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Transitioning From Primary School to Middle School: The Experience of Students on the
Autism Spectrum in Local Schools

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Masters in Access to Education

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University of Malta



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I am also profoundly thankful for my family. To my husband, I appreciate all your sacrifices on my behalf. Your constant support and belief in my academic aspirations have been significant to my success. Words cannot explain my appreciation for your encouragement throughout this process. To my beloved sons, thank you for being such excellent young men who always cheer me up. I hope I set an example for you to never give up in difficult situations and to always believe in yourself.

This dissertation shows not only my effort but also the collective support of everyone who has impacted my life both academically and personally. This journey has taught me the value of inquiry and the importance of various viewpoints in enriching our understanding of people on the autism spectrum.

Dedication

To my dear mother, Mary Rose, whose unconditional love, support, and encouragement shaped me into the person I am today. Her strength and wisdom inspired me to always do my best, be kind, and take nothing for granted. This work honours her constant affection and her profound impact on my life. I hope that this achievement made her proud.

Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school represents a significant milestone in a student's educational journey. It greatly impacts students' educational experiences, affecting their intellectual development and social growth. Research indicates that significant challenges during this transition arise from changes in social structures and exposure to diverse learning environments. Students on the autism spectrum are particularly affected by these challenges in comparison to their peers. The transition experiences of students on the autism spectrum have been inadequately addressed in research. This research sought to explore the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school. Data were collected through interviews with four participants who transitioned from primary school to Maltese state or church middle school. The findings suggest that various factors related to the transition affect students' experiences. The participants described how small schools helped their transition and alleviated their anxiety and worries, which stemmed from a fear of the unknown, commonly known as Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU). Support networks, including family members, guidance teachers, Learning Support Educators (LSE), and psychosocial professionals, were identified as crucial in supporting participants during and following the transition. The presence of empathy and understanding within these support systems was essential, especially during challenging times. Instances of bullying have been reported to negatively affect students' educational experiences. This study offers valuable insight into the academic performance and personal strengths of students on the autism spectrum, emphasising their progress and resilience in these developmental domains. The research advocates the need for reforms in policy and planning processes related to transitions and inclusive education. Individualised transition strategies that provide students sufficient time to become acquainted with their new school

environment prior to the transition are crucial for mitigating anxiety. The study highlights the necessity for educators to enhance their understanding of autism through ongoing training, alongside increased efforts by professionals to engage more effectively with the students' perspective. Research indicates that students on the autism spectrum require more effective transition procedures, particularly through their involvement in the decision-making process during the pre-transition phase.

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Students on autism spectrum

School Transitions

Support Networks

Emotional Resonance

Achievements & Growth

Inclusive Education

Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
IEP	Individualised Educational Plan
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
IU	Intolerance of Uncertainty
LEAP	Learning Experiences and Alternative Program
LSE	Learning Support Educator
MCAST	Malta College of Arts Science & Technology
NAS	National Autistic Society
NSSS	National School Support Services
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TEACHH	Teaching Expanding Appreciating Collaborating Cooperating Holistic
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UN	United Nations
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

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Introduction

The educational experiences of children on the autism spectrum are diverse and influenced by various personal, societal, legal (e.g., policy-related), and environmental factors. A common experience shared by many is that of educational transition. In this context, educational transitions refer to movements within an educational system from one setting to another, such as progressing from primary to secondary school (Jindal-Snape, 2010). These transitions involve significant changes, which can pose challenges for all children (Metzner et al., 2020). However, children on the autism spectrum may experience these transitions and the changes they bring in ways that are uniquely their own (Trew, 2024). This thesis seeks to amplify the voices of students on the autism spectrum, emphasising the importance of their perspectives on educational transitions. As they navigate the complex landscape of school transitions, their experiences shed light on both the challenges linked to change and uncertainty and the remarkable resilience and strength reflected in their stories.

Background

Societal awareness and acceptance of diversity in educational environments are reportedly increasing (Holmes, 2020). Numerous mainstream schools constantly aim to cultivate an inclusive culture that appreciates the contributions of all students, ultimately diminishing stigma and enhancing understanding among peers (Caballero, 2024). Inclusion practices help eliminate barriers that could cause student segregation and cater to the varied needs of all learners (Mugambi, 2017). Inclusion should offer a broader range of programmes compared to special schools while ensuring equal resources and opportunities for all students. Being included in mainstream classrooms leads to improved

social cohesiveness for children with impairments (Kumar, 2018). Comprehensive education for everyone is essential since it is connected to human, economic, and social development objectives. When an education system fails to educate all children, it results in an educational, social, and economic underclass with significant ramifications for society both presently and in the future (Mugambi, 2017).

The 1994 Salamanca Declaration confirmed the right of every person to education and urged governments worldwide to create policies rooted in the ideals of inclusive education. The Salamanca special needs world conference was the first conference dedicated to promoting the ideology of inclusive education. It acknowledges the right of every student to be integrated into regular schooling without discrimination based on perceived differences or assistance requirements. The conference defines inclusion as the improvement of ordinary schools in educating all children in the community. The Salamanca statement asserts that mainstream schools must adopt more inclusive policies to establish an inclusive community that addresses inequality. This is the sole method to get education for all and establish an inclusive society (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994). As a result, the number of students with different abilities in mainstream schools is increasing, confirming a growing acknowledgement of the significance of inclusive education and marking a transition towards more inclusive educational practices, reinforced by legislation (Austermann et al., 2023).

Malta initiated a transition towards a community-based education system that was more inclusive in the late 1990s. Research data from 2020 revealed that 96% of pupils in Malta identified as having different abilities attended mainstream schools. Remarkably, Malta has a rate of statements of approximately 5.5%, regarded as high compared to

nations such as the UK, where the rate is around 3.5% for pupils being statemented. Many of the aforementioned pupils are admitted into mainstream schools, while it is reported that approximately 160 students utilise the three resource centres accessible throughout Malta. These resource centres, also called special schools, operate full-time and part-time (Bebbington, 2020).

Children on the autism spectrum in the UK and North America are progressively being educated in regular schools, which demonstrates a policy of inclusivity aimed at safeguarding the rights of those with different abilities. The percentage of students on the autism spectrum in mainstream classrooms in the United States increased from 12% to 59% between 1991 and 2009 (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). According to research conducted by the National Autistic Society (NAS), there was a notable rise in the number of children on the spectrum attending mainstream schools in England and Wales between 1999 and 2009 (Emam & Farrell, 2009). Though the number of students on the autism spectrum is increasing in Maltese mainstream schools, there is limited research and data available regarding the number of students on the autism spectrum in regular schools in Malta. Furthermore, the voices of students on the autism spectrum appear to be underrepresented or even largely absent in educational discussions and research, limiting a complete understanding of their unique perspectives and needs (Holmes, 2022a).

My aspiration to engage with the experiences of students on the autism spectrum began during my time as a guidance teacher at various local schools. Observing the challenges and achievements of these students firsthand motivated me to look into the impact of school transitions on their educational experiences. Transitioning from a class teacher to a guidance teacher a decade ago enhanced my comprehension of the emotional and social complexities associated with school transitions. It reinforced my dedication to promoting inclusive educational approaches. These experiences have influenced my

understanding of the strengths and challenges encountered by students on the autism spectrum and have intensified my aspiration to engage in research that improves effective transition methods within inclusive educational environments. This thesis seeks to heighten the perspectives of these students and offer insightful suggestions for educators and policymakers.

Focus of Study

Responsible education must take into account the needs and requirements of students on the autism spectrum. Needs should not be determined by the perspectives of professionals and neurotypical individuals (i.e., individuals whose neurological development and functioning follow what is generally considered typical or average, without characteristics associated with neurodivergent conditions, such as autism) who speculate on the requirements of students on the spectrum; instead, they should be adapted to reflect the distinctiveness of these individuals. This study examines the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school in Maltese mainstream schools. It aims to explore the impact of transition processes from primary to middle schools on students on the autism spectrum. The students' narratives highlight successful strategies that positively influenced them alongside challenges that have adversely affected their educational experiences. Emphasis is placed on methods that can more effectively assist students on the autism spectrum during school transitions. Additionally, these experiences underscore the requirements of these pupils as articulated by autistic individuals rather than via the perspectives of professionals and policymakers.

Value of Research

The rising number of students considered neurodivergent (i.e., individuals whose neurological development or cognitive functioning differs from the typical range. This encompasses variations in sensory processing, communication, behaviour, and learning styles associated with conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ADHD, dyslexia, and others) in regular schools, highlighting the necessity of study focusing on their experiences, especially during crucial transitions like their move from primary to middle school education. Students on the autism spectrum encounter specific challenges during school transitions, such as issues with social integration and increased anxiety (Mandy et al., 2016a). Investigating these experiences can reveal the unique challenges faced by these students, enabling educators and policymakers to meet their needs more effectively. This research can identify beneficial techniques, such as collaboration among educators, parents, and support personnel, leading to the development of best practices that enhance transitions and improve results for these students. Research investigating students' transition experiences with specific requirements can yield essential insights for enhancing current support systems. Comprehending the significance of personalised transition plans and family involvement can assist schools in establishing more effective support systems tailored to the distinct needs of each student.

As educational systems adapt to a more diverse student population, research findings can guide policy development, ensuring that educational frameworks address the needs of all students, especially those with different abilities who may necessitate additional support during transitions. This research aims to enhance students on the autism spectrum's voices, enabling them to share their experiences and encourage essential

reforms in educational systems. This participative method can result in more informed decision-making by educators and administrators.

Research Aims and Objectives

This thesis aims to explore and understand the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school. This research aims to identify the situations encountered during school transitions, the support systems that aid adjustment, and the strategies that can improve the overall educational experience during this critical period of change. The research question directly addresses the primary aim of the dissertation:

RQ: What are the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from Primary School to Middle School in Maltese schools?

This study investigates the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during the transition from primary to middle school, focusing on social, emotional, and academic aspects. This research examines the support mechanisms available to students during their transition, including support from teachers and staff and the involvement of parents and peers. It also explores the coping strategies employed by students on the autism spectrum to navigate the transition process, highlighting both practical and ineffective approaches. The study's objective is to collect and analyse student perspectives on the transition experience, emphasising their insights and recommendations for enhancement. An important objective is to provide practical recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers to improve transition processes for students on the autism spectrum, ensuring their needs are addressed in inclusive educational environments.

The findings of this investigation aim to enhance the existing literature on autism and education by examining the transition experiences of students on the autism spectrum from primary to secondary education, an area that has been insufficiently researched (Hebron, 2017), thereby informing future research and practice.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is structured to thoroughly examine the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school. Each chapter aims to enhance the preceding one, forming a unified narrative that examines every aspect of this significant period in education.

Literature Review

The literature review introduces new definitions of autism based on neurodiversity and double empathy, which apply to this research. There is a section on autism prevalence, abilities, challenges, and how transitions affect students on the spectrum. These topics, primarily educational transitions, underpin student narratives of transitions. A contextualised overview of inclusive education in Malta and policies promoting inclusion are provided to enhance the study's analysis.

Methodology

The methods chapter shows the research rationale and design. This chapter describes the qualitative methodology used in this study, including participant selection, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. This study uses semi-structured interviews to collaboratively develop participants' narratives and experiences for meaning-making using narrative inquiry. The discussion covers ethical issues and research validity and reliability measures, providing transparency about the study's conduct.

Findings

This chapter examines the results obtained from interviews conducted with students on the autism spectrum. This chapter categorises the data thematically, focusing on the transition processes adopted by schools, assessing their effectiveness, the support networks utilised during the transition, and the emotional well-being of students on the autism spectrum before and after the transition. This chapter examines the accomplishments and progress of students on the autism spectrum as a result of this transition. Participant experiences are represented through rich narratives and quotations, enhancing the study.

Discussion and Conclusion

The conclusion summarises the study's key findings, insights, and contributions obtained through the research, offering a comprehensive reflection. The conclusion illustrates how the findings improve comprehension of students on the autism spectrum in contexts of change, particularly during the transition from mainstream primary to mainstream middle schools, while offering practical strategies for educators, administrators, and policymakers for improving support during these transitions.

Literature Review

Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that is characterised by impairments in social communication, as well as the manifestation of limited interests and repetitive activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Furthermore, the presence of autism can influence the academic achievements of children (Huang et al., 2022). This is primarily attributed to the disorder's distinctive features, which include a solid aversion to alterations in daily routines or surroundings, atypical reactions to various sensory stimuli, and a tendency to engage in repetitive activities (Ashburner et al., 2010). This literature review will commence by providing a complete outline of autism's definition. While the present method of diagnosing and identifying autism is primarily based on the medical model, this literature review seeks to examine autism from the perspective of a neurodiversity paradigm. One of the aims of this literature review is to investigate autism through a neurodiversity paradigm lens, shifting our attention away from deficits and instead highlighting the preferences of individuals with autism and the broader neurodiversity movement. Neurodiversity has gained prominence, emphasising the wide range of human cognitive abilities and challenging conventional deficit-oriented perspectives and diagnostic paradigms. This literature review provides a concise overview of significant subjects related to the prevalence of autism throughout time, its strengths and challenges, the concept of double empathy, inclusive education, and the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum. It is crucial to comprehend and recognise the strengths and difficulties of individuals on the autism spectrum in order to grasp how these traits influence transitions for those on the spectrum. The understanding of double empathy and

its correlation with autism is of the utmost significance, as it posits that failures in communication arise from the mutual issues faced by both parties in comprehending one another. This underscores a reciprocal issue rather than solely assigning all difficulties to those with autism. The notion of the double empathy problem shifts the conversation away from a model that focuses on deficiencies and towards one that recognises the intricacies of communication difficulties. It highlights the importance of mutual comprehension and respect in interactions between those who are neurodivergent and those who are neurotypical. This literature review will additionally explore the advantages and challenges posed by the characteristics of autism and their impact on the transition from primary to middle schools. Furthermore, we will examine the progress of inclusive education and its influence on integrating students on the autism spectrum into mainstream educational settings. Combining existing studies and viewpoints emphasises the significance of implementing comprehensive and individual-focused strategies to assist persons with autism in several aspects of life. Additional research and cooperation are required to enhance our comprehension of autism and advocate for inclusive practices that honour and embrace neurodiversity.

Defining Autism

Autism is a clinical term used to describe persons who exhibit a range of difficulties in social communication, repetitive habits, restricted interests, and sensory behaviours during early childhood (Lord et al., 2020). In a clinical context, autism is commonly understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder that is defined by behaviour that typically appears in the early stages of development. The symptoms of autism are observed in many situations and continue throughout an individual's life (American Psychiatric Association,

2022). The diagnosis depends on professionals' subjective opinions based on direct observation, observed behaviour, and qualitative symptom descriptions. Thus, clinical competence is presently the sole assurance for upholding diagnostic accuracy (Kamp-Becker, 2024).

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The clinical conceptualisation of autism often originates from a medical standpoint, emphasising deficits rather than strengths or diverse perspectives. Recently, the concepts of neurodiversity and the social model of disability have become more prominent, challenging conventional notions of autism as a condition (Den Houting, 2018).

Neurodiversity is a notion that is closely linked to the more well-known idea of biodiversity. It emphasises the significance of valuing our environment's wide range of cognitive or neurological profiles. The concept of neurodiversity is a progressive mindset that builds upon the notion of respecting our world and communities (Baron-Cohen, 2017). The neurodiversity movement recognises autism as an inherent aspect of an individual's personality rather than a pathological condition that necessitates treatment (Araujo et al., 2023). By adopting a neurodevelopmentally informed perspective, persons of all ages and neurotypes can be more comprehensively understood, leading to the potential for effortless adaptation (Rutherford & Johnston, 2023).

Autism, from a neurodiversity paradigm (or lens), is viewed as a type of variance among a range of cognitive abilities, and the challenges associated with it are not seen as a deficiency or disorder. Instead, they are viewed as a mismatch between an individual's traits and the demands of their surroundings (Pellicano & Den Houting, 2021). By emphasising strengths rather than shortcomings, the conceptualisation of autism provides

individuals with a positive identity and a supportive group. There is now a distinction between viewing autism as a "disorder/disability" and as "diversity/identity," each with its consequences for how autism is understood and treated (Schuck et al., 2022). Moreover, the autistic rights movement views autism as a distinct cognitive style rather than a "disorder" and argues for the recognition of neurological diversity among individuals. To eliminate any potential negative associations with the autism designation, the phrase "disorders" is replaced with "conditions", resulting in the new designation of "autism spectrum conditions" (Leveto, 2018).

Scholars and individuals who advocate for autistic people have highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on strengths when it comes to comprehending autism. This includes recognising and incorporating positive attributes such as the capacity for hyperfocus, meticulous attention to detail, strong semantic memory, and thoughtful analytical thinking (Urbanowicz et al., 2019). Notable studies that have explored these strengths include Brosnan et al., 2016 and 2017, Russell et al., 2019, and Urbanowicz et al., 2019. These strengths are seen as "context-dependent" and may not be inherent characteristics (Russell et al., 2019). However, this approach that focuses on strengths is in opposition to a perspective that emphasises social deficits, which are believed to arise from the medicalisation of individuals with autism. These theories support implementing a comprehensive and socially inclusive classification system that recognises the strengths and functional differences of individuals with autism. They also emphasise the increased involvement of autistic individuals in research and society and the formulation of efficient strategies to foster mutual understanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals. (Kapp, 2019). The neurodiversity paradigm perceives an individual as impaired not because of their impairment but rather due to the inadequacy of their surroundings in

meeting their specific requirements. The impairment does not originate directly from autism; instead, it arises from the physical, social, and emotional obstacles that autistic individuals encounter in a culture that is not accommodating to them (Den Houting, 2018).

Undoubtedly, every notion and ideology is accompanied by criticism and restrictions. An inherent constraint of the neurodiversity paradigm is the assertion that autism is regarded as a distinction and a cultural affiliation rather than a disability (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Critics perceive this as a flaw of neurodiversity, arguing that autism is undeniably a disability for specific individuals within the autistic community (Den Houting, 2018). The neurodiversity paradigm is sometimes argued, as in Jaarsma and Welin (2012), to predominantly represent autistic individuals, commonly referred to as "high functioning," who are considered to have relatively low support needs. Some critiques of the neurodiversity movement, such as Russell (2020), suggest that individuals with higher support needs, often labelled as "low functioning," are underrepresented within the movement. Jaarsma and Welin (2012) also contend that adopting the neurodiversity paradigm to understand autism may inadvertently suggest that autistic individuals do not require assistance, as it frames autism as merely a normal variation.

Prevalence of Autism

Accurate prevalence figures of autism are essential for informing public policy, enhancing awareness, and setting research objectives (Zeidan et al., 2022). The prevalence estimates exhibited a temporal increase and displayed significant variation within and among sociodemographic groups. Hence, the occurrence of autism beyond the borders of the United States exhibits a wide range and is shaped by a multitude of circumstances, such as diagnostic standards, public consciousness, and the availability of medical services

(Zeidan et al., 2022). Currently, while there are governmental services and a limited number of non-governmental organisations dedicated to individuals on the autism spectrum, there are no official statistics available regarding the frequency and occurrence of autism in Malta (Mubashir et al., 2020). However, professionals in Malta are predicting that approximately 1 out of every 52 newborns will be diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. According to data from the Statement Moderating Board, the number could exceed that amount (Tanti-Burlo, 2016).

Strengths and Challenges of Autism

The current body of autism research documented in literature mainly concentrates on the shortcomings of identifying characteristics of individuals on the autism spectrum. The prevailing tendency has primarily been to give greater importance to addressing the behavioural difficulties experienced by individuals with autism. Nevertheless, research studies recognise the distinct aptitudes and capabilities (both exceptional and non-exceptional) of individuals with autism and their distinctive potentials (Halder et al., 2022). Clinicians and researchers are becoming more conscious of the capabilities exhibited by individuals on the autism spectrum. For instance, it is currently understood that most individuals on the autism spectrum possess an intelligence quotient (IQ) within the normal range, and a considerable number of individuals on the autism spectrum exhibit notable cognitive abilities (Howlin et al., 2009). Halder et al. (2022) argue that strengths and challenges are inherently interconnected and cannot be disentangled from one another; they are, in fact, inseparable. This contingency paves the path for acknowledging, involving, and including individuals with autism in communities.

Comprehending autism might be challenging. The understanding of autism was changed by Mottron et al. (2014), who determined that people on the autism spectrum process and respond to stimuli in a distinct manner compared to neurotypicals. Nevertheless, these distinctions are not inherently shortcomings but instead might be regarded as advantages and superiorities. However, the considerable variations and diversities among individuals on the autism spectrum have led to several misconceptions regarding this condition (Panzano, 2018). A study conducted with parents and professionals who work with individuals on the autism spectrum revealed that approximately one-third of people exhibit exceptional ability in one or more areas (Howlin et al., 2009). Furthermore, documentation verifies that individuals on the autism spectrum may not possess remarkable strengths and abilities. Yet, they can achieve exceptional outcomes if provided with suitable nurturing in their surroundings (Halder et al., 2022). This notion demonstrates the crucial significance of education in fostering the abilities of children and young people on the autism spectrum to reach their maximum capabilities.

Strengths

Notwithstanding the obstacles they face, autistic individuals possess elevated intellectual abilities and linguistic aptitudes (Jordon, 1999, as cited by Emam & Farrell, 2009). Specific individuals on the autism spectrum may exhibit a remarkable and intriguing aptitude. A minority of individuals have exceptional abilities, typically in music, art, or mathematics. Individuals with outstanding skills may focus on a particular area of interest to the point where they acquire extensive knowledge. However, this expertise is frequently limited to accumulating factual information and lacks practical significance. Additional 'special' skills may emerge due to variations in information processing; however, this depends on the specific circumstances (Jordan, 2013). A study

conducted by Cope and Remington (2022) among adults on the spectrum revealed the presence of elevated cognitive abilities and cognitive benefits compared to adults without the condition. The objective of this study was to ascertain the workplace strengths shown by individuals on the autism spectrum, as reported by them. In this study, researchers administered an online questionnaire to individuals on the autism spectrum, inquiring about their perspectives on the strengths they encountered in their professional environment. Sixty-six individuals completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire results were categorised into clusters based on their similarity. Thus, the study found the specific domains in which the autistic participants perceived themselves as having superior performance compared to their non-autistic counterparts.

Several strengths identified by Cope & Remington (2022) include exceptional creativity, concentration, and memory; heightened productivity; and personal attributes such as integrity and commitment (Cope & Remington, 2022). Also, it has been observed that individuals on the autism spectrum can provide a distinctive perspective peculiar to autism. These exceptional abilities were identified by Asperger in 1944 (as cited by Halder et al., 2022). He recognised that individuals with autism often display a unique focus that allows them to excel in particular areas. It serves as the foundation for specific types of innovative thinking and creativity, opening up opportunities for further skill enhancement. Subsequent research after Asperger's work has confirmed that the unique problem-solving skills and creative thinking of individuals on the autism spectrum can be advantageous. It is crucial to provide opportunities for them to cultivate their competence in their chosen subjects (Halder et al., 2022). Therefore, it is advisable to implement a strengths-based approach for those on the autism spectrum that utilises abilities such as hyperfocus, meticulous attention to detail, strong semantic memory, and analytical reasoning.

Moreover, encouraging individuals on the autism spectrum to develop their strengths can result in positive consequences, such as enhanced well-being (Taylor et al., 2023).

Multiple research investigations outline the aptitudes exhibited by individuals on the autism spectrum. A research study by Halder et al. (2022) involved parents and professionals working with persons on the autism spectrum. The study affirms the qualities previously identified in other studies, such as memory, mathematical aptitude, calendar calculation, absolute pitch and musical talent, mechanical and detailed visual perception, and artistic characteristics. It is evident that these characteristics or skills are not universally present in all individuals on the autism spectrum and exhibit significant variation and diversity within the autistic community. Several of these strengths seem to arise from the distinct manner in which individuals on the autism spectrum process information. Baron-Cohen (2000) states that individuals on the autism spectrum experience challenges in understanding and interpreting the expressions and feelings of others due to a condition called mind blindness, also known as Theory of Mind. Nevertheless, these problems can be viewed as positives as they stimulate novelty, creativity, and invention.

In contrast to the theory of mind, which posits that deficiencies in communication and social interaction can be attributed to a lack of empathy, the manifestation of restricted or repetitive behaviours and exceptionally narrow interests can be elucidated by a pronounced inclination towards systemisation (Grove et al., 2015). Autism is distinguished by a heightened capacity for rule-based systemisation (Paul et al., 2021). The hyper-systemising theory of autism, initially introduced in 2003, suggests that individuals with autism have a systemising mechanism (SM) that is adjusted to higher levels than the

average. Therefore, a potential reason for the association between autism and skill can be attributed to the hype systemising theory of autism (Baron-Cohen & Lombardo, 2017).

According to Simon Baron-Cohen (2009), systemising pertains to the capacity to comprehend and establish procedures and regulations. Individuals on the autism spectrum exhibit enhanced systemising abilities when compared to persons without the disorder, as suggested by the theoretical framework. There is a prevalent belief that the increased process of systemising contributes to the inclination towards narrow interests and repetitive behaviours (Baron-Cohen, 2009). Individuals on the autism spectrum exhibit an excessively elevated mechanism, which accounts for their inclination towards aversion to change or their seeming resistance to change. Furthermore, it elucidates their disposition for systems that exhibit a high degree of lawfulness or predictability, such as mathematics, repetition, spinning items, routine, music, machines, and collecting (Baron-Cohen, 2006). Baron-Cohen et al. (2009) contend that hypersystemising contributes to the manifestation of talent in individuals. Through a thorough examination of evidence, they have determined that hyper-systemising is a characteristic cognitive style observed in individuals on the autism spectrum. The capacity to systemise can be regarded as a notable attribute in autism, since it enables individuals to concentrate on particular intricacies and patterns inside a system, resulting in extraordinary aptitudes in specific areas (Baron-Cohen & Lombardo, 2017). As illustrated by Baron-Cohen and Lombardo (2017), individuals identified as autistic may exhibit heightened proficiency in activities that necessitate meticulousness, such as calendar computation, mathematical computations, and musical compositions. The aforementioned abilities can be regarded as a manifestation of neurodiversity, as opposed to a disability, and could potentially enhance aptitude in particular domains (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009).

The study by Halder et al. (2022) found that the issues identified by parents and practitioners were mainly associated with the fundamental characteristics of autism, particularly related to processing impairments. The results are consistent with previous research indicating that individuals with autism still face difficulties in communication, social interactions, repetitive behaviours, resistance to change, and sensory sensitivities. The Theory of Mind can account for and justify many of these challenges (Baron-Cohen, 1995, 2009). Theory of mind refers to the cognitive capacity to comprehend and anticipate the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions of another to predict their behavioural responses. Such capability is crucial for an individual to excel in social interactions (Byom & Mutlu, 2013).

Challenges

Social Communication. A challenge reported by individuals on the autism spectrum is related to difficulties with engaging with non-autistic social knowledge (Baron-Cohen, 2000). Undoubtedly, people on the autism spectrum encounter difficulties in participating in prosocial behaviours, having a significant effect on the formation and sustainability of interpersonal relationships, often resulting in unfavourable long-term consequences such as feelings of isolation and anxiety among individuals without neurological disorders (Gates et al., 2022). Furthermore, individuals on the autism spectrum have challenges with social contact and unconventional and unusual communication, sometimes accompanied by consistent patterns of restricted behaviours (Emam & Farrell, 2009). They may face difficulties in ordinary life abilities due to cognitive abnormalities, including inadequate planning, decision-making, timing, and motor skills. Research indicates that individuals with co-occurring mental health challenges continue to experience these difficulties from childhood through adulthood, affecting both males and females.

Empirical data demonstrates a notable surge in mental health issues, such as mood and anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), ADHD, and psychotic illnesses, during the adult stage of life (Murphy et al., 2016).

Intolerance of Uncertainty. Recent studies have commenced exploring the significance of IU in relation to anxiety within the context of autism. The concept aligns clinically with several core characteristics of autism. Restricted and repetitive behaviours, including insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, rigidity, and difficulty tolerating change, have been associated with anxiety since the initial descriptions of the disorder. These behaviours exhibit a conceptual similarity to IU, characterised by the avoidance of unforeseen events and the inclination to enhance predictability in life. Emerging evidence indicates that IU plays a central role in the relationship between autism and anxiety (Rodgers et al., 2018). IU denotes the difficulties faced by individuals on the autism spectrum in managing unpredictable or uncertain circumstances. This indicates a greater sensitivity to ambiguity, potentially resulting in increased anxiety and distress when events or outcomes are uncertain or challenging to predict (Normansell-Mossa et al., 2021). The IU model of anxiety posits that IU is the belief that uncertainty is inherently distressing and that the inability to predict future events is undesirable and should be avoided (Rodgers et al., 2018).

Rigidity. Rigidity constitutes an additional challenge associated with autism. The condition encompasses stereotyped or repetitive movements and speech, insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, ritualised patterns of behaviour, rigid thinking, and highly restricted or fixed interests. The various aspects of rigidity significantly influence daily social interactions and can impact performance in educational and professional settings and overall well-being (Petrolini et al., 2023).). Furthermore, cognitive rigidity in children on the autism spectrum could lead to struggles to adapt to change, often finding comfort in

routines and predictability (Koegel et al., 2012). They may interpret things literally, rely on consistent daily habits, and feel anxious or upset when faced with unexpected changes. Recent studies (e.g., Bos et al., 2019) suggest that cognitive rigidity can also drain cognitive resources needed for effective cognitive control, which may, in turn, negatively impact subjective well-being (Grove et al., 2018).

Masking. Masking entails the intentional application of strategies, such as self-monitoring of body language and facial expressions, creating a 'script' for social interactions, or compelling oneself to maintain eye contact (Cook et al., 2021). Some individuals with autism have highlighted that masking can become an automatic and pervasive behaviour when interacting with the neurotypical environment, leading to confusion regarding aspects of their identity. This can result in uncertainty about where the mask begins and ends, even for the individuals themselves (Tierney et al., 2015).

Masking may emerge as a protective mechanism to prevent the recurrence of bullying, rejection, discrimination, or ostracism. Studies indicate that masking serves as a response to the stigma associated with autism (Chapman et al., 2022). Individuals on the autism spectrum have described masking to attain social acceptance, potentially influenced by feelings of shame and self-criticism (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Masking may be influenced by a perception, frequently rooted in adverse past experiences, that relationships with non-autistic individuals must conform to neurotypical standards (Miller et al., 2020). Individuals on the autism spectrum who exhibit increased masking behaviours typically express heightened levels of anxiety. Moreover, specific studies have established an association between masking and depression. The data suggest an association between masking and mental health challenges; however, the direction of causality is yet to be established (Chapman et al., 2022).

The Double Empathy Theory

The double empathy theory presents a counterargument to deficit-based hypotheses in the field of autism by positing that social obstacles are not exclusive to autism (Laushman, 2024). Additionally, it challenges the idea that individuals on the autism spectrum lack the theory of mind but rather suggests that the issue lies in the mismatch between autistic and non-autistic individuals rather than solely in how autistic individuals interact with others. This concept implies that autistic and non-autistic individuals may struggle to understand each other's perspectives (Milton, 2012). The term 'double empathy dilemma' describes a breakdown in communication between individuals with diverse dispositions and mental understandings. It is a 'double problem' as both individuals are affected, making it a shared issue rather than one person's burden. The social interaction between two individuals with differing social dispositions creates a significant disconnection, which is more pronounced for non-autistic individuals who perceive it as strange. In contrast, the autistic individual considers it a common experience (Milton, 2013).

Durig (1993) proposes that a perceived deficiency in empathising is due to the distinct information processing methods of individuals on the autism spectrum compared to neurotypicals. Individuals on the autism spectrum possess a strength in splitting and systematising information, which may lead to a reduced emphasis on empathy in their processing. Conversely, Coleman and Garfinkel (1968) contend that individuals with autism do not engage in the process of 'filling in gaps' as opposed to neurotypicals. He contends that non-autistic individuals typically 'fill in gaps' with the information given to build a complete or comprehensive picture as they see it. As already stated, individuals on

the autism spectrum process information literally and focus on physical and immediate details rather than filling in gaps during information processing thus, they lack the inherent disposition that forms the collectively understood social context and are viewed as lacking empathy. Hans Asperger (1944) also acknowledged such ideas.

Other studies contradict the points presented and acknowledge that neurotypical individuals do not always have a better understanding of how autistic individuals think, and vice versa. (McGeer, 2004). Additionally, Milton (2013) contends that labelling individuals with autism as lacking empathy is highly perilous. He acknowledges that the distinctive perspectives of individuals on the autism spectrum do not entirely account for the challenges in understanding and communication between autistic and non-autistic individuals. Milton (2013) proposes that the challenge of mutual understanding stems not just from autistic cognition but also from struggles in grasping each other's thinking, as demonstrated by the concept of double empathy. Both individuals with autism and those without autism encounter difficulties in comprehending each other during encounters, a phenomenon described by Milton (2017) as a salience mismatch. Hence, it is contended that this problem impacts neurotypical individuals and those with autism in the same way.

A recent study conducted by Sheppard et al. (2023) involved 348 participants, with 139 of them being autistic. These participants completed an online questionnaire to confirm previous research indicating that non-autistic individuals perceive greater difficulty in understanding the thoughts and emotions of autistic individuals compared to non-autistic individuals. Similarly, people on the autism spectrum experience a heightened sense of empathy towards their peers who also have autism, as compared to those without autism. This aligns with research indicating that individuals with autism tend to prefer socialising with other individuals who also have autism (DeBrabander et al., 2019).

Moreover, when interacting with other individuals with autism, they exhibit similar levels of efficacy and rapport as non-autistic individuals (Crompton et al., 2020a). The results align with the findings of Crompton et al. (2020b), in which autistic adults said that they found it easier to comprehend those who are also autistic and possessed a greater understanding of other autistic individuals. Additional studies explored the idea that interaction requires two individuals, demonstrating that non-autistic individuals have difficulty fully understanding the emotional and mental states of autistic individuals (Camilleri et al., 2023).

Hence, the issue of double empathy underscores the difficulties in achieving mutual comprehension between those with autism and those without autism. Additionally, it underscores the significance of valuing neurodiversity and distinctiveness among different populations. Resolving the issue of double empathy might result in a more perceptive comprehension of autism among persons without autism and assist autistic individuals in feeling appreciated and accommodated by their non-autistic counterparts. This methodology cultivates a heightened degree of empathy and comprehension, crucial in establishing inclusive educational settings whereby disparities are accepted and accommodated to facilitate favourable social interactions and learning encounters for all participants.

Benefits of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is the practice of having children with diverse abilities learn together in a regular classroom setting, following the same curriculum simultaneously, with complete acceptance and integration, ensuring that all students feel equal (Bailey et al., 1998). Significant studies conducted over several years consistently demonstrate that

children with different abilities display favourable social and emotional conduct when integrated into regular classrooms. This is due to their ability to assimilate with peers who exhibit a wide range of socio-emotional skills. Studies conducted by researchers revealed that children with different abilities who engage in mainstream settings alongside neurotypical classmates demonstrate enhanced social skills due to their tendency to copy the behaviour and skills of their peers. Students on the autistic spectrum demonstrate the ability to utilise social skills in new encounters within an inclusive environment, primarily due to peer support (Gupta et al., 2014). A study conducted by Strain and Bovey (2011) revealed that children on the spectrum who participated in Learning Experiences and Alternative Program (LEAP) classrooms had milder autistic behaviours compared to children with autism who did not participate in the LEAP programme model. It is worth noting that children on the spectrum have enhanced behavioural patterns subsequent to their involvement in programmes, which persist as they transition into mainstream educational settings (Strain & Bovey, 2011). The LEAP programme is specifically created to provide a behaviourally and developmentally suitable technique for instructing children, with or without disabilities, in an inclusive early childhood setting.

Inclusion educational systems offer benefits not only to students with different abilities but also to all children through peer-to-peer interactions facilitated by adult educators. Educators must enable interactions that align with the child's developmental levels in such a system (Gupta et al., 2014). One frequently mentioned benefit of inclusion for typically developing children pertains to regular and spontaneous interactions within an inclusive setting (Odom et al., 2006). Despite the predominant emphasis on the advantages of inclusion for children with different abilities in existing research, it is evident from limited studies that average peers do not experience a decrease in their skills

as a result of their collaborations with students with different abilities (Strain & Bovey, 2011). Consistently exposing children to inclusion from a young age increases the acceptance of individuals with different abilities. This, in turn, fosters greater understanding and good attitudes towards diverse individuals. Children exhibit a decreased tendency to regard individuals with different abilities as impaired and demonstrate an increased inclination to initiate friendships with peers who may possess dissimilar characteristics. In the context of inclusiveness, it is observed that students who are typically developing exhibit a propensity to proactively assist their peers who are encountering challenges with academic assignments. Hence, research indicates that all positive actions enhance the ambience and foster a feeling of inclusion and mutual respect within the classroom and school (Gupta et al., 2014).

The findings of a study conducted by Siperstein et al. (2007) indicate that the inclusion of students with different abilities in mainstream classrooms may potentially enhance typical developing students' attitudes towards those with impairments. Nevertheless, the participants expressed their belief that the inclusion of children with needs could have an adverse effect on their academic outcomes. This is attributed to the fact that students with needs tend to demand teachers' attention, resulting in diminished academic performance. In addition, the research conducted by Siperstein et al. (2007) suggests that typically developing pupils exhibit a lack of interest in engaging with peers with different abilities outside of the classroom environment. This observation is further corroborated by Idol (2006), who asserts that the inclination of older children to embrace and integrate peers with disabilities diminishes. These studies provide a rationale for the limited social circle that students on the autism spectrum tend to have during their school years. Furthermore, it affirms that the most effective approach to achieving inclusion is to

implement complete inclusion within regular schools at the earliest opportunity (Gupta et al., 2014).

Addressing the needs of students with different abilities necessitates additional dedication from students and educators. It encompasses logistical planning but offers numerous advantages to all pupils, regardless of disability. Teachers in inclusive classrooms must incorporate numerous teaching strategies to reach students with diverse learning abilities effectively. Even students assigned to a traditional classroom can benefit from this, as it enhances their engagement in the learning process (Kumar, 2018). A number of educators believe that including students with different abilities in mainstream classes yields benefits for all students. However, due to the newness of inclusive education, educators perceive a shortage of accessible resources and meet various obstacles in effectively implementing inclusivity. Research findings suggest that educators encounter various problems, with a prominent concern being the insufficient confidence educators possess in effectively implementing inclusive practices. The absence of confidence appears to be attributed to insufficient training and support provided by colleagues and special education supervisors. Furthermore, it appears that the teaching approaches employed are inadequate, and there is a lack of consistency in the adaption of the curriculum for children with different abilities (Dash, 2018).

In order to attain true inclusivity within the realm of education, inclusion systems must extend their attention beyond mere academic accomplishments. Instead, they should prioritise the cultivation of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are crucial for effectively addressing the needs of society. Inclusive education should prioritise individuals in the school or community who encounter barriers to fully participating in education (McMaster, 2014). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2017), various obstacles to inclusive education extend beyond only teaching methods. Society's unfavourable views towards differences pose the most significant obstacle to attaining successful inclusivity. These attitudes lead to discrimination, labelling, stigma, prejudices, and a lack of awareness. Overcoming these barriers leads to an improved and more prosperous inclusive education

Inclusion Practices in Maltese Educational System

In February 2023, a comprehensive evaluation and subsequent relaunch of the Policy on "Inclusive Education in Schools Route to Quality Inclusion" took place. The advancement of inclusive education and equity necessitates the development of a proficient implementation strategy. This policy aims to guarantee equitable access to high-quality education and comprehensive support for all learners, fostering academic achievement within a comprehensive and inclusive educational framework. The policy adopts a responsive approach, fostering the principles and practices of inclusion and equity. The policy is based on the principle that every learner has the right to a meaningful educational experience that is effective, suitable, and tailored to their specific learning journeys. The primary objective is to foster inclusive educational settings that promote safety, security, motivation, and belonging among all students within the school community. Consistent with the aforementioned research, the policy recognises the utilisation of an individual strength-based strategy, which has been demonstrated via several studies to yield superior outcomes and achievements. The education department fosters a cooperative community through its policies, wherein all parties involved collaborate to eliminate any educational obstacles (MEYR, 2022).

Implementing a policy that caters to the unique demands of all learners is the most efficient approach to ensure equitable access to education, enabling all students to acquire knowledge and cultivate the necessary abilities for success. The policy employs a diversity wheel to ascertain the varied requirements of the students. Two of the six categories of diversities are associated explicitly with students with different abilities. These categories include cognitive and learning diversity, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, and gifted and talented individuals with high abilities. Additionally, there is physical and psychological diversity, which incorporates physical and sensory impairments and emotional and behavioural challenges (MEYR, 2022). As a result of the broad spectrum of autism, students who are on the spectrum belong to both groups.

The policy guarantees an efficient teaching strategy that is inclusive and adaptable to a wide range of differences while promoting a learning environment that adheres to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (MEYR, 2022). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is advocated as a comprehensive philosophy, methodology, and set of principles that aim to facilitate the development and implementation of adaptable pedagogical methods that effectively cater to the diverse needs of students within the educational setting. In light of the heterogeneous composition of modern educational settings, educators are actively seeking novel approaches to address the complexities arising from this diversity effectively. A disparity exists between a progressively varied student body and a uniform curriculum. UDL is widely regarded as a suitable framework for creating lesson plans in general education classes that are becoming more diverse. It also plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive education. (Capp, 2017).

The educational system in Malta is presently involved in developing a National Education Strategy from 2024 to 2030. The documentation was made available for

thorough review and input from all relevant parties. The consultation process involved the active participation of educators, parents, professionals, and the general public.

Stakeholders were invited to comment on the proposed plan through meetings, conferences, and online forms. The strategic framework is founded upon three primary pillars: growth and empowerment, well-being, and equity and inclusion (MEYR, 2023)

The prioritisation of equality and inclusion as a strategic priority is driven by the escalating socioeconomic disparities, particularly exacerbated by the pandemic, heightened migration rates, and the digital divide. A recommended approach under this strategy involves the implementation of a redesigned inclusion model that primarily focuses on class support systems for students who have challenges but do not qualify for a statement of needs. The national strategy acknowledges the distinct functions of resource centres and learning centres. Additionally, the suggested framework includes measures that evaluate the concept of support centres and their programmes to address existing difficulties (MEYR, 2023).

These two publications, establishing Malta's educational system, were created in conjunction with the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, the National Curriculum Framework for All, and the Respect for All Framework, demonstrating their complementary nature. In addition, they utilise international obligations, including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which Malta has signed to ensure universal access to education (Eurydice Unit Malta, 2023).

Inclusion and Autism

The inclusion of children on the autism spectrum is a fundamental right. Inclusive educational environments offer numerous advantages for students on the autism spectrum, encompassing the mitigation of social stigma, the establishment of respectful interpersonal connections, the cultivation of positive social behaviour among all students, and the enhancement of autism-related knowledge (Beghin, 2021). Nevertheless, obstacles and impediments exist to achieving inclusivity, including educators' attitudes, the necessity for professional development in autism comprehension, and the requirement for adjustments and adaptations in the classroom (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). One of the main challenges mainstream schools face is the provision of suitable pedagogy that prioritises the needs of students, ensuring their effective education, including those who face significant disadvantages and disabilities (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education., 1994). This is exceptionally accurate for students on the autism spectrum, given their distinct profiles of abilities and challenges (Roberts & Webster, 2020).

In Malta, students on the autism spectrum who are educated in mainstream settings receive support through two distinct methods: a one-on-one LSE or a shared support educator. A one-to-one LSE is meant to help a single student with different abilities assigned to a specific class. In contrast, a shared support LSE is intended to cater to the requirements of two or more students with different abilities who may not be in the same classroom. Consequently, students assigned shared LSEs must work alone for a designated duration and are expected to complete specific tasks autonomously (Frendo, 2019). A governing body allocates the necessary help within the education department based on the

suggestions of multiple professionals assessing the child. Providing support is crucial to guarantee that the child receives suitable education and attention, facilitating optimal functioning within a classroom setting. This could provide individualised learning help for several youngsters on the autistic spectrum in Malta (Frendo, 2019).

Students on the Autism Spectrum and School Experiences

Regrettably, there is a lack of study on the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum about inclusion (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). Over several years, individuals on the autism spectrum have been overlooked in studies about their understanding of inclusion and the consequences of its absence in a school environment. The significance of social inclusion in promoting favourable educational outcomes for students on the autism spectrum has been supported by empirical research (Holmes, 2022a). A limited number of studies have focused on the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum, underscoring the necessity for more investigation to have a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and viewpoints about inclusion (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). A number of research have been globally published regarding the self-reported inclusive school experiences of students on the autism spectrum. Only six of these investigations included pupils attending secondary school settings (Lebenhagen, 2024).

The synthesis of these study findings suggests that autistic high school students express significant concerns regarding diagnostic labelling, depression, peer relationships, teacher qualities, access to professional support, and the availability of "space and time" for communication (Lebenhagen, 2024). Roberts and Simpson (2016) conducted a research study involving students on the autism spectrum. The analysis of data collected from these students suggests that education professionals should have a more profound

understanding of the environmental factors that impact the students' involvement in school. These elements include noise, crowding, restricted mobility opportunities, curriculum requirements, and alterations in routine. Additionally, education professionals must grasp how these factors can potentially intensify pre-existing levels of stress and anxiety. The most beneficial forms of support at school, as deemed by students, include teachers who demonstrate empathy and patience, social support and friendships, and engaging work (Saggers et al., 2016). Students on the autism spectrum identified teacher flexibility as a significant factor in successful inclusion, positively influencing their experiences (Roberts & Simpson, 2016).

Otherwise, a number of studies have demonstrated that students on the autism spectrum encounter challenges in accessing the necessary support, resulting in their limited engagement and academic performance in both educational settings and beyond. According to research conducted by Hedges et al (2014), it is indicated that individuals on the autism spectrum have several challenges during their secondary school years. These challenges include inconsistencies within the school environment, problems in establishing interpersonal relationships, a general lack of information regarding autism, and the presence of inefficient support. Support from special education teachers and paraprofessionals is recognised as a crucial resource for students on the autism spectrum, particularly when it is delivered in a subtle manner that does not highlight their differences. While support from special education teachers and paraprofessionals can promote positive emotions among students, inadequate management may result in students on the autism spectrum feeling isolated, potentially leading to negative emotional outcomes (Danker et al., 2016).

Students on the autism spectrum define mainstream schools as intricate social environments. Though these students demonstrated a desire for friendship in school, many encountered difficulties forming and sustaining these relationships, with numerous individuals reporting a lack of close friends in the school environment. The social experiences of autistic girls diverge from those of their male counterparts, as girls often employ strategies to mask their differences in order to conform (Horgan et al., 2022).

Mainstream school experiences seem to adversely affect students on the autism spectrum well-being (Horgan et al., 2022). Hebron and Humphrey (2012) identified that adolescents on the autism spectrum in mainstream education exhibit markedly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and anger, alongside a diminished self-concept compared to their neurotypical counterparts. A significant number of student participants demonstrated elevated levels of stress, anxiety, anger, frustration, loneliness, and despair. This was mainly attributed to social relationships, interruptions in routine, encounters with an unpredictable environment, and a demanding curriculum (Horgan et al., 2022).

Students on the Autism Spectrum and School Transitions

Transitioning from primary to secondary school can be a crucial milestone in a student's educational path, defined by different changes and obstacles. This shift holds significant importance in the holistic development of adolescents. Studies indicate that the experiences children undergo during these transitions can significantly influence their social and academic achievements, perhaps determining the success or failure of a student (Stack et al., 2020). A growing body of research substantiates the proposition that children who commence their education with a favourable beginning are more inclined to actively participate and achieve academic and social accomplishments (Marsh et al., 2017).

Students on the autism spectrum are expected to face greater difficulty throughout this shift. Students on the autism spectrum exhibit specific challenges when adjusting to changes. The academic performance and mental suffering of students on the autism spectrum might be adversely impacted by the challenges they face in middle and secondary schools (Mandy et al., 2016b).

Existing material on the psychosocial effects and perceptions of students on the autism spectrum regarding the transition to school is conflicting. Studies indicate that certain students reported favourable experiences deemed superior to their initial expectations (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Nevertheless, some individuals have documented adverse encounters irrespective of the specific service to which a student was transitioning to. The observed diversity in experiences appears to be influenced by the nature of the support students receive within mainstream educational institutions. The majority of adverse experiences were observed among students who lacked support within the context of regular education (Stack et al., 2020).

The viewpoints on school transitions of pupils on the autism spectrum shed light on a range of difficulties and encounters that influence their educational path (Stack et al., 2021). According to existing research, moving from primary to secondary school poses significant challenges and is of utmost importance for adolescents on the spectrum. Although certain students may encounter favourable experiences during this period of transition, others encounter various challenges, including sensory stress in bustling settings, difficulties in establishing and sustaining friendships, victimisation by peers, unfavourable perceptions of differences, obstacles in accessing educational resources, disciplinary concerns associated with autistic behaviours, and diminished expectations from teaching personnel (Stack et al., 2020).

Adults appear to view the shift as more challenging and demanding than students on the autism spectrum do (Richter et al., 2022). A study undertaken by Stack et al. (2020) in Ireland included adolescents on the spectrum and their parents to investigate their perceptions regarding the transition from primary to secondary school. The findings of this study highlight the significance of thorough planning and collaboration among all parties involved. In general, the secondary school environment had a high degree of structure, encompassing modifications to the curriculum, supportive systems and structures, and an overall school climate that demonstrated more efficacy in addressing the unique requirements of the students in the sample compared to their primary schools.

In similar terms, a separate study conducted in France, including students on the autism spectrum, revealed a favourable self-perception and a preference for secondary education over primary education due to a range of factors. The students directed their attention towards their daily experiences in secondary school rather than engaging in critical analysis of the transition process, which was typically orchestrated and facilitated by the adults in their lives. The positive experiences and distinct perspectives they possess regarding the transfer and the initial year of secondary school can enhance the overall optimism and inclusivity of transition planning (Richter et al., 2022).

It is vital to comprehend the distinct requirements of pupils on the spectrum and offer customised assistance to guarantee a favourable transition encounter and foster their overall welfare throughout their educational course. Regrettably, students on the autism spectrum are frequently excluded from both transition planning and transition research (Richter et al., 2022). To foster supportive, including, and empowering educational environments, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of youngsters on the autism spectrum concerning inclusion and school transition. By appreciating their viewpoints and

engaging them in the procedure, educational institutions can more effectively address the varied requirements of pupils on the spectrum and enhance their scholastic, interpersonal, and psychological welfare.

Chapter Summary

This literature review discusses the intricate nature of comprehending and assisting those individuals on the autism spectrum. The literature study encompassed an examination of various aspects, including the definition of autism, the neurodiversity-informed approach, the strengths and challenges associated with autism, and the double empathy theory. The text presented an overview of inclusive education policies and their progression in international and national contexts. Additionally, the literature review provides a comprehensive examination of scholarly investigations pertaining to autistic children attending mainstream schools, as well as stakeholders' viewpoints regarding the process of transitioning from primary to secondary education. In recent years, there has been an increase in studies focused on the education of students on the autism spectrum, specifically investigating the most effective approaches to enhance their learning. Further investigation is warranted in the domain of autism students' viewpoints regarding inclusion and transitions in mainstream educational settings. In order to foster supportive and empowering educational environments, it is imperative to consider the perspectives of youngsters on the autism spectrum in relation to inclusion and school transition. By appreciating their viewpoints and engaging them in the procedure, educational institutions can more effectively address the varied requirements of students on the autism spectrum and enhance their scholastic, interpersonal, and psychological welfare. Thus, the primary inquiry that directs this study is: What are the experiences of students on the

Autism Spectrum when transitioning from Primary School to Middle School in schools in Malta?

The findings of the study conducted with students from Malta have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the existing body of international literature. This is particularly relevant as numerous countries are currently transitioning towards a more inclusive education system, which presents comparable challenges despite variations in their respective educational systems (Watkins et al., 2009).

Methodology

The research study aimed to investigate the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school, emphasising its potential impact on both academic and social development (Smyth et al., 2004). Transitioning from primary school to middle school is reported to pose significant challenges for pupils due to the variations in school structure and environment (Mandy et al., 2016b). Nevertheless, it is also reported that adolescents on the autism spectrum encounter more difficulties in adapting to such changes compared to their peers (Mandy et al., 2016b). Despite the seeming more significant challenges faced by students on the autism spectrum throughout this transition, there is a lack of research that considers the viewpoints of these students themselves (Stack et al., 2021).

Therefore, this study explores the transition experiences of adolescents on the autism spectrum as they move to Middle School. The research being conducted will examine the positive encounters and challenges students on the autism spectrum may have because of the distinct differences between primary and middle school environments. By gaining insight into the students' perceptions, educators and stakeholders can enhance their understanding of the students' needs and implement more effective support systems. The pupils' experiences help mitigate the environmental stressors and changes that come with transitions (Holmes, 2022b).

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods used to address the transition of students on the autism spectrum from primary school to middle school. The underlying research theory is rooted in interpretivist ideas, which place significant focus on comprehending participants' subjective experiences and viewpoints (Ryan, 2018). To accomplish the aim of the research, the study implements a qualitative methodology by

adopting semi-structured interviews. The data was obtained via semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who showed a response to the call. The interviews offer a comprehensive understanding of the students' transition and encounters resulting from the shift from primary to secondary education (Curson et al., 2019).

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to gather comprehensive information on the experiences of students on the autism spectrum school transition. In this context, "narrative" pertains to the storytelling aspect inherent in the interviews, emphasising the way participants share their experiences, perspectives, and meanings through structured and personal accounts (Creswell, 2013). Employing a narrative research paradigm within the qualitative research framework enabled me to actively participate in the research process (Giorgi, 2009). More precisely, a combination of in-person and online interviews were conducted to investigate the various situations that students on the autism spectrum encounter during the transition from primary to middle school. The findings offer insights into the subjective experiences of students on the autism spectrum, which can contribute to developing inclusive practices in schools. Applying a narrative research methodology was crucial in acquiring a more comprehensive understanding of the research subject (Giorgi, 2009). The participants assume the role of key informants since their stories serve as the foundation for the development of detailed accounts of their experiences in middle school (Weiss, 1995).

Thus, narratives from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data and identify recurring patterns and themes. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Thematic analysis is a technique used to find, analyse, organise, describe, and report the recurring ideas or topics identified within a collection of data, specifically in this case,

narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, when applied to narratives, enables researchers to understand the experiences, perspectives, and meanings shared by individuals or groups. Additionally, it enables the identification of patterns and themes that may not be readily evident using alternative approaches (Riessman, 1993). Four main overarching themes emerged from the analysis, which will be further explored in subsequent chapters.

This chapter will discuss the methods employed to collect and analyse data, providing insights addressing the identified research questions.

Rationale for Research Strategy and Approach

Research Paradigm

Interpretivist research implies subjective, multifaceted, socially constituted reality. Interpretivism evaluates social events through societal or cultural ideals (Chowdhury, 2014). Interpretivist or constructivist perspectives study human experiences (Mertens, 2005).

This study used the interpretivist approach because of its philosophical viewpoint and research methodology, which analyses social events through individual perceptions and understandings (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). The study examines transition experiences from primary to middle school students on the autism spectrum. Interpretivism is the best philosophical research for the study since it holds that understanding social beliefs, motivations, and reasoning is essential to understanding facts (Ryan, 2018). The interpretivist approach to this study helps the researcher understand the subjective interpretations and encounters of students on the autism spectrum within a social framework, focusing on their beliefs, motivations, and reasoning. This strategy is helpful

in studying complex social phenomena like social relationships, inclusion, and individuals on the autism spectrum. It recognises the importance of understanding this group's unique perspectives and experiences in a particular society.

Research Approach

Qualitative research methodology examines the subjective aspects of reality and their social construction. The objective is to understand a social phenomenon from the participants' perspective. It also highlights the description of individual cases and the varied interpretations different individuals offer (Creswell, 2013). The main aim of the qualitative approach is to explore individuals and gain insights into their social and cultural phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This methodology adopts an interpretive and naturalistic perspective, focussing on understanding events through the meanings attributed by individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Furthermore, it employs a methodology that seeks to analyse the daily experiences of diverse groups and communities in their natural settings, enabling the researcher to comprehensively understand real-life occurrences (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methodology seeks to collect data by purposefully selecting participants and employing semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Creswell, 2009).

This dissertation's research inquiry is closely aligned with the qualitative methodology criteria. This study aims to gain a thorough understanding of the various experiences faced by students on the autism spectrum during their transition from primary to middle school. A qualitative approach is the most effective method for understanding and acquiring knowledge about such events. The choice of a qualitative methodology in this study is driven by its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of students on the autism spectrum and the factors that shape their experiences. This tool provides essential

insights that would otherwise remain inaccessible, enhancing the understanding of young individuals on the autism spectrum (Kalra et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the interpretative research paradigm is closely associated with qualitative methods (Abubakar, 2018). This allows for an exploration of the complex, socially constructed realities that shape our understanding of the world (Trent & Cho, 2020). This study emphasises qualitative research techniques and an interpretivist approach that prioritises the exploration of the views, motivations, and reasoning of students on the autism spectrum (Ryan, 2018).

Narrative Inquiry. The study's purpose and question guide the researcher in determining the research philosophy, design and approach. These factors should be in line with and mutually reinforce each other to ensure the validity and reliability of the research (Butina, 2015). A narrative inquiry complements both the research philosophy and design of this research study, as it is an inductive qualitative research method (Butina, 2015). Its primary focus is the interpretation of human experience through the use of stories or narratives. It is especially beneficial for research initiatives that seek to comprehend individual experiences, investigate intricate social phenomena, and reveal the subtleties of human experiences that may be overlooked by alternative methodologies (Riessman, 1993). Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 415) argue that: “Experience . . . is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.” Researchers employing the narrative inquiry approach contend that stories represent the most accurate representation of collective experiences (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007).

Narrative research relies on the principle that individuals comprehend and attribute significance to their experiences through the narratives they recount (Andrews et al., 2013;

McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013). People employ narratives to construct and organise their life experiences. By employing narrative structures, individuals make sense of and attribute importance to their existence (Ntinda, 2018).

Narrative research can significantly contribute to this study by offering an extensive and intricate comprehension of participant experiences and facilitating the understanding and enrichment of participants' overall experience (Moen, 2006). It facilitates an in-depth understanding of the participant's experience, in this case, school transitions, by enabling the researcher to gather and examine narratives from participants, which can yield a more profound insight into their experiences, motivations and behaviours. Riessman (1993) asserts that respondents construct narratives about specific situations in their lives, mainly when there is a disconnect between themselves and society. By analysing the participants' narratives, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the behaviours and activities (Moen, 2006) that occur within the social context of school transitions.

Narratives may more accurately reflect the context and integrity of people's lives compared to quantitative research methods (Kartch, 2017). Narratives are limitless in their diversity (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Narrative inquiry includes multiple definitions, but in this context, it is utilised via narrative interviewing. This approach uses semi-structured interviews primarily to elicit and co-construct students' narratives. By employing open-ended questions, the interviewer facilitates students in articulating their personal experiences and fosters a collaborative process of meaning-making. This method not only records the students' perspectives but also emphasises the relational dimension of the interview, wherein both the interviewer and the student collaboratively construct the

narrative, providing significant insights into the student's educational and personal experiences.

This research study considers interviews not only as instruments to obtain factual information but also as jointly established narratives that represent the students' experiences, values, and processes of meaning-making (Riessman, 2008). Moreover, the participants were prompted to narrate their experiences, emphasising major or critical events in their academic journeys, specifically the school transition (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). Interviews enable students to express their perceptions of their learning experiences while the interviewer facilitates deeper thinking and meaning-making (Chase, 2011). Consequently, I employed these narratives as the primary data, analysing them within the context of the student's life instead of separating the facts (Polkinghorne, 1995). Furthermore, the narratives enabled the researcher to reflect on the participants' stories and interact with their experiences innovatively, as the researcher derived meaning and anticipated experiences from new perspectives (Hutchinson, 2019).

Data Collection

Children are increasingly seen as significant participants in their daily lives and overall welfare studies. However, children's support needs and experiences remain elusive due to a lack of children's involvement in social research (Rasmussen & Pagsberg, 2019). Children are not solely perceived as "subordinates" to whom adults should communicate but also as significant social participants who should be engaged and acknowledged for having valid voices of their own (Howe & Covell, 2009). This research aligns with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), which mandates that children are entitled to articulate their opinions in areas that concern

them freely. Nevertheless, studies only offer a limited representation of the perspectives of children with autism, leaving their support requirements unmet (Rasmussen & Pagsberg, 2019).

Sampling Technique

This study employed non-probability purposeful sampling for its ability to acquire tailored and specialised samples (Gill, 2020). Purposeful sampling is a commonly employed technique in qualitative research that entails the deliberate selection of participants who offer substantial information to optimise the use of limited resources. This procedure involves identifying and choosing individuals or groups with outstanding knowledge or skill in a specific area of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Therefore, a purposeful sampling approach is beneficial for addressing the research issue pertaining to the population of students with autism. The participants for this study were intentionally selected through a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring they met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. This deliberate selection process allowed for the inclusion of individuals whose experiences and characteristics aligned with the study's focus, thereby enhancing the richness and relevance of the data. By targeting participants who met predefined qualifications, such as their educational background, diagnosis, or transition experiences, the study aimed to gather insights that would provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach ensured that the findings directly applied to the research questions and objectives.

Recruitment Process

This research project required participants who were students on the autism spectrum and had already transitioned from primary to middle school in local state and church schools. The study required participants to engage in a one-hour narrative

interview either in person or online, thus targeting students on the autism spectrum who communicate through verbal means.

A multifaceted recruitment approach was implemented to ensure a comprehensive and diverse sample for this research, utilising both conventional and digital methods. The primary recruitment approach involved using the National School Support Services (NSSS) as a liaison or intermediary for recruiting participants within State schools. Online platforms were also used and proved to be crucial channels for recruiting due to their broad reach and ease of use. This is particularly true when recruiting participants from Church schools. Subsequent conversations were carried out to verify eligibility and obtain first informed consent from the participants' parents, followed by their very own assent.

Participants Characteristics

The study included a varied sample of participants, consisting of four students on the autism spectrum, aged 11 to 17 years. The sample had two males and two females, indicating a balanced gender representation. Participants were selected from state and church schools, guaranteeing diverse experiences involving transitions in mainstream education. Participants were required to possess a formal diagnosis of autism as part of the inclusion criteria. Two participants were identified with autism spectrum disorder, though with varying levels of needs. One of the participants was classified as being on the high-functioning spectrum of autism, described by the parents as Asperger's syndrome. One participant was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in conjunction with ADHD. Individuals on the autism spectrum exhibited a range of support needs. Three participants received classroom support from a shared LSE. One participant was deemed entirely autonomous by the board of education assessment, thus lacking the support of an LSE. All participants demonstrated effective communication during the interview. One participant exhibited proficiency in

English and opted to converse in English during the interview despite the family being Maltese-speaking and communicating with the participant in Maltese. One person was entirely fluent in English, and the family also communicated in English. Two individuals communicated exclusively in Maltese and favoured the Maltese language during the interview. The participant's characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	School Sectors	Diagnosis	LSE Support	Communication	Language Preference
P1	11	Female	Church	ASD	Yes	Yes	English
P2	11	Male	State	ASD with ADHD	Yes	Yes	English
P3	14	Female	State	High Functioning ASD (Aspergers)	No	Yes	Maltese
P4	17	Male	State	ASD	Yes	Yes	Maltese

Ethical Considerations

Consent, assent, safeguards, and self-determination are key considerations. In this study, participants had the right to decline or withdraw at any stage. Informed consent empowers participants to make decisions, including the choice to refuse participation (Cohen et al., 2007).

The importance of informed consent becomes evident at the early stages of a research study, as it is necessary to obtain access to the institution or organisation where the research will take place and gain the approval of those individuals whose permission is required before beginning the work (Cohen et al., 2007). I submitted an ethics form and study documents to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) to perform this research. This form was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (see Appendix 1). MEYR Research Ethics Committee clearance was needed to recruit state school volunteers. The National School Support Services Inclusion Head of Departments helped me recruit through state schools after approval from the MEYR Research Ethics Committee (MREC) (see Appendix 2). Social media platforms, including my personal Facebook page, were utilised to share study invitations, with approval from the Faculty of Education's FREC. Every recruitment channel followed a methodical procedure to guarantee uniformity and uphold ethical principles. All communications provided comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, methodologies, and the rights of the participants. As part of my research study, I conducted interviews with students under the age of 18. In addition, I provided assent forms to the students, which they used to indicate their consent to engage in the research study (see Appendix 4). The legal guardians' informed consent forms (see Appendix 3) were submitted together with these forms. Students' assent ensures their understanding of the research, its implications, and their responsibilities. This dual consent approach safeguards student rights and well-being. Assent protects students' autonomy by enabling them to express their opinions on significant matters. Minors must be able to express their intention to participate while receiving protection during the study. The ultimate decision to participate in the study rests with the student, enabling respect and autonomy, which are fundamental in ethical research, particularly involving children (Cotrim et al., 2021).

I formulated my ethical judgements by prioritising care and compassion. I acknowledged the potential for an emotional reaction from the participants and showed respect for their emotions (Wiles & Boddy, 2013). I implemented a well-defined strategy and referral mechanism to handle any distress effectively. I identified multiple services that can assist participants who might experience distress during the interview. A list of psychological and emotional support services was provided to the participants at the beginning of the interview, along with an explanation that they have the right to end the interview if they feel overwhelmed or distressed. If this distress impacts their emotional well-being, participants may reach out to one of the support services provided in the list. Fortunately, this was not required. I observed the participants' nonverbal cues and committed to halting the interview procedure if they displayed signs of strong emotions (Wiles & Boddy, 2013). Furthermore, I took measures to ensure the secure storage of records, data, and transcripts. Prior to the interview, I provided a concise and explicit explanation to both the participants and the legal guardians regarding their entitlements as participants. The participants' consent indicated that their involvement in this research was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any explanations. Participants had the right not to respond to any questions that caused discomfort, and I repeated this right to them throughout the interview to ensure they did not feel pressured or uneasy at any time. Consent also stressed the importance of participants maintaining non-identifiability.

To maintain the privacy of the participants, respondents were ensured that pseudonyms would be used in the research and that all provided information would be kept confidential. Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that the interviews were recorded in audio format and transcribed. These recordings and transcriptions were securely saved on

a computer that required a password for access. It was emphasised that all data will be permanently deleted after the study is published. Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that the study would not disclose the participants' identities. They were assured that all the collected data would guarantee the non-identifiability of the participants.

Interviews

Interviews allow individuals to share their transition experiences. This can illuminate inclusivity (Gibson, 2004), particularly autistic students' needs. Semi-structured interviews are used in qualitative social science research, especially for exploration and investigation (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Qualitative research methods engage all participants. The researcher explores social aspects and establishes rapport with people through interviews (Gibson, 2004). Participants feel empowered during the study since they may communicate their beliefs, feelings, and worries through interviews (Kalra et al., 2013).

To set a framework, semi-structured interviews follow a guide and focus on one topic. However, it offers investigation and flexibility, allowing the conversation to go multiple ways (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Semi-structured interviews employ closed and open-ended questions, often with follow-up questions for clarification. Semi-structured interviews should last about an hour to avoid interviewer and respondent tiredness (Adams, 2015). According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), semi-structured interviews are the preferred method for gathering information on a given community population's experiences, feelings, and beliefs. Success with this data collection method depends on the flexibility of interview question creation and administration (Horton et al., 2004). This study addresses sensitive topics and requires participant opinions. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are more flexible than other qualitative research methods (Horton et al., 2004). Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow participants to

freely express their views, feelings and emotions (Allan & Skinner, 2020) and ask more detailed questions about individual responses. The goal was to discover participants' actual experiences and narratives. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are the best data-gathering method for this research due to their features.

In the field of education, narrative inquiry entails performing interviews designed to obtain students' lived experiences, perspectives, and beliefs. The interviews are generally semi-structured, permitting flexibility in discussion while maintaining attention to particular topics of interest to the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999). The objective is to gather data and collaboratively create meaning with the participants by thoroughly examining their personal experiences (Hutchinson, 2019).

Narrative interviewing prompts students to contemplate their experiences, difficulties, and achievements in their educational pursuits. This approach appreciates the significance of individual viewpoints, recognising that each student's narrative is distinct and influenced by their social, emotional, and educational circumstances. By collecting these narratives, researchers can gain a deeper, more intricate comprehension of students' experiences, encompassing their emotions, thoughts, and interpretations of their surroundings (Bocharova & Kamińska, 2022).

Narrative inquiry underscores the relational component of research, whereby the interviewer and the student jointly participate in constructing meaning. This strategy allows students to articulate their experiences while enabling researchers to comprehend how students interpret their environment, enhancing personalised and contextually relevant educational insights (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

Interviews Design

The development of appropriate questions (see Appendix 5), which focused on the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during the transition from primary to middle school, was shaped by both local and international literature. The interview protocol has been structured into four sections utilising the funnel format to address the study's research topics. The initial set of inquiries focused on the students' pre-transition experience, encompassing their emotions, aspirations, and reflections around the forthcoming commencement of their new educational institution. The subsequent set of questions pertained specifically to the transition period. This encompassed inquiries regarding the students' encounters upon commencing their attendance at the middle school, encompassing their favourable experiences and whatever challenges they may have faced. As a last step in the questionnaire, participants were requested to provide their perspectives on the local methods employed to facilitate transitions. This section of the questionnaire allows students to express their opinions. It gives them the ability to consider what improvements they would want to see in the transition system.

Conducting the Interviews

After obtaining approval from the FREC, I recruited participants by utilising NSSS and social media platforms. All my participants reached out through social media. I conducted interviews with four participants whose ages ranged from 11 to 17 years. All interactions with my interviewees were conducted in a professional manner. I ensured that the legal guardians and pupils received a copy of the informed consent (see Appendix 3) and assent forms (see Appendix 4) in advance for their perusal. The interview appointments were scheduled via email, with a mutually agreed upon time and convenient

location for the participant. Three participants chose to conduct the interview online, while one participant preferred an in-person interview. To conduct online interviews, I made use of a familiar social media site that the participants were already familiar with. The platforms chosen were Zoom and Microsoft Teams. I personally sent an invitation to the participants, requesting their presence at the prearranged time.

I ensured that the participants were fully aware and knowledgeable about the nature of the study topic and willingly agreed to participate, following the guidelines established by Creswell (2013). Prior to initiating the interview, the participants were notified that the session would be recorded in audio format. The recordings were downloaded onto a laptop that required a password for access. They were then saved in a file that also required a password for transcription and data analysis purposes. Finally, to maintain the non-identifiability of the respondents, I assigned pseudonyms to the information I gathered. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and took place in December 2023.

Conducting interviews with students on the autism spectrum provided significant insights into their distinct perspectives and challenges. Initially, I felt anxious about the participants' readiness to engage in sensitive discussions. Throughout the interview, I observed a few instances of pauses from the participants, and periods when they repeated the question multiple times before responding. However, as they shared their experiences, it became evident that the conversation flowed smoothly, and the students were eager to express their thoughts and feelings. During the interviews, different emotional responses were observed among participants. Some students exhibited enthusiasm when expressing their interests and aspirations, whereas others showed signs of concern or discomfort when dealing with challenges encountered during transitions. Since I was aware of these

emotional cues, I tried to adjust my questioning style to ensure that participants felt safe and respected during the process.

I also experienced moments of understanding and empathy as students shared their narratives. Their reflections offered significant insights into their experiences, emphasising their resilience and the unique challenges they faced. These interactions enhanced my comprehension of the participants' perspectives and highlighted the significance of incorporating their voices in autism-focused research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research denotes the methodical evaluation and structuring of interview transcripts, observational notes, or other non-textual data gathered by the researcher. This analysis seeks to improve the understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Qualitative researchers frequently employ a standardised methodology and outline the data analysis process in their research proposal (Wong, 2008). Creswell (2009) proposes that researchers approach qualitative data analysis by progressing from the particular to the general and by doing analysis at several levels. This is accomplished via a sequential, hierarchical method that starts from the lowest level and progresses to the highest level. However, Creswell (2009) characterises it as being more interactive, as the different stages are interconnected and may not necessarily be followed in order.

To evaluate the data collected from the interviews, I employed a thematic method to understand and examine the narratives of the participants' experiences. To analyse the data, I adhered to the hierarchical framework outlined by Creswell (2009). The initial stage entails arranging and preparing raw data, including transcribing the recorded interviews. In order to achieve an exact transcription, I personally transcribed the

interviews. Once I finished, I cross-referenced the transcription with the original recordings to guarantee precision. Two participants responded and engaged in discussions using the English language. Two other participants were more proficient in speaking Maltese, which led to a more time-consuming transcription procedure. Initially, I transcribed the interviews in Maltese to maintain the authenticity of the original material. After translating the interviews into English, I used the QSR NVivo programme to facilitate the coding and categorising process.

After completing the transcription process, I thoroughly reviewed all the data to comprehensively understand the information and contemplate its overarching significance. Subsequently, I initiated the procedure of coding and categorising the data. The coding or categorisation of data is a crucial step in the process of qualitative data analysis (Wong, 2008). Coding involves systematically arranging textual material into discrete units or sections to derive meaning from the information. The process involves extracting textual data or images acquired during data collection, categorising sentences (or paragraphs) or photographs into separate classifications, and designating labels to these classifications, usually employing terminology sourced from the participants' language. (Creswell, 2009).

I used NVivo (NVivo 15, Lumivero) to conduct this round of data analysis. Data coding techniques are employed to ensure precision while working with raw data. In addition, utilising a computer guarantees that the user is operating in a more systematic, comprehensive, and focused manner (Hilal et al., 2013). The programme was used to upload transcribed documents to extract codes and categorise information based on these codes. The coding process involves generating descriptions of the scene or persons, as well as categorising and analysing themes (Creswell, 2009). The codes were derived by discerning patterns from the collected data. The selected codes were further classified into

different groups or categories (a process called axial coding), facilitating the next stage of the study, where similarities within these categories were consolidated to create a final set of four themes (Creswell, 2013). The categorised data underwent comprehensive analysis and interpretation to identify these four key themes that align with the study's objectives. The four themes that emerged from the descriptions encompassed all the essential information obtained from the transcribed interview material. By employing themes, I could effectively locate and analyse data during the writing process. The data analysis was presented in a concise and logical manner in order to offer a captivating interpretation of the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I will provide a comprehensive analysis of these four themes in the subsequent chapters.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

Rigour in qualitative analysis is essential for ensuring the validity and reliability of the process (Seale, 1997). When evaluating qualitative studies, trustworthiness is regarded as a more suitable criterion compared to validity and reliability, which are more relevant for quantitative studies (Maher et al., 2018). To ensure excellent rigour and trustworthiness in my research projects, I adhered to the methodology outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994). They identified four criteria a qualitative study must meet: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This strategy ensures a thorough and reliable research procedure (Maher et al., 2018).

The thesis was written in the English language. Two interview transcripts were in Maltese, and these quotes were translated into English for linguistic coherence. To ensure the transparency and reliability of the study and accurately represent the participants' original statements, a table containing translated quotes with the original transcript excerpts has been supplied in the Appendix (see Appendix 7).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings of a study accurately reflect the subject matter that was investigated. This entails guaranteeing that the procedures for collecting and analysing data are systematic and transparent and that the outcomes are derived from and representative of the information obtained from the participants (Johnson et al., 2020). Recognising the significance of credibility and validity, I actively worked towards creating trustworthiness during every stage of the research project (Creswell, 2013). The interviews with participants were captured using audio technology and then transcribed exactly as spoken to maintain the integrity of the original material. I carefully reviewed and verified the accuracy of the transcription by comparing it with the audio recording to ensure that transcripts include all the rich information depicted during the interviews. Audio recordings have become a significantly valuable instrument for qualitative research. The transcriptions of these recordings provide a remarkable account of the naturally occurring interactions that take place during interviews. Recordings and transcriptions serve as reliable and precise documentation researchers can consult (Seale, 1997).

I opted for NVivo, a software application, to assist with categorising and organising the data. The software enables researchers to handle complex coding systems and large text volumes effectively, increasing the analysis's depth and complexity (Nowell et al., 2017). NVivo facilitated the digital storage of all data collected from the interviews and allowed for speedy retrieval (Maher et al., 2018). Also, employing computer software to aid in qualitative data analysis ensures a more methodical examination of significant data instances. Additionally, it enhances the transparency of the research audit trail (Seale, 1997).

Transferability

Proving the transferability of qualitative research data can be challenging. Narrative research aims not to discover a universally applicable truth but to illuminate multiple truths or narratives (Hunter, 2010). A distinct characteristic of qualitative research is that it aims to collect participants' experiences while minimising the influence of controlled variables. Every circumstance or experience is inherently unique, making it exceedingly challenging to be transferable or generalised (Krefting, 1991). To ensure the transferability of research, my responsibility was to provide detailed and comprehensive descriptions. These descriptions allow other researchers to assess the applicability of the results to different scenarios (Nowell et al., 2017).

Dependability

Dependability is an essential factor in qualitative research, as it guarantees that the results of a study are coherent and can be reproduced under comparable circumstances. This term is intricately connected to the notion of reliability in quantitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). In my research, I employed a meticulous audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017) to ensure consistent and dependable outcomes. This was accomplished by carefully documenting the raw data, which in this instance consisted of interview transcripts, and maintaining a reflexive notebook during the research endeavour. These phases facilitate the organisation, correlation, and cross-referencing of data while streamlining the research process's reporting (Cypress, 2017). Following these procedures increases the probability that other researchers can reproduce the study and achieve comparable outcomes.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the impartiality, dependability, and trustworthiness of qualitative research conclusions and explanations. It ensures that data collected and analysed are

based on participants' perspectives and experiences rather than the researcher's subjective interpretations or biases (Nowell et al., 2017). Without confirmability, research rigour and trustworthiness are incomplete (Maher et al., 2018). I meticulously recorded every aspect of my dissertation work, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, to maintain its credibility. This documentation allows external evaluation and examination of the research process, promoting transparency and accountability (Noble & Smith, 2015). By providing detailed explanations of the research environment, participants, and data, I am enabling readers to understand the research results. Readers can evaluate interpretations and findings, confirming the research. I carefully acknowledged and examined my biases, values, and preconceptions throughout my investigation. This reduces subjectivity and improves research reliability (Noble & Smith, 2015). Later in this chapter, this concept will be explored.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, reflexivity implies that the researcher should actively engage in ongoing self-evaluation and self-analysis. This involves acknowledging and examining how the researcher's personal experiences may have impacted the various stages of the research process (Dowling, 2006). It guarantees that the researcher's personal opinions and prejudices do not excessively impact the results and acknowledges the researcher's influence on the research process, including the design of research questions and interpretation of results (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

I find the process of reflexivity to be one of the most arduous aspects of the study process. Engaging in a thorough self-analysis and self-evaluation is a task that I find uncomfortable because the deeper my understanding becomes, the greater the potential for self-doubt. Nevertheless, this approach augments objectivity by revealing my possible

subjectivity, thereby diminishing or eradicating bias (Probst, 2015). The inspiration behind selecting this research topic stemmed from my interactions with students on the autism spectrum while working at multiple schools. During my professional interactions, I discovered that students on the autism spectrum often faced difficulties with transitions and experienced a significant change from their early education years. I began to question the efficacy of the school system, educators, and professionals in meeting the needs of these students.

The primary justification in selecting a research topic that directly reflects the student's perspective is primarily because, in various situations such as policy making, transition meetings, and individualised education plan (IEP) meetings, discussions and decisions are constantly influenced by adults. There may be a discrepancy between the perceptions and needs of students on the autism spectrum as perceived by adult stakeholders and the actual thoughts and needs of the students themselves. Hence, I sought to empower these students by giving them a voice. Due to my expertise in guidance, I prefer conducting one-on-one sessions; thus, I chose to use semi-structured interviews. I thought privacy would enhance conversation, foster trust, and establish a connection between the participant and the interviewer. Moreover, my prior experience with students on the autism spectrum influenced my perception of autism as a symptomatic diagnosis that entails challenges and problems. Discussions with my tutor helped me stay focused on adopting a positive perspective on autism using a neurodivergent framework. It was a challenging task because the literature on the topic tends to be influenced by the medical approach, mainly the diagnostic criteria established in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).

I never anticipated the considerable difficulty of recruiting participants. Regrettably, I did not receive any response from the Heads of Department Inclusion, whom NSSS contacted for the recruitment process. The experience was highly disheartening, prompting me to expand my research scope to include students from church schools through social media to potentially recruit additional subjects. It entailed repeating the entire FREC process, resulting in a prolonged procedure and causing a delay in the recruitment and interview process. It was an exceedingly exasperating circumstance and challenging period throughout which I experienced a sense of discouragement. During this phase, I experienced a moment of self-doubt. For example, while striving to be self-reflective, I questioned myself: am I executing this correctly? Is this process worthwhile? Will I achieve the desired outcomes and effectively capture the essence of the participants' experience? Will this research significantly impact the educational experience of students with autism?

Utilising social media to recruit participants yielded positive results, as I started receiving feedback from parents of potential participants. This improved my confidence and optimism, shifting my perspective to believe that this research could provide valuable insights into the experiences and expectations of middle school students with autism. Reflecting on the participant eligibility, a significant limitation of the study becomes evident. It only includes participants who can communicate verbally, excluding non-verbal students on the autism spectrum due to communication challenges during data collection through interviews. These students may possess distinct experiences compared to students on the autism spectrum who can communicate verbally. The epistemological context of this research is conveyed by presenting the participants' perspectives through their narrative excerpts and quotes. This also guarantees that the participants' opinions are not

suppressed by the researcher's subjectivity and influences (Davis, 2018). Furthermore, as cautioned by Johnson and Duberley (2003), I acknowledge my intellectual responsibility by disclosing the epistemological context and origins of any theoretical gains produced in this research.

The purpose of this open and reflective method is to create an audit of valid research decisions made during the investigation. Engaging in reflexivity has allowed me to avoid the confidence that comes with having absolute conviction in knowing and being self-sufficient or immune to criticism. According to Berger (2015), reflexivity is employed not to confirm the researcher's philosophy but to place the research inside an epistemological framework. It is not a final goal but an ongoing endeavour. Incorporating the researcher's perspective and consistently considering their position throughout the thesis supports the inter-subjectivity framework of qualitative research (Davis, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methods applied to this qualitative study investigating the real-life experiences of students on the autism spectrum as they shift from primary to middle school. The study employed a narrative inquiry by using semi-structured interviews for data gathering and thematic analysis methods to conduct data analysis. The chapter also addressed critical ethical considerations, including the principles of informed consent, confidentiality regulations, and risk mitigation methods. The recognition of methods to ensure reliable and trustworthy research and the researcher's reflective practices were noted. Once the methodological framework has been developed, the following chapter will present the investigation findings.

Findings

This chapter presents the research study's findings, with a specific focus on the experience of students on the autism spectrum as they transition from primary to middle school. Through a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, this chapter aims to illustrate the key themes, patterns, and insights that emerged from the interviews with students conducted during the research. The findings in this chapter strongly connect to the research topic and offer unique insights into the influence of emotional and practical support systems on student experiences and growth by emphasising the significance of the school community, peer networks, and transition processes.

The results are categorised into thematic parts, each representing important aspects of the data that enhance comprehension of students on the autism spectrum and their transitions in school. In this chapter, I will provide the significant themes uncovered through thematic analysis that shed light on participants' experiences transitioning to mainstream middle schools in local state and church schools. The chapter begins by introducing themes derived from collected data. Each theme will be thoroughly studied, illustrating its relevance to the research questions by analysing and detecting patterns and trends in data collected in reference to current literature on the topic of study. Moreover, the chapter will explore the sub-themes and categories of each theme, including elements such as the emotions and sentiments experienced before and after the school transition, current strategies related to the transition process, the positive aspects and challenges of the supportive systems, as well as personal accomplishments of the participants. Table 1 illustrates the four primary themes and their respective sub-themes and categories. The findings of this study not only address the research questions that were first enquired but

also add to the current understanding of students with autism. They have a practical impact on educators, policymakers, and future researchers.

Table 2

Themes, Sub-Themes, and Categories Identified From Data Gathered

Themes	Sub Themes	Categories
Theme 1: Formal Transition Procedures	Sub Theme 1: Current approaches to school transition programs	
	Sub Theme 2: Rethinking school transition strategies	
Theme 2: Support Networks	Sub Theme 1: Family	
	Sub Theme 2: Specialised Support	
	Sub Theme 3: Education Professionals	1. Senior Leadership Team & Teachers 2. Learning Support Educators 3. Guidance Teachers
	Sub Theme 4: Peers	1. Positive Friendships 2. Challenging Encounters
Theme 3: Emotional Resonance	Sub Theme 1: Positive sentiments in transition process	1. Before transition 2. After transition

	Sub Theme 2: Emotional challenges in school transitions	1. Before transition 2. After transition
Theme 4: Achievements and Growth	Sub Theme 1: Personal Growth	
	Sub Theme 2: Educational Milestones	

Theme 1: Formal Transition Procedures

This theme explores the organised procedures and systems implemented in schools to provide smooth and effective transitions between primary and middle schools, as experienced by students on the autism spectrum. Transition processes are crucial in facilitating students' easy and successful navigation through educational changes. The strategy in which transition processes are carried out impacts the transition experience of students in terms of their emotional well-being and academic achievement. The theme comprises two more subthemes: current approaches to school transition programs and rethinking school transition strategies.

Current Approaches to School Transition Programs

The current transition processes implemented in both state and church schools were examined and discussed with participants. This section explores the various programs, visits, and meetings conducted prior to the transition of students from primary to middle school, highlighting how these initiatives facilitate the adjustment during this significant shift.

Data gathered indicate variations in transition processes between state schools and church schools. The respondent from the church school noted that there were no transition programs conducted prior to the transition, as clearly stated by the student: “No, there wasn't *any programs*” (Mariella). As explained by the participant, on the first day of year 7 (the first year of middle school), students remain in their previous classroom and are led by teachers to their new classroom “*my school on the first day you have to go to your old classroom before you are called to your new one*” (Mariella). The participant claimed that this method is possible due to the proximity of the primary and middle school buildings.

Conversely, state schools set up several events for students before they transition. Two attendees from state schools asserted that a visit to the middle school is arranged for all year 6 students between the second and third term of the academic year. The visit date appears to be subject to the college's academic calendar. The participants reported that the visit encompassed discussions on various subjects and an orientation visit to the school. Parents and legal guardians are also invited to participate in this activity. However, participants acknowledged that this approach lacks personalisation and fails to address the specific support and requirements that students on the autism spectrum may require. One participant asserted that this activity was conducted digitally via an online gathering in response to the closure of schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also recognised that the usual IEP is conducted between the primary and middle schools, but the students were not present. This was held between the schools' professionals and the parents/legal guardians, as this participant clearly shows that “*a meeting just with the parent. I and all the other kids who had the meeting related, we were not invited*” (Peter).

However, in Maltese state schools, if a student obtains a recommendation of needs from an Educational Psychologist but is not provided with an LSE, individual transition

sessions similar to IEPs are not held. Consequently, this could lead to a shortage of information at the receiving school and provide further challenges for the student, as indicated by the participant: *“I was already diagnosed but apparently the school was not aware...it didn't help much”* (Jessica).

Two participants who had already moved to secondary schools acknowledged that the transition to middle school facilitated a smoother transition to secondary school. They asserted this was possible because *“I already had an idea of what was going to happen”* (Jessica).

Rethinking School Transition Strategies

Given the changing educational setting, established ways of transferring between schools must be rethought to meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum. This section discusses new strategies and beneficial methods suggested by participants to ease transitions, improve student well-being, and foster academic accomplishment. Participants investigated ways to improve transition processes for students on the autism spectrum to reduce their anxiety.

Students perceive state school transfer programs as informative but lacking personalisation. One participant argued that *“the visit doesn't offer ways to be close to the teachers and form teacher, meaning that they can help you more, I think it makes a difference”* (Andrew). This might have a significant impact on students and educators. Another participant stressed this point by claiming it is *“the exact opposite of reassuring because you don't know what's happening, so it defeats the entire purpose you know, if the kid isn't invited when it's their education”* (Peter).

Additionally, students believe that it is necessary to have individual transition visits during the summer, where students on the autism spectrum and other students with

different abilities can meet the staff personnel who will be assisting them in middle school. The participants identified staff members who would be appropriate to get acquainted with prior to the shift, primarily including the assistant head responsible for the year group, the LSE (if applicable), the class form teacher, and the guidance teacher.

A participant expressed the belief that it would be reassuring if students were prepared for the change from the early months of year 6. During the interview, this participant suggested that having sessions in class every fortnight would be excellent, *"that would be ideal and maybe during PSCD"* (Peter). By informing students well in advance, they become cognisant of *"the big change way in advance"* (Peter) and are familiarised and reassured about what to anticipate in the upcoming academic year.

Theme 2: Support Networks

Support networks examine how interpersonal interactions and institutional resources help children through educational transitions. Family, friends, educators, and professional support services provide emotional, practical, and informational support during change and hardships. This study explores the dynamics and efficacy of these interactions as identified by participants to understand how they affect resilience and well-being.

Family

Family as a support network for students examines family members' vital role in students' educational and personal development. This theme examines how parents, legal guardians, and extended family members provided emotional and motivational support to help students on the autism spectrum cope with the transition from primary to middle school and highlights ways families have assisted their children in achieving their academic and personal goals.

All participants emphasised the importance of consistent support from the family, particularly from the mother figure. Family support was consistently present throughout the entire transition process. Participants asserted that they mostly expressed their fears and anxiety regarding the school transition with their immediate and extended family. They also indicated that their family played a crucial role in supporting their concerns before and after the transition. Several comments from participants confirm the ongoing support of family members, highlighting the significance of discussing the students' anxieties with their families, “... *but my mom helped me, reassured me. She's also ADHD and autistic. So, much more understanding and much easier to talk to*” (Peter), “*my mother's aunt used to help me and she used to understand me*” (Andrew), “*yes sometimes I talked about it with my mum*” (Mariella). One participant expressed the extent of her family's support during a challenging period following her transition, when she faced challenges in being understood by educators “*at one point, we decided to speak with the school by email to make them aware of my situation and needs*” (Jessica).

Another participant noted that his family and extended relatives were present and actively participating in the transition meetings “*they spoke to my mum and grandparents*” (Andrew), referring to the professionals involved in the transition meetings. Additionally, he acknowledged that he sometimes relied on his aunt for emotional and academic support, as indicated by the following comment “*I relied on my mother's aunt since she was helpful and understood me. Thus, I expected personal support from her*” (Andrew).

Specialised Support

Family as a support network for students examines family members' vital role in students' educational and personal development. This theme examines how parents, legal

guardians, and extended family members provide emotional and motivational support to help students on the autism spectrum cope with the transition from primary to middle school and highlights ways families have assisted their children in achieving their academic and personal goals.

Two participants asserted that they sought support from specialists outside of school because of the difficulties associated with transitioning. The participants collaborated with a private psychologist and a private counsellor. *“I spoke about them with ma parents, friends and psychologist”* (Jessica), indicating that she and her family sought a psychologist's help before the transition to address the anxieties associated with the change to a new school. The psychologist provided ongoing support to the participant throughout her middle school years in response to the social anxiety concerns. The psychologist facilitated the communication of the participant's challenges and fears pertaining to the school itself. *“Yes, I went to counselling for some time”* (Jessica). The comment indicates that the participant acknowledged the importance of obtaining professional guidance. The support was necessary due to the student's concerns and obsession with academics, which were detrimental to their emotional well-being.

Education Professionals

Creating a comprehensive student performance and well-being support network requires education professionals. This theme involves teachers, LSEs, guidance teachers, and senior leadership team members. It studies how professionals collaborate to meet students' needs, especially during key transitions such as the move from primary to middle school for students on the autism spectrum.

Senior Leadership Teams & Teachers. The experience of the participant attending a church school differs somewhat from that of those participants who attend

state schools. The Student Leadership Team (SLT) members in this specific church school remain the same when they transition from primary to middle school. Due to the school's small size and the close vicinity of the primary and middle school buildings, the members of the SLT are the same for both schools. This was advantageous for the student as the administration was already familiar with the student's requirements and strengths, resulting in minimal adjustments for the student.

A number of the participants indicated feelings of appreciation towards educators. Under most circumstances, educators were described as helpful, compassionate, and sensitive towards the needs of students on the autism spectrum. Participants indicated that most educators were quite supportive. Specifically, one participant who was experiencing fear and obsession over academics stated that *“the teachers used to stop and offer me the opportunity to ask questions”* (Andrew). Furthermore, he maintained his stance that he should have seized the opportunity to seek assistance from educators more frequently, given their willingness to provide support when necessary. Another participant expressed high praise for the lecturers, stating, *“another thing was that my teachers were actually very nice. Well, my teachers. Yeah. And they were also very nice and very caring. This is also a nice thing there”* (Peter).

Occasionally, educators displayed a lack of comprehension towards certain requirements and behaviours exhibited by students on the autism spectrum. One of the participants faced difficulties since the student's documentation did not reach the receiving school during the transition, and the educators were unaware of the student's needs. It appears that certain educators were sensitive and understood specific requirements and behaviours, while others were not, particularly when the student experienced excessive stimulation in specific classroom conditions and was required to fidget *“for example,*

when I was overstimulated in class, I would fidget a lot, and teachers would either stop me or remove me out of class” (Jessica). This resulted in educators reprimanding the student and causing shame. The student asserted that she would discreetly communicate with educators outside the classroom once the lesson had concluded to make them aware of her needs. Another student claimed that *“sadly, they weren't that understanding of ADHD and autism, to be honest”* (Peter). This led to a gap in understanding of the student's requirements on the part of the teachers, thereby causing frustration for the student.

Learning Support Educators

Three of the participants are assisted by an LSE. The participant without LSE support believes such assistance is unnecessary since she possesses high self-sufficiency and intellectual competence. However, all the other participants had a common affiliation with the LSE, indicating that the LSE has more students who receive support. Due to timetable conflicts, there may be instances where the LSE is in a different classroom, providing support to other students. Each of the three participants asserted their appreciation for the assistance provided by an LSE. They found that an LSE competence is particularly beneficial, especially in challenging situations such as group work. *“My LSE was also really nice which helped me. My new LSE who helped me a lot to transitions from to be honest”* (Peter), *“it's having...an lse”* (Mariella), *“most of the LSEs were very good”* (Andrew), comments received from students confirm the significant assistance provided by LSEs in supporting students on the autism spectrum who require academic and social support.

Guidance Teachers

Guidance teachers were also identified as a highly valuable support system within schools. These educators appear to have a crucial function in schools, particularly at

challenging instances for students. Guidance teachers are trained educators who assist students in managing their emotional well-being and help *"to get all of our worries out of the way"* (Peter). All participants enrolled in state schools received support from guidance teachers at some point following the transition. Two students regularly attended meetings with the guidance teachers to receive ongoing help for their social and emotional well-being, as stated by this participant: *"there was a point when I used to attend guidance and they really helped me"* (Jessica).

Peers

The theme of peers as a support network discusses the importance of friendships and social relationships in a student's life. It includes both the positive effects of strong, healthy friendships and the complications that develop when those connections are challenged.

Positive Friendships

The participants placed great importance on being included in a social circle of friends and having peers who accepted them. The majority of the participants reported having positive friendships. A participant asserted that friends provided help and support during challenging moments of social anxiety. Another participant expressed that the presence of a single close friend brings her happiness and a sense of comfort and security. Another participant said that while many of his friends from primary school also attended the same middle school, he *"grew distant to some of my old friends, but that happens"* (Peter). However, he remained close friends with others.

Challenging Encounters. Only one participant addressed the issue of bullying. The individual had experiences of loneliness and isolation in their peer connections as a result of being targeted by their peers owing to their perceived

differences. As stated in the interview, *“They picked up on me because I was different”* (Andrew). He recognised his inability to make friends due to his distinct interests from his contemporaries. The participant abstained from using social media during his middle school years, resulting in a greater disconnection from his peers, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown time when social media served as the primary means of communication with others. It appears that the assistance provided by guidance teachers and the disciplinary measures implemented by the school were ineffective, as the alleged bullies; *“the students were rude, and even when the school issued them consequences they kept going”* (Andrew)

Theme 3: Emotional Resonance

Emotions and sentiment were prominent themes in the data. Understanding these emotional elements deepens data analysis and emphasises the intricacies of human behaviour. As they experienced these feelings, participants showed relief, comfort, anxiousness, worry, and fear. Through categorisation, we can better understand how these emotions influence participants' perceptions and behaviours.

The theme of emotional resonance is subdivided into two subthemes, which the participants primarily associated with. Moving schools causes both positive and negative emotions. Emotional revelations highlight participants' unique experiences and address the fundamental study topic about the students' overall experience during transitions.

Positive Sentiments in Transition Process

Positive feelings in transition processes examine people's emotional and psychological responses to significant change. This subject emphasises how students on the autism spectrum can adapt, grow, and find comfort during school transitions. This perspective helps us discover positive experiences and outcomes, which improves support

systems and supports smooth transitions in mainstream schools. Although this subtheme is divided into positive emotions before and after the transition, the data indicates that only a limited number of positive feelings were experienced before the transition.

Before Transition. Accepting and acknowledging the necessity of changing schools was a major sentiment expressed by a male participant, stating, "The *thing that helped me cope, really, I just needed to accept it*" (Peter). The shift is an integral aspect of the educational process and children's cognitive development. Consequently, acknowledging and embracing the process of adjusting to new surroundings is of utmost importance (Poquet et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the participant acknowledged that the acceptance process may differ among youngsters, depending on the support they receive from their families. The participant found it very beneficial to acknowledge and accept his concerns over the transition, and he received reassurance from his support network. Adopting such a mindset and being well-prepared can assist in reducing further adverse feelings that may arise in students on the autism spectrum before the change.

After Transition. A significant number of positive feelings were observed to occur subsequent to the actual transition. All participants perceive the transition as being more intimidating than it truly is. The prevailing opinion was that "it was much easier when you actually face it" (Peter). The statements "*scared of almost nothing,*" "*thought is scarier than reality,*" and "*when I went to school all my thoughts evaporated*" indicate that before the change, students only experienced fear and anxiety towards unfamiliar circumstances. The actual transfer into middle schools is less challenging than anticipated. When a female participant was asked for advice to provide to other children on the autism spectrum about their future transition, she said, "Do not worry; things *may not turn out as*

you expect” (Mariella)—an affirming declaration acknowledging that the changeover has proven to be more favourable than initially anticipated.

The shift from primary to middle school facilitated a smoother progression from middle to secondary school upon completing year 8. Two participants who had already progressed to their secondary years made this statement. They determined adjusting was more convenient for them due to the similarities in teaching methods and daily operations between middle and secondary schools. *“I feel that I am coping better now”*, (Jessica) expressed a female participant, alluding to the worry she had to confront throughout her middle school years. A male participant emphasised that his move from middle school to secondary school, then from secondary school to Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST-tertiary level education), enabled him to handle obstacles more effectively because of his increased maturity and improved ability to comprehend and reason *“the way I was interpreting study and other issues, I ended up worsening the situation”* (Andrew).

A widespread occurrence of positive attitudes towards middle school was observed after the transition. Participants in middle school often encounter a variety of valuable experiences. It appears that certain modifications provide a stimulating effect on students. Participants highlighted various positive experiences, such as engaging in hands-on learning, utilising specialised classrooms (such as physics laboratories, art classes, home economics rooms, and design and technology classrooms), going on outings, participating in organised games during morning and break times, and joining clubs during break times, *“I used to have fun during outings and at school they used to do several activities like games in the morning before lessons start and clubs”* (Andrew). One boy participant strongly affirmed that the positive experiences outweighed the negative ones. This

influenced his recollections of the transition and aided him in adopting an optimistic outlook towards the future.

The change in the transition process and the organisational structure of state and church schools resulted in increased reassurances and a more favourable attitude towards the move. A female participant enrolled in a church educational institution confirmed that the transition was more manageable. The youngster asserted that if she had to switch schools entirely, she would have experienced heightened anxiety. The participant found it easy to adapt due to the school's established structure, as just a few situations were altered. She expressed her contentment by stating, "*I don't think I need anything else*" (Mariella).

Emotional Challenges in School Transitions

The transition process examines students' complex and often difficult emotional experiences during significant changes such as school transitions. This topic shows the fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and other negative feelings students on the autism spectrum may experience when starting a new school. Before the shift, emotional challenges predominated over pleasant ones. Most participants seem to have overcome their pre-transition fears and concerns throughout middle school.

Before Transition. The participants' pre-transition phase, particularly in the final year of primary school and during the summer break, was characterised by emotions of anxiety, fear, and worry. Each participant experienced a challenging period, anticipating the impending school move in September when they would have to transition to their new educational institution.

Anxiety arose from the fear and worries of being isolated and lonely in a larger, unfamiliar school. The three participants who attend local state schools primarily

acknowledged the worry, mostly due to the significant increase in the school's population after shifting to a state middle school. Nevertheless, the student who frequented a church school did not experience apprehension over the problem of loneliness and social connections, as the shift did not entail a drastic relocation.

“At first I was I was nervous and I mean nervous..... I'm not so good at making friends as such..... I was scared that I would, you know, become out of touch with the world. I mean, you have a bit of an introvert, but we need friendship to stay sane or to keep grounded to society so that friendship. Insane. So honestly, I think that the friendship was a valid concern because I do not want to be lonely as well, which is also something which is, which is very popular when it comes to transitions in my case”
(Peter).

This comment reflects the sentiment all three individuals enrolled in state educational institutions share. The students interviewed exhibit anxiety and stress in relation to friendship-related circumstances. Furthermore, one of the participants had to make the transition to middle school amidst COVID-19 restrictions protocols, which heightened anxiety due to the fear of losing friends. Due to Covid rules, students were not allowed to interact with students from other classes during break time or lessons. They were required to remain with their classmates throughout the whole school day. This might result in being unable to socialise with friends if you were placed in a different class than them; in fact, the participant stated, *“If my friends were not in my class, I could not meet them”* (Jessica).

Additional concerns expressed by the participants were associated with the middle school educational system and the presence of larger facilities. One participant expressed fear of becoming lost *“What if I get lost?”* (Mariella), while another participant expressed concern about transitioning to a larger school, mainly because their previous primary school

was small in both size and student population; *“the fact that it is a big school and a completely different system”* (Jessica). Students are concerned about the comprehensive change in the academic environment, encompassing timetables, classes, and teaching methods. *“I was extremely worried because I knew it was going to be a significant change for me”* (Jessica), *“I was also quite scared about how would it be with multiple teachers....biggest challenge was, you know, these new subjects”* (Peter), *“I think it would be more difficult and I need to focus more”* (Andrew) are all statements that express profound worry regarding this transition in the educational system.

After Transition. The emotional difficulties experienced following the change were attributed to several causes, including academic content, educators' level of awareness of autism or lack thereof, and concerns relating to friendships. Each participant had unique experiences that resulted in distinct emotional difficulties.

One specific participant experienced a phase of social anxiety as a result of feeling inadequate in class, primarily owing to educators drawing attention to their behaviour. The experience of being dismissed in front of the entire class led to heightened self-consciousness, ultimately causing the participant to develop social anxiety. One of the major obstacles another participant faced was adjusting to the several unfamiliar disciplines taught in middle schools. Due to the coexistence of ADHD and autism, the student experienced difficulties in adjusting to the new system, leading to a sense of fear. The student expressed this concern by stating, *“at first I started losing my school's point system a lot, which scared me”* (Peter). This concern stemmed from a point system implemented by the school, where the individual thought they were falling behind during the initial weeks of the school year.

Another person experienced significant challenges following their transition. The concern of achieving academic success transformed into fear and obsession with studies, resulting in negative consequences affecting social interactions within the school environment. *“As time passed, I experienced mental effects that made it challenging for me to communicate with other students”* (Andrew), which shows that such an obsession impacted the student’s mental condition, resulting in a lack of trust towards peers, defensiveness, and isolation.

Theme 4: Achievements and Growth

Exploring the accomplishments and development of students on the autism spectrum may be an insightful and inspirational theme, as it emphasises their distinct abilities, developments, and contributions. This theme is categorised into two sections: Personal Growth, which focuses on the individual achievements of students on the autism spectrum, and Educational Milestones, which pertain to their academic successes.

Personal Growth

The participants engaged in a discussion about ways they have experienced personal growth with the help of support during this transition. One of the participants recognised the ability to overcome episodes of social anxiety by engaging in drama activities at school. Engaging in theatre classes, in which the participant was selected for a minor role in a school film production, not only facilitated stepping outside one's comfort zone but also fostered the opportunity to meet and connect with new peers. This facilitated the participant in recognising new talents and developing as an individual within the educational community; *“we produced a short film with the drama group. I was chosen as one of the protagonists. I met most of today's friends in the drama group”* (Jessica).

One of the participants shared their thoughts on the difficulties encountered while shifting from primary to middle school, both during and after the process. After transitioning to secondary school and tertiary education, the participant developed a deeper understanding of his behaviours and social interactions during the previous years and how these affected the challenging periods of middle school years. Indeed, the transfer to tertiary education was less challenging compared to the middle school years.

“I understand things in my own way, which is unique.... What I'm saying is that because of how I interpreted the study or other factors, I ended up making things worse because I wasn't participating in or watching activities that students do, which meant that I had fewer chances of getting along with them. My mind developed later; it is true” (Andrew).

Educational Milestones

The young participants talked about a discussion on how they were able to quickly overcome academic challenges with the help of their families and educators, particularly their LSEs. Initially, students faced problems such as incomplete assignments and poor academic performance while familiarising themselves with the different school curricula and the new educational system. Students on the autism spectrum were able to successfully adjust and improve their academic performance over a few weeks, which was considered a significant achievement. Another participant expressed that he had never considered the possibility of pursuing higher education. However, he successfully enrolled in a first-level course at a tertiary institution and intends to continue his studies.

Participants' Suggestions

Participants also provided suggestions for improving inclusion in mainstream education to enhance their school experience. Students made a highly valid observation

regarding the transition process, stating that transitions for students on the autism spectrum should be tailored to everyone's needs. Participants proposed that involving students on the autism spectrum in the meeting between the primary and middle school professionals will facilitate a smoother transition by ensuring they are aware of the educational plans being made for them. Students believe that visits to middle school should be conducted in a private setting. They suggest that these visits should take place during the summer and that each student should have the opportunity to meet with the SLT member responsible for their year group, their form teacher, LSE, and guidance teacher individually. These professionals are perceived as integral members of the school's support network, as emphasised by "*they will get to know you first, and you will get to know them too*" (Andrew).

Another suggestion was made concerning educating and disseminating autism awareness among educators, legal guardians, and students. The primary obstacles faced by students on the autism spectrum during and after transitions were primarily caused by a lack of knowledge among different stakeholders involved in the school community. Participants considered that individuals who are not on the autism spectrum, including children and adults, should be made aware of the experiences and challenges faced by students on the autism spectrum. Adults in the field of education require a comprehensive understanding of the various manifestations, actions, beliefs, and attitudes associated with autism, as a wide range of variations characterises the spectrum. According to participants, having knowledgeable and well-prepared educators to address autism will diminish the feelings of humiliation, shame, and fear caused by challenges faced with educators.

Moreover, it is crucial to provide guidance support within the initial days of the transition to ensure that students have a sense of security and nurturing in an intense

environment until they become accustomed to the new procedures employed in middle school. Similarly, it is essential to offer the use of learning zones from early stages, particularly for individuals on the autism spectrum who struggle with social interaction. The learning zone provides a secure setting for individuals to engage with peers.

Critical Discussion

This section offers a thorough interpretation of the findings and initial analysis compared to the current literature described in chapter two. The subject of transition processes is central to the study's research objective. Students' experiences on the autism spectrum may be significantly related to how educational institutions, professionals, and educators manage these transitions. Unfortunately, current available studies have mostly overlooked to explore the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum regarding their experiences throughout the transition to school.

The thematic analysis revealed four interdependent themes: 'Formal Transition Procedures', 'Support Networks', 'Emotional Resonance', and 'Achievements and Growth'. Data implies that strategies employed by educational institutions to handle school transitions significantly impacted the support networks required by students and the emotions they experienced during the transition. From this perspective, the data indicates that these themes are interrelated and cannot exist in isolation. One clear observation is the difference in transition procedures between state and church schools and how this affects the students' well-being. The contrast in the transition procedures overall affected the outcomes obtained from the collected data.

Considering the participant's enrolment in a small church school with no new students in Year 7 (the first year of middle school in the Maltese educational system), it appears that there was no requirement for meetings or transition programs. The transition

is characterised by a smooth educational progression from primary to secondary school facilitated by the fact that the SLT remains consistent across both levels of education. The process instilled a sense of comfort and practicality in the student as she recognised its benefits *“I will be a little bit more nervous if I was going to change school completely.... it's actually easier this way”* (Mariella). The evidence favours previous research suggesting that children's experiences during transitions can significantly impact their social and academic success (Stack et al., 2020). In this case, the participant attending church school had positive attitudes and experiences. By affirming that she experienced positive emotions and experiences after transitioning to middle school, she verifies the belief of existing literature that smoother transitions with minimal changes enhance better outcomes for students on the autism spectrum (Marsh et al., 2017). She further expresses this sentiment by declaring, *“Well, I don't think I need anything else”* (Mariella) and reaffirms her conviction by responding with a resolute *“not a bit”* when asked whether there is anything she would change about her school.

Furthermore, the data suggests concerns have diminished once entering middle school. The participant asserts, *“It was like when I went to school, all my thoughts evaporated”* (Mariella). Research suggests that some students reported positive experiences that exceeded their initial expectations (Zeedyk et al., 2003). The data also indicate that the student who attend church school appear to be the sole participant who did not require any additional help other than the support provided by the shared LSE. The shift appears less demanding than that of students on the autism spectrum attending state schools. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the student expressed only a limited number of concerns like *“I was worried that I get lost, or I'd say baby stuff like that too”* (Mariella), in contrast to the fears that students on the autism spectrum seem to face before

transitioning to state schools. This impacted the ease at which the student adjusted to the change. However, Mandy et al. (2016b) discovered evidence that opposes this claim, indicating that adolescents on the spectrum are more likely to have additional difficulties during this period of change. According to Mandy et al. (2016b), students on the autism spectrum encounter specific challenges when adjusting to changes.

In contrast, state school students move to a significantly larger middle school. State colleges consist of multiple primary schools that feed into middle and secondary schools. All participants from state schools had a consistent trend in their experiences with transition procedures. Participants highlighted the importance of transition programs and visits to middle schools in facilitating the transition process. The findings about the transition processes of state schools offer an alternative perspective on how these processes can more effectively support students on the autism spectrum. Results suggest that these resources lacked personalisation and individuality for students on the autism spectrum. As mentioned in the results above, an essential observation highlighted by participants is that students are excluded from meetings conducted between professionals and legal guardians. A participant emphasised this critical matter: "It defeats the entire purpose, *you know, if the kid isn't invited when it's their education*" (Peter). Consistent with the participants' experiences, previous research (Rose et al., 2016) has demonstrated that young adolescents greatly value being actively involved in the transition process. Specifically, having the chance to meet support professionals beforehand significantly reduced their anxieties and concerns. This study was conducted in Irish schools, using a longitudinal design and involved 158 kids selected for case studies. The research incorporated both observations of the pupils and interviews with professionals and parents (Rose et al., 2016). Consistent with these findings is a study conducted by Tobin et al.

(2012), where parents expressed significant anxiety regarding their children's ability to handle secondary education's social and intellectual challenges. Additionally, parents typically felt that the support provided to their child throughout the transition period was insufficient.

The recent Maltese policy on inclusion, titled "A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools Route to Quality Inclusion" (MEYR, 2022), establishes specific goals for inclusion based on the UDL paradigm to enhance the abilities of all students. Benchmark 3 acknowledges the significance of well-coordinated support systems in equipping learners for various transitions, particularly in the stages of Preschool, Primary, Middle School, Secondary, Post-secondary education, tertiary education, and work. The prioritisation of learners' transitions and the development of strategies occur collaboratively between schools (MEYR. 2022). Therefore, the findings demonstrate that the specific strategies for transitioning procedures vary depending on the school, and there are no established rules regarding the optimal approach to support students with different abilities. The Maltese strategy appears to align with the policy on inclusion in Ireland. In 2014, a study was carried out in Ireland to assess the educational support provided to students on the autism spectrum. The study gathered evidence from 24 different locations and found no standardised program for transitioning these students to secondary school. Additionally, the practices for transitioning vary between schools (Daly et al., 2016). Given these circumstances, the research provides new insights into constructing a framework for transition procedures that are most suitable for students on the autism spectrum.

Heightened feelings of stress, anxiety, and uneasiness characterised participants' experiences prior to the transition processes. Anxiety is prevalent in children on the spectrum, potentially linked to IU, which is characterised by an inclination to respond

poorly to unpredictable circumstances (Goodwin et al., 2021). The IU model of anxiety suggests that IU is the belief that uncertainty is distressing and that the inability to predict future events is undesirable and must be avoided at all costs (Rodgers et al., 2018). This research study further substantiates the findings of Mandy et al. (2016b) cited earlier, which showed that children on the autism spectrum are more prone to facing additional challenges during transitions because they struggle to adapt to changes. As previously stated, the absence of individuality in transition processes can be ascribed to these emotions.

Evidence implies that state school students require additional support due to the more challenging transition experience. According to this interpretation, the findings indicate that support networks have a crucial impact on assisting students on the autism spectrum before and after the transition. The level of help students receive varies depending on their specific challenges during the transition. The results indicated that possessing an LSE, even though the support is shared, helps adjust to changes in the school environment. In this view, these data findings suggest that an LSE is beneficial in challenging circumstances involving teachers and classmates, especially for students on the autism spectrum who lack access to LSE support. This was demonstrated by participants claiming that *"LSE help you while you are in group work"* (Mariella) and *"I found most of the LSEs to be helpful"* (Andrew). Regrettably, locating relevant literature on LSE support for students on the autism spectrum in mainstream educational institutions was challenging due to the variability of inclusive education approaches across different nations. There appears to be a lack of research on this subject.

Individuals on the autism spectrum face numerous difficulties during their secondary school years. The issues encompass discrepancies within the school

environment, difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships, an overall lack of information regarding autism, and the existence of ineffective support (Hedges et al., 2014). The collected data supports the findings of Hedges et al. (2014) that there is a widespread lack of knowledge and awareness regarding autism. Participants' experience demonstrates that challenging circumstances involving educators and classmates prompted participants to seek assistance from guidance teachers and professionals outside of school. Research indicates that students on the autism spectrum face difficult situations in the classroom due to educators' lack of awareness and understanding. Participants who received assistance from an LSE reported the LSE as highly beneficial in facilitating communication with instructors and helping them comprehend their difficulties. Nevertheless, participants who did not receive LSE support were required to independently engage with educators for additional assistance outside of the classroom. Regrettably, these problems caused the student to experience feelings of shame and humiliation. The evidence supports that most negative experiences were found among students who did not receive adequate help within the regular school system (Stack et al., 2020).

Furthermore, data suggests that the students' classroom experiences are influenced by their relationship with their educators. According to one participant, most teachers were regarded as helpful and understanding. This was exemplified by the statement, "*Most of them were understanding*" (Jessica), which referred to feeling overwhelmed and fidgety in class. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that few educators did not demonstrate the same level of empathy and support as their counterparts, as stated by Peter: "*Sadly, they weren't that understanding of ADHD and autism, to be honest*". This lack of comprehension can be associated with previous research findings indicating that teachers' inadequate

assurance in proficiently executing inclusive practices is a significant worry for teachers. The lack of confidence seems to stem from inadequate training and support from colleagues and supervisors in special education (Dash, 2018).

Nevertheless, the respondents emphasised the significance of adult and peer understanding regarding autism based on their experiences with the transition to middle school. The results were impacted by a lack of knowledge or coherence in the system, indicating a pressing requirement for training and awareness programs for all individuals involved in the school community. The findings align with previous research studies. Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022) argued that achieving inclusivity is challenging due to educators' perspectives, the need for professional development in understanding autism, and the need for classroom adjustments and adaptations. For students on the autism spectrum, education professionals need to have a profound grasp of the environmental aspects that affect their participation in school. This is because these students have unique combinations of strengths and difficulties, which suggests the need for a more comprehensive understanding of their educational needs (Roberts & Webster, 2020). Educators must understand how different environmental elements in the classroom might potentially exacerbate existing levels of stress and anxiety (Saggers et al., 2016). The current literature strongly supports the correlation between data collected and instances where the classroom setting leads to overstimulation in children on the autism spectrum or a lack of focus during classes. Research findings indicate that several educators failed to address the issue suitably. One participant stated, *“Some teachers did not understand my needs. For example, when I was overstimulated in class and start to fidget, teachers used to tell me to stop or else they will send me out of class”* (Jessica).

The most beneficial forms of support in an educational setting encompass educators who demonstrate empathy, patience, social support, and friendship (Saggers et al., 2016). According to Roberts and Simpson (2016), students on the autism spectrum rated teacher flexibility as a crucial factor for successful inclusion. These studies exhibit a substantial correlation with the experiences of the participants. The analysis of the data indicates that students on the autism spectrum tend to seek assistance from guidance teachers in educational institutions. Guidance teachers appear to provide a reliable source of support for students with autism spectrum disorder in educational institutions. Students appreciate the support they receive and play a vital role in ensuring an excellent experience for students in middle schools.

Peer interactions seem to determine whether the transition from primary to middle school is positive or negative. Most of the feelings reported by participants appear to be connected to friendships and how peers interact with them. The most prevalent sentiment reported by participants appears to be a fear of loneliness. This demonstrates that while encountering challenges in social relationships, as seen by Acevedo et al. (2020), adolescents on the spectrum nevertheless possess a desire to establish connections with their peers. However, data indicates that their encounter with peers may vary slightly compared to neurotypical individuals their age. A significant number of participants expressed their satisfaction with having one or two intimate friends that they can rely on. As Mariella states, "*It's having a friend. Really it just happened, but I'm happy with it.*"

While three participants had great experiences and reliable peer support, one person had had unfortunate contact with friends. The occurrence of bullying during the student's middle school experience can be attributed to a lack of mutual understanding between the student and their friends, resulting in feelings of loneliness and retreat. These

occurrences may arise due to the perception that the student on the spectrum is distinct from their peers. The participant stated, “They *pick up on me because they see me as being different*” (Andrew). From this perspective, this data indicates the same trend observed in earlier scholarly works. Initial negative impressions can hinder the fulfilment of the desire for social engagement, as one's approach and retreat behaviour towards new social peers is influenced by subjective views. Consequently, this could restrict the chances for those on the autism spectrum to cultivate social relationships and friendships (Sasson et al., 2017). In addition, Idol (2006) argues that the tendency of older children to accept and include peers with disabilities decreases. These studies justify the participants' restricted social networks throughout the school journey.

This evidence can also be attributed to the double empathy theory. Communication failures occur when autistic and non-autistic individuals have difficulty understanding each other's views, indicating shared challenges in comprehension (Milton, 2012). It indicates that the problem stems from the disparity between autistic and non-autistic individuals rather than just from how autistic individuals engage with others. Both autistic and non-autistic individuals may face challenges in comprehending each other's viewpoints (Milton, 2012). Consequently, autistic individuals may find themselves isolated since neurotypical individuals tend to distance themselves from their autistic counterparts. Given these circumstances, certain students on the autism spectrum may encounter a lack of interaction, which might, therefore, affect their experience during the transition, as reported by one of the participants.

Despite the transitional stage causing concerns, participants perceive the change as positive. This is demonstrated in the fourth theme of accomplishments and personal growth. The participants' statements indicate that the advantages of the change appear to

outweigh the negative experiences, as demonstrated in the following statement: *“During the time when they were annoying me and attempting to make me feel worse, there were these activities that I personally enjoyed”* (Andrew).

During adverse periods of the transition, the participants' morale was also improved by support networks as identified above, *“I cope much better now in secondary”* (Jessica) indicates that the middle school experience was also seen as a crucial preparation for secondary education, making the transfer easier because of the prior experience of the change in the middle school. The results align with the study conducted by Mandy et al. (2016b), which did not identify a significant rise in difficulties, in contrast to other empirical research that indicates that the majority of children on the spectrum face significant difficulties in mainstream school environments (Tobin et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter has extensively examined the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during school transitions. It has uncovered an intricate interaction of various elements that impact their ability to adjust to new educational settings. Several key themes were identified, such as the formal protocols of transitions, support networks, emotional impact, accomplishments and personal growth. Prior to transitioning, individuals experienced heightened anxiety and concerns regarding their ability to adapt to the new educational system in middle schools. However, most of these emotions dissipated once the transition took place.

These findings indicate that the transition may be defined by some adverse occurrences attributed to school transition strategies and the lack of comprehension among adolescents on the spectrum. Nevertheless, support networks provided by family, schools, and professional

services enable students to transform bad experiences into opportunities for personal development and positivity. The results obtained from this study indicate that schools should give high importance to early preparation, cooperation among everyone involved, and continuous assistance in order to address the difficulties faced by students on the autism spectrum throughout transitions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter summarises the findings of the study, addressing the research questions while analysing them in relation to existing literature. It further offers insights and contributions derived from the research, providing a comprehensive reflection on the study's outcomes. The study explored the experiences of students on the autism spectrum transitioning from primary to middle schools in Maltese state and church schools. These two types of educational institutions enhance the research findings by providing a greater understanding of the potential impact of these transitions. The conclusion will provide reflections on the journey of this study, whilst emphasising how the findings enhance our comprehension of students on the autism spectrum in particular situations involving change, especially during the transition from mainstream primary schools to mainstream middle schools. This chapter aims to synthesise the findings related to the initial research question and objectives while offering a comprehensive discussion on its implications for theory, practice, and policy. Whilst summarising the key conclusions, this chapter will further examine the study's limitations, recognising the constraints that may have influenced the results. It will also offer recommendations for future study based on the gaps identified during the research.

So, what are the experiences of students on the autism spectrum when transitioning from primary school to middle school in schools in Malta?

The study aimed to investigate and evaluate the experiences of students on the autism spectrum during their transitions from primary school to middle school, specifically within local state and church schools, to analyse the participants' perspectives. This study sought to explain the genuine experiences and interpretations of the participants on this phenomenon and to understand the impact caused by these experiences as reported by the students. Though experiences are subjective, distinctive, and specific to the individual who endures them, they

serve as reliable sources of knowledge as they encompass the individual's perspective within a broader context (Daher et al., 2017).

A thematic analysis of participant narratives revealed that, despite each individual's unique experiences and transitions, they encountered similar emotions, faced comparable challenges, and received guidance from various, yet similar, support networks. By analysing their narratives, this study aimed to investigate which transition processes and support networks benefit students on the autism spectrum in terms of growth, accomplishments, and emotional well-being. Due to the distinctive characteristics of the students' experiences, there is no singular response to the research question. However, the four themes identified through the analysis are pertinent to the study's objective. The four themes derived from the collected data in relation to the primary research question—Formal Transition Procedures, Support Networks, Emotional Resonance, and Achievements and Growth—were consistently prevalent among all participants, although experienced differently. The four themes are interrelated and directly respond to the research question posed by the study.

The findings revealed that the experiences of students on the autism spectrum throughout their transition to middle school were influenced by several variables they faced during this process, namely the methods used by the school for transitioning from primary to middle school and the support encountered by the participants within the school community. The primary factors influencing students' emotional well-being were the schools' size and the processes associated with the transition. Students moving from small primary schools to larger middle schools showed significant anxiety and worry, which influenced their behaviour and necessitated support from psychosocial services both inside the school and outside of the educational system. Smaller educational institutions, such as church schools, seem to elicit less anxiety in students on the autism spectrum due to their

small size, the proximity of the primary and middle school buildings, and fostering a sense of familiarity, as the number of students generally remains consistent. The size issue could be linked to sensory overload (Marco et al., 2011). Sensory overload occurs when an individual is exposed to overwhelming sensory input, which the brain struggles to process effectively (Bogdashina, 2016). Previous exposure to crowded environments, often characterised by loud noises, bright lights, and overwhelming smells, might have triggered such feelings. Anticipation of such experiences could have provoked feelings of fear, anxiety, or distress, affecting their ability to function effectively in such settings. Thus, the lack of clarity on what to expect in a “large school”, or even the expectation of experiencing sensory overload, could have led to heightened anxiety.

The participants’ experiences indicated that anxiety before the transition was the predominant emotion among those who participated. Research such as Goodwin et al. (2021) indicates that anxiety is widespread among children on the spectrum, presumably associated with intolerance of uncertainty, which is described by a tendency to react adversely to unforeseen situations. IU describes the difficulty many individuals on the autism spectrum face when confronted with unpredictability or ambiguity. This heightened sensitivity to uncertain situations can make unclear or unexpected outcomes particularly challenging, often leading to feelings of anxiety or distress (Normansell-Mossa et al., 2021). Rodgers et al. (2018) argue that uncertainty can be distressing for individuals on the autism spectrum and that the inability to predict future events is undesirable and thus becomes an experience that autistic individuals strive to avoid. Notwithstanding, uncertainty may hold different interpretations for different people. Trauma from prior experiences may induce anxiety in individuals on the autism spectrum in settings characterised by a lack of knowledge (Goodwin et al., 2021). The students' interviews

highlighted how uncertainty about what to expect had caused worry and anxiety, primarily during the pre-transition phase, driven by fear of the unknown. Furthermore, while all participants encountered moments of uncertainty and anxiety before transitioning from primary to middle school, the interpretation of uncertainty varied among individuals. The varying interpretations of uncertainty among participants may have originated from prior experiences with change and situations in which they hold insufficient knowledge. This indicates that the preparation for transition, which the students were exposed to, appears to have failed to address the students' anxieties and fears specifically. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily indicate that transitions and preparation are futile. Instead, this could imply that transitions methodically structured around a student's specific needs could be required.

An important aspect to highlight is the participants' concerns and anxieties about transitioning to a new educational institution, which were strongly linked to challenges in social interactions. These findings suggest that unfamiliar environments exacerbate double empathy problems (Milton, 2012). In other words, transitions to new institutions may intensify the disconnect between autistic students and their neurotypical peers and staff, who may be unfamiliar with the communication style of the autistic individual. This incongruence can also lead to an increase in masking behaviours by autistic students. Masking refers to the strategies that autistic individuals use to hide their autistic traits and present themselves as neurotypical to cope with their social context. Autistic individuals often make significant efforts to modify their natural social behaviours to understand, navigate, and influence predominantly neurotypical environments (Goodwin et al., 2021). However, it is also important to note that once the transition occurred, fear diminished, and the data indicated that pleasant emotions predominantly characterised post-transition

experiences. This could have implications on preparation related to the pre-transition phase, as educators could look to reduce uncertainty and provide students on the autism spectrum with more explicit and more specific information about the new school whilst also preparing the support staff effectively by providing opportunities for them to engage with the students during the pre-transition phase. The data from this study indicates that educators highly influence the school transition experiences of students on the autism spectrum. LSEs seem to have facilitated and improved the participants' transition. They were recognised as beneficial in settling into the middle school system, which was considerably more demanding than primary education. LSEs aided students on the autism spectrum in adapting to timetable changes by training them in timetable preparation at home, assisting with using lockers, and prompting them to organise school materials before each lesson. Moreover, LSEs facilitated support for students on the autism spectrum during overwhelming situations by acting as intermediaries between educators and students, as well as addressing overstimulating experiences and behaviour. Occasionally, LSEs choose to remove students from class to manage the students' frustrations by taking them to areas within the school premises that they perceive as safe and comfortable. The practice of withdrawing students from highly stimulating situations, though often well-intentioned, may reflect inadequate preparation to meet their specific needs. While the use of such "pull-out" strategies may aim to facilitate sensory modulation, this approach can be seen as overly reactive rather than proactive. It underscores the importance of engaging proactively with the individual profiles of students to better anticipate and accommodate their sensory needs, rather than responding only after challenges arise.

In further attempts to support the students, LSEs also helped address challenges during group work and peer interactions. Many participants expressed reluctance toward group work, as it required engaging with classmates who often avoided interaction unless prompted by group assignments. In these situations, LSEs played a crucial role in fostering inclusivity by helping all group members identify shared interests and assigning roles to ensure active participation from everyone.

Teachers also play a crucial role in shaping students' transition experiences. Many educators made significant efforts to understand the unique profiles of strengths and challenges that students on the autism spectrum may present while also recognising the necessary adjustments and adaptations needed to support them effectively. When educators engaged with the culture of autism (i.e. ways of thinking, communicating, and interacting that resonate with autistic individuals), the students' experiences in class resulted in a good feeling that reduced their anxieties and fears while simultaneously enhancing their participation in academic learning tasks. Regrettably, these positive encounters were hindered when educators lacked awareness or comprehension of social and communicative practices associated with a profile of autism. Such adverse encounters intensified students' worries and anxieties, leading to overstimulation linked to undesirable behaviour from educators' perspective, such as fidgeting and moving around.

Students on the autism spectrum, who may have higher support needs, often face challenges in social interactions with peers, which can sometimes lead to bullying incidents. This was the case with some of the participants in the study. The research demonstrated that an effective and dependable support network helps students on the autism spectrum overcome problems related to social interactions and bullying. Participants selected family members, guidance teachers, and LSEs as dependable sources

of help and practical support networks upon which they relied. The study specified that peers could assume two distinct roles in the experiences of students on the autism spectrum: they may either serve as supportive and trustworthy companions, contributing positively to the school community, or they may engage in bullying, causing difficulties for these students. Participants with low-level support needs tend to have better peer interactions than those with higher support. Challenges in socialisation and instances of bullying were observed solely with one participant who had higher levels of support needs compared to the rest of the participants. The participant indicated that these interactions resulted from other students considering him different and misinterpreting his thoughts and socialisation methods. Double empathy theory suggests that challenges in communication and socialisation are bidirectional. Milton (2012) defined the 'double empathy problem', suggesting that autistic individuals struggle to integrate into society not only due to their misinterpretation of others but also because others misinterpret them. Hence, given the interactions between autistic and neurotypical individuals, there may be a mutual failure in empathy. The misperceptions and consequent behaviours of neurotypical students affect the views and behaviours of students on the autism spectrum, leading to their growing separation and isolation from peers. This hinders individuals on the autism spectrum from reaching their full potential and effectively limits their participation in the school community (Mitchell et al., 2021). Consequently, difficulties in peer interactions and socialisation are not only attributable to individuals on the autism spectrum. Notwithstanding the difficulties they encountered during the transition process, all participants regard their time in middle school as a positive experience.

Consequently, it may be concluded that the experiences of students on the autism spectrum are influenced by various elements, primarily transition strategies, school size,

availability of support, and the severity of autism. The research highlights the significance of understanding and awareness of autistic culture. Educator and peer awareness fostered positive experiences for students on the autism spectrum, as they felt supported and understood. As teachers and peers become more knowledgeable about autism, the empathy gap reduces. Viewing autism as a profile of characteristics and abilities rather than solely as a challenge can encourage more understanding and acceptance among educators and peers towards students on the spectrum. This may enhance peer connections and reduce feelings of shame in difficult classroom conditions, as educators can avoid such scenarios. Understanding autism allows for focusing on the student as a unique individual, shifting attention away from limitations towards their individuality.

Professionals and policymakers are encouraged to refrain from presuming the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum based on neurotypical perspectives and instead directly enquire about their actual needs. For inclusive education to be effective, engaging in discourse, listening to experiences, recognising needs, and taking appropriate action are essential. Policies must focus more on students to effectively support all learners, especially those with specific requirements in mainstream educational settings. By implementing a student-centred transition policy, educational institutions can foster a more inclusive and friendly atmosphere that substantially helps students at critical phases of change in their academic journeys. By adapting individual transition requirements, policies facilitate students' adjustment to new educational settings. Active participation of students in their transition planning enhances their engagement and fosters initiative in the learning process. This empowerment cultivates a sense of ownership over their education.

A crucial element of the transition process for students on the spectrum is preparation. An effectively structured transition strategy minimises fears and anxieties

among students on the autism spectrum. Enquiring about the challenges and requirements of students on the autism spectrum prior to and during their transition processes could have improved their experience. Regrettably, policymakers regarded students on the autism spectrum only as numbers throughout the transition from year 6 to year 7. Nevertheless, LSEs and guidance teachers assisted students post-transition by demonstrating the essential daily tasks required in middle schools. Through reverse sequencing, LSEs facilitated and assisted students on the spectrum with needs within the new educational environment. This personalised help facilitated the student's transfer into the school environment more smoothly. A personalised transition can foster a strength-based viewpoint among educators and the school community.

Participants were excluded from transition processes and meetings, resulting in experts determining their needs based on their "condition" or what professionals perceive as necessary for students on the autism spectrum. Neurotypicals may have a perception of the needs of students on the autism spectrum that differs significantly from the student's understanding of their requirements. This notion necessitates a revision in managing transition procedures as they currently exist to ensure that students on the autism spectrum attain the optimal experience in middle schools.

Insights and Implications of Research Study

Preparation for transition has been recognised as a critical component of transition success. The qualitative study findings indicate that schools ought to prioritise early transition planning and cultivate support networks in middle schools, primarily through peer and educator assistance for students on the autism spectrum, which may result in positive outcomes. In accordance with prior research, while collaboration among schools

is significant, the importance of the middle schools' role in the preparation phase is highlighted (Stack et al., 2020). Additionally, the findings indicate that transition processes should be conducted individually, especially for students with needs, rather than collectively with all year 6 students from the college's primary schools, as is currently being practised. This may derive from the notion that personalisation fosters a sense of belonging for the student within the school and enhances familiarity with educators and the educational system. Transition policies should be implemented using a student-centred approach rather than a policy-driven framework. Providing guidelines for a heterogeneous audience, such as students with different abilities, is exceedingly challenging. Transition process guidelines and policies should not adopt a uniform approach; instead, they ought to shift from a universal design to a more inclusive one that accommodates the distinct needs of each student. Transitions must involve the targeted audience throughout the process to ensure that students on the autism spectrum experience acceptance, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to establish connections with teachers, LSEs, and the school community. This strategy can further assist students on the autism spectrum who may feel disoriented in large groups, facilitating a smoother adaptation to the new educational environment. Providing students sufficient time to familiarise themselves with their new school environment before the transfer is crucial for mitigating anxiety; thus, extended pre-transition visits to middle schools are advised for children on the spectrum.

Taking into account students' perspectives, particularly those on the spectrum who often exhibit heightened moral objections to dishonesty and appear to possess remarkable moral honesty (Jaarsma et al., 2012), provides stakeholders with a more profound understanding of the specific requirements of these students. A participant's assertion that "*it defeats the entire purpose, you know, if the kid isn't invited when it's their education*" (Peter),

speaking about IEPs and transition meetings with legal guardians, resonated with me throughout my research journey, profoundly altering my perspective on the existing approach to decision-making in schools. Regrettably, student demands are exceedingly uncommon and do not fit their preferences. The participant noted that transition meetings and IEPs occur between legal guardians and professionals, often neglecting the students' opinions, feelings, and needs. Students' experiences demonstrated a substantial necessity for changes in decision-making procedures and formulation of policies. As outlined in the previous chapter, Malta's revised policy on inclusion lacks explicit guidelines for transition procedures, delegating the responsibility for managing transitions to the respective colleges and schools. These research findings imply a necessity for enhanced planning in transition procedures for students on the autism spectrum to facilitate their adaptation to change with minimal barriers.

Another significant finding concerning experiences during the transition process was the help provided by support networks, particularly by school guidance teachers. These teachers were identified as crucial in assisting students during challenging periods, and participants suggested their presence at individual transition meetings. I was highly satisfied by the findings concerning the role of guidance teachers, as being a member of the psychosocial team in Maltese state schools, I place significant value on this information, mainly since evidence indicates that emotional well-being is an essential prerequisite for effective participation and performance in academic environments (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). This indicates that students on the autism spectrum prioritise their emotional well-being and are prepared to ask for assistance at challenging times. Strengthening the function of psychosocial teams and emotional well-being support in educational settings is essential. Research findings indicate that emotional well-being must be prioritised in schools, as students' experiences and aptitude for learning are significantly influenced by their sense of well-being.

Students in middle school experienced various challenges, particularly the need for sensitive and understanding educators. A significant necessity for educators' training concerning autistic behaviours, cognitive processes, and support requirements was identified. Knowledge and comprehension of autism among educators remains inconsistent (Ravet, 2017), thus necessitating ongoing training in this area. Best practice implications involve ongoing professional development for educators and LSEs to enhance their ability to address diversity in the classroom and comprehend the demands of different conditions. Malta's revised policy on inclusive education acknowledges the importance of educator training but lacks a systematic and clear implementation plan. The scarcity of local research on students on the autism spectrum leads to insufficient information, hindering the development of effective training programs. This gap underscores the need for comprehensive studies to inform and enhance educator preparation, ensuring that the diverse needs of all students are met.

The presence of safe places, such as the Learning Zone or break-time activities, in middle schools is valued, indicating that such environments benefit students on the autism spectrum. Students recognised the learning space as a safe place when experiencing stress and a comfort zone during breaks when they may feel isolated. The learning zone provides shelter for students facing challenges with peers, allowing them to connect. Break-time activities provide an opportunity for students on the autism spectrum to engage in preferred activities and serve as a secure environment for socialising with peers who have similar interests. Research indicates that these practices require enhancement.

Notwithstanding a number of challenges students on the autism spectrum faced prior to and after their transition from primary school to middle school, the findings indicate that participants view their shift as a good experience. Their experiences demonstrate no definitive method for comprehending events and behaviours, confirming the double empathy theory. This strongly contrasted my perspective and ideas that students on the autism

spectrum may encounter numerous problems when transitioning schools, so negatively impacting their experience. My perception was influenced mainly by my profession, where I frequently encounter students, including those on the spectrum, who have challenges in middle school due to peer conflicts and difficulty in the classroom environment. Students recognised that break-time activities, hands-on lessons, drama and music education, outings, and other stimulating school activities contributed to a pleasant experience. Providing students with adequate support and diverse activities allows them to recall their middle school years positively despite the hardships.

It is valuable for policymakers to explore the experiences, perspectives, and recommendations of students on the autism spectrum. By acknowledging their value and standpoints, policymakers may facilitate connections between students and professionals to establish an inclusive education system that accommodates all learners.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

The study addresses a crucial yet understudied field, investigating students' experiences on the autism spectrum throughout educational transitions. Regrettably, there is a deficiency of local research on autism. Thus, research exploring the experiences of these students will enhance the understanding of how to provide appropriate support. This study provides significant educational insights from students on the autism spectrum and addresses a gap in the current knowledge.

A strength of this study is its emphasis on the perceptions of children on the spectrum regarding their transition to middle school rather than the viewpoints of adults. This is significant as prior research indicates that children's opinions differ from those of other stakeholders (Frederickson et al., 2004). Furthermore, children's voices may be

overshadowed by the inclusion of other stakeholders' perspectives (Richter et al., 2019). Although multiple studies highlight the distinct difficulties faced by students on the autism spectrum within the educational system, few research include these students in their studies. By integrating the voices and perspectives of the students, the study guarantees that the findings accurately represent the lived experiences of those directly affected by school shifts. This participant-centred methodology enhances the authenticity of the findings and highlights the distinct challenges and achievements encountered by students on the autism spectrum. This approach facilitates the development of personalised interventions for school transitions that can improve students' well-being, preparation, and participation in school.

The study enhances broader discussions on inclusive education, highlighting the necessity for individualised support and knowledge of the specific requirements of individuals on the autism spectrum during transitional phases. This research has identified protective variables facilitating efficient transition experiences, including strong support networks within educational institutions and nurturing familial settings. The survey highlighted an urgent need for awareness about autism among the families of the students' peers. Comprehending these elements can facilitate the development of interventions that enhance these strengths and refine inclusion strategies in mainstream educational institutions.

Limitations

A significant limitation of the current research is the small sample size and the lack of representativeness among participants due to the low number of responses. The limited sample size may restrict the generalisability of the findings and lead (Hackshaw, 2008). The qualitative sample size must be sufficiently large to comprehensively represent the study subjects' perceptions or views. This indicates that, depending on the research issue, a small

sample size may pose challenges in qualitative research, as a smaller sample size increases the likelihood that the perceptions collected would be limited and may introduce bias into the results (Oppong, 2013).

The qualitative nature of the study required participation from students on the autism spectrum who could engage in discussions for around one hour. The perspectives examined were primarily expressed by students on the autism spectrum who could verbally express their transition experiences. A further drawback is that the accessibility of information is relevant to students with cognitive and linguistic abilities. Despite the broad and diverse nature of the autism spectrum, the study's criteria limited eligibility to students who require minimal support and are mainly independent. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the experiences of children who need lower levels of support and/or demonstrate cognitive abilities that are more aligned with their chronological age. Participants were required to attend either state or church schools, which limits the ability to draw general conclusions applicable to all students on the autism spectrum across all educational institutions.

Qualitative studies depend on self-reported data from participants, which could induce bias. Participants may not accurately remember events as they occur since they recount experiences from their perspectives and viewpoints. This may obstruct critical information that might influence research outcomes.

By recognising these strengths and limitations, the study offers a comprehensive perspective on its contributions and openings for future research, thereby enhancing understanding and assistance for students on the autism spectrum throughout critical transitional times.

Future Research

This study is the first investigation into the transition to middle school experiences of Maltese children on the spectrum, providing a comprehensive evaluation of the transition process. The findings offer possibilities for future research exploration. Longitudinal studies indicate that the positive views of children on the autism spectrum during transitions diminish over time. The transition to secondary education is not a fixed occurrence but occurs along a progression (Stack et al., 2020). Consequently, a longitudinal rather than a cross-sectional study might examine children's experiences on the spectrum as they progress through each academic year with greater detail than this research. This can yield more trustworthy results regarding children's experiences on the spectrum, potentially providing deeper insights into the transition processes.

Broadening research to include a more diverse sample of students on the autism spectrum is necessary. Subsequent investigation may consider broader characteristics of autism, incorporating further eligibility criteria that reflect the wider spectrum of the condition. Consequently, an increased sample size may enhance the significance and reliability of results, as it would better represent the broader community of students on the autism spectrum.

Future research may explore specific issues indicated by participants in this study and further investigate these experiences. Participants recognised the significance of collaboration among stakeholders in transition processes. Examining the effects of collaborative practices among educators, parents, and specialists in facilitating transitions might provide significant insights. Subsequent research may investigate the impact of effective communication and teamwork on the transition process and student outcomes.

The family is a crucial participant in the transition. Further studies might evaluate the effect of parental engagement during the transition phase, investigating how parents' perceptions and actions affect their child's adaptation to new educational environments. This may result in improved techniques for involving families in the transition planning process.

Educators were also noted as influencing the students' experiences. Students' interactions with educators evoked mixed emotions. Future research may further explore the training requirements of educators in supporting transitions for students on the autism spectrum. Comprehending the most effective methods of professional development can enable educators to acquire the skills essential for supporting students throughout these crucial periods.

Conclusion

Transitions from primary to middle school are regarded to be challenging phases, particularly for students on the autism spectrum (Mandy et al., 2016a). This research study has examined the multifaceted experiences of students on the autism spectrum throughout school transitions, highlighting the specific problems they encounter, strategies that can promote smoother adaptations and the personal strengths and achievements they acknowledge. The study highlighted the considerable influence of transition processes, support networks, and the absence of students on the autism spectrum in transition meetings and processes across schools.

Through a qualitative approach, this study has identified various successful strategies to assist students during these crucial periods. Central to this are personalised transition plans that cater to the specific needs of each student and facilitate proactive communication among educators, parents, and professionals. The study emphasises the need of a collaborative

strategy that engages all stakeholders in the transition process, guaranteeing that students have thorough help tailored to their individual circumstances. The findings suggest that transitions trigger substantial emotions in students on the autism spectrum. These anxieties frequently arise from the fear of the unknown, also referred to as the intolerance of uncertainty. Research indicates that students on the autism spectrum experience anxiety and fear prior to school transitions due to uncertainty regarding forthcoming events and a lack of control over these changes. Nevertheless, these anxiety and concerns diminish after the transition occurs and children adapt to the new educational environment. Involving students in meetings and transition processes appears to alleviate anxiety and concern among students on the autism spectrum, as they feel included and acknowledged. Moreover, the research highlights the essential function of healthy connections with both peers and educators in cultivating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. Ongoing training for educators is essential in assisting students on the autism spectrum to cope with the increasing educational challenges faced in middle schools.

In conclusion, assisting students on the autism spectrum during educational transitions is essential for their academic achievement and overall well-being. The study points out the necessity for educational systems to implement personalised, well-coordinated measures to enhance support for students on the autism spectrum during school transitions. By implementing evidence-based strategies and promoting collaboration among all stakeholders, a more inclusive educational environment can be established that supports these students to succeed during transitions and beyond. By addressing students' individual needs, promoting understanding within the school community, and supplying appropriate resources, educators and policymakers can significantly enhance the transition experience and contribute to these students' overall success and well-being in their academic pursuits.

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Appendix 1

FREC Approval Letter

The status of your REDP form (EDUC-2023-00277) has been updated to   

Approved 



form.urec@um.edu.mt

to me 

11 Mar 2024, 11:40



Dear Deborah Sciberras,

Please note that the status of your REDP form (EDUC-2023-00277) has been set to **Approved**.

This status change was accompanied by the following explanation/justification: *Dear Deborah Sciberras, Please note that FREC Office has verified the documents and finds no further ethical issues or missing documents. You can proceed with your data collection. Thanks and regards. Natalie Formosa FREC Secretary f/Dr Joseph Gravina*

You can keep track of your applications by visiting: <https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics/redp-form/frontEnd/>.

****This email has been automatically generated by URECA. Please do not reply. If you wish to communicate with your F/REC please use the respective email address.****

Appendix 2

MEYR Clearance Letter



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT, YOUTH
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
DIRECTORATE FOR RESEARCH, LIFELONG LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY

Tel: 25982743

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 21st June 2023

Ref: R06-2023 1629

To: Director – National School Support Services
From: Senior Manager – Research Unit

Title of Research Study: *Transitioning from Primary School to Middle School: The Experience of Students on the Autism Spectrum in Local State Schools.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to Deborah Sciberras to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MA Ed (Open)
Research Support Teacher
Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/Jeannine Vassallo she/her
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MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT,
YOUTH, RESEARCH & INNOVATION
GREAT SIEGE ROAD, FLORIANA, MALTA

Appendix 3

Legal Guardians Information and Consent Form

1st April, 2023

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

My name is Deborah Sciberras, and I am currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Inclusive Education at the University of Malta. As part of my studies, I am writing a thesis about students on the autism spectrum who have already transitioned from primary to middle school.

I am writing to invite your child to take part in a qualitative study for my research project. My research focuses on the experience of transitioning from primary to middle school for students on the autism spectrum, and your child's participation would be greatly appreciated.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or negative consequences. Your child will be interviewed, and the interview will last approximately one hour. This will take place in a place where your child feels comfortable and safe. The information gathered during this research will be used solely for academic purposes, and all information will be kept strictly confidential.

If your child chooses to participate in this study, their identity will be kept anonymous. Their names and personal information will not be disclosed to anyone outside of the research team, and their responses will be kept strictly confidential.

Participation in this study may give your child the opportunity to learn more about exploring their feelings while also contributing to the field of inclusive education, specifically

ways to support better students on the Autism Spectrum. You and your child will also have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the research and study.

Data Management

The information gathered will be kept confidential. All personal and research data will be saved and only the researcher will have access to them.

Please keep in mind that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify, and, where appropriate, have data about you erased. Only with your permission will your identity be revealed.

Data will be pseudonymised at source, stored separately from personal information and in encrypted and password-protected modalities. Recordings will be deleted at the end of the Masters degree whilst the anonymised transcripts will be kept for 5 years after completion of the study.

If your child is interested in participating in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me via email. I would be happy to provide you with additional information about the study and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Deborah Sciberras

Email: deborah.sciberras.02@um.edu.mt

Parent/Guardian Consent Form:

I have read and understand the above information. I give permission for my child,
_____, to participate in the research study on transition from
Primary to Middle Schools for students on the Autism Spectrum. I understand that my child
can decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

Child Name: _____

Date: _____

1 ta' April. 2023

Għeżież Ġenituri/ Gwardjani,

Jisimni Deborah Sciberras, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master's Degree fl-Edukazzjoni Inkluziva fl-Università ta' Malta. Bħala parti mill-istudji tiegħi, qed nikteb tezi dwar studenti fuq l-ispettru tal-awtiżmu li diġà għaddew mill-iskola primarja għal dik medja.

Qed nikteb biex nistieden lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek biex j/tiehu sehem fi studju kwalitattiv għall-proġett ta' riċerka tiegħi. Ir-riċerka tiegħi tiffoka fuq l-esperjenza sħiħa tat-tranzizzjoni mill-iskola primarja għal dik medja għal studenti fuq l-ispettru tal-awtiżmu u l-partecipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek tkun apprezzata ħafna.

Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija għal kollox volontarja, u tista' tirtira fi kwalunkwe ħin mingħajr penali jew konsegwenzi negattivi. It-tifel/tifla tiegħek ser j/tiġi intervistat/a, u l-intervista se ddum madwar siegħa. Dan se jseħh f'post fejn it-tifel/tifla tiegħek iħossuhom komdi u sikuri. L-informazzjoni miġbura matul din ir-riċerka se tintuża biss għal scopijiet akkademiċi, u l-informazzjoni kollha tkun hija strettament kunfidenzjali.

Jekk it-tifel/tifla tiegħek j/tagħżel li j/tippartecipa f'dan l-istudju, l-identità tagħhom tinżamm anonima. Ismijiet u informazzjoni personali mhux se tiġi żvelata lil xi hadd barra mit-tim tar-riċerka, u twegibiet tagħhom jinżammu strettament kunfidenzjali.

Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju tista' tagħti lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek l-opportunità li jitgħallmu aktar jesploraw emozzjonijiet ta' l-esperjenzi tagħhom filwaqt li tikkontribwixxi wkoll għall-qasam tal-edukazzjoni inkluziva, speċifikament modi kif tappoġġja aħjar studenti fuq l-ispettru tal-awtiżmu. Int u t-tifel/tifla tiegħek ser ikollkhom ukoll l-opportunità li tistaqsi lil xi mistoqsijiet li jista' jkollok dwar ir-riċerka u l-istudju.

Ġestjoni tad-Data

L-informazzjoni miġbura se tinżamm kunfidenzjali. Id-dejta personali u ta' riċerka kollha se tiġi ssejvjata u r-riċerkatur biss ikollu aċċess għalihom.

Jekk jogħġbok żomm f'moħħok li, bħala parteċipant, għandek id-dritt taħt ir-Regolamenti tal-Protezzjoni Ġenerali tad-Dejta (GDPR) u leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali għall-aċċess, u ir-rettifika, fejn xieraq dejta dwar tifel/tifla tiegħek tiġi mħassra. L-identita' tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek tiġi żvelata biss bil-permess tiegħek.

Id-dejta se tiġi psewdonimizzata fis-sors, maħżuna separatament minn informazzjoni personali u f'modalitajiet kriptati u protetti bil-password. Ir- registrazzjonijiet jithassru kif titlesta il-Masters waqt li t-traskrizzjonijiet jithassru 5 snin wara li titlesta r-riċerka.

Jekk it-tifel/tifla tiegħek huwa interessat/a li j/tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju, jekk jogħġbok, toqgħodx lura milli tikkuntattjani permezz tal-emejl jekk tkun tixtieq informazzjoni addizzjonali dwar l-istudju u nwieġeb kwalunkwe mistoqsijiet li jista' jkollok.

Grazzi għall-hin u l-konsiderazzjoni tiegħek.

Sinċerament,

Deborah Sciberras

Imejl: deborah.sciberras.02@um.edu.mt

Formola ta' Kunsens tal-Ġenitur/Gwardjan:

Qrajt u fhimt l-informazzjoni ta' hawn fuq. Nagħti permess għat-tifel/tifla tiegħi,

_____, biex j/tipparteċipa fl-istudju ta' riċerka dwar it-tranzizzjoni mill-Primarja għal Skejjel medji għal studenti fuq l-Ispettru tal-Awtiżmu. Nifhem li t-tifel/tifla tiegħi j/tista' j/tirrifjuta parteċipazzjoni jew j/tirtira fi kwalunkwe hin mingħajr penali.

Isem tal-Ġenitur/Gwardjan: _____

Firma tal-Ġenitur/Gwardjan: _____

Data: _____

Isem tat-Tifel/ Tifla: _____

Data: _____

Appendix 4

Students Information Letter and Assent Forms

1st April, 2023

Dear Student,

I am Deborah Sciberras and currently I am a student at University of Malta, where I am following a course on Inclusive Education. As part of my studies, I am conducting my research for my thesis on the transition of students on the Autism spectrum from primary to middle school.

The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experience of these students when changing schools. Participation in this study will entail a 1 hour interview which will take place at a place where you feel safe and comfortable. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to leave at any time.

Your participation in this study is important to me, and I believe it will help me conduct important research that will benefit the academic community and society as a whole. I also assure you that all information and data gathered for this study will be kept strictly confidential, and your anonymity will be preserved.

If you are interested, please contact me via email. I will gladly provide additional information and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation. I hope to hear from you shortly.

Sincerely,

Deborah Sciberras

Email: deborah.sciberras.02@um.edu.mt

Student Participant Assent Form

I confirm that I read and comprehended the Participant Information Sheet for this study, and that I was given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study. Based on the information provided, I consent Ms Deborah Sciberras to conduct an interview with me about my experience during transition from primary school to middle school.

I agree on the condition that:

- The audio recordings be kept safe and accessible only to Ms Deborah Sciberras
- I am free to stop at any time without explanation.
- My name is hidden and kept confidential
- My real name will never be used in any study-related write up.

Student's name

Student's signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

1 ta' April, 2023

Ghaziż Student,

Jien Deborah Sciberras u bħalissa jien studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, fejn qed insewgi kors dwar l-Edukazzjoni Inkluziva. Bħala parti mill-istudji tiegħi, qed nagħmel ir-riċerka għat-tezi tiegħi dwar it-tranzizzjoni tal-istudenti fuq l-ispettru tal-Awtiżmu mill-iskola primarja għall-iskola medja.

L-għan ta' dan l-istudju huwa li wiehed jifhem aħjar l-esperjenza ta' dawn l-istudenti meta jibdlu l-iskejjel. Il-parteciċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju se tinvolvi intervista ta' siegħa li ssir f'post fejn tħossok sigur u komdu. Il-parteciċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju hija għal kollox volontarja, u inti liberu li tieqaf fi kwalunkwe ħin.

Il-parteciċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju hija importanti għalija, u nemmen li se tgħinni nwettaq riċerka importanti li tibbenefika l-komunità akkademika u s-soċjetà kollha kemm hi. Nassigurakom ukoll li l-informazzjoni u d-data kollha miġbura għal dan l-istudju se jinżammu strettament kunfidenzjali, u l-anonimità tiegħek tiġi ppreservata.

Jekk inti interessat, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattja lili permezz tal-imejll. Bi pjaċir niprovdi informazzjoni addizzjonali u nwieġeb kwalunkwe mistoqsija li jista' jkollok.

Grazzi talli ħadt il-ħin biex tikkunsidra din l-istedina. Nispera li nisma' mingħandek dalwaqt.

Sinċerament,

Deborah Sciberras

Imejl: deborah.sciberras.02@um.edu.mt

Formola ta' Assens tal-Partecipant- Student

Nikkonferma li qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' Informazzjoni għall-Partecipant għal dan l-istudju, u li ngħatajt l-opportunità li nagħmel mistoqsijiet u niddiskuti l-istudju. Fuq il-bażi tal-informazzjoni mogħtija, nagħti l-kunsens lis-Sinjura Deborah Sciberras biex tagħmel intervista miegħi dwar l-esperjenza tiegħi waqt it-tranzizzjoni mill-iskola primarja għall-iskola medja.

Naqbel bil-kundizzjoni li:

- Ir-registrazzjonijiet tal-awdjjo jinżammu siguri u aċċessibbli biss għas-Sinjura Deborah Sciberras
- Jien liberu li nieqaf fi kwalunkwe hin mingħajr spjegazzjoni.
- Ismi jibqa' moħbi u jinżamm kunfidenzjali
- Ismi mhux se jintuża fi kwalunkwe kitba relatata mal-istudju.

Isem l-istudent

Firma ta' l-istudent

Data

Firma tar-Riceratur

Appendix 5

Semi- Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you feel when you first realised it was time to move from primary school to middle school?
2. Did you have any concerns or fears about transitioning to middle school?
3. Can you mention ways you prepared yourself for the transition to middle school?
4. Was the transition to middle school difficult for you? If so, what challenges did you encounter?
5. Were teachers and staff at your new school supportive and understanding of your needs?
6. Did you feel included and accepted by your peers/ friends and classmates at your new school?
7. Were there any specific programs or resources that helped make the transition easier for you?
8. Looking back, what advice would you give to someone on the autism spectrum who is about to transition to middle school?
9. What were some of the highlights of your experience in middle school?
10. Do you consider your middle school experience to be positive or negative overall?
11. Is there anything you wish adults had known or done differently to support you during your transition to middle school?

Mistoqsijiet ta' Intervista Semi-Strutturata

1. Kif hassejtek meta rrealizzajt li kien wasal iż-żmien li tgħaddi mill-iskola primarja għall-iskola medja?
2. Kellek xi thassib jew biżgħat dwar it-tranzizzjoni għall-iskola medja?
3. Tista' ssemmi modi kif hejjejt lilek innifsek għat-tranzizzjoni għall-iskola medja?
4. It-tranzizzjoni għall-iskola medja tqis li kienet waħda diffiċli għalik? Jekk iva, liema sfidi ltqajt magħhom?
5. L-għalliema u l-istaff fl-iskola l-ġdida tiegħek kienu ta' appoġġ u fehmul-bżonnijiet tiegħek?
6. Hassejtek inkluz u aċċettat minn sħabek/ħbieb u sħabek tal-klassi fl-iskola l-ġdida tiegħek?
7. Kien hemm xi programmi jew riżorsi speċifiċi li għenu biex it-tranzizzjoni tkun aktar faċli għalik?
8. Meta tħares lura, x'parir tagħti lil xi hadd li huwa fuq l-ispettru tal-awtizmu u wasal biex jgħaddi għall-iskola medja?
9. X'kienu wħud mill-punti ewlenin tal-esperjenza tiegħek fl-iskola medja?
10. B'mod ġenerali, tqis li l-esperjenza tiegħek fl-iskola medja hija pozittiva jew negattiva?
11. Hemm xi haġa li tixtieq li l-adulti jkunu jafu jew għamlu b'mod differenti biex jappoġġawk matul it-tranzizzjoni tiegħek għall-iskola medja?

Appendix 6

Interview Transcripts Extracts

Participant 1- Mariella

Interviewer: And so I gave you the questions before. To your mom. Maybe you could have looked them up for. And we'll take a look at them. So that you feel comfortable and we're going to start with the first question, if there is a question that you don't feel like answering, feel free to stop and tell me, I would.

Mariella: OK.

Interviewer: I don't want to answer this question. OK, so you are you are in control of this of this interview. Is that OK for you?

Mariella: Yes

Interviewer: So, first before we start? Can, I ask you how old are you?

Mariella: 11.

Interviewer: 11, OK, so you must be in year seven, year 8.

Mariella: Yes, Seven.

Interviewer: Yes. So this is your first year in the secondary school sort of your same school, yeah.

Mariella: Umm.

Interviewer: So the first question is, how did you feel when last year when you were in year six, you realized that it was time to move from primary to middle school? How was? How was it? How did you feel?

Mariella: I felt a little bit nervous, but other than that normal.

Interviewer: And could you maybe explain what your thoughts were?

Mariella: Well, when I finished year six, my first thought was yay, it's summer vacation.

And then when I thought about middle school, it was all like I'm super nervous. What if this happens? What if that happens? What if I get lost?

Participant 2- Peter

Interviewer: Yes, so I'm Ms Deborah.

Peter: OK. Hello, Miss Deborah.

Interviewer: Hello Peter and I'm doing research on students who are on the spectrum and they already went to middle school and left their primary years behind.OK.

Peter: Yes

Interviewer: And it seems that you are in year seven, it's your first year in middle school.

That's what your mother said true?

Peter: This is the first semester, yes

Interviewer: Yes. So, I wanted to ask you the first question is about before you started middle school, how did you feel when you were in year six or you were in your primary years and you realized that soon you will be moving to another school and how did you feel?

Peter: Well, yes, I. At first I was I was nervous and I mean nervous, like I was. I was actually very scared, but now that I look upon it, I was just scared of almost nothing, but my mom helped me reassured me because most of the people who I have in primary, the reason why I was scared most because I'm not so good at making friends as such. So like I was scared that I would lose my friends, but surprisingly most of them came. So my mom reassured me that most people who went to primary would come to my middle school, which was very reassuring and helped me ease in to, to middle school more.

Interviewer: OK. And because some of these students then they move to other middle schools that maybe are not the same middle school that you're going to.

Peter: Yes, some of them went to different ones. Most of them came to Tarxien middle school, which was very nice.

Interviewer: And OK, so. What was your main fear, when you thought about middle school, what scared you the most of this transition?

Peter: What scared me the most, as I said, friendships. That's what scared me the most. Ah, cause I was scared. I was also quite scared about how would it be with multiple teachers, but honestly the main focus was friendship, so I could actually say that.

Participant 3- Jessica

Interviewer- Mela, issa domandi jien issa battomlok so għandek idea bejn wiehed u ieħor issa fuq xiex ħa nitkellmu. Nibdew bl ewwel waħda. Meta inti irrejalizzajt li ħa timmuvja mil primary għal middle school kif hassejtek? Kif kienet kif hassejtek meta kont għadek fil primarja u kont taf li ħa timxi għal middle school?

Jessica- jien hassejtni mbeżza ħafna għax qisni kont naf li kienet ħa tkun tibdila kbira ħafna għalija.

Interviewer- X tibdil kellek f moħħok meta kont taħseb fil middle school? X kien ibeżżek l iktar? X l iktar tibdil li kien ibeżżek?

Jessica- Il fatt li skola kbira, sistema kompletament differenti, klassijiet ma hemm l ebda garanzija li ħa nkun ma sħabi

Interviewer- Ok u dawn qisek il biżat li kellek jew il worries li kellek kont tkellimtu ma xi ħadd, mal mama jew forsi ma sħabek forsi kontu titkellmu int u sħabek?

Jessica- Tkellimthom kemm mal ġenituri kemm ma sħabi u kemm mas psychologist

Interviewer- U kellek xi reassurances min naħa tal iskola jew min naħa tas psychologist li changes inti ħa tiflaħ għalijhom?

Jessica- Esaċc iva

Interviewer- Kellek daqsxejn iktar reassurance?

Jessica- Ehe

Interviewer- Mela kieku jkollna ngħidu kif inti preparajt ruħek għal din it transition qisu inti kellek iktar għajnuna professjonali minn dik tad dar?

Jessica- Ehe eżatt

Interviewer- U min naħa ta skola sibt għajnuna fuq din ic change biex jipreparawk għaliġa?

Eżempju kellhom xi transition meetings mal iskola jew inkella mortu tal iskola inti u tal familja taraw l iskola qabel? Sibb dawn it tip ta għajnuniet min naħa tal iksola?

Jessica- Iva imma kollox online għax fiż żmien il covid inżertat.

Interviewer- Taħseb li kienet iktar diffiċli transition il fatt li konna f dak il perjodu tal covid u l affarijiet kienu kollox online ma kienx hemm affarijiet physical?

Jessica- Iva hafna

Interviewer- Inti meta għalqu l iskejjel bil covid x year kont?

Jessica- Year 6

Participant 4- Andrew

Interviewer: Kien perjodu twil fil year 6 dan jew qisu lejn l aħħar meta jibdedw jurukhom x ser jigri fis sekondarja? Ma nafx jekk ħadukhomx ukoll tarawha l iskola? Kienu għadhom jieħdukhom dak iż żmien tarawha l iskola waqt li tkun fil year 6?

Andrew: Ma kelliex biża biss kont għidt biss li rrid nitfa moħħi hemm imma jibda jkolli l beżat kif bdejt matul is sena.

Interviewer: Kellek lse inti fil-primarja u fil middle school?

Andrew: Iva fi tnejn.

Interviewer: U kienet shared jew one to one?

Andrew: Emm nahseb minn dejjem shared miniex ċert imma nahseb minn dejjem shared

Interviewer: Kont taqsama ma xi ħaddieħor mela.

Hemm kif ippreparajt lilek innifsek forsi inti mal mama id-dar forsi int mal lse l-iskola stess kif preparajt lilek innifsek għal din il-bidla għal dik change ta x'se jigri. Forsi kellkhom meetings ma' l-iskola qabel dhalt hemm?

Andrew: Kellna meetings eżatti

Interviewer: Kellkhom meetings?

Andrew: Hekk qishom ikun hemm kull tifel ikollu laqgħa mal-iskola mm ikun hemm ġenituri tiegħu.

Interviewer: Hassejta aħjar li l-fatt li kellek dawn il one to one meetings?

Andrew: Hassejt xiex?

Appendix 7

Table of Translated Quotes

Page No	Maltese Language	English Language
82	Jiena ġa kont diagnosed pero l-iskola ma kinitx aware apparentament... fixklitni naqa mhux ħażin	I was already diagnosed but apparently the school was not aware...it didn't help much
82	qisu ġa kelli tikka idea ta x'ha jiġi	I already had an idea of what was going to happen
82	l-visit żgur ma joffrix li qisek tkun daqsxejn diġà vicin tal-ġhalliema jew tal-form teacher, jiġifieri jkun aktar jistgħu jgħinuk, jiġifieri nimmagina li tagħmel differenza	the visit doesn't offer ways to be close to the teachers and form teacher, meaning that they can help you more, I think it makes a difference
84	zija t'ommi kienet tgħini ħafna u hi kienet tifhimni	my mother's aunt used to help me and she used to understand me
84	imbghad f'ċertu punt iddeċidejna nibagħtu email l-iskola biex qishom ngibuhom aware biex inbati jien	At one point, we decided to speak with the school by email to make them aware of my situation and needs
84	kellmu lil ommi u n-nanniet	they spoke to my mum and grandparents

84	peress li zija t'ommi kienet tgħini ħafna u hi kienet tifhimni mil-ewwel x'ikun rrid ngħid jista' jkun jien emm ħadtha drawwa biex inserrah fuqha inserrah l-ewwel fuqha. Jigifieri xi hekk hemm aktar għajnuna personali nistennija minnha	I relied on my mother's aunt since she was helpful and understood me. Thus, I expected personal support from her
85	Tkellimthom kemm mal-ġenituri kemm ma sħabi u kemm mas-psychologist	I spoke about them with my parents, friends and psychologist
85	Ehe kont ġieli mort xi counselling	Yes, I went counselling for some time
86	l-għalliema li kelli imma huma kienu jieqfu iħalluni emm nistaqsihom	the teachers used to stop and offer me the opportunity to ask questions
86/87	perezempju meta kont inkun overstimulated fil klassi kont niffiġitja ħafna jiena u teachers kienu jgħiduli biex nieqaf jew ha joħorguni mill-klassi jekk ma nieqafx	for example, when I was overstimulated in class, I would fidget a lot, and teachers would either stop me or remove me out of class
87	L-lse biċċiet minnhom kont sibthom tajbin ħafna	most of the LSEs were very good
88	kelli żmien kont immur għand tal-guidance tajjeb... għenuni ħafna	there was a point when I used to attend guidance and they really helped me

89	jaqbd u miegħi għax jarawni iktar differenti	they picked up on me because I was different
89	kienu tfal vera kienu tfal vera keshin u anke jekk jatuwhom dixxiplina xorta jibqgħu għaddejin	The students were rude, and even when the school issued them consequences they kept going
91	Jiena qisni qed nikkowpja ħafna aħjar dan l-aħħar	I feel that I am coping better now
91	kif konna qed ninterpreta l-istudju jew affarijiet oħrajn kont spicċajt għamilt l-affarijiet aghar	the way I was interpreting study and other issues, I ended up worsening the situation
91	outingi kont nieħu pjaċir u anke l – iskola stess kienu jagħmlulna ħafna attivitajiet bħal loġħob filgħodu qabel ma jibdew il-lessons hemm il-klubbs	I used to have fun during outings and at school they used to do a number of activities like games in the morning before lessons start and clubs
93	kieku sħabi ma nsertawx fil-klassi miegħi ma kontx inkun nista' niltaqgħa magħhom bl-ebda mod	if my friends were not in my class, I could not meet them
94	Il-fatt li skola kbira u kompletament differenti	the fact that it is a big school and a completely different system)

94	Mbeżża ħafna għax qisni kont naf li kienet ħa tkun tibdila kbira ħafna għalija	I was extremely worried because I knew it was going to be a significant change for me
94	naħseb li ħa tkun itqal u li ħa jkolli bżonn niffoka aktar	I think it would be more difficult and I need to focus more
95	U kien u kien għamilli biz-żmien emm li kien affettwani mentalment, jiġifieri ma kontx emm, kont inbati aktar biex nitkellmu it-tfal	as time passed, I experienced mental effects that made it challenging for me to communicate with other students
95	Konna għamilna qisu short film ma' ta' drama.... Kont waħda mil-protagonisti.....Il-magġoranza tal-ħbieb li għandi llum minn hemm ġibthom fil-fatt.	We produced a short film with the drama group. I was chosen as one of the protagonists. I met most of today's friends in the drama group.
96	Jien għandi l-mod tiegħi kif nifhem mod uniku kif nifhem....Li qed ngħidlek imma għax kif emm, kif konna qed ninterpreta l- istudju jew affarijiet oħrajn kont spiċċajt għamilt l-affarijiet aghar għax ma kontx nagħmel jew nara affarijiet li t-tfal jagħmlu, jiġifieri inqas inqas kelli çans naqbel magħhom, i mean. Moħħi kien idum jiżviluppah aktar vera.	I understand things in my own way, which is unique....What I'm saying is that because of how I interpreted the study or other factors, I ended up making things worse because I wasn't participating in or watching activities that students do, which meant that I

		had fewer chances of getting along with them. My mind developed later, it is true.
97	ikunu diġa jafuk u anke inti tkun qisek diġa qed issir tafhom	They will get to know you first, and you will get to know them too
102	L-lse biċċiet minnhom kont sibthom tajbin ħafna	I found most of the LSEs to be helpful
103	il-maġġor parti kienu jifhmu	most of them were understanding
104	ċertu teachers ma tantx fehemu l-bżonnijiet tiegħi. Pereżempju meta kont inkun overstimulated fil-klassi kont niffiġitja ħafna jiena u teachers kienu jgħiduli biex nieqaf jew ħa jgħorguni mill-klassi jekk ma nieqafx	some teachers did not understand my needs. For example, when I was overstimulated in class and start to fidget, teachers used to tell me to stop or else they will send me out of class
106	jaqbduni miegħi għax jarawni iktar differenti	they pick up on me because they see me as being different
106/107	Minn waqt li kienu emm il-hin kollu jdejjquni tfal u ikunu jagħmluni nħossni aghar u kien jgħiduli affarijiet li jwegghawni ħafna personalment imbagħad kien ikun hemm dawn l-attivitatijiet	during the time when they were annoying me and attempting to make me feel worse, there were these

		activities that I personally enjoyed
107	nikkopja hafna aħjar dan l-aħħar	I cope much better now in secondary