for disciplinary action.

"They wanted me to be someone I could never be" "I am a person, but they wanted me to be the way they said. I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't feel welcome", expressed an ex-student, Jonathan.

"It is a big school (referring to his mainstream school) and there weren't that many teachers. If I wanted to, for example, wanted to miss Maltese lesson, I'd just slip out somewhere and go around the building. You get lost alone...if I wanted to skip a lesson, I could do it there", shared Nigel, another ex-student.

Describing his experience of moving from mainstream to the Msida Educational Hub, Pierre, an ex-student expressed a feeling of "coming backing down from a mountain". The experience of mainstream schooling, for all participants was one where they felt disengaged, or where there was no genuine interest in actually being listened to. Overall, it was one where students felt unhappy, where they weren't feeling content ("Imedjjaq. Ma kontx għal qalbi", Liam told the team). Some thought the pressure educators were under to prepare students for exams and having to cope with so many learners meant there was no time for those personal connections they found so helpful at the Hub.

Most participants recalled how in mainstream, attending was just for the sake of showing up, skiving lessons was frequent and how they lacked interest and motivation or felt no desire to learn or participate. Matthew shared how he would "as much as possible...try to come up with something to be sick, or lie to my mum, or play truant, or get into a fight to avoid lessons or just skive lessons". Some attributed this feeling to the larger population-size of the school and the ratios of staff to students, expressing how easy it would be to get out of sight; others thought it was because of the size of the classroom, where there were more distractions or people to distract, or even the components within that classroom where they felt other students could not understand and vice-versa. Comments from ex-students:

"We were a small group, we weren't that many in the school. Since we weren't students who couldn't actually be able to sit in class and work with other students, they would split us into smaller groups...to give us more attention", said Andrew.

"We were a small group...that helps", Philip said, and continued "We were a small group, so you go in for lesson".

"I used to pay more attention, because there were fewer students", Liam felt.

Adam felt he was capable and able to contribute in class but that the volume of students in his previous mainstream class impinged on his behaviour and made it harder for him to get involved positively. Most of the other students however, spoke about how they felt they were

just “not meant for school” – a diagnosis that a large part of the first cohort of students at the Hub attributed to themselves. One participant, who was possibly the only one in the first cohort to have joined the group during their last of the three years there and come from an entirely different College and region than theirs, in fact described the students he found there as being those rejected by the mainstream schooling system.

“I wasn’t meant for school. I was never looking to continue my schooling” said Nigel.

“I’m not really made for school to be honest” said Pierre.

Jonathan described his team of peers as: “Students like us, that’s what I call it, like us, who are not interested in school”, and described the students he found at the Hub as “They were all students expelled from schools”.

And yet nonetheless, their recollection of their experience at the Msida Educational Hub on the other hand, talks about a will to learn, showing up, a sense of responsibility, finding activities during lessons appealing:

“I didn’t care for school. And then suddenly there (at the Hub), I would take initiative and care about school things”, said Nigel. “You don’t want to skip lessons, not because of the small numbers and being caught out, but because you just feel you shouldn’t”, said Nigel.

Comparing their experiences at the two, a number of students recall the transition as a change “from black to white”. Some of the students expressed their initial concern about leaving mainstream and having to face the next unknown. Also, this would need to be explored in future research in the light of other ‘unknowns’ potentially present in the students’ lives. Alternative education programmes are often seen as ‘other’ to the mainstream or regular school (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Mills & McGregor, 2013). However, all of the participants recounted how being at the Hub soon felt “like family”.

The environment and culture at the Hub as described by those who used to attend it, appeared to be far less rigid than those found in traditional mainstream schools, where most students had felt alienated. Issues such as attendance and behaviour were handled with greater flexibility and a general attitude of flexibility appeared present.

“At the Hub, we kept our phones in our pockets, there was an area where we were allowed to smoke. We didn’t have requests for permission and firmness (sikkatura)”, said Pierre.

“They let us keep our things, like mobiles and jewellery, even though we’re not supposed to”.

“It wasn’t so rigid (sikkatura). They understood us and explained things to us.” said Liam.

“There wasn’t that inflexibility (sikkatura) that can bother a student”, said Nigel.

“If I need to use my phone]...[they would let me”, said Jonathan.

Ongoing staff–student dialogue appeared to be present. Explaining how their changed experience within this educational programme resulted in part from small differences, such as gestures and attitudes from the system, students expressed how:

“The Hub is not like other schools where, if you make a mistake, you will be kept after school or a similar punishment. They teach you instead”, shared Pierre. He shared how “If I got into a fight...[in mainstream]...they’d expel me, keep me after school, or something like that. At the Hub, they’d teach you, not to do it again, and say ‘What good came out of that?’ They don’t send you home, they teach you”. He also went to comparing the experience to that the LSZ by saying, “At the LSZ, there’d be fights frequently, and I’d get involved. There, at the Hub, we were all a family”, attributing his changed behaviour to being spoken to by staff members, including the Head.

Liam said: “They wouldn’t let me do anything I wanted, but if, for example, I did something, they wouldn’t just up and expel me. They’d explain things to me”.

Matthew explained: “If I fought, they’d help us talk about it and make friends”.

“We felt like a school, but that you enjoy going to. We were at that school because we didn’t give attention to school. In school (mainstream), I used to be unhappy but then there (at the Hub), it starts feeling like going home”, explained Nigel.

“There were occasions when we got into fights, but they’d teach us about bullying and what not. I used to go in for lessons more frequently”, shared Philip.

The respect that students felt was a big factor for them, congruent with what research indicates (Kendall et al., 2007; Martin & White, 2012). Experiencing what felt like a compassionate and sensitive context, attributes that are consistently described throughout research as valuable, if not essential to learners in alternative educational programmes (Quinn et al., 2006, Quinn & Poirier, 2006, Michael and Frederickson, 2013), appears to have made it possible for them to reconnect with the educational system. They felt like they were a significant participant in a community and as such, reported feeling more inclined to participate and get involved in the activities of that group. Schools which do their utmost to appeal to all their learners, even those with specific needs, have a strong value structure based on a commitment to valuing all students as being members of their school community (Pizzuto, 2010).

The educators at the Hub also felt the programme offered its students a sense of community and belonging, describing the Hub as:

“The place where [our] students feel safe learning through an alternative learning programme that caters for different abilities, interest and talents”, said educator5.

“A small school with a big heart where you will be seen, accepted and set on a journey altogether”, commented educator6.

“A home where students are adopted into a caring environment...empowering them. The Hub is a special learning environment where the students feel at home and accepted”, shared educator8.

“A loving and caring home with a heart of gold”, claimed educator1.

Thompson and Pennacchia (2015) identified relationships to be a learning goal in their own right when it comes to the successful provision of high quality alternative education.

Relationships were thus understood not a means to an end, a prerequisite for the learning, but they were important social learning in their own right. Establishing and modelling a culture of support, care and respect were key elements, fundamental to the relationships amongst all staff and students. The development of a sense of community and belonging paved the way for the development of fruitful emotional development and with it, once trusting foundations are established, the concurrent delivery of the learning programme.

"I'd say I need to go out for 5 minutes. She'll come, speak to you, ask you what's wrong. She understands you and gives you your time. And then when she has time, she explains the lesson to you alone", Nigel explained.

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

The feeling of a sense of family and community as significant elements of their alternative schooling environment at the Msida Educational Hub was echoed with all of the participants and sustained a sense of wellbeing amongst the learner. The same can also be said about feeling respected for who they were as individuals, someone that mattered, someone who was meriting of positive regard. Comments from ex-students:

"Accepting me the way I am" and "helping me be myself, but in a positive way", shared Jonathan. "They always accepted us the way we are". "I could express myself with them".

To the question "What is the ethos of the Msida Educational Hub?", educator11 quoted the Hub's website and said:

"The Educational Hub...aims to enhance the students' rights and ability to access a holistic educational experience whilst being empowered to exceed expectations and surpass any limitations they may encounter. Achieving these goals means full commitment and hard work. This is why it is essential that every member of the Hub is fully aware of his/her rights and responsibilities."

Educator4 distinguished the Hub from other programmes by saying it was "a place focusing on individual needs rather than on numbers". Other educators also echoed this, such as educator3, who commented on how it "focuses on the needs of the students" or how according to educator4 it helped them "believe in themselves and boost their self-esteem". The valuing of students as meriting individuals and valid contributors in society and in their own learning journey was in fact a significant theme throughout this study. For social inclusion, in the classroom, it is necessary to be part of the class as a participant (Koster et al., 2009). This would mean that students need to be fully included, by taking full and active part in the life of the school and that they should be seen as valued members of the school community. Positive social participation leads to a sense of belonging and better academic performance (Bierman 2004; Blum & Libbey, 2004). Feeling socially accepted and part of the family community that was created at the Hub, makes it possible for the students to participate meaningfully in their education. Educator comments consistently reflected this sentiment:

"We know each student individually so we can cater for his individual needs whereas in mainstream these students would be seen as a threat with the probability that they end up excluded most of the time, given consequences for their behaviour, looked down upon, resulting in absenteeism and early school learning", said educator3.

"The Hub is a place where the staff makes students feel welcome and safe. Treat students like a family", commented educator12.

"Every opinion matters and everyone is valid", shared educator4.

"The ethos of the Hub stems from the main values of respect and tolerance towards each other in a safe, orderly, caring and supportive environment", said educator8.

With claims like these, it is natural then that most student participants expressed that the Hub provided a significant support system for them, allowing them to feel welcome, valued, supported and understood. Some went on to saying how this foundation had also aided them in becoming more understanding of other people's realities:

"It made me understand the situation, people. I didn't used to understand people, students, [in mainstream] what they were going through. At the Hub, I had the opportunity to meet people who were going through difficulties", shared Jonathan.

Matthew explained: "It helped us, not only with school things. They didn't only care about things related to school, but also our behaviour after we leave school...how we behave with our families and people out there".

Nigel shared a similar sentiment when he said: "You change...everything they'd say to you, you'd lose it. Then you change because it's like you want to understand others, not just yourself".

Their educators too, valued this as an important lesson to take with them from the Hub, with educator6 identifying "being an example to other people who are also going through a lot and believing there is always support if ones asks" as one of the main targets of the Msida Educational Hub.

The above claim could also indicate that finding themselves in a context with students who they likewise felt didn't fit into the scholastic model, could have acted as a window for these learners to potentially see this experience from an outsider's point of view, maybe identify commonalities in their circumstances, and possibly reflect on their reality in the picture of society from a different angle. Pizzuto (2010) claimed that students with learning difficulties or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties do not need to be separated or segregated from each other. Likewise, Heinrich (2005) maintained that success in alternative education could not be achieved by segregating students from their peers in mainstream schools who, he suggested, should also spend time in alternative provision while those from the alternative should maintain contact with the mainstream. If students can develop empathy and emotional literacy through being involved in the resolution of their own or peers' behavioural difficulties through dialogue and safe discussion, then this approach has the potential to be transferred and mirrored even within the mainstream context through processes such as supported reintegration or exchange channels.

THE TEACHING RELATIONSHIP

"In mainstream I wouldn't attend many lessons. I needed a bond, someone to tell me 'come in' but no one ever took notice before. And then I started in Msida and they'd pay attention to

me. If I didn't feel up to a lesson, they'd tell me to go for a short walk and then return to class. I understood them. I used to participate normally", shared James, one of the students from the Hub's first cohort.

The environment and climate within the Hub, as described by participants, clearly paved the way for the nature of interactions between educators and students at a person level. These relationships were identified by the students and educators alike as being central to the learners' on-going engagement in the learning process. Rogers (1980) identifies three key conditions necessary for healthy relationships which could be directly applied to the teacher-student relationship: empathy, unconditional positive regard and honesty. The educators at the Hub were described by participants as having taken notice of them, taken an interest in what they had to say and understanding of their aspirations, preferences, difficulties and of what they had to share in general. These relationships were identified by those who had attended the Hub as being pivotal to their reigniting an interest in learning and maintaining on-going engagement in the learning process:

"If all teachers were like Mariah⁵, kind of, keeping their attention on you, I think maybe it could be I'd have gotten somewhere, been attentive at school, more interested", shared Nigel. "Jeffrey keeps you active. He pays attention to you".

"The teachers loved us (cared about us a lot)...They spoke to us", explained Philip.

"When I was in mainstream, I didn't even try to learn. During my time at the Hub, I learnt a few things. I used to stay with a teacher and he'd bring me papers and work and say 'just a bit more'", said Michael. Describing his experience in mainstream school before attending the Hub, he explained, "You wouldn't find a teacher that will listen to you. They come in, give the lesson and they're done".

Andrew shared: "I felt [my previous school] was a school that I wasn't very comfortable because at the end of the day, everyone goes to work to get paid and that's it. For them (referring to the educators in his previous school) they came to their daily job, that's how I see it. Now at the Hub, I saw things differently".

The value that these students gave to feeling 'loved' and nurtured transpired even in contexts outside the Hub itself. Philip described how prior to attending the Hub, he would skive class and go to the LSZ because "there were two teachers who loved me", even though he expressed the LSZ was still not sufficient and that he felt the Hub was still a better package for him. Adopting a teaching style which is proactive in its approach towards all students is essential in having different needs met (Pizzuto, 2010). It comes as no surprise therefore that the mentor approach adopted by the Msida Educational Hub brought some individual attention to the students that they had long felt lacking prior to then. Describing this mentor approach, Matthew recounted how "every student had a mentor of his own. She would keep an eye on you...speak to you about your life, like that, in more detail". He described how a subject-teacher would use his/her free lessons to dedicate them to their mentees and "for a little time, speak to him, ask how he's doing, in school, in life. To help". "She used to tell us how we can ameliorate, how we have to care about others. She helped, not only with academic things, but even with behaviour even when we left school, how we behaved with our families

⁵ Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities

and society". This relational commitment may have ensured that every student felt like a valid member of the school's community and served as a fundamental platform for personal and educational development. It is widely understood that wellbeing is essential for the academic and social development of young people, with significant longer-term benefits including the ability to develop healthy relationship and strong social bonds (MacDonald et al., 2019; Layard, 2005). Providing individual attention and personal support is therefore at the root of the learning exchange offered for students at the Hub. Mario commented on how teachers used to give him lessons on a one-to-one basis during breaks and free time because he wanted to sit for a particular exam, which, as a result of these efforts, he obtained.

Cefai and Cooper (2010) identified the perceived lack of understanding and support by the classroom teacher as one of the most common and frequently mentioned grievances by students. This resonated a lot with the findings from data gathered from ex-students and the importance of feeling cared for echoed in most interviews with these young adults. To a question as to whether in hindsight he would choose to go to the Hub or not, Philip asserted, "Yes, I'd go...The teachers loved us...The Head too, he spoke to us". Nigel even expressed how pleased he was when educators extended looking into his progress even outside the Hub: "There were some teachers and the Head, they even came to watch us play football after school" ... "they kept in contact with us".

Staff at the Msida Educational Hub recognised that most, if not all of the students in their care had experienced difficulties beyond school and that their task was to know about these, understand and provide support. Thomson and Pennacchia (2015) noted how despite the difficult contexts they work in, educators regularly go above and beyond their job description. Typically, this included working unpaid hours or giving additional assistance to the students, such as bus fares or food. In fact, a number of the participants interviewed explained how some teachers would make breakfast for them at the Hub. During initial meetings, SLT also pointed out that all the students in the present group attending the Hub at the time of this research after offered a meal during school hours and are all offered transportation to and from the Hub. Academically, many participants also mentioned how teachers would often take time out of breaks or free lessons to help students at a one-to-one level, catch up on lessons or activities they may have missed during classes.

Matthew shared: "The teachers, the mentors and even the Head, they treated me in a way like I wasn't there just as a number in school and I'm only there to clock in as present and that's it, school is done. They treated me like I was their son. They head cared about me, the teachers, the mentors, everyday they'd come see how I was doing and how things are going".

Comments from educators also resonated with this, describing the Hub as "a place where students feel safe to vent out. There is a good relationship between students and teachers" (educator7). The learning experience offered at the Hub extended beyond the academic and included opportunities for personal, social and emotional development that "catered for the individual needs of the students and of their families" (educator3).

At the heart of all education is the practice of teachers; consequently, the role of teachers in developing inclusion is central to its effectiveness (Lindsay, 2007). Pierre described how throughout his experience in every school he had been to, whenever he expressed his displeasure or disinterest in activities involving writing tasks, he would just be told he had to write anyway and was expected to conform. The authoritarian approach where 'the teacher makes the rules' has often been found across research to provoke feelings of lack of validation,

leading these students to disengage from the system (Bartolo & Tabone, 2002; Chircop, 1997; Clark et al., 2005; Dalli & Dimech, 2005; Magri, 2009). However, at the Hub, Pierre explained how when he told them about his disliking with writing tasks, they told him that wasn't a problem and that they would help write material for him, as long as he kept his attendance regular. Pierre expressed how having the staff giving priority to his happiness and long-term attendance meant a lot to him. He laid it out very clearly when he said:

"If at the Hub they taught masonry (referring to classes he attended at a previous school), I'd have liked it more and so on. Because I liked doing manual work (at his previous school). But the difference...[between the Hub and the LSC]...was considerable. The fact that they wrote things down for me, I really appreciated that. Because they knew it bothered me, instead of letting me do something unhappily, they did it for me, and I'd do the work, happily".

The educator had given priority to Pierre's consistent attendance, his trust, they had validated a sentiment with which he had filtered out every other educational institution he had previously attended as equally disinterested in what he had to say. This time, he was being listened to and understood. The trusting relationship developed by teachers through this and similar instances, appears to have provided a scaffold that helped these students find confidence and a will to believe in themselves, and to find meaning in their school experiences:

"They understand you", expressed Liam. "The Hub was like my second family".

"The teachers helped me a lot to feel like a family there", shared Nigel.

"We were liked family", shared Matthew.

Andrew shared: "The Hub is a different school because, for example, if I have a problem, even if it's not related (to school), they will treat you like family". "It was a school where you felt like you were going home".

Classrooms are the educational interface at which connection or disconnection occurs for students (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Thus, the relationships and pedagogical approaches nurtured within classrooms are critical to engaging and retaining the interest and trust of students (McFadden & Munns, 2002; Smyth & Hattam, 2005). According to participants from the first cohort of the Msida Educational Hub students, the educational team was present and attentive to their needs and this instilled a sense of acceptance and a value to their self-worth during their experience there. Even students who only attended the Hub for a year felt this way.

Pierre said: "It made a big difference to me...No one took me seriously. At the Hub, they opened the door for me".

Michael shared: "It didn't feel like going to school. I'm going near my friends, even the teachers. They'll understand you. They'll help you. Not the kind where if you don't feel like doing anything, that's that. They'll encourage you: 'let's do a little bit more, let's do a little bit more'".

Information gathered from educators regarding the second cohort of students indicated

however that for the second group of students at the Hub, absenteeism and behavioural issues were still very much present.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

“That he is aware of issues that might trigger emotions and be capable of regulating himself rather than resorting to violence”. Educator6’s comment about the targets and aims of the programme at the Msida Educational Hub.

In a 2010 review, Cefai and Cooper identified a sub-theme across studies that evidenced an autocratic and rigid behaviour management approach that was adopted by many teachers in their response to misbehaviour. Data gathered for this research appears to resonate this, shifting its focus on the system as a whole where, any misbehaviour would lead to direct punishment by the school with no mediation, understanding or learning opportunities. “They’d expel you”, said Pierre. And he continued, “They’d keep you after school or something like that”. Students recounted their experience in mainstream as an impersonal, punitive one. Describing an episode of misbehaviour, Matthew recalled:

“In mainstream, the first thing they’d do is send me to the head. Maybe he’d shout a bit, or maybe then make me stay in for break. Then he’d give me some detention. And it would be over”.

When it came to describing their experience at the Hub however, the group consistently described how educators didn’t take a confrontational approach and would steadily, be given support to reflect on their actions. One notes that the staff-student ratio allows for such as well, whereas in the mainstream the situation is quite different. They wouldn’t be sent off to the head of school, the head would come over to have a candid chat with them; a whole-school approach where everybody is included in the education of the students there. Matthew continues:

“They wouldn’t do that at the Hub”... “They wouldn’t give me extra work or things like that. They speak to me, sometimes even the Head would come and talk to me. And they’d try to help us resolve it. We were like a family”.

And others concurred:

“The Head was really approachable and came down to our level. Everyone was alright”, said Luke. He continued: “The Hub had discipline. They explain everything to you. For everything, there is a consequence. In mainstream, you make a mistake, out. At the Hub there were more teachers, they’d tell you – if you do something, there will be a consequence. That makes you think. It stays with you even after you leave school. If I break a car, there will be a consequence. Like in school, if I kick a ball onto someone, there will be a consequence, you could hurt him or maybe get expelled”.

Michael said: “The teachers are not going to snap at you, because you didn’t do your homework. They’d ask why you didn’t do it and speak to you gently”.

“The Head cared about us. The teachers, the mentors, they would check on us every day to see how I am and how I was doing”, shared Matthew.

Liam explained: "Before (in mainstream) we'd always get into fights. I'd fight with this guy, then that guy. Not at the Hub. At the Hub they'd explain things to me (ifehmuk bil-mod)".

Teachers who support students' emotional experiences, or engage in emotional scaffolding, are viewed by students as more supportive and caring (Meyer & Turner, 2006; Patrick et al., 2003; Wentzel, 1997). All participants in fact, told of how they would be spoken to when incidences of misbehaviour occurred, creating an environment where the students felt valued and where they were systematically being supported towards reflecting upon and better manage their behaviour. Reid (2009) highlights the importance of the role played by teachers investing emotional capital in their students and in fact, calls for schools to facilitate 'networks of trust'. The contribution made by the teachers at the Hub in fact, was described by most participants as extending well beyond the delivery of curricula. Within the context of the community, the role of educators was multi-faceted:

"The Head used to tell us not to bully each other"... "He would call us in the morning, tell us how there'd be no bullying", shared Philip.

Michael explained: "In mainstream, you wouldn't think 'There are teachers who I can talk to and who will try to understand me'. You can't quite get it, nothing. You speak to them, it's like...different from the Education Hub. You'd speak to them, they always try to act to help you, promptly. They either speak to the Head or something, they do something to help you. The teachers themselves, there's no need for anything, they tell you themselves, whatever we need, to speak to them".

Willmann and Seeliger (2017) highlighted that the inclusion of students with behavioural difficulties requires a high level of personal engagement on behalf of the educators, as well as professional knowledge and expertise that, in the context of SEBD, is specifically bound to a preparedness to provide and sustain emotional support, often presented on a platter of challenging behaviour. The importance of the relationship that the team of educators at the Msida Educational Hub appears to have formed with the students from the first cohort of pupils who participated in this research, finds a fundamental role in the development of learning relationship and emotional literacy.

"The first thing Joseph, the first thing the Head, Joseph, told us were man to man, like the man he is.] he said [What's the point in fighting amongst yourselves? You have to see each other every day. What's the point?]", Pierre explained.

Nigel shared: "With personal problems...we always found them willing to help us, all of them"

"The teachers become your friends there (at the Hub). You don't think that you can't trust them or that you can't talk to them. They're not teachers. You speak to them like they're your friends", said Michael.

All the students told of fond connections with members of staff, most of which they referred to by their first name and this mirrors the sense of family fostered at the Hub. This will be discussed further in the next section. James commented on how "if I need anything, even now, I know they'd help me", even after so many years.

Most students, frequently commented upon their renewed enthusiasm for learning and their willingness to participate as a consequence of this nurturing culture. The relationships developed at the Hub between educators and students and the teaching strategies that flowed from that was in fact a dominant theme within the data from our study. Participants frequently used adjectives such as 'caring, small group, family, and cared about' when discussing their experience at the Hub. The following comments are just a small selection from the many positive endorsements from students:

"I was never planning to continue my studies. Sort of, when I started going to the Hub, the, I'm not saying that I started thinking of continuing my studies, but when I was there, then I started paying attention to school...We were a school, but that you enjoyed going to", shared Nigel.

Michael shared: "When we went there, we were still young. Had it not been for them, opening our eyes, I think, I wouldn't know what I'd find...I'm not the kind of person who is interested in school and what not. But I used to go there gladly. It wasn't like going to other schools. In mainstream, I used to feel unhappy needing to wake up for school. There, I'd wake up well". He continued: "It's a school that you look forward to going to. Not like other schools where you go unhappy. You'll find people who understand you".

"Thanks to them I started going back into the classroom and participating", expressed James.

TEACHER TO STUDENT RATIOS

The ratio of educator-presence to students came across as a significant factor in the difference with which the students could engage at the Hub.

"There was only sixteen of us, four in every class...I think there were more teachers than students", explained Nigel.

Luke shared: "Here we were twelve or fifteen students. There were more teachers than students so there was more discipline".

"I used to pay more attention because there were less students", said Liam. "There were less students (at the Hub). There wasn't as much bullying. [In mainstream] there was bullying, arrogant (kesħin) students.

"In mainstream, I got hit with a key in my ear. I felt safer at the Hub because I knew there were enough teachers", revealed Andrew.

"We were twenty-three in total. They kept us as a small group, so we could be friends and even if someone gets into a fight, they help us resolve it and make friends again", explained Matthew.

In contrast to his experience with big numbers of students in mainstream, Luke explained:

"There are a lot of kids and a few teachers (in mainstream). It's not serious. So, what if you say 'afterschool'? You look for him and don't find him amongst all those kids. You find him

the next day and he gets an expulsion. And he stays home playing play station”.

Educators too felt that the smaller group sizes were better suited to the aims of the Hub, not only in terms of attention, but also for flexibility and adaptability.

“The group is small and so our timetable can be as flexible as possible”, said educator7. Educator9 felt “the low student population and mentor – mentee relationship” make it different from other services, even the local alternative offered at LSCs.

“Being so small, we can give individual attention”, shared educator10.

“In groups of 4 at a time... (students) have a lot of time to interact with each other and work on social skills”, explained educator11.

The student to educator ratio at Msida Educational Hub therefore, narrowed the distance between the two: it was smaller in volume compared to the students' previous mainstream experience, reducing the sense of anonymity and being just another student; and, within that the reduced volume, was also composed of smaller, more personal groups. To the participant, the experience at the Hub therefore felt a lot more human than most traditional schools. Several studies speak of the benefits that a small learning community can have on achievement and youth development (e.g. Castellano et al., 2001; McDonald, 2002; Raywid 2001; Secada 1999). The smaller community size provided a sheltered platform, while the higher teacher-student ratios made it possible for deeper connections and a more individual approach to be fostered.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

While most participants found the smaller sizes of school and classroom to be a pivotal factor to their integration and development within the Hub, a few students still reflected on the difference in social opportunities with peers that were present in larger, mainstream school:

“It distanced me from my friends” (referring to the transition from mainstream to the Hub). I used to go to [mainstream school] to play football with my friends. I used to go in at 6 in the morning to spend two hours playing football before they call us in for assembly”, said Nigel.

Nevertheless, Nigel felt there sometimes was a misfit with his mainstream peers although he recognised that there were different students who they felt more inclined to work with:

“I didn't feel comfortable working with the students I was in class with. But I'd see other students working (in another class), and I'd ask to join their lesson”.

While others, felt that the presence of larger volumes of students in mainstream, didn't directly influence their relationships and behaviour:

“There are a lot of students (referring to mainstream schooling) ...there will be bad company, but there will be positive company too. Then it's up to you who to choose as friends”, said Nigel.

Recommendations for the promotion of whole-school awareness of SEBD to improve acceptance and inclusion is widespread amongst research (e.g. Watkins and Wentzel 2002; Westwood 2003; Highland Children's Forum 2006). The development of emotional literacy and a culture of acceptance and understanding may therefore prove to be a factor in the reintegration and/or performance of students with behavioural difficulties in a mainstream set-up.



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The Flexible Learning Programme

THE FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMME

“Better independent living skills, improved self-esteem, the ability to present themselves for an interview, the belief that they can achieve something in life in spite of being considered challenging. Self-sufficiency in looking after their own needs (including medicinal). Experiencing nurture and unconditional positive regard, finding a significant other in one of us”.

Educator11's description of the programme's aims.

The Msida Educational Hub offers its students the opportunity to undertake traditional academic core subjects, such as Maths, English, Maltese and P.E. on a regular basis as its backbone, however its educational programme also includes a number of vocational subjects: Welding, Electrical, Woodwork, Art, Gardening and Home Economics. At par with this curriculum, The Hub participates in the Achieve Programme (also known as the Prince's Trust and/or the XL Programme). Consequently, according to the current SLT, a number of students from the previous cohort (the ones interviewed for this research) had obtained O-level-equivalent certification. **The Achieve Programme** “works primarily with young people who are struggling with their learning and at risk of dropping out, supporting them to engage and succeed in education”. “It is a learner directed experience” and “offers young people the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence through relevant, engaging and informal learning”. “The Prince's Trust offers the opportunity to achieved accredited qualification. Topics include Life Skills, Personal & Social Development, Enterprise, Active Citizenship and Preparation for Work” (Prince's Trust International, 2020).

In addition to the this, the SLT shared that the Hub is also involved in an Erasmus project, making it possible for a group of students from previous group to travel to Portugal as part of this initiative. The group also received students from foreign schools locally and, the present group of students have the opportunity of visiting Germany as part of the project.

The SLT also added that at the end of the scholastic year, students are offered a month of what is called 'Work Experience' where students are offered short courses e.g. food handling, welding. Participants from the previous cohort of students also shared how they would attend work placements, in areas that they had expressed an interest in, found for them by the team at the Hub during their school hours.

Educators at the Hub further described the educational programme offered as:

“Tailormade, individualised programmes focused to prepare students for a job/career”, shared educator2.

“An individualised programme that is tailor made to the student. Timetable / apprenticeships / job shadowing / academic subjects / job coaching / sponsorships...all adapted to suit the gifts of the individual student”, said educator6.

“The school offers academic subjects that are essential and also vocational subjects where students work hands-on. The school also provides courses for students such as First Aid, Job Exposure, and also talks that are essential for their lifestyle”, said educator12.

Asked about what they felt were the targets of the Msida Educational Hub and what they felt the programme aimed to achieve for students attending, educators commented:

"(For students) to be a fully functional, independent human being that gives his contribution to society", shared educator⁶.

"To empower students to become successful and responsible citizens", said educator¹².

"(To give students) skills for them to function and be successful citizens and employees", claimed educator².

"(For students to have) mastered enough life skills which will make them employable", shared educator³.

"Students will become better citizens, able to pursue a career and function properly in and for the benefit of society", said educator⁴.

"To educate and enrich our students in a holistic way and to" ... "empower them to become successful and responsible citizens", continued educator⁵.

"Not just prepare them academically but also preparing them well to join the labour market", said educator⁷.

"The students will be able to find their own work...and be functioning citizens", said educator⁹.

The Hub's educational programme therefore offers an academic spine, embellished with vocational, life and work experiences, taking the core of the mainstream programme and adding a focus on learning work skills as well as providing opportunities to obtain experiences in actual, local workplaces. With components such as the Achieve Programme, realistic learning opportunities, as well as the teacher's pedagogical approach, the students at the Hub had the opportunity to re-explore their learning journey from a more interactive, hands-on and varied angle. Matthew, who often skived lessons and played truant in mainstream, had this to say about the Msida Educational Hub:

"[The Hub] helped me a lot more than my previous school because I found a lot more practical work rather than theory and material to read. It helped me a lot too because while I'm hands-on in practical tasks, I'm exhausting energy, I'm doing something I enjoy, I'll understand better".

"I used to find it very hard to understand and memorise things. I didn't enjoy studying, I would get bored writing and reading, it would come in from one ear and out the other. So, for me, what really helped was that instead of spending time writing and reading, I was directly doing things myself".

"I need practical work to learn. For example, I am a (he works in a practical, hands-on job⁶) now. I don't want to read about how to (do my job). I want to have model and (learn through practical work). And that's how I learn. And that's what I always wanted, since mainstream school".

⁶ Information has been omitted to protect the identity of participant

He also added, with reference to the work placements:

“We were sent once a week, we chose what area we'd like to work in and they'd try to find a company to work with for a day once a week. Actual work experience. And then when we completed a year of attending (the work placement) once a week, we'd get a certificate”.

Not only were work placements being made a factual part of their educational programme, they were also selected ad-hoc in parallel with their preferences. Data collected from students and educators alike pointed out the value of these work placements and realistic job exposure opportunities. Educators also pointed out that these need to be developed carefully so as to be of benefit to students. The first cohort of students shared how they were found work experiences within sectors they had expressed an interest in (e.g. a student who liked animals was offered a job exposure experience at the President's Kitchen Garden). They also shared how would be offered transportation and how members of staff would accompany them to placements where they would then spend some hours of work with no staff from the Hub on-site before being once again picked up by a member of staff from the Hub at the end of the day. In the case of the current cohort of students, it was reported that it is the LSEs who coordinate work placements, however it is not clear how these placements are carried out – from the selection of placements, job coaching, logistics, transportation and so on.

Resonating with all participants was the sentiment of how the Hub provided a schooling experience that was positive enough to make these young people want to reconnect to learning and allow them to carve a future for themselves. The programme was delivered within a flexible and inclusive environment founded upon supportiveness and respect, it included essential components of the academic backbone, and it gave the opportunity to focus on more practical aspects. Andrew pondered on whether his need to go to the Hub at all would have ever risen if subjects such as welding, woodworking, gardening were offered in mainstream schools. Educators too highlighted the enhanced educational approach through the addition of practical and hands-on experiences:

“Project-based learning”, said educator1.

“Hands-on individual programmes in: welding, plumbing, electrical, art, home economics, gardening” ...adding “the possibility to prepare for an O-level with 1:1 attention and 1:1 mentoring”, explained educator11.

“Academic and hands-on programme focusing on life skills, soft skills and employability skills”, shared educator4.

Students appreciated the more hands-on approach and the structure of the day of lessons at the Hub as well as the pedagogical approach taken by teachers was also a factor in their wellbeing and positive participation.

Nigel shared: “Lessons were half an hour long so that they're not long and students don't get bored. It's easier to say, it's a half an hour not forty-five minutes, so it's easier to stick through it. And they keep lessons active. You can't give students something they're going to dislike, it has to be something they'll enjoy. A normal lesson but including elements that students enjoy. For example, during an English lesson, the teacher includes a short video.

That way, for students, it's not a half hour full of listening to the teacher. It's twenty-five minutes and five minutes watching the video".

"The way lessons are done, they're not boring", said Matthew. "We still had reading and similar activities. But we also did what felt like games. So that students, aside from doing classwork, are having fun with a game. Turning lessons into a game, so that students can enjoy it. You're not at school and disgruntled thinking 'I have this lesson, I'm going to get bored. You go to it enthusiastically".

Michael said: "They (lessons) used to be shorter (at the Hub). Having a double lesson and having to sit through it for two hours in class, for short-tempered people like myself! (referring to his discomfort with longer lessons in mainstream schooling). I need something like that (referring to shorter lessons at the Hub), not listening to the same things for two hours".

Andrew said: "Even lessons were not that boring. Back then, I used to find it boring to have to sit at a table writing and that's it. Lessons were more than that. For example, we used to have more things".

In contrast with data reported by ex-students at the Hub, the team of educators on the other hand expressed encountering difficulties getting students to class and retaining their continuous participation. The team shared experiences of how the SLT would chase students around the school and ask them to go to class. Similarly, to how the first cohort of students expressed they experienced mainstream schooling, the educators told of the current cohort as students who went to school to hang out with peers, sleep and eat. They spoke of students who were hardly ever in class and who cause fights or similar challenging behaviours to erupt if they did attend.

When comparing the educational approach found at the Hub to that experienced in mainstream schooling, most students identified work experience and/or relevance to their work prospects as a common feature that they looked for in their educational programme. Thompson and Pennacchia (2015) bring up the notion of this discussion being not of alternative education but of 'flexible learning choices'.

Educators also highlighted the need for the programme to address issues such as safety, attachment, belonging, boundaries, healthy living, sexuality and developing relationships as well as work-related topics such as job searching and interviewing skills.

At the foundation of this programme for the students who attended when it was first established, remains the personal, safe culture nurtured by trusting relationships between learners and educators and that made it possible for these students who had previously become disengaged, to consider engaging once again. McGregor and Mills (2012) highlighted the importance of three pillars: environment, programme and teaching, in the retaining, engaging and motivating students.

THE PREMISES

Data collected from educators evidenced a recurring importance given to the physical structures and facilities that the alternative learning programme is offered in. References to the school's premises and its amenities were brought up by almost a quarter of educators when asked what the least positive thing about the programme was or how it could improve. "Better physical environment with more space"...for students to "exert their anger, where they can practice mindfulness" (educator3) and "access to a small football area" (educator10) where amongst the points mentioned. Specialised rooms to offer services or therapies "on a regular basis, e.g. calming room, indoor gym, well-equipped classes for subjects...and a...cafeteria" (educator11) were also suggested.

REINTEGRATION

When asked whether they felt the programme offered at the Msida Educational Hub was different to that offered in LSCs, three main points of view transpired amongst educators:

- Those who felt there were no real differences between the two;
- Those who felt there were elements of the programmes that were different e.g. flexibility in time-table and ratios of staff to students; and
- Those who felt that the major difference between the two was that while LSC accommodate students for a period with the aim of reintegrating these back into mainstream schooling with their peers, the Msida Educational Hub on the other hand, focus on in-house developing and completion of the students' remaining school years.

These options could be complemented by a distinction made by Pierre, a student who was amongst those in the first cohort at the Hub but had also attended a LSC before that:

"(Referring to the LSC) They know, for example, when I get nervous I'd want to smoke a cigarette. She used to tell me: 'Go out, have a cigarette then come back in'. They always accepted me. At the Hub, we had no problem...They let me do what I wanted (at the LSC). But at the Hub, I'd do things without needing to ask".

The above could also be explained in light of the fact that educators were aware that students, unlike the rest of the first intake, had availed from services offered in a LSC. In other words, the need for more support and possibly 'leniency' could be explained in this context.

The LSC claims to offer its learners a "temporary programme" "aimed at providing students with alternative educational provision and to offer mentoring during the reintegration process" (Ministry for Education and Employment website, 2020), although rates of student reintegration into mainstream (or other) may need to be confirmed. The Msida Educational Hub, on the other hand, according to its team/s of educators, aimed to retain its students actively involved in their educational journey through building a three-year relationship with them. In a review of alternative educational programmes across the UK, Thomson and Pennacchia (2015) remarked that students are typically not reintegrated.

Amongst the objectives of alternative learning programmes is the eventual reintegration of students back into conventional pathways, as students into mainstream schooling or adults back into society. Educator11 comments, "In the LSC students are prepared to be sent back to mainstream whereas...at the Hub, students stay in the programme without being given the

option to revert to mainstream”, stating that they did “not agree with this”. It is noted that students attend to the Hub during the last three years of compulsory schooling. So one needs to evaluate reintegration using a different yardstick such as being successfully employed. Educator4 however commented on how this permanence at the Hub was “pivotal to provide a holistic programme and build a healthy ongoing relationship based on their particular needs”. The latter was echoed by two more colleagues who felt that thanks to the three-year programme, “one can have a tailor-made programme for each student” (educator6).



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The Team of Educators

THE TEAM OF EDUCATORS

Asked to identify what they felt were their main challenges as a professional at the Hub and how they felt the programme could be improved, the following themes transpired:

- A need for support, from SLT, colleagues and professionals
- A behaviour strategy guiding educators on how to handle challenging behaviour
- Guidance and training on techniques for working with students SEBD

TEAMWORK AND WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

Interestingly, educator7 mentioned the “experience of other teachers” as a contributor towards improving their skills and knowledge to work with the students at the Hub. Cooper and Cefai (2013), claimed it is important that leaders provide models of positive interpersonal relationships, with one another, with staff, students and their guardians/parents. They suggest that “in good schools experienced staff mentor their less experienced colleagues” ...and... “help their less experienced colleagues by empathizing with them when they experience difficulties, and by offering supportive advice”. This sense of collegiality in itself, may provide students with a model positive orientation and through its participatory process, can contribute to the development of the school community not only as one preaching about it to the students but endorsing and practicing it in its methods.

From data gathered it appears that some of the staff members at the Hub feel that not all members of the team are working towards the same goals. Educator11 commented “I believe that there are different targets for different staff members”. Educator2 pointed out a “lack of teamwork between staff members”. These comments are indicative of a disconnect amid the team, and brings about concerns amongst the group of educators that a lack of synergy towards the same objectives might be present. The lack of and desire for “unity between teachers where everyone pulls the same rope” (educator3) appeared to be a recurring theme.

The division present amongst staff members was also observed during meeting with the research team, who noted different educational approaches present amongst the team. A number of members of staff appeared to take a more traditional and inflexible approach to dealing with issues related to behaviour. This however has been noted to push students away, creating conflicts and power struggles between educators and learners, only perpetuating the autocratic educational system that the students previously felt disengaged from in mainstream settings. A part of the team was noticed to present an indifferent approach, communicating an overall lack of interest and care, perpetuating society's and at times their family's attitude towards the students. The third segment of the team on the other hand, appeared to adopt an understanding approach, albeit one that nevertheless felt helpless. This approach aids students build connections and develop relationships with educators, however, the latter encounter difficulties with behaviour management and feel helpless in these instances, finding that students at times take advantage of their goodwill to create connections.

KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING

Data gathered in this research indicates that more than half of the educators at the Msida Educational Hub felt they were prepared to work with young people at the Hub when they joined. 42% felt they were well prepared while 17% felt they were very well prepared.

Additionally, amongst the team of educators, a number who were employed on a contract for service to bring trade subjects into the learning programme, were not in possession of a degree in education. Studies, ongoing training and experience were identified as being the main contributors towards being prepared to work with these students. The nature and content of training received by the team of staff at the Msida Hub was however not clarified for the purposes of this research. A personal positive approach was also brought up, together with daily-life lessons and experiences, which were mentioned by two of the members of staff. Training offered by the Hub itself or as part of the educators' continuous professional development were valued as enriching the team's skills, especially in addressing issues of behaviour management. One member of staff mentioned researching for information about behavioural difficulties. Another mentioned attending more elaborate training during their own free time to improve their knowledge and skills-set.

The remaining 42% of educators felt they were moderately or not very prepared to work with the young people at the Hub. Of these, 17% felt they were not really prepared, while 8% felt they were not prepared at all. Indeed, while a number of educators expressed their appreciation of ongoing training in meeting the needs of students, it was also apparent that a number of educators felt that they needed support and training, especially when it came to specific interventions for behaviour management. Educator11 shared that "working with a team of professionals who fully understand and support the students in their individual needs and challenges" could improve the programme offered at the Hub, expressing how they felt not all staff members had the knowledge or skills to address the needs of students with behavioural difficulties. Educator11 also went on to mentioning "the lack of professional staff with knowledge in psychology and how-how and understanding and empathy of the students' mental health and behavioural challenges" as one of the things they found least positive about the Hub. The same educator went on to describing feeling like the quality of the service provided was being undermined and a sense of "frustration when others...sow bad seeds because of their lack of proper knowledge and understanding".

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

One of the members of staff, educator6 described their experience at the Hub as "challenging, intense, supportive, accepting, unpredictable, comical at times". The multitude of emotions, the degrees to which they present themselves and the sometimes-sporadic nature of these feelings brought up by this employee reminds us of the accent on emotional issues that programmes for learners with behavioural difficulties bring with them. Emotions and emotional skills are therefore central to effective teaching and the shaping of teachers' emotional connections with students, which foster learning and positive developments in pupils (Hargreaves, 1998, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Emotional skills underpin what teachers do, and this is even more so in the case of alternative educational programmes such as the Msida Educational Hub.

Data gathered from educators highlighted the difficulty a number of educators were in finding the right approach to handling behavioural difficulties, such as for examples, instances when students used foul language. "We lack strategies for anger management", said educator3. "Students will be given a consequence to their bad action", stated educator7 when asked how things could be improved. Another educator, educator6 commented about the constant fear of aggression, sharing, how anything can cause aggression: "Often you cannot tell what triggers are so you are placing yourself in danger without knowing and you do not know whether student is carrying a weapon as they are unpredictable especially at the

beginning”, shared another educator. Students have access to kitchen utensils as well as tools from workshops – these, together with items of furniture and fixtures were all identified by educators as potential risks of being used to cause harm during cases of aggressive behaviour. Expressing concerns with their own or other students’ safety, some educators proposed the introduction of better surveillance and security systems.

LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATOR EMPOWERMENT

A number of educators lamented a need for validation of their contribution and for “more people at higher level to believe in [them]...treat [them] as educators and not numbers” (educator1). Another educator, educator6 commented, “There needs to be more celebration of our achievements. This increases motivation and the feel-good factor of working in such a demanding environment” indicating a degree of feeling undervalued in their place of work.

Lack of trust and confidence in decisions taken about the running of the programme was also expressed by one of the educators, educator6. This educator described “people with no experience in the field” ... “telling you how best to give a lesson and what material to use when you know it won’t work”, describing how this could lead to students that “will break everything in sight”. Issues related to dissatisfaction with management and feeling unappreciated were echoed by a number of the educators. Since its conception, the Hub has seen SLT changes from the Head of School who was involved in its launch and who ran it for almost four years, followed by an acting Head for a few months and subsequently, another Head of School since then. When asked what could make the programme better, educator2 replied, “Change of SLT” together with “recruit teachers who actually want to work with SEBD students”. Teaching and learning take place in complex settings which are subject to a wide variety of influences (Cooper & Cefai, 2013). With this in mind, Cooper and Cefai (2013) referred to the contribution that management and leadership can make to the effective deployment and co-ordination of human and other resources in this area. Valuing individuals and nurturing relationships between all members of the school’s community extends beyond merely being a learning objective for students, but becoming a *modus operandi* for the school community as a whole. This can be achieved through adequate school policies and complementary leadership approaches.

SUPPORT SERVICES

“Lack of support and very little back up from colleagues. SLT make the situation even harder since they do not practice discipline with students but rather expect miracles from staff members” (educator2).

A number of educators commented on the need for additional support in their provision of services to the students at the Hub. Directly from colleagues and SLT, as well as from psychosocial support systems such as a “psychiatrist and a team of professionals” (educator11), including examples such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) provision, nurse, psychologists, occupational therapists, dyslexia specialists, speech and language services, youth workers, social workers, prefects of discipline, career advisors, etc. highlighting how “the lack of these human resources is detrimental” (educator11). Counselling services were also mentioned in that they could “support [the students] in their issues” (educator6).

“Regular supervision by someone who knows the field/area well” was also mentioned by educator11 as a potential source of support for improvement of the quality of the programme.

Peer mentoring amongst teachers and sharing of good-practices with professionals in the field could be considered as an area for professional development for the members of staff.

In addition to the above support services aimed at bettering the quality of services offered to students, the need for support for educators who may face personal difficulties working with students with behavioural difficulties was also brought up on a number of occasions by different members of the Hub's educational team.



Discussion

DISCUSSION

Inclusion in the classroom is now firmly on the national and international policy agenda and is a challenge facing countries around the world. Such efforts form part of a broad human rights agenda which can be traced back to the Salamanca World Statement on principles, policy and practice in Special Educational Needs (SEN) issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1994). The declaration asserts the fundamental right of every child to education and advocates the development of inclusive mainstream schools which “are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (Clause 5, paragraph 2). The ways in which alternative learning centres construct their learning environments, educational programmes and pedagogical relationships are conducive to encouraging young people to re-engage in their educational trajectory (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The Msida Educational Hub, proved to have shaped a flexible learning community where the participants from its first cohort felt at home and discovered new pathways towards engaging with educational processes. But should a student need to tumble down the mainstream ladder to have access to these conditions? More than one of the participants reflected on whether their experience within mainstream schooling would have been different if they had met teachers like those at the Hub, who they felt connected with. “I think maybe it could be I'd have gotten somewhere, been attentive at school, more interested”, confided Nigel. The relationships formed were pivotal in paving the way for educational connections. Another student reflected on how he may have found mainstream more appealing if it included a vocational subject he was interested in. It is generally agreed that the move towards a more inclusive education system requires substantial reform of mainstream schooling (Wilde & Avramidis, 2010).

One of the student participants as well as a number of educators commented that there needs to be more schools like the Msida Educational Hub:

“More Hubs are needed to cater for students that are being ‘missed’ by the mainstream. They need to be seen and validated, supported if need be so that they can flourish where society failed them. The Hub makes up for it, but we need support” (educator6).

Interestingly, Luke, who felt there should be schools like the Hub, and who expressed he would have gone there since kindergarten if he could have, expressed how he would like his son to go to mainstream schooling “to grow up normal”. Asked why he felt the Hub was ideal for himself and would have attended from an earlier age but then did not feel it was ideal for his son, he explained, “[He] was naughty, that’s why [he] went there” and how he would like his “son not to be naughty, because if we (referring to the students at the Hub) weren’t naughty we wouldn’t have been sent there”.

Other students too suggested they would like to have started attending the Hub from an earlier year (given the current national Lacuna for Form 1 and Form 2 students).

Jonathan shared: “If it were up to me, personally, I think it would help students who need it more, to have it started from Form 1. From Year 6 you can tell if students want school (referring to the mainstream schooling system) or not.

Asked whether looking back, he’d have chosen to go to the Hub, Pierre who had attended mainstream schooling as well as a LSC prior to joining the Hub in his final Form 5, replied: “Yes, since the start”.

The Msida Educational Hub provided opportunities for many young people who had been marginalised from the mainstream schooling sector to re-engage with educational processes in positive ways. Such opportunities are critical to re-engage young people in education and to further their life chances. Nevertheless, are these characteristics limited to structures that are distinct from our schools or can these practices be brought closer to the mainstream classroom? Dyson et al (2002) found that that an 'inclusive' culture produces an overall enhancement in 'participation' and highlight that in schools with an 'inclusive culture' there is:

- Staff consensus around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities;
- Staff collaboration and joint problem solving so that the school's capacity to respond to different student needs is enhanced;
- A community in which all individuals – staff and students – are valued;
- Strong school leaders committed to inclusive values and non-autocratic leadership styles allowing participative decision-making;
- Flexible and integrated school approaches;
- Student collaboration and engagement in collaborative learning.

Raywid (1990) identified important and ongoing tensions and debates about alternative educational programmes. Many focused on some key questions around enrolment and purpose:

- Whether alternative education is only for those who do not fit into the mainstream;
- Whether the difficulties for those students is the result of something about them, or something about the schooling system; and
- Whether the goal of alternative education is to 'fix' the student in order that they can re-enter mainstream education, or to offer a different pathway to educational outcomes.

The answers to these questions are at the core of any attempt to make sense or evaluate the components of an alternative educational programme. Quinn et al. (2006, p. 11) argue strongly that, "When a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not solely with the child but instead lies mainly with the system and the adults responsible for it". Te Riele (2007) also makes the point that rather than targeting so-called 'at risk' youth – schools need to change from a focus on uniformity to a focus on diversity.

What students with behavioural difficulties have to say about their learning and behaviour at school helps to provide a more adequate and useful construction of the situation, contributing to a better understanding and resolution of difficulties (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). Pizzuto (2010) asserts that the fact that students come to school with a different 'baggage' is one of the realities that the educational system needs to cater for.

The findings of this research evidence that while students the first cohort of students struggled in what felt to them like an alienating mainstream experience, most still appreciated that structure and discipline were required. What many of them objected to was that it felt suffocating and forced them to fit into a mould that did not listen to what they had to say or were experiencing. Being supported as individuals by the educators, developing a nurturing relationship with their learning community, being valued as rightful contributors

to the process and working towards realistic goals in an individual way were considered to be central to the participants in the development of their wellbeing and success at the Msida Educational Hub. Relationships with educators, in particular, resonated throughout the students as being highly valued. Wellbeing for learners in alternative learning programmes is greatly associated with staff support and respect (MacDonald et al., 2019). This practical support, was also accompanied by school structures, curricula and pedagogy that made the Hub attractive to its students and kept these learner not only in school, but also engaged and willing to learn.

The programme offered within the Hub acknowledged, for example, that most of the students came from complicated socioeconomic backgrounds and non-judgementally, offered support and flexibility that allowed the students to give priority to their emotional wellbeing first and foremost. Sitting together for breakfast, having an assigned mentor watching over you, discussing and reflecting over incidents of behavioural difficulties, provided the students with a familiar, safe context within which to be able to reconnect with their learning journey. The programme's flexibility is also noted in its approach towards students that were addicted to nicotine and required time to smoke; in its validating the students as contributors in the carving of their educational pathway, having them involved in decision-making; as well the less autocratic approach of being able to call educators by their first names, helped to create an environment where students felt like equal partners in the educator-learner relationship.

The learning programme offered at the Hub provided a core academic ladder for its students, but also focused on supporting them towards developing work-related skills. Vocational classes, work placements and even aiding in job searches, assisting students in obtaining work, facilitated student engagement in meaningful learning. Through empowering the students to explore areas of work that they chose and felt interested, the Hub's first cohort of students was provided with ad-hoc work placements based on those interests, providing flexible learning pathways towards adulthood and enabling students to feel validated and empowered with greater control over their own learning.

Thus, through engaging curricula that are relevant to the students and through the nurturing of positive emotional connections, the team at the Hub appears to have opened up opportunities for their students to engage once again with learning. Data gathered from students for this research consistently commended the pedagogical relationships developed and their value in reigniting an interest in school and reconnecting the students to learning. The students, most of whom have been gainfully employed since their period at the Hub except for one who is furthering his studies with an agency for youths, confidently shared with us the ways in which the approach that they found at the Hub enabled them to re-connect with learning in positive ways, and to develop skills that would last them for life.

Jonathan claimed: "As a curriculum, it wasn't like mainstream, but it was the things I need most in life".

The findings of this research, in line with the international literature, suggest that giving students with behavioural difficulties the opportunity to be listened to and to contribute meaningfully, supports the development of improved educator-learner relationships, enhancing student interest and participation in school activities, especially those they find to be relatable and meaningful, and consequently contribute to more positive academic and social behaviours. Nonetheless, as can be seen from data from educators about the current cohort of students, the prevalence of behavioural issues still remains present and teacher training to equip the

team with relevant skills, as well as ongoing support remain an essential component of the programme's backbone. At the heart of what happens in the classroom is the teacher and the skills-set s/he brings along can make all the difference in establishing classroom dynamics. In alternative learning programmes especially, the employment of members of staff who bring along a positive approach and can nurture relationships between educators and learners through investment in emotional capital, underpins the effectiveness of such programmes. Through appropriate recruitment and training policies and complementary leadership styles, teachers need to be able to adapt programmes and tasks to the individual needs and learning patterns of learners. But even more importantly, while it is not the role of teachers in alternative learning programmes to replace or substitute primary relationships in the learners' lives, the care and support they give can enhance young people's capacity to sustain engagement in schooling (Mills et al, 2016) and is therefore fundamental to the programme's success.

Thus, whilst educators entrusted with alternative learning programmes need to seek to make curricula relevant and connected to their students' reality, they also need to be equipped with the aptitude and skills-set to develop positive emotional connections between themselves and their students. Valuing individuals and nurturing relationships extends further than being a service to the students, becoming the culture of the school community as a whole. Employee selection for alternative educational programmes should therefore be driven by these critical job requirements, as should training and development opportunities offered to them.

From data collected for this research, it appears that a larger part of the students who formed the first cohort at the Msida Educational Hub did not make use of the services of a NG in primary school or a LSZ in more recent years. This factor might indicate an inconsistency in referral processes or other potentially contributing issues such as the lack of early detection and intervention or deficiencies in service provision across colleges, etc.

Wilde & Avramidis (2010) found that inclusion is frequently thought of as something that has to be done in addition to or differently from the norm in order to increase the participation of students who struggle with conventional educational practices in mainstream schooling. This as opposed to viewing inclusion in terms of a whole class or whole school approach. Pizzuto (2010, p. 88) suggests the possibility that "schools need to review their rationale and how to measure success. Broadening the way in which success is interpreted and avoiding the measuring of success solely with examination scores is one way to start. Effective schools are not standardized, driven by regulations but educators in these schools take action because it will help their students to learn". McGregor and Mills (2010) also suggest that many of these practices have a place in mainstream schools where they could be beneficial to all students. It is more effective, for mainstream schools to promote positive experiences from the start and prevent negative experiences from taking place (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). Alternative pathways to educational success can be presented to learners at every step of the way, embedded within their educational career, rather than separate and distinct from it, or exiled from it. Learning environments such as the one at the Msida Educational Hub provide the opportunity to challenge deeply embedded frames of reference concerning educational attainment and thereby have the potential to transform learning.

During the time of writing of this report, Malta, like the rest of the world, faced the Coronavirus pandemic and the social restrictions that came along with it. The Msida Educational Hub offered its students educational material through an online portal. However, during the period



of school closure, the Ministry for Education and Employment made the decision of closing down the Hub as per media reports. (Malta Union of Teachers, 2020).

Limitations of the Research

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Recruitment of ex-student participants for the purposes of this study was dependent on a staff members' access to these students through personal social-media platforms. These contacts that were retained even after their period at the Hub was completed, may be indicative of the quality of the relationships between this educator and these students. If this were the case, it could mean that the students who were contacted for the purposes of this study may have shared differing opinions about their experience at the Hub.

Due to changes that occurred closer to the end this study, only feedback from ex-students and the current team of staff was collected. Data from the current cohort of students could not be collected. While the cohort of students changed, so did the SLT at the Hub. The students interviewed attended the Hub during a previous administration. With the latter, the leadership style of the programme may have changed. This could mean that the data collected here is true to the original team of students but not necessarily applicable to the current situation at the Hub. While their experiences stand, they may not be representative of those of the students who were attending the Hub at the time of writing of this report. Educator2 had this to say in this respect:

"The ethos [of the Hub] has changed drastically since the vision of the current head of school has nothing to do with that of the previous head of school who, in turn, was the heart and mind behind this project".

The use of google forms for the collection of data from educators meant that any one participant could actually submit more than one answer. The alternative would have required that participants have a google account, which would have potentially limited the number of eligible participants as well as their perception of actual level of anonymity related to the research.

During the period when data from teachers was being collected, the Ministry for Education and Employment took the decision of closing down the Msida Educational Hub. This may have caused conflict and generated tensions for the staff cohort. Data collected from educators may reflect this. Educator2 commented:

"(The Hub is) a specialised programme which has been undermined due to the perceptions of people from the outside. It has been treated as a dump yard and has never gotten the right attention. This killed the vision and motivation which once were the biggest assets of the Hub".

"The programme will probably close down soon so there is not much relevance in this research".

All of the data collection for this research was carried out during the coronavirus pandemic and may have/not been influenced by it.

The background is a solid teal color with a subtle pattern of small, light-teal squares arranged in a grid that tapers towards the right. A thin, horizontal teal line runs across the page, positioned just above the word 'Recommendations'.

Recommendations



RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 4: Outline of Recommendations

Policy Development

- Challenging Inclusive Education as it is currently practiced
- Creating New Norms
- Network of Learning Communities
- Integrative Alternative Services
- Inclusion for All
- Effective Educator Qualifications, Training and Development of Emotional Literacy
- Educator Skills-Set
- Strategically Targeted Educator Professional Development

Design and Operational Practices for provision of Alternative Services

- Alternative Educational Pathways
- Process of Referral
- Reintegration
- Continuation of Services
- Transfer of Support
- Quality Reviews

Professional Support Services

- Service Support Network
- Educator Support
- Counselling and psychotherapy services

Services to Students expressing behavioural difficulties

- Acknowledging the voices of learners
- Realistic and Practical Curriculum
- Connections with Society
- Tailoring Learning
- Parental Involvement

Further Research

- Listening to learners' voices
- Observing Good-Practices (e.g. in Reintegration)
- The value of different Pedagogies
- Effects of current lacuna in local services
- Professional Support Services

Based on themes identified along the course of this research and from data gathered, further research and development in these areas can support continued success and improvement in such flexible learning programmes, in order to ensure that students gain the maximum possible benefit from their education.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- Challenging Inclusive Education as it is currently practiced – Vulnerable students depend on the effective development of the policy for inclusive education for their educational success. Continuous commitment to supporting the rights of all students, including those with behavioural difficulties, to an educational experience which makes available the best opportunities for enhancing their social, emotional and cognitive development, is therefore fundamental.
- Creating New Norms – Perceptions of students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties even within the realm of mainstream schooling, evidence the need for positive change in educational practice, with particular emphasis upon the need for enacting educational inclusion. The deconstruction of social perceptions is not an easy feat however knowledge, resources and support can address educator feelings of inadequacy and with that, reduce the incidence of marginalisation for learners with behavioural difficulties.
- Network of Learning Communities – Alternative and mainstream schools sharing resources in a spirit of mutual support can create a collaborative effort towards the inclusion of all students in education. Alternative educational programmes may play an expert source of practices and resources for mainstream schools while these, in turn may have a supporting role to play in partnership with alternative programmes. Enhancing collaboration among schools can provide shared best-practices and transfer of knowledge along a continuum of synchronised support ensuring the best service to all learners. Additionally, developing a relationship of exchange of knowledge and practices amongst the different educational providers may limit exclusion of students from either and ease transitions for student reintegration from alternative towards mainstream schooling. Advocacy of network learning communities, including coordination of support services and co-operative multi-agency services will be futile if policy fails to address these systemic issues.
- Integrative Alternative Services – Alternative educational provision offered along a students' educational pathway in the form of educator/mentor relationships or LSZs within schools, should be tailored-to-need, expertly staffed and not merely a form of containment and diversion for learners exhibiting behavioural difficulties fitting into the standard classroom. The incorporation of alternative educational choices for students in the non-alternative, mainstream routes can create diverse educational pathways promoting inclusion for all.
- Inclusion for all – Policies in several countries, including Malta, are generally supportive of inclusion, however the evidence of the effectiveness of inclusive education is, at best, marginal. Inclusive education is a multifaceted practice, built upon foundations grounded in a belief that learners, especially those with difficulties, require appropriate education, which optimizes their life chances as individuals to become full members of society. Continuous commitment towards addressing the needs of even those who are more vulnerable amongst learners and providing safe classrooms for all to enjoy should be at the heart of policies drafted and practices implemented.
- Effective Educator Qualifications, Training and Development of Emotional Literacy – The importance of emotional literacy throughout educational programmes has been highlighted throughout a dearth of research, including this one. Investing in regular

training for emotionally literate teachers and the creation of emotionally fluent classrooms can help staff and students develop coping skills and provide a platform for further emotional development if issues arise, or to reduce their incidence.

- Educator Skills-Set – Enthusiasm and commitment of staff are an ingredient, necessary, but alas also insufficient, without the breadth and depth of expertise. Ensuring the effectiveness in provision depends pivotally on ensuring educators are qualified and prepared for the task. As a fundamental interface for students in schools, this includes not only teachers, but also LSEs, technicians or any other members of staff involved in the education of these learners. Educators' skills-set is then further enhanced through ongoing training and support (in alternative as well as mainstream schooling) on how to develop classroom climates that are engaging and appealing to all learners.
- Strategically Targeted Educator Professional Development – Alternative classroom (as well as mainstream) educators' ill-preparedness may often contribute to the presence of behavioural difficulties, which in turn add to the educators' difficulties. Continuous professional development through the provision of targeted training and learning opportunities for educators, including LSEs, SLT, administrative staff and anyone involved in the learning journeys of students (e.g. mentoring, emotional literacy, instructional strategies based on cognitive behavioural principles, resilience, etc.) can better prepare for the complexity of learning and behavioural needs that can surface.

DESIGN AND OPERATIONAL PRACTICES FOR PROVISION OF ALTERNATIVE SERVICES

- Alternative Educational Pathways – The provision of alternative educational services available for students along the primary and secondary years needs to be common knowledge in schools so that students who require these services can be given access to them and for early detection of any particular needs.
- Process of Referral – Referral to alternative learning programmes should be on the basis of a comprehensive assessment of the learner's needs and aspirations, with input from the students himself and his/her caregivers. Clarification of referral process and distinctions (if any) between the opportunities at the programme can be made.
- Reintegration – Monitoring quality and impact of the programmes offered through evaluation of successful reintegration practices and possibly the tracking the learners after they leave the programmes. Although this data may not necessarily evidence the extent to which positive student outcomes happened as a result of alternative learning programme (and would not have occurred in its absence), it does give an indication of whether or not a programme is contributing to the achievement of successful mainstream school-year or post-16 transitions. Also, as in this case, listening to the voices of those who have experienced the educational slalom can shed light on best-practices and the continuous development of the services provided.
- Continuation of Services – Provision of alternative educational services for students in Form 1 and Form 2, for whom there are currently no LSCs or similar services.
- Transfer of Support – Continuity of care and insight, from the critical reception stage throughout a learner's educational pathway, can help a student, and teaching staff, to create a relevant curriculum and pedagogy. Primary-secondary liaison can aid in buffering tensions that may arise, particularly in secondary schools where the structures – of the school day, of the curriculum, of a multiplicity of teachers – may impact against the emotional support and climate for learning that some young learners need.

- Quality Reviews – Quality education providers, alternative ones and not, have evaluation and planning cycles and regularly review and reflect on how they can improve their practice (Thompson & Pennacchia, 2015). Ensuring that the Msida Educational Hub as well as other alternative educational programmes meet the minimum educational standard required (e.g. the use of Individual Educational Plans for students and attendance) through regular reviews for quality assurance.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

- Service Support Network – Improvement in professional and psychosocial support services offered to alternative educational programmes (and potentially even in mainstream set-ups).
- Educator Support – Improved support services for educators who may be facing difficulties handling the emotional demands or other issues related to working with students with behavioural difficulties.
- Counselling and psychotherapy services – Provision of spaces for individual and group support to educators working in alternative educational settings.

SERVICES TO STUDENTS EXPRESSING BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES

- Acknowledging the voices of learners – Listening to the voices of students, in this case, those with behavioural difficulties or who for one reason or another, feel the need for an alternative educational route and getting to know them at a more personal level can shed light into their perspectives and experiences of the educational journey. Education is dynamic and continuously developing if it wants to address the diverse student populations it is faced with. With listening to its students' voices at its heart, schools can build around their learners and develop towards becoming more inclusive communities. This means not only listening to their experiences and views from a therapeutic angle, but also involving them in discussions and decision-making regarding their education. In its many facets, from direct acknowledgement and listening as well through research such as this, giving value to students' voices is paramount.
- Realistic and practical curriculum – The inclusion of practical aspects to education resounded amongst the students and educators throughout this research and is present in research in general. Offering learners engaging pedagogies and learning opportunities that include hands-on experience that can feel realistic to them, such as through work placements and/or involvement in project work should be part of the backbone of their educational experience.
- Connections with Society – Expertise may not always exist within a school but this can be less problematic when there are strong connections outside the school with agencies, organisations and institutions that can provide platforms for placements and/or educational exchanges for the students.
- Tailoring Learning – Through the development of an individual educational plan, involving not only professionals in the respective related fields, but also the students themselves, educational programmes can better identify the realistic aspirations and goals that curricula should address. This would allow students to contribute, take ownership of their learning journey as well as make it possible for educators to design educational programmes that can be appealing, challenging, valuable and attainable for students.

- Parental Involvement – Partnership with parents is a key ingredient in supporting students' learning and the ability to cope with social and emotional passage between school and home. Involving parents in discussions regarding their children's educational career as well as offering counsel to parents on how to support learning and manage behaviour in the home environment can yield more opportunities for development for the learners as well as the families as a whole.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The role of research in guiding practitioners and policy-makers away from deep-rooted conceptualisations about this highly varied population of learners and learners in general is indisputable. This research project focused one of the alternative educational programmes offered in the local scene and the findings and recommendations need to be considered in the light of this limitation. Clearly, more research in exploring the views and experiences of students, especially those who are easily marginalised and risk isolation, should continue to serve as a beacon towards creating and developing more ways forward. Ongoing discussions between the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta and the Ministry for Education and Employment can make this commitment a factual step forward. Some of the areas where further research can provide valuable insight include:

Listening to learners' voices, not only those in alternative schooling but potentially even others who were identified as having SEBD but who nonetheless completed their educational years within mainstream schooling, looking into what they feel worked for them;

Observing good-practices in areas such as reintegration from alternative to mainstream schooling;

Studying the value of different pedagogies towards improving student engagement and retention for vulnerable learners;

Investigating the effect of the current lacuna for Form 1 and Form 2 students in the local scenario when it comes to alternative educational options;

Looking into the nature and quality of professional support services offered to alternative provision, both directly to students and potentially their families, as well as to educators.

Conclusion

Alternative provision, whether it be offered within school or at an alternative site, should not be viewed as merely a place to send students who are disruptive so that teachers can get on with teaching. A systematic and structured alternative learning programme designed to meet individual learning needs through a flexible approach can make or break the academic attainment of a learner. Proper design, staffing and support of these alternative services is imperative towards successfully improving inclusion for all. Nevertheless, flexibility in learning approaches, adaptation of curricula to address realistic students goals and the creation of caring educational community, amongst others, are attributes that play a role solely within alternative learning sites for those who failed elsewhere, as a plan B. Alternative provision, if at all, should be a pit-stop along a learner's journey of being given their right to be included in a fruitful educational experience together with their peers. Cooper et al (1994) remind us that behaving in problematic ways is sometimes a legitimate response to intolerable circumstances. The ability for schools to provide suitable education for all learners, even if their emotional and behavioural needs are complex or harder to work with should fall within the remit of our inclusion for all agenda.

Inclusion should not rely on individual schools struggling to contain children with diverse needs but should be conceived as a collaborative effort, one that can only work in a culture of collaboration in which there is sharing of resources and expertise and where learning is about addressing students rather than fitting students into a system. Offering a quality educational programme that is flexible, realistic and human can lead to improved inclusion in our classrooms and in the life of a learner, can mean a world of a difference "from black to white".

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 – DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR FOCUS GROUP WITH CURRENT STUDENTS

Interview schedule for Focus Group:

- Overall experience at the Msida Educational Hub
- Most positive element of the Hub
- Least positive aspect of the Hub
- Your experience at the Hub compare to that in mainstream
- The impact of the Hub on your educational experience
- Is Hub helping you overall in life?
- Other alternate schooling facilities e.g. Learning Support Centre, Learning Support Zone, Nurture Group, etc.? If so, did these help at school and in managing your behaviour?
- How would you compare these to the Hub?
- Would you choose to attend the Msida Educational Hub or prefer mainstream?

Intervisti għall-Focus Group ma' studenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub:

- L-esperjenza tiegħek fil-Imsida Educational Hub
- L-aktar ħaġa pożittiva fil-Hub
- L-inqas aspekt pożittiv fil-Hub
- Il-Hub ikkumparat mal-mainstream
- Il-Hub qiegħed jgħinek f'l-aspett edukattiv
- Il-Hub jgħinek fil-ħajja ta' kuljum
- Programmi oħra ta' edukazzjoni alternattiva, bħal l-Learning Support Centre, Learning Support Zone jew Nurture Group, jew oħrajn? U jekk, iva, għenuk l-iskola u f'kif timmaniġġja l-imġieba?
- Kif tqabbel dawn l-esperjenzi ma' dik fil-Hub?
- Tagħzel illi tattendi l-Hub tal-Imsida jew tippreferi tkun f'mainstream?

APPENDIX 2 – DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS (EDUCATORS)

Interview schedule for professionals

1. How would you define the Hub?
2. What is the ethos of the Hub?
3. Can you describe your clientele?
4. What type of programmes are offered today within the Hub?
5. What are the targets of the Hub – what does the Hub aim to achieve after students attend for 3 consecutive years?
6. Do you feel the Hub is different to a Learning Support Centre? If yes/no, how so?
7. Do you find that the students attending the Msida Educational Hub benefit from attending this alternative educational programme when compared to mainstream? How so?
8. What do you consider to be the most positive element of the programme offered at the Hub?
9. What do you consider to be the least positive element of the programme offered at the Hub?
10. What potential changes would you feel could be made to the programme at the Hub to improve it?
11. What are the main challenges (if any) you face as a professional?
12. How long have you worked here?
13. Did you feel prepared to work with the young people at the Hub when you joined?
14. What improved your skills/knowledge to work with these students along the years?
15. What do you feel would help you improve your performance at the Hub?
16. The first cohort hailed from one College, however you are now catering for students coming from different colleges. What are



Intervisti mal-professjonisti

1. Kif tiddefinixxi l-Imsida Educational Hub?
2. X'inhu l-ethos tal-Hub?
3. Min huma l-klienti tal-Hub? Għal min jikkejterja?
4. X'tip ta' programm/i huma offruti fil-Hub?
5. X'inhuma l-għanjiet tal-Hub – lejn xiex jimmira li jilhaq il-Hub għall-istudenti wara 3 snin konsekuttivi?
6. Taħseb illi l-Hub huwa differenti minn Learning Support Centre? Jekk iva/le, kif?
7. Taħseb li huwa ta' benefiċċju għall-istudenti li jattendu l-Hub illi jattendu dan il-programm alternattiv minflok jattendu skola mainstream? Jekk jogħġbok spjega r-risposta tiegħek.
8. X'taħseb illi huwa l-aktar element pożittiv fil-programm edukattiv offrut mill-Hub?
9. X'taħseb illi huwa l-inqas element pożittiv fil-programm edukattiv offrut mill-Hub?
10. X'tidiliet tħoss li jistgħu isiru fil-programm offrut mill-Hub sabiex dan jitjieb?
11. Liema huma l-akbar sfidi (jekk issib) għalik bħala professjonist fil-Hub?
12. Kemm ilek taħdem hawn?
13. Meta bdejt taħdem hawn, ħassejt illi kont ippreparat biex taħdem maż-żagħżagħ tal-Hub?
14. Tul is-snin, x'kienu l-affarijiet illi tejbu l-ħiliet u l-għarfien tiegħek biex tkun tista' taħdem ma' dawn l-istudenti?
15. X'taħseb illi jista' jtejjeb is-servizz li inti toffri bħala professjonist fil-Hub?
16. L-ewwel cohort ta' studenti li attendew il-Hub kienu kollha minn Kullegġ wieħed, iżda issa qegħdin tilqgħu studenti minn kullegġi differenti. X'taħseb dwar dan?
17. Aktar kummenti

APPENDIX 3 – DATA COLLECTION TOOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH EX-STUDENTS

Interview schedule for ex-students:

1. How would you describe your experience at the Msida Educational Hub?
2. What do you consider to be the most positive element of your experience at the Hub?
3. What do you consider to be the least positive element of your experience at the Hub?
4. What did you expect from your experience in school, both in mainstream as well as at the Hub?
5. How would you compare your educational experience at the Hub with that in mainstream schooling?
6. Did you attend regularly at the Hub? In mainstream?
7. Do you feel your experience at the Hub improved your educational experience?
8. Did your experience at the Hub help you in any way on life?
9. Did you previously attend any other alternate schooling facilities e.g. Learning Support Centre, Learning Support Zone, Nurture Group, etc.? If so, did you feel these helped you throughout your educational years, particularly, in managing your behaviour?
10. How would you compare these to the Hub?
11. Since you left the Hub, have you engaged in work? Studies? Other?
12. If you were in a position to choose would you opt to attend the Msida Educational Hub? Please explain your answer.



Intervisti ma' ex-studenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub:

1. Kieku jkollok tiddekriviha, xi tgħid dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek fl-Imsida Educational Hub?
2. Xi tħoss li kienet l-aktar ħaġa pożittiva dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek fil-Hub?
3. U liema tħoss kienet l-inqas aspekt pożittiv dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek fil-Hub?
4. X'kont tistenna mill-esperjenza tiegħek tul is-snin fl-iskola, mainstream jew fil-Hub?
5. What do you expect from your experience in school?
6. Kif tqabbel l-esperjenza edukattiva tiegħek fis-snin li għaddejt il-Hub ma' dawk meta kont fi skola mainstream?
7. Kont tattendi l-Hub b'mod regolari? U meta kont fl-iskola f'mainstream?
8. Taħseb illi l-esperjenza tiegħek fil-Hub għenitek f'l-aspett edukattiv?
9. L-esperjenza tiegħek fil-Hub għenitek b'xi mod fil-ħajja ta' kuljum?
10. Qabel ma attendejt il-Hub, kont tattendi xi programmi oħra ta' edukazzjoni alternattiva, bħal per eżempju l-Learning Support Centre, Learning Support Zone jew Nurture Group, jew oħrajn? U jekk, iva, tħoss li dawn għenuk tul is-snin edukattivi, b'mod partikolari, f'kif timmaniġġja l-imġieba?
11. Kif tqabbel dawn l-esperjenzi ma' dik fil-Hub?
12. Minn meta tlaqt mill-Hub, dħalt taħdem? Kompletjt tistudja? Jew xi ħaġa oħra?
13. Kieku stajt tagħżel, kont tagħżel illi tattendi l-Hub tal-Imsida? Jekk jogħġbok spjega r-risposta tiegħek.

APPENDIX 4 – INFORMATION AND ASSENT FORMS FOR PARENTS



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INFORMATION LETTER FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS
Msida Educational Hub Focus Group and Observation Sessions

Research Team: Dr. Janice Formosa-Pace, Academic Research Supervisor
Ms Olga Formosa and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan,
Research Support Officers

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Ms Samantha Pace Gasan	samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt	23403720

On behalf of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing - Università' ta' Malta, we would like to carry out a focus group and observation sessions at the Msida Educational Hub and would like your consent in order for this to be held. Please to read this information carefully and if you are happy that your child takes part, fill in the consent form attached.

Focus Group: 4-5 participants will be asked to discuss their experience at the Msida Educational Hub. The focus group will be audio-recorded for later transcription and data analysis.

Observation Sessions: The researcher will observe activities at the Hub. The researcher will take a passive role in the classroom setup, interfering the least possible with activities being carried out, in order to understand the daily activities that are held at the Hub.

Both activities will take place at the Msida Educational Hub itself during school hours. Brief notes may be taken during both activities. These will only be accessed by the research team and will be kept securely, as per General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). All data will be destroyed by the end of February 2021 and will be stored at the Principal Researcher's office at the University of Malta until then. Any information used for publication of results will be anonymised at transcription stage and your child will not be identified (all names will be changed). If, throughout the research, your son chooses to stop his participation, he may do so for whatever reason until 31st May 2020.

What we find out in this study will be forwarded to the Ministry of Education within the Government of Malta and may also be published in academic journals or at conferences. Throughout the publication of findings, the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be published. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want your child to take part in this study.

If you have any questions, or want to speak about this study please contact us as Research Team on our contact details above.

Thanking you in advance.

Sincerely,

Dr Janice Formosa Pace PhD

Ms Olga Formosa and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan

Research Support Officers, Faculty for Social Wellbeing



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Assent Form – Msida Educational Hub Focus Group and Observation Sessions
Parents / Legal Guardians of children aged between 5 and 17 years

By signing this assent form I confirm that:

- I have read and understood the information letter and had a chance to ask any questions.
- I understand that my child's participation in the focus group and observation sessions is voluntary and participation can be withdrawn until 31st May 2020 without any consequence.
- I have been informed that the focus group will be audio recorded and brief notes may be taken by researchers. Data gathered will be anonymised upon transcription.
- I am aware that any data will be destroyed by the end of February 2021 and that until then, any material will be stored at the Principal Researcher's Offices at the University of Malta.
- I have been informed that all data will be treated securely (as per GDPR) and I have the right to access, rectify and if applicable erase any data pertaining to myself or my child.
- I have been informed that any details which would allow people to recognise my child will be taken out or changed and that anonymised quotes can be used in publications.
- I have been told that the information will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the 'Msida Educational Hub Research Project' and may also be published in academic articles or used in conferences.
- I understand that while no emotional or psychological harm is foreseen through my child's participation, a list of services that can offer support is being provided (see list of services attached).
- I understand that while the researchers will keep whatever is said confidential unless there is a risk of harm for my child or others, the researchers cannot guarantee that other participants will keep confidentiality although they will be asked to do so.
- I understand that the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be included in the publication of research findings.

This is to confirm that I have read and understood the information provided, and consent to my son's participation in the above mentioned focus group.

Student Name
Parent/Guardian Name/s
Parent/Guardian I.D. No./s
Parent/Guardian Signature/s
Date

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ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI GĦALL-ĠENITURI/KUSTODJI

Proġett Msida Educational Hub

Diskussjoni fi Grupp (Focus Group) u Sessjonijiet ta' Osservazzjoni

Riċerkaturi: Dr. Janice Formosa-Pace, Academic Research Supervisor
Ms Olga Formosa and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan, Support Officers

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Ms Samantha Pace Gasan	samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt	23403720

F'isem il-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ għas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, nixtiequ nagħmlu diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group) u sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni fl-Imsida Education Hub. Għalhekk, xtaqna l-kunsens tiegħek biex dawn isiru. Jekk jogħġbok, aqra din l-informazzjoni u jekk taqbel li t-tifel tiegħek jipparteċipa f'dawn, imla l-formola ta' kunsens mehmuża.

Diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group): 4-5 studenti ser jiġu mistiedna biex jiddiskutu l-esperjenza tagħhom għewwa l-Imsida Educational Hub. Id-diskussjoni se tkun irrekordjat(a) u mbagħad traskritt(a) mir-riċerkatriċi għal skopijiet ta' analiżi.

Sessjonijiet ta' Osservazzjoni: Ir-riċerkatriċi ser tosserva attivitajiet li jsiru l-Hub. Ir-riċerkatriċi ser tieħu rwol passiv fil-klassi, fejn ser tinterferixxi mill-inqas f'dak li jkun għaddej biex nieħdu stampa ċara ta' l-attivitajiet li jsiru għewwa l-Hub.

Iż-żewġ attivitajiet ser isiru fil-Hub stess waqt ħin l-iskola. Ir-riċerkatriċi ser tieħu xi noti waqt l-attivitajiet. L-informazzjoni kollha tiġi aċċessata biss mir-riċerkaturi u tiġi miżmuma skont il-liġi (General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR]). Ser jiħassru u jitqatta' kwalunkwe materjal traskritt wara l-konklużjoni tar-riċerka sa mhux aktar tard mill-aħħar ta' Frar 2021 u sa dakinhar kwalunkwe materjal jinżamm fl-uffiċju tar-Riċerkatriċi Prinċiparli (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta. Jekk tintuża xi informazzjoni, l-ismijiet kollha jinbidlu u d-data tkun kollha anonimizzati waqt it-transkrizzjoni, biex it-tfal ma jingħarfux. Jekk, waqt ir-riċerka, it-tifel tiegħek ikun jixtieq jieqaf, jista' jagħmel għal kwalunkwe raġuni, sal-31 ta' Mejju 2020.

Ir-riżultati tar-riċerka se ngħadduhom lil Ministeru tal-Edukazzjoni fil-Gvern ta' Malta u jista' wkoll jinkitbu f'ġurnali akkademici jew ipprezentat f'konferenzi. L-isem tal-Imsida Educational Hub ser jkun imsemmi fil-pubblikazzjoni tar-riżultati. Huwa b'mod b'volontarju illi inti tista' tagħzel jekk it-tifel tiegħek jipparteċipax f'dan l-istudju.

Għal aktar informazzjoni, tista' tikkuntattjana permezz ta' ittra elettronika jew b'telefonata.

Grazzi mill-quddiem,

Dr Janice Formosa Pace, PhD

Ms Olga Formosa and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan

Research Support Officers, Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ għas-Socjetà

Formola ta' Kunsens – Msida Educational Hub Diskussjoni fi Grupp (Focus Group) u Sessjonijiet ta' Osservazzjoni
Ġenituri/Kustodji ta' tfal ta' bejn 5 u 17 il-sena

L-iffirmar ta' din il-formola huwa ftehim li:

- Jiena irćevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni u kelli ċ-ċans nagħmel xi mistoqsijiet li seta' kelli dwar din ir-riċerka.
- Jien nifhem illi l-partecipazzjoni tat-tifel tiegħi fid-diskussjoni fi grupp u fis-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni hija volontarja u li hu jista' jwaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni tiegħu sal-31 ta' Mejju 2020 mingħajr ebda konsegwenza.
- Jiena konxju li d-diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group) tkun awdjo irregistrata għal analiżi bil-miktub għall-iskop ta' din ir-riċerka.
- Jien konxju/a illi l-informazzjoni kollha tiġi ttrattata b'mod sigur kif skont il-liġi (GDPR) u li għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika u fejn applikabbli nħassar data dwari nnifsi
- Nifhem li materjal irrekordjat jew traskritt ser jitħassar u jitqatta' sa Frar 2021 u li sa dakinhar ser jinżamm fl-uffiċju tar-Riċeratrici Principali (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta.
- Nifhem illi d-dettalji li bihom jista' jingħaraf it-tifel tiegħi ser jiġu mneħħija jew mibdula u li ser tiġi użata biss informazzjoni anonimizzata. Id-data tiġi anonimizzata waqt it-transkrizzjoni.
- Jiena nifhem illi l-informazzjoni miġbura ser tiġi użata biss għall-għanijiet ta' tar-riċerka 'Msida Educational Hub Research Project' (Proġett ta' Riċerka dwar l-Imsida Educational Hub) u li jistgħu jkunu ppublikati f'gurnali akkademiċi jew konferenzi.
- Jiena nifhem illi filwaqt illi mhux mistenni li l-partecipazzjoni tiegħu ser tqanqal dan, jekk f'xi punt matul il-proċess tar-riċerka, it-tifel iħoss xi emozzjonijiet jew ħsibijiet negattivi, qed tiġi pprovduta lista ta' servizzi disponibbli li jistgħu joffru appoġġ (lista ta' servizzi annessa).
- Jiena nifhem illi filwaqt li r-riċerkaturi ser iżommu dak li jintqal bħala kunfidenzjali, sa kemm ma hemmx riskju għat-tifel tiegħi jew oħrajn, ir-riċerkaturi ma jistgħux jiggarantixxu li partecipanti oħrajn ser iżommu l-kunfidenzjalità, allavolja ser jiġu mfakkra jagħmlu dan.
- Nifhem illi l-isem l-Imsida Educational Hub ser jiġi ippubblika mar-riżultati tar-riċerka.

Jiena qrajt u fhimt l-informazzjoni pprovduta, u nagħti kunsens biex it-tifel tiegħi jipparteċipa f'din id-diskussjoni fi grupp u s-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni.

Isem l-istudent

Isem tal-ġenitur/i / kustodji

I.D. tal-ġenitur/i / kustodji

Firma tal-ġenitur/i / kustodji

Data

Riċerkaturi:

Dr Janice Formosa Pace janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt

23403720

Ms Olga Formosa olga.formosa@um.edu.mt

23403720

Ms Samantha PaceGasani samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt

23403720

Firma tar-riċerkatur/i

Data

APPENDIX 5 – INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR CURRENT STUDENTS



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ta' Malta**

**Faculty for
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INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS – Focus Group with current students

Title of research project: Msida Educational Hub Project

Research aims and description: The aims of this research are to address a multifaceted study investigating effectiveness of the alternative education programme for secondary-school youths, offered at the Msida Educational Hub. This research project involves a focus group with students who are currently attending the Msida Educational Hub.

You are kindly being asked to participate in a focus group.

Research procedures: After reading the Information Sheet and listening to an explanation about the research, if you do agree to participate in a focus group, you will be asked to sign a consent form detailing your rights, and to fill in a form concerning your characteristics [name and surname, signature and date]. The focus group will then commence and is expected to take about 45 minutes.

During the focus group, you will be asked questions concerning your educational experience at the Msida Educational Hub. The group will consist of 4-5 students who currently attend the Msida Educational Hub. The focus group will take place at the Hub itself and will be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription (anonymised) and data analysis. These will only be accessed by the research team and will be kept securely, in strict accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). The name of the Msida Educational Hub will be included in the publication of findings.

Further information about your rights can be found in the consent form associated with this Information Sheet.

Researcher's contact details:

Academic:

Dr. Janice Formosa-Pace janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt 23403720

Research Support Officers:

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CONSENT FORM – Focus Group with current students

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Contact no: 23403720

Name: Ms Olga Formosa
Email: olga.formosa@um.edu.mt
Contact no: 23403720

Name: Ms Samantha Pace Gasan
Email: samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt
Contact no: 23403720

Msida Educational Hub Research Project

Signing this form is an agreement that:

- I am voluntarily participating in this research that is being carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta.
- I have received, read and understood an Information Sheet with the details of this study.
- I have asked for all the information I require to be a participant in this study and that I have had all these questions answered.
- I am aware that the purpose of this research is to understand the effectiveness of alternative education programmes such as the Msida Educational Hub for secondary-school youths.
- I understand that the information gathered will be used for the sole purpose of this study.
- I am aware that my participation will consist of a focus group of approximately 45 minutes.
- I am aware that I will be asked to talk about my experience as a student at the Msida Educational Hub.
- I am aware that the focus group will be audio recorded for later written analysis for the purpose of this research.
- I am aware that the data collected will be anonymised at gathering stage during the study.
- I am aware that any recordings will be destroyed immediately after transcription by deleting them and any transcribed material will be destroyed by the end of February 2021. Until then, any material will be stored at the Principal Researcher's Offices at the University of Malta.
- I understand that the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be included in the publication of research findings.
- I am aware that if at any point during the research process I feel upset, a list of services that can offer support is being provided (see list of services attached).
- I am aware that I may withdraw from the study by not later than 31st May 2020 and that I do not need to give any justification for opting out. If I choose not to participate in the study any data collected will be deleted and will not be included in the research project.
- I understand that personal data will be treated as per GDPR and I have the right to access, rectify and if applicable erase any data pertaining to myself.

Participant's Name

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Name

Researcher's Signature



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ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI GHALL-PARTEĊIPANTI

Diskussjoni fi Grupp (Focus Group) ma' studenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub

Titlu tar-riċerka: Proġett Imsida Educational Hub

L-għanijiet u deskrizzjoni tar-riċerka: L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li jiġi studjati il-programm edukattiv alternattiv li qed jiġi offruti lil studenti fl-Imsida Educational Hub. Ir-riċerka tinvolvi diskussjoni fi grupp ta' 4-5 studenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub.

Inti qed tiġi mitlub(a) sabiex tipparteċipa f'din id-diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group).

Proċeduri tar-riċerka: Wara li taqra l-folja tal-informazzjoni u tisma' spjegazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka, jekk inti taqbel li tipparteċipa, se tintalab tiffirma formola tal-kunsens li fiha hemm dettalji dwar id-drittijiet tiegħek bħala parteċipant, u se tintalab timla formola rigward il-karatteristiċi tiegħek [isem, kunjom, firma u data]. Id-diskussjoni fi grupp imbagħad tibda u hija mistennija li tiegħu madwar 45 minuta.

Waqt id-diskussjoni, inti se tiġi mistoqsi mistoqsijiet rigward l-esperjenza tiegħek fl-Imsida Educational Hub. Il-grupp ser jikkonsisti minn 4-5 studenti li jattendu l-Imsida Educational Hub. Id-diskussjoni se ssejtni fil-Hub stess u se tkun irrekordjat(a) u mbagħad traskritt(a) b'mod anonimu mir-riċerkatriċi għal scopijiet ta' analiżi. L-informazzjoni kollha tiġi aċċessata biss mir-riċerkaturi u tiġi miżmuma b'mod sigur, skont kif tirrikjedi l-ligi (General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR]). Ser jiġihassru u jitqatta' kwalunkwe materjal traskritt wara l-konklużjoni tar-riċerka sa mhux aktar tard mill-aħħar ta' Frar 2021 u sa dakinhar jinżammu fl-uffiċju tar-Riċerkatriċi Prinċiparli (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta. L-isem tal-Imsida Educational Hub ser jkun imsemmija fil-pubblikazzjoni tar-riżultati tar-riċerka.

Il-parteeipazzjoni tiegħek hija b'mod volontarju u ma taffettwax il-programm edukattiv tiegħek fl-Imsida Educational Hub. Jekk tkun tixtieq twaqqaf il-parteeipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju, tista' tagħmel dan sa mhux aktar tard mill-31 ta' Mejju 2020 mingħajr bżonn li tagħti l-ebda ġustifikazzjoni.

Tista' ssib iktar informazzjoni rigward id-drittijiet tiegħek ġewwa l-formola tal-kunsens assoċjata ma' din il-folja tal-informazzjoni.

Dettalji tar-riċerkaturi:

Akkademiku:

Dr. Janice Formosa-Pace janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt 23403720

Research Support Officers:

Ms Olga Formosa olga.formosa@um.edu.mt 23403720

Ms Samantha Pace Gasan samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt 23403720

FORMOLA TA' KUNSENS

Diskussjoni fi Grupp (Focus Group) Studenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub

Isem: Dr Janice Formosa Pace

Email: janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt

Telefon: 23403720

Isem: Ms Olga Formosa

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Riċerka dwar l-Imsida Educational Hub
L-iffirmar ta' din il-formola huwa ftehim li:

- Jien qed nipparteċipa volontarjament f'din ir-riċerka mill-Fakultà għat-Tishih għas-Socjeta' fl-Università ta' Malta.
- Irċevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni bid-dettalji ta' dan l-istudju.
- Staqsejt għall-informazzjoni kollha li għandi bżonn biex nkun parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju u li l-mistoqsijiet kollha ġew risposti.
- Nifhem li l-għan ta' din r-riċerka f'dan il-qasam qiegħda issir biex nifhmu l-effetti ta' programmi edukattivi alternattivi li jiġu offruti lil studenti ta' skola sekondarja bħall-Imsida Educational Hub.
- Għandi għarfien sħiħ li l-informazzjoni miġbura se tintuża għall-iskop uniku ta' dan l-istudju.
- Jien konxju li l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi se tikkonsisti f'diskussjoni fi grupp ta' madwar 45 minuta.
- Jien konxju/a li se nkun mitlub nitkellem dwar l-esperjenza tiegħi bħala student fl-Imsida Educational Hub.
- Jiena konxju li d-diskussjoni tkun awdjo irregistrata għal analiżi għall-iskop tar-riċerka u li din ser tiġi transkritta b'mod anonimu.
- Id-data miġbura se tkun anonimizzati waqt it-transkrizzjoni f'dan l-istudju.
- Id-data kollha miġbura (reġistrazzjonijiet, traskizzjonijiet u noti) ser tinqered wara li titlesta r-riċerka billi jitħassar u jitqatta' kwalunkwe materjal traskritt sa mhux aktar tard mill-aħħar ta' Frar 2021. Sa dak inhar id-data ser tinzamm fl-uffiċju tar-Riċerkatriċi Prinċipali (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta.
- Nifhem illi l-isem l-Imsida Educational Hub ser jiġi ippubblika mar-riżultati tar-riċerka.
- Jiena konxju li jekk tul il-proċess tar-riċerka inħoss xi emozzjonijiet negattivi, qed tiġi pprovduta lista ta' servizzi disponibbli li jistgħu joffru appoġġ (lista ta' servizzi annessa).
- Jien naf li nista' nagħzel li ma nipparteċipax fl-istudju. Naf ukoll li nista' nirtira l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi sal-31 ta' Mejju 2020 mingħajr ma nagħti l-ebda ġustifikazzjoni. Jekk nagħzel li ma nipparteċipax, l-informazzjoni miġbura mingħandi titħassar u ma tiġix inkluzi fir-riċerka.
- Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li tiġi miġbura se tiġi mmaniġjata skont il-proviżjonijiet tal- GDPR u għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika u fejn applikabbli nħassar data dwari nnifsi.

Isem tal-Parteċipant/a

Firma tal-Parteċipant/a

Isem tar-Riċerkatur/Riċerkatriċi

Firma tar-Riċerkatur/Riċerkatriċi



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INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS – Observation Sessions

Title of research project: Msida Educational Hub Project

Research aims and description: The aims of this research are to address a multifaceted study investigating effectiveness of the alternative education programme for secondary-school youths, offered at the Msida Educational Hub. This research project involves a series of observation sessions with students at the Msida Educational Hub.

You are kindly being asked to participate in observation sessions.

Research procedures: After reading the Information Sheet and listening to an explanation about the research, if you do agree to participate in the observation sessions, you will be asked to sign a consent form detailing your rights, and to fill in a form concerning your characteristics [name and surname, signature and date].

During the observation sessions, the researcher will take a passive role in the classroom setup, interfering the least possible with activities being carried out, in order to understand the daily activities that are held at the Hub.

The observation sessions will take place at the Msida Educational Hub. Brief notes may be taken by the researcher during the observation session for the purpose of data analysis and will be treated as per General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Throughout the publication of findings, the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be published.

Your participation in this study is on a voluntary basis and will in no way affect your educational programme at the Msida Educational Hub. If you chose to participate but then want to terminate your participation, you may do so, with no repercussions until 31st May 2020.

Further information about your rights can be found in the consent form associated with this Information Sheet.

Researcher's contact details:

Academic:

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Research Support Officers:

Ms Olga Formosa olga.formosa@um.edu.mt 23403720

Ms Samantha Pace Gasan samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt 23403720

CONSENT FORM – Observation Sessions

Name: Dr Janice Formosa Pace

Email: janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt

Contact no: 23403720

Name: Ms Olga Formosa

Email: olga.formosa@um.edu.mt

Contact no: 23403720

Name: Ms Samantha Pace Gasan

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Contact no: 23403720



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Msida Educational Hub Research Project
Signing this form is an agreement that:

- I am voluntarily participating in this research that is being carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta.
- I have received, read and understood an Information Sheet with the details of this study.
- I have asked for all the information I require to be a participant in this study and that I have had all these questions answered.
- I am aware that the purpose of this research is to understand the effectiveness of alternative education programmes such as the Msida Educational Hub for secondary-school youths.
- I am in full knowledge that the information gathered will be used for the sole purpose of this study and in strict accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).
- I am aware that my participation consists of observation sessions during activities at the Hub.
- I understand that the researcher might take notes during the observation sessions.
- I am aware that the data collected will be anonymised at gathering stage during the study.
- I am aware that any written material will be destroyed after the completion of the research project by deleting and shredding them by the end of February 2021. Until then, any material will be stored at the Principal Researcher's Offices at the University of Malta.
- I understand that the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be included in the publication of research findings.
- I am aware that if at any point during the research process I feel upset, a list of services that can offer support is being provided (see list of services attached).
- I am aware that I may withdraw from the study until not later than 31st May 2020 and that I do not need to give any justification for opting out. If I choose not to participate in the study any data collected will be deleted and will not be included in the research project.
- I understand that personal data will be treated as per GDPR and I have the right to access, rectify and if applicable erase any data pertaining to myself.

Participant's Name

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Name

Researcher's Signature



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ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI GHALL-PARTEĊIPANTI Sessjonijiet ta' Osservazzjoni

Titlu tar-riċerka: Proġett Imsida Educational Hub

L-għanijiet u deskrizzjoni tar-riċerka: L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li jiġi studjati il-programm edukattiv alternattiv li qed jiġi offruti lil studenti fl-Imsida Educational Hub. Ir-riċerka tinvolti sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni mal-istudenti tal-Imsida Educational Hub.

Inti qed tiġi mitlub tipparteċipa f'dawn is-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni.

Proċeduri tar-riċerka: Wara li taqra l-folja tal-informazzjoni u tisma' spjegazzjoni dwar ir-riċerka, jekk inti taqbel li tipparteċipa fis-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni, se tintalab tiffirma formola tal-kunsens li fiha hemm dettalji dwar id-drittijiet tiegħek bħala parteċipant, u se tintalab timla formola rigward il-karatteristiċi tiegħek [isem, kunjom, firma u data].

Waq t-is-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni, ir-riċerkatriċi ser tiegħu rwol passiv fil-klassi, fejn ser tinterferixxi mill-inqas f'dak li jkun għaddej sabiex niehdu stampa ċara ta' l-attivitatijiet li jsiru għewwa l-Hub. Is-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni ser isiru għewwa l-Hub stess u waqt l-osservazzjoni, ir-riċerkatriċi ser tiegħu xi noti b'mod anonimu (mingħajr ismijiet).

L-informazzjoni kollha tiġi aċċessata biss mir-riċerkaturi u tiġi miżmuma b'mod sigur, skont kif tirrikjedi l-liġi (General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR]). Ser jitħassru u jitqatta' kwalunkwe materjal traskritt wara l-konkluzjoni tar-riċerka sa mhux aktar tard mill-aħħar ta' Frar 2021. Sa dakinhar id-data tinzamm fl-uffiċju tar-Riċerkatriċi Prinċipali (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta. L-isem tal-Imsida Educational Hub ser jkun imsemmija fil-pubblikazzjoni tar-riżultati tar-riċerka.

Il-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħek hija b'mod volontarju u ma taffettwax il-programm edukattiv tiegħek fl-Imsida Educational Hub. Jekk tkun tixtieq twaqqaf il-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju, tista' tagħmel dan sa mhux aktar tard mill-31 ta' Mejju 2020 mingħajr bżonn li tagħti l-ebda ġustifikazzjoni.

Tista' ssib iktar informazzjoni rigward id-drittijiet tiegħek għewwa l-formola tal-kunsens assoċjata ma' din il-folja tal-informazzjoni.

Dettalji tar-riċerkaturi:

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Riċerka dwar l-Imsida Educational Hub
L-iffirmar ta' din il-formola huwa ftehim li:

- Jien qed nipparteċipa volontarjament f'din ir-riċerka mill-Fakultà għat-Tishih għas-Socjeta' fl-Università ta' Malta.
- Irċevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni bid-dettalji ta' dan l-istudju.
- Staqsejt għall-informazzjoni kollha li għandi bżonn biex nkun parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju u li l-mistoqsijiet kollha ġew risposti.
- Nifhem li l-għan ta' din r-riċerka f'dan il-qasam qiegħda issir biex nifhmu l-effetti ta' programmi edukattivi alternattivi li jiġu offruti lil studenti ta' skola sekondarja bħall-Imsida Educational Hub.
- Għandi għarfien sħiħ li l-informazzjoni miġbura se tintuża għall-iskop uniku ta' dan l-istudju u kif skont il-liġi (General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR]).
- Jien konxju/a li l-partecipazzjoni tiegħi se tikkonsisti f'sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni.
- Nifhem li ir-riċerkatriċi ser tieħu xi noti anonimizzati waqt is-sessjonijiet ta' osservazzjoni.
- Id-data miġbura se tkun anonimizzati immedjatament waqt it-transkizzjoni f'dan l-istudju.
- Noti meħuda ser jinqerdu wara li titlesta r-riċerka billi jithassar u jitqatta' kwalunkwe materjal traskritt sa mhux aktar tard mill-aħħar ta' Frar 2021. Sa dakinhar il-materjal jinżamm fl-uffiċju tar-Riċerkatriċi Prinċipali (Akkademiku) fl-Università ta' Malta.
- Jiena konxju li jekk tul il-proċess tar-riċerka inħoss xi emozzjonijiet negattivi, qed tiġi pprovduta lista ta' servizzi disponibbli li jistgħu joffru appoġġ (lista ta' servizzi annessa).
- Nifhem illi l-isem tal-Imsida Educational Hub ser jiġi ippubblika mar-riżultati tar-riċerka.
- Jien naf li nista' nagħzel li ma nipparteċipax fl-istudju. Naf ukoll li nista' nirtira l-partecipazzjoni tiegħi sal-31 ta' Mejju 2020 u mighajr ma nagħti l-ebda ġustifikazzjoni. Jekk nagħzel li ma nipparteċipax, l-informazzjoni miġbura mingħandi titħassar u ma tiġix inkluża fir-riċerka.
- Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li tiġi miġbura se tiġi mmaniġjata skont il-provizjonijiet tal- GDPR u għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika u fejn applikabbli nħassar data dwari nnifsi.

Isem tal-Partecipant/a Firma tal-Partecipant/a

Isem tar-Riċerkatur/Riċerkatriċi Firma tar-Riċerkatur/Riċerkatriċi

APPENDIX 6 – INFORMATION SHEET FOR PROFESSIONALS (PROVIDED WITH GOOGLE FORM)

INFORMATION SHEET – Professionals

Principal Researcher: Dr Janice Formosa Pace Email: janice.formosa-pace@um.edu.mt

Research Support Officer: Ms Olga Formosa Email: olga.formosa@um.edu.mt

Research Support Officer: Ms Samantha Pace Gasan Email: samantha.pace-gasan@um.edu.mt

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research, following an agreement with the Ministry of Education, regarding the Msida Educational Hub Project. This research is being carried out to understand the effectiveness of alternative educational programmes as is the Msida Educational Hub. This will be accommodated through exploring experiences of current professionals as well as those of past pupils. Also, a number of classroom observations will be carried out during lessons as well as a focus group session with 4-5 current students attending at the Msida Educational Hub.

We would like to request your help to conduct this research which can be done by voluntarily participating in an online questionnaire regarding your experience as a professional at the Msida Educational Hub. The questionnaire will include a number of semi-structured questions.

The information gathered will be anonymous and will be used for the sole purpose of this study; and material gathered will be destroyed following completion of the study, by February 2021: any material will be deleted and shredded. Until then, any material will be stored at the Principal Researcher's office at the University of Malta.

The study will review literature completed in the area so that information explored can be in relation to previous findings. The questionnaire will therefore include a series of questions guiding you towards sharing your experience as a professional at the Msida Educational Hub.

The data will be anonymized throughout the research so that your confidentiality will be respected. Throughout the publication of findings, the name of the Msida Educational Hub will be published. In order to participate in the research study, you will have to decide to do so freely without coercion. Proceeding with the questionnaire means that you agree to participate freely.

If you feel that the subject is upsetting, you may seek support through the Employee Support Programme which provides a wide range of free and confidential support services to public employees designed to assist them in managing their work and life difficulties.

No payment will be received for participation.
Should you require further information feel free to contact us.

Yours Sincerely,
Dr Janice Formosa Pace
Ms Olga Formosa and Ms Samantha Pace Gasan



