

**Inclusion or Illusion?**

**Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education**

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## Abstract

Inclusive education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and forms the foundation of Malta's educational policies, which promote the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream settings. However, research suggested that its implementation is often compromised by persistent barriers that hinder disabled students' full participation and future opportunities. This qualitative study explores the perspectives of eight neurodivergent young adults, aged 18 to 25, on inclusive education, during and after compulsory schooling in Malta. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and informed by the social and human rights models of disability, this research adopts a neurodivergent-affirmative approach that centres participants' voices and experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four overarching themes: the pivotal role of teachers in shaping inclusion; the misalignment between student needs and existing support systems; the ongoing impact of inclusive education's limitations on participants' transitions and post-secondary experiences; and evolving understandings of meaningful and sustainable inclusion. Despite legislative progress, the implementation of inclusive education remains inconsistent, often dependent on the variable goodwill of individual educators, alongside persistent reliance on outdated models prioritising integration over genuine inclusion. Participants highlighted gaps in support, limited understanding of neurodivergence, and persistent reliance on narrow, stereotypical frameworks that overlook gender, individuality and cognitive diversity. The research concludes that inclusive education in Malta requires a shift from tokenistic practices to approaches that genuinely embrace and respond to students' holistic needs. Key implications centre on practice-oriented policy reform, comprehensive educator training, and robust support structures that enable holistic and responsive provision. Additionally, the amplification of neurodivergent voices is essential to foster more equitable, empowering, and inclusive educational environments.

**Key words:** ADHD; autism; human rights model; inclusive education; Malta; neurodivergent students; perspectives; social model of disability.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Inclusive education is a globally endorsed principle that upholds disabled students' access to mainstream education, not as a privilege but as a fundamental human right (UNCRPD, 2006). It is based on the belief that educating all children together, regardless of differences, fosters a more inclusive society where everyone is valued and supported to thrive (UNESCO, 2020b). This process requires accommodating the individual needs of all students to ensure their equitable access and meaningful participation in learning alongside their same aged peers (Calleja et al., 2017). However, despite decades of efforts to promote inclusive education, disability remains "one of the most serious barriers to education across the globe" (UNICEF, n.d., para. 2). According to UNESCO (2020a), the enduring challenges to inclusion are largely attributed to "the lack of belief that it is possible and desirable" (p. 1).

This study explores how neurodivergent students experience inclusive education in Maltese schools. It centres on the voices of eight young adults, aged between 18 and 25, who are either autistic, have ADHD, or both, to examine the strengths and limitations of Malta's inclusive education system and incorporate their suggestions for improvement. In this chapter, I outline the study's purpose, the theoretical and epistemological foundations that guide it, and my personal motivations for undertaking this research. I also provide a brief overview of the dissertation's structure.

### **Background and Global Context**

The recognition of education as a universal right was first articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, article 26). Translated into more than 500 languages, this landmark document catalysed a global discourse that increasingly recognised inclusion and equity as essential principles in education (Bauer et al., 2010). Subsequent international frameworks reinforced this commitment, with expanded visions of inclusion that promote disabled

students' integration in mainstream schools with appropriate support. A major turning point came with the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), which advocated for schools to accommodate all learners regardless of ability, laying the groundwork for a global movement toward educational equity and social justice (Norwich, 2013).

This momentum continued with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006). Specifically, Article 24 legally obliged signatory nations to ensure inclusive education for disabled students, with reasonable accommodations that support their full potential. This principle aligns with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), which directs the focus from people's impairments to societal barriers and advocates for systemic change to ensure equitable opportunities. In education, this change entails schools to proactively remove obstacles to disabled students' holistic success, such as one-size-fits-all teaching methods and inaccessible environments.

Since its adoption, the UNCRPD has garnered widespread international support. As of 2024, 191 countries have ratified the Convention (United Nations, 2024), reinforcing the global consensus on inclusion as a principle of justice and rights. However, despite progressive legislation, significant shortcomings in the implementation of inclusive education continue to be reported globally (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; UNESCO, 2020a, 2024; UNICEF, n.d.).

### **The Maltese Context**

Malta became a signatory of the UNCRPD in 2007 and fully committed to its implementation in 2012. Following the Equal Opportunities Act (Legiżlazzjoni Malta, 2000), the UNCRPD was formally incorporated into national legislation (Legiżlazzjoni Malta, 2021). As a result, inclusion became a guiding principle in Maltese education policy, with schools increasingly adopting an ethos that places inclusion at the forefront (MEYR, 2022a, 2022b). However, the Maltese context presents no exception

to the aforementioned global challenges. Despite strong legislative commitments and policy developments, inclusive education in Malta continues to face significant implementation gaps.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the complex and persistent barriers affecting the successful inclusion of disabled students in Maltese educational settings (Bajada et al., 2021; Callus & Farrugia, 2016; Galea, 2017; Marić, 2018; Psaila, 2017). Among these barriers, many neurodivergent students face stigma, isolation, biased discipline, and inadequate support, all of which compromise their academic progress and emotional well-being (Borg, 2020; Camilleri, 2015; Debono, 2017). These issues are compounded when conditions like ADHD or autism remain undiagnosed, leaving students without essential assistance (Attard, 2020; Mifsud, 2016; Muscat, 2022). In Malta, only students with an official statement of needs are allocated structured support (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019; MEYR, 2022a). This system places undiagnosed neurodivergent students at greater risk of negative schooling experiences and disengagement.

Aligning to global appeals to abolish negative attitudes and misconceptions surrounding disability (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018; UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b), local researchers call for more cohesive systems that better serve neurodivergent students. Specifically, Azzopardi et al. (2023), Camilleri, (2015) and Muscat (2024) argued that eliminating negative attitudes and stereotypical ideologies surrounding neurodivergence is essential to preventing neurodivergent students' setbacks and underachievement. Echoing this concern, the Early Leaving from Education and Training Strategy (MEYR, 2023) identified disability as a major contributor to school dropout, reinforcing the urgent need for stronger more effective inclusive practices.

### **Notes on Terminology**

As noted by Beckett and Callus (2024), preference of terminology surrounding disability differs across cultural contexts. In this study, language is intentionally framed to reflect and uphold disabled people's rights and perspectives.

## **Neurodivergence and Neurodiversity**

Given the terms neurodiversity and neurodivergence are often interchanged, it is important to clarify their distinct meanings. Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in human brain functioning and embraces neurological differences as part of human diversity (Singer, 1999). Neurodivergence, more specifically, refers to cognitive functioning that diverges from socially constructed norms (Legault et al., 2021; Walker, 2021).

Echoing Fricker (2007), who coined the term 'epistemic injustice' to describe how marginalized groups are often excluded or discredited as knowers of their own experiences, Legault et al. (2021) defined neurodivergence as "neurodiversity accompanied by epistemic injustices" (p. 12844), to underscore the systemic marginalization of neurodivergent people. Similarly, Walker (2021) presented neurodivergence as an affirmative concept that exposes oppression and advocates for the rights of those whose cognitive profiles challenge societal expectations.

While neurodivergence encompasses a range of conditions (Connolly et al. 2023; Kapp, 2020), this research focuses on autism and ADHD, the most prevalent neurodevelopmental differences within the neurodivergent spectrum (French et al., 2023; Sparrow & King, 2024).

## **Autistic, ADHD(ers) and Disabled**

This study aligns with a neurodivergent-affirmative approach that views identity-first expressions as empowering and essential to reducing stigma (Coral, 2024; Kapp et al., 2013; Walker, 2021). Terms such as 'autistic students', 'are autistic', 'ADHD students', 'are ADHD', and 'ADHDers', are used to affirm neurodivergence as an integral, non-pathologized aspect of identity. Similarly, the term disabled students/people reflects the social model of disability which distinguishes impairment from the disability imposed by societal structures. This approach locates responsibility for the challenges disabled people face within systemic and institutional barriers (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2010).

## Personal Motivation

This research is driven by both academic curiosity and personal experience. Having worked as a learning support educator (LSE) for over 14 years, I have witnessed both the positive efforts that foster inclusion and the persistent barriers that hinder it: I have seen students thrive thanks to their own resilience, strong family support, and the responsive teaching and dedication of many committed and inclusive educators working within school systems that strive to promote empathy and equity; I have also seen others struggle academically, socially, and emotionally in environments that fail to accommodate their individual needs. Too often, these struggles stem from limited educator understanding of neurodivergence, rigid curricula, and insufficient support structures. Such factors can leave students disillusioned with both education and their future prospects.

These challenges, while grounded in my direct experience supporting neurodivergent students, reflect broader realities widely discussed in literature (Armstrong, 2012; Attard, 2020; Muscat, 2024; Sparrow & King, 2024). As Legault (2024) noted in her reflections as a neurodivergent 'outsider' in academic spaces, neurodivergent people are frequently misunderstood and marginalised by dominant ableist discourses that uphold neurotypical norms. Inspired by Dei's (2016) assertion that "inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists" (p.36), but about transforming spaces to ensure equitable participation for all, through this study I seek to challenge epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), by centring the voices and knowledge of neurodivergent young adults who are too often disregarded in educational discourse.

## Positionality

As a professional working within the system I seek to critique, I recognise that my positionality inevitably shapes this inquiry. While I acknowledge the potential influence of my role, I will engage in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process to ensure participants' perspectives remain central and authentically represented. In line with the work of Bertilsdotter

Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2024), Legault et al. (2021), and Stone and Priestley (1996), who argued that disabled people's perspectives must underpin any emancipatory change, my primary aim is to centre neurodivergent students' voices as valid and essential sources of knowledge, in the pursuit of more inclusive and equitable education practices.

## The Research Design

### Aims and Objectives

This study is guided by the central research question: What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on inclusive education?

It aims to critically evaluate the effectiveness of Malta's inclusive education system in promoting a good quality of life for neurodivergent students. It also explores how existing policies align with their experiences and perspectives, highlighting both the supports they benefit from and the barriers they face. Furthermore, the study investigates how inclusive education has influenced neurodivergent students' academic, social, and personal development, both during and after compulsory schooling. By amplifying the voices of neurodivergent young adults, this research aspires to generate meaningful insights that can inform a more effective and equitable inclusive education system in Malta. To achieve its objectives, the study addresses three key sub-questions:

- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on their inclusion during compulsory schooling?
- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on their inclusion after compulsory schooling?
- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on how inclusive education can better support the diverse needs of neurodivergent students?

## Conceptual Framework

The aim of centring neurodivergent people's voices required an epistemological approach that prioritises understanding human experiences from the perspectives of those who live them. Therefore, this study is grounded in interpretivism, which allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and recognises the value of subjective understanding (Denicolo et al., 2016; Willis, 2007). It also draws on social constructionism, which examines how knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interactions, cultural norms, and institutional practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Sandu, 2016). This lens enables critical analysis of how neurodivergent students make sense of their experiences, and how institutional practices and cultural discourses shape their realities.

Additionally, this research is guided by the social and human rights models of disability. The social model highlights the societal origins of disability, shifting focus from individual impairments to the structural barriers that hinder participation, and emphasises the need to remove obstacles to inclusion (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2010). The human rights model expands on this by advocating for the dignity and rightful inclusion of disabled people (Degener, 2016a; United Nations, 2006, Article 1). As noted by Lawson and Beckett (2021), these two models together give a comprehensive framework for analysing inclusive education. Furthermore, a neurodivergent-affirmative framework (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2024) recognises neurodivergent cognitions as an invaluable source of knowledge production, challenging deficit-based narratives that pathologize difference. This aligns with the study's aim to foreground neurodivergent voices and promote an inclusive education system that embraces cognitive diversity.

## Relevance of the Study

A key element of this research is its reciprocal and emancipatory intent. As Stone and Priestley (1996) argued, research should not solely serve academic certification but must also contribute meaningfully to the emancipation of the communities it represents. In alignment with emancipatory disability research, a neurodivergent-affirmative lens recognises neurodivergent students as active agents in shaping inclusive education. It seeks to create space for their voices to inform practice and challenge the systemic barriers that undermine their inclusion and success. This commitment is reinforced by the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006, Articles 21, 24), which upholds disabled people's rights to freedom of expression and quality education.

Despite increasing recognition of the need to include neurodivergent voices in education research, these are often overshadowed by non-disabled perspectives (Beckett & Callus, 2024). Taneja-Johansson (2023) also noted that current research disproportionately focuses on autistic students with low support needs, while often excluding ADHDers and neurodivergent students with more complex support needs. This study responds by centring the experiences of autistic and ADHD young adults, including those with varying support needs, directly addressing their underrepresentation. In doing so, it echoes Garcia (2020) and Walker (2021), who argue that disabled people's perspectives must be foundational to inclusive reform. Consistent with the core models on which it is founded, this study aspires to inform inclusive educational practice within the Maltese context and contribute to broader efforts toward equity and improved quality of life for neurodivergent people.

## Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I build a comprehensive understanding of neurodivergent students' experiences within inclusive education, with a special focus on the Maltese context. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of global and local literature on inclusive education, foregrounding key

milestones and challenges within the Maltese education system. It includes broader discussions around disabled students and identifies key gaps related to neurodivergence, particularly autism and ADHD. In chapter 3, I outline the study's qualitative methodology, detailing the research design, data collection, participant recruitment, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the research findings and a critical discussion of these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and wider literature. Finally, Chapter 5 offers conclusions and recommendations aimed at strengthening inclusive practices, with a focus on better supporting neurodivergent students within the Maltese education system.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

The concept of inclusive education is anchored in the principles of social justice, underscoring that education is not a privilege, but a basic human right. UNESCO claimed that inclusive education has the potential to lay the groundwork for a more "just and non-discriminatory society" (UNESCO, 2020b, p.12). This concept envisions a learning environment where all students, irrespective of ability, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and social class can learn together and fulfil their potential. Framed within this perspective, inclusive education represents a holistic endeavour that embraces diversity, upholds equity, and cultivates a sense of belonging for every learner.

While these principles offer an ideal vision for equity and participation, literature by Florian and Spratt (2013), Krischler et al. (2019) and Lüke and Grosche (2017) brought forward a more complex reality. The interpretations and practices of inclusive education vary significantly, and are shaped by cultural values, socio-economic conditions, policy frameworks, professional backgrounds, and historical contexts. In parallel, Karim's view (2023) of inclusive education as a "multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that deals with policy, practice and pedagogy" (p.138), implies the extensive variation in comprehending the core concept of inclusion and how such fluctuations result in varied practices and levels of inclusion across different settings. UNESCO (2020a) further emphasised that deeply held doubts about the feasibility and value of inclusion continue to pose an entrenched barrier to its full realisation.

This literature review opens with a general overview of the global historical documentation of inclusive education. It then highlights the relevance of the social and human rights models of disability as a crucial framework shaping inclusive education. Adopting a neurodivergent-affirmative approach, this review will explore how inclusive education has become a staple in Maltese policy, examining researched practices and the various lacunas that have been pointed out in the Maltese education

system, specifically in light of neurodivergent students who are autistic and/or ADHD. While the primary aim of this chapter is to bring forth the perspectives on inclusive education within the Maltese context through a review of Maltese policy documents and research carried out in Malta, it also draws on insights from international research and contributions from neurodivergent scholars and advocates.

### **Carving a Blueprint for Inclusion**

International efforts to promote inclusive education began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, article 26). This ground-breaking document planted the seed for future advocacy and policy-making efforts to ensure equitable access to education, among other life domains. The subsequent World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) further emphasized the importance of an expanded vision that addresses the learning needs of those most likely to be marginalised, including disabled children, youth, and adults. Additionally, Rule 6 in the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1993) provided more targeted guidance. It stressed the importance of inclusive policies that address the unique needs of disabled people and ensure their inclusion within regular education systems through the provision of the necessary support. A year later, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) marked a significant milestone by explicitly calling for inclusive schools that "accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions" (p.6).

The Salamanca Statement triggered a movement of advocacy for inclusion and social justice across the globe. It paved the way for various texts emphasizing education's role in fighting discrimination and fostering equity and respect for diversity (Norwich, 2013). A broad international commitment to inclusive education was further solidified with the adoption of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006). Specifically, article 24 called for all countries to ensure inclusive education at all levels. It prioritised disabled people's rightful entitlement to reasonable accommodation in education to reach their best possible potential and to participate in the community while upholding their inherent dignity. With 191 member states having ratified the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2024), the Convention has become a legal framework that underscores a widespread consensus on inclusive education policies promoting inclusion as a fundamental human right essential for developing a just and equitable society.

### **The Social and Human Rights Models of Disability in Education**

Altogether, the above-mentioned documents advocate for a progressive approach that broadens the understanding of disability from a social perspective and supports the rightful holistic development of every individual. Following this stance, Calleja et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of inclusive education to operate as a safe space for disabled students whereby their individual needs are catered for and voices are heard. Within the educational context, the social and human rights models of disability represent a move towards a more inclusive, equitable, and rights-based approach to education. Lawson and Beckett (2021) proposed that these two models complement each other as "oppositional devices" (p.365) in their shared aim to disrupt the status quo. In accordance with Rieser (2012), Lawson and Beckett (2021) also suggested that both models are relevant to the emancipation of disabled people since they offer a remarkable contrast to the exclusionary tendencies of the charity and medical models of disability. Through the charity model, disabled individuals are seen as objects of pity who need help to survive (Barnes, 2012). In relation to this perspective, the medical model portrays disabled people as flawed and in need of correction (Shakespeare, 2010). Through such a deficit-based lens, educational opportunities for disabled students are often framed as acts of benevolence rather than basic rights, thus perpetuating dependency and failing to address the need for systemic change or empowerment.

While acknowledging the importance of medical interventions for the well-being of disabled people, Rieser (2012) cautioned against viewing disability solely through a medical lens. Such a narrow perspective results in marginalisation and segregation in educational settings, where the focus remains on rehabilitation and care. Rather than real inclusion, the medical and charity models support mere placement and prioritise the conformity of neurodivergent students to the dominant norms of mainstream environments (Bartolo, 2010). In contrast, the social model serves as a "tool" (Oliver, 2013, p.1025; Degener, 2016b, p.4) that identifies disability as a product of societal barriers that hinder participation. It contests exclusion based on impairment and emphasises the removal of environmental, attitudinal, and institutional obstacles. In education, this model underpins inclusive policies and practices that respond to disabled students' diverse learning needs, ensuring participation and belonging, not as a charity act but as a case of justice and equity (Shakespeare, 2010).

Degener (2016a, 2016b) acknowledged the social model as the driving force behind the UNCRPD. However, she expanded upon it further, situating disability within a universal human rights framework. She presented the human rights model as one that, in addition to addressing social barriers, incorporates legal recognition of disabled people's entitlement to dignity, autonomy and equal participation. While aligning with Degener's view, Lawson and Beckett (2021) broadened the discourse by emphasising the complementary role of the social model in shaping the Convention. This comprehensive framework offers a critical lens to assess current educational practices, identify potential shortcomings where policy and practice may fall short, and advocate for a more rights-based approach where needed. Building on this, the social and human rights models underpin this research, providing the basis for foregrounding neurodivergent students' voices on inclusive education.

## **Inclusive Education in Malta**

### **International Influence and Early Momentum**

The afore-mentioned international documents have been crucial in asserting disabled children's right to education and in the evolution of Malta's inclusive education system (National Curriculum Council, 2002). Malta's endorsement of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) had sparked national debate across the island. Mercieca and Mercieca (2019) claimed that this document served as a catalyst for advocacy for the rights of disabled children at a time when parents had no say in their disabled children's education and when educators could refuse to teach students based on the grounds of their impairment. The Salamanca Statement not only became a crucial reference point for parents, educators, and policymakers who wanted to disrupt the status quo, but also facilitated the country's commitment to the concept of inclusive education (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019).

### **Malta's Foundations of Inclusion in Practice**

Malta's first official steps toward inclusive education emerged in the early 1990s. During this period, plans were introduced to abolish the segregation of many disabled children by transforming special schools into resource centres that support inclusion within mainstream settings (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019; Ministry of Education, 1999). Additionally, this period saw the initial engagement of learning support educators (LSEs), then referred to as facilitators, to support disabled students' access to mainstream schools (Bencini, 2002). This move was followed by the National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999), which emphasised a more inclusive mindset by prioritising disabled students and diversity to reflect a just society. These official documents imprinted a steadfast commitment to a challenging yet essential journey that would transform education policy into one that favours and promotes inclusive practices. The aim was to foster learning environments that

welcome all students, including those with diverse impairments, and uphold their rightful entitlement to thrive holistically with their same-aged peers.

### **A Continuous Effort Towards Inclusion**

The above initiatives were soon supported by formal legislation that began to affirm Malta's commitment to inclusion. The legislative trajectory of inclusion was first formalised through the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act (Legiżlazzjoni Malta, 2000), which provided a detailed and legally binding framework to uphold disabled persons' rights to access, equity, and quality in the provision of services. Building on this act, the foundation of inclusive education and the government's commitment to positive change was further reinforced upon the signing and ratification of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006) in 2007 and 2012, respectively. Eventually, the rights of disabled people, as established throughout this trajectory, were transposed into national law through the UNCRPD Act (Legiżlazzjoni Malta, 2021), which further cemented Malta's adherence to the UNCRPD. Subsequently, the inclusion of all students, irrespective of any form of diversity, including that resulting from impairment, has been unequivocally enshrined by Maltese legislation in the Education Act (Legiżlazzjoni Malta, 2022).

As this legal foundation took shape, the Salamanca Statement and the UNCRPD have been pivotal in shaping Malta's ongoing efforts for a better and more inclusive society through education. Conforming to Norwich (2022), who highlighted the importance of a detailed perspective of inclusive education, Maltese policies and frameworks have evolved over time, condensing the concept of inclusion with a comprehensive approach that is more value-driven. Notably, A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (MEYR, 2022a), and the National Inclusive Education Framework (MEYR, 2022b) have been recently revised to reflect a denser intersectional approach to student diversity. These documents not only promoted inclusion as invaluable in upholding students' rightful entitlement and sense of belonging, but also advised on the elimination of barriers that jeopardise students' active

engagement and attainment. Moreover, the recent Early Leaving from Education and Training Strategy (MEYR, 2023a) acknowledged disability as a critical factor in school dropouts and promoted a positive way forward to address the issues that may contribute to the loss of human potential due to disability.

### **Gaps in Practice**

Despite policies and legal frameworks portraying inclusive education as a progressive approach that supports all students, global and national research has highlighted a plague of contradictions between policy and practice. These disconnects undermine the core principles of inclusion and jeopardise the educational experiences and future opportunities of disabled students.

### **The Enduring Reliance on Traditional Disability Models**

Studies that explored the perspectives on inclusive education of various stakeholders, including those of young disabled children and adults, revealed various structural, systemic, and social limitations in the sector that preclude students' progress and belonging (Genova, 2015; Mallia, 2017; Marić, 2018; Psaila, 2015, 2017; Sparrow & King, 2024; Zammit, 2020). These limitations obstruct access to inclusive education and its potential long-term benefits, going against national and global policies, but also contradicting the social and human rights models of disability.

This disconnect can be noted in Malta's 2024 Budget Speech (Caruana, 2024) and the National Reform Programme (NRP) (Government of Malta, 2024). The budget speech (Caruana, 2024) outlined several measures to support disabled people and their families, such as increased funding for personal assistants, expanded tax credits for therapy services, and enhanced disability allowances. While these initiatives addressed the poverty-related challenges affecting the quality of life of disabled people noted by Stein and Stein (2014), and demonstrated the government's commitment to

alleviating such challenges, they reflected the charity and medical models of disability. With their focus on reactive support, such measures risk reinforcing dependency rather than fostering independence through systemic, proactive and sustainable initiatives. Similarly, the NRP (Government of Malta, 2024) addressed broader issues like skill gaps, education infrastructure, and early school leaving, yet it lacked targeted efforts to foster inclusive education through proactive and sustainable practices that ensure equitable opportunities for all disabled students, such as teacher training on neurodivergent students' learning needs, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practice, and student-teacher ratio. Such measures can act as potential game changers in addressing disabled students' heterogeneity within classrooms (Blatchford & Russell, 2020; Sparrow & King, 2024).

### **Student Voices on Lived Realities**

Unfortunately, the absence of proactive planning and the reliance on short-term measures can profoundly tarnish disabled students' attainment. Bajada et al. (2021), Callus and Farrugia (2016), Galea (2017), Marić (2018), and Psaila (2015, 2017) all highlighted how such ineffective practices, particularly those that neglect students' self-determination and voices, can significantly undermine the basic goals of inclusive education. Additionally, their findings support the notion that the provision of safe, supportive, and flexible learning environments, where diversity is fully embraced and all students are empowered to succeed together is not a straightforward matter. In fact, many underscored limitations, ranging from lack of educator training and preparedness to cater for disabled students, to the muffled and devalued voices of students, testify that various systems can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion when inclusion principles are not holistically acknowledged and executed consistently (Mallia, 2017; Micallef, 2018; Psaila, 2015, 2017). While gathering insights from neurodivergent students, Sparrow and King (2024), Connolly et al. (2023), and Camilleri (2015) alarmingly revealed that these students felt judged and demeaned by educators' comments and actions. Some also recounted disconcerting feelings of isolation, smallness and loneliness, including

likening school to a "prison" and having the urge to "jump out of the window... and run away" due to lack of understanding and unjust punitive measures (Camilleri, 2015, p. 52). With such shortcomings, the potential of student diversity remains constrained due to societal stigma and low expectations, undermining students' sense of belonging, aspirations and job prospects (Armstrong, 2012; Borg, 2020; Debono, 2017).

### **Addressing Diversity in Schools**

Ainscow (2007) sustained that diversity in the classroom is constantly widening its boundaries and needing intervention. Such an ever-changing process requires the educational system to continuously evolve to cater for diversity in its broadest sense. While, as often outlined in policies, this requirement places more responsibility and pressure on educators (MEYR, 2022), Flamich and Hoffmann (2017) brought attention to the lack of teacher preparedness to teach the diversity of disabled students in their classrooms. Similarly, recent local studies showed that the Maltese system does not adequately prepare teachers to holistically cater to the broad diversity of students in their classrooms (Galea, 2018; Micallef, 2018; Parnis & Schembri, 2023). Building on Krischler et al.'s findings (2019) about widespread misconceptions regarding inclusive education, such misunderstandings can pose significant barriers to effective implementation. In the Maltese context, the system's heavy reliance on supply teachers who may lack the necessary teaching qualifications and expertise (Attard Tonna, 2023; MEYR, 2023b) adds further strain, deepening the void between policy and practice.

In this vein, Blatchford and Russell (2020) argued that, if the wide array of student diversity is not met with adequately trained educators, the resulting pressure can lead to educator burnout, and consequently, to growing deficiencies in inclusive education. Similarly, Attard Tonna (2023) pointed to the stress and isolation experienced by newly qualified teachers due to insufficient preparation and support. A lack of educator competence and preparedness acts as significant threat to students' self-

determination and sense of belonging, both of which are crucial for meaningful participation and academic attainment. Playing such a critical role in the sector, educators must have the right positionality to effectively teach a heterogeneous spectrum of students (Vlachou & Papananou, 2015), striving to cater for them holistically through learning activities and socialisation opportunities that suit their unique needs, level of understanding and interests. Such provision entails a stable and cohesive chain of human resources consisting of people with the proper disposition and willingness to also support one another (Micallef, 2018; Zammit, 2020). While Zammit's findings (2020) underscored educators' key role in imparting inclusive values to students, they also highlighted how even the slightest lapse or lack of commitment to inclusion within the human resources chain may lead to deficient practices. For example, one SLT member described how some caretakers resisted accepting a disabled colleague, sending a negative message to students and undermining the school's inclusive values. As Zammit (2020) contended, such deficits not only hinder the holistic implementation of inclusive education but also jeopardize its long-term sustainability.

### **Human Resources and Support Limitations**

As evidenced by the above-mentioned gaps, the success of inclusive education and the realisation of disabled students' potential rely on myriad factors that go beyond the provision of LSEs. Rutherford (2012) argued that the engagement of LSEs is often "regarded as the solution to inclusion" (p.757), by virtue of their support for students' diverse needs, whether academic, social, behavioural or emotional. From this perspective, the LSE can be considered a pivotal human resource that, together with the respective professionals, facilitates students' realization. Falzon (2019) noted the complexities of the LSE's role: besides acting as a medium for students' holistic achievement, the effectiveness of the LSE's contribution is highly dependent on other dynamics, including one's level of training, sector-specific knowledge, and the quality of communication and collaboration established with other stakeholders. Furthermore, Brion-Meisels (2014) found that the success of support

provision, in whatever form and level, is highly dependent on students' interpretation of and willingness to use that support. Additionally, Falzon (2019) and Webster and Blatchford (2019) agreed that the constant presence of an LSE may also be counterproductive in fostering independence and self-efficacy, since students may either become fully reliant on constant support or not get the required personal space to experience their school years in a typical manner.

Besides LSE provision and its complexities, teachers' limited commitment to inclusion, as noted by Mallia (2017), is another key issue affecting the adequacy of inclusive education. Similar to Camilleri's (2015) study on the inclusion of ADHD students in secondary schools, Mallia (2017) found that teachers' overreliance on LSEs can lead to students' exclusion. This suggests that when teachers feel detached from students receiving LSE support, they may no longer see those students as their responsibility. Rainforth and York-Barr (1997), Mitchell (2014), and Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) emphasized that collaboration and communication between all stakeholders are vital to holistically support disabled students. However, Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) also noted systemic barriers to such collaboration, such as time constraints, insufficient planning opportunities, and unclear role definitions. Resonating with these obstacles, overreliance on LSEs can also impede the development of meaningful student-teacher relationships, further marginalising the students who have the utmost need and right to benefit from an inclusive setting. Moreover, when teacher engagement is limited, it can inadvertently reduce the likelihood that less evident needs are recognised and addressed.

### **Invisible and Unmet Needs**

Since only students with an official statement of needs are assigned an LSE for support (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019; MEYR, 2022a), many others with invisible conditions risk going unnoticed and inadvertently falling through the cracks without this provision. This issue becomes even more pronounced for students who experience intersectionality, where overlapping factors such as disability, gender, socioeconomic disadvantage, or ethnic minority status compound the barriers

they face (Crenshaw, 1991; Ojedokun, 2023). In such cases, teachers are often left stranded to cater for these students on their own without the necessary knowledge and resources. While educators' positive attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion play a significant role in shaping students' experiences, they are not enough to ensure effective inclusion. Galea (2018) and Micallef (2018) brought to light that inclusive practices often fall short due to a lack of training, resources, and support from school administrations. Moreover, the fact that various invisible conditions, like ADHD and autism can go undiagnosed until later stages of development (Azzopardi et al., 2023) plays a critical role in such circumstances, since affected students are left without the necessary support to navigate their school years with greater well-being and success (Attard, 2020; Mifsud, 2016; Muscat, 2022).

This lack of recognition can also extend to neurodivergent students' strengths. Kennedy et al. (2011), Richey (2024), and Sparrow and King (2024) confirmed that autistic and ADHD children can be twice-exceptional (children who are gifted and have a disability). Yet, they stressed that their talents are often obscured by the label of their condition. The notion of giftedness being unseen and wasted was implied in Migneco and Zammit Endrich's (2015) study on teachers' perspectives on giftedness. However, this was not connected to the needs of twice-exceptional students. On the contrary, the study drew a clear distinction between special needs related to disability and those related to giftedness, highlighting the precarious invisibility of twice-exceptional students. This reinforces Muscat's (2024) and Camilleri's (2015) call for a more cohesive education system that fosters greater understanding of neurodivergence and challenges the negative attitudes and fears that often contribute to these students' setbacks and underachievement. This is particularly relevant in the context of autism and ADHD, where both needs and abilities are frequently misunderstood or overlooked (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Sparrow & King, 2024).

## Understanding Autism and ADHD

A closer look at autism and ADHD, two of the most prevalent forms of neurodivergence, can help illuminate both the specific barriers many neurodivergent students face and the potential they hold when supported effectively. The genuine inclusion of these students was discussed by various scholars like Armstrong (2012, 2023), Attard (2020), Azzopardi et al. (2023), Camilleri (2015), Falzon (2019) and Sparrow and King (2024), to mention a few.

### Defining Traits and Hidden Strengths

Known as invisible conditions due to the absence of physical indicators, autism and ADHD are the most prevalent neurodevelopmental differences within the neurodivergent spectrum (French et al., 2023; Sparrow & King, 2024). Alongside other neurodivergences, like dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia (Connolly et al. 2023; Kapp, 2020), autism and ADHD present distinct divergences in neurological development, cognitive functioning and behaviour when compared to the neurotypical norm (Bedford et al., 2024; Hayashibara et al., 2023; Legault et al., 2021).

Autism is characterised by differences in reciprocal social interaction, comprehension and communication, restricted interests and behaviours, sensory processing and a constant desire for sameness (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2022; Halayem et al., 2022). It is considered a spectrum because these traits can vary widely in severity and manifestation across individuals. In fact, Hacking (2010, p.265) described autism as "a many-dimensional manifold of abilities and limitations", an idea further supported by Kittay and Carlson (2010), who pointed out that "some forms of autism are accompanied by intellectual and developmental disabilities" (p.15), thus necessitating diverse levels of support. Connolly et al. (2023) noted that autism is closely related to anxiety disorders, especially in school aged children. However, Kennedy et al. (2011) and Armstrong (2023) affirmed that despite their challenges, autistic people frequently possess distinct strengths and stressed the importance of avoiding stereotypical ideologies that overshadow their individuality.

While autism is often associated with social interaction and sensory processing difference, ADHD features persistent inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, combined or in isolation, that interfere with daily activities and development. ADHD is also attributed to genetic makeup (Ma et al., 2021), yet environmental dynamics also contribute to its manifestation. Rolé et al. (2019) linked socioeconomic status to severe ADHD prevalence, concluding that districts with increased population density, families having lower education levels, higher rates of poverty, and social deprivation show higher rates of ADHD diagnosis, particularly with children requiring pharmacological treatment. Conrad and Bergey (2014), Foreman (2018) and Méndez et al. (2015) asserted that ADHD prevalence is influenced by diagnostic differences arising from variations between the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) (World Health Organisation, 2022) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (APA, 2022). They further emphasized that differing cultural behavioural expectations can significantly contribute to variations in its prevalence.

Among others, Kennedy et al. (2011) noted that, like autism, ADHD can also co-occur with giftedness. They highlighted the remarkable potential of neurodivergent individuals, presenting both confirmed and theorised examples of neurodivergent giftedness, such as Temple Grandin, Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton. These examples reinforce the argument that neurodivergence can coexist with, and even contribute to exceptional intellectual and creative abilities that should not be overlooked. Recognising these neurodivergences solely through a deficit lens risks missing the many strengths they carry. With the right supports and learning environments, the talents of autistic and ADHD students can emerge in unexpected ways (Armstrong, 2012; Richey, 2024).

### **Diagnostic Complexities and Gender Disparities**

While the above literature portrays ADHD and autism as distinct and complex conditions, Miller et al. (2018) and Hours et al. (2022) noted a co-occurrence rate of 50 to 70% that further intensifies the challenges of diagnosing and supporting individuals with overlapping traits. Research

on inclusive education gives evidence of autistic and ADHD students' struggles often stemming from lack of knowledge, resources, and adequate support within schools (Armstrong, 2012, 2023; Attard, 2020; Galea, 2018; Sparrow & King, 2024). Despite diagnostic criteria that help detect and accommodate neurodivergences, Azzopardi et al. (2023) suggested that the vast heterogeneity of both ADHD and autism should not be underestimated. Gabbay-Dizdar et al. (2022), Miller et al. (2018) and van 't Hof et al. (2021) emphasized that a timely diagnosis is pivotal to one's progress and well-being.

Nevertheless, research by Azzopardi et al. (2023) and Muscat (2022) revealed that many autistic and ADHD people often receive late diagnosis, especially women. In accordance, Baron-Cohen (2002), Camilleri et al. (2017), and Kreiser and White (2014) confirmed that both neurodivergences are more prevalently diagnosed in males than in females. This disparity is partly attributed to females displaying different manifestations than males and being more skilled at masking or camouflaging their neurodivergent traits to appear neurotypical (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Eaton, 2023; Muscat, 2022; Richey, 2024). Additionally, diagnostic criteria are said to be more attuned to the male presentation of ADHD (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Craddock, 2024; Mowlem et al., 2019). Furthermore, Gupta and Gupta (2023) asserted that women are more likely to experience more diagnostic overshadowing, where traits are misattributed to a single or primary diagnosis, thus obscuring co-occurring conditions, especially when one's traits do not align with typical expectations. This overshadowing often leads to lacking and delayed support (Gupta & Gupta, 2023; Sparrow & King, 2024).

While literature by Fairbank (2023), Hens and Langenberg (2018) and Mifsud (2016), underscored the complexities of diagnosing autism and ADHD, and suggested a significant element of underdiagnoses and misdiagnoses, Gnaulati (2013) and Maisel (2022) contended that these conditions are being overly diagnosed. They argued that ordinary childhood behaviours and reactions are often misinterpreted and pathologized due to societal pressures and medical practices that encourage unnecessary diagnoses, thus contributing to overdiagnosis and excessive medication.

Russell (2020) posited that the absence of reliable and uniform testing methods for neurodivergence creates space for subjective interpretations, hence to possible connotations with mental illness and psychiatric disorders. Saul (2015) took an even more extreme position, rejecting ADHD altogether, arguing that it is only a cluster of symptoms that can be better explained by underlying factors such as family dynamics, mood disorders, and boredom resulting from an under-challenging learning environment. Bezzina (2023) maintained that a delayed diagnosis is often tied to extreme frustration, disappointment and low self-esteem.

### **Educational Implications of ADHD and Autism**

While diagnosis plays a crucial role in shaping access and identity, it is equally important to consider the broader educational environment in which neurodivergent students learn. In education, a diagnosis of ADHD and/or autism is pivotal to achieve the support of an LSE and access arrangements as outlined by Mercieca & Mercieca, (2019) and MEYR (2022a). Beyond these supports, the clarity provided by a diagnosis can bolster self-awareness and esteem, facilitating better personal outcomes (Hens & Langenberg, 2018; Muscat, 2022).

Despite the benefits of a diagnosis, Sparrow and King (2024) argued that current education systems lag way behind the evolving perspectives on neurodivergence, thus restricting the creativity, flexibility, and innovation necessary to support neurodivergent students. Confirming these shortcomings, Connolly et al. (2023) reported that 92.1% of children and adolescents who experience school-related distress fall within the neurodivergent spectrum. Similarly, Bhuiyan et al. (2022) and Hotte-Meunier et al. (2024) highlighted the significant barriers faced by autistic and ADHD individuals in education and employment when compared to their neurotypical counterparts. Such findings support Stein and Stein's perspective (2014), that disabled people are often disproportionately impacted by poverty. As Connolly et al. (2024) noted, these barriers often arise from entrenched norms rooted in neurotypical privilege, which is the unconscious advantage neurotypical individuals

hold in systems designed around their ways of thinking, learning, and interacting. To address such disparities, Azzopardi et al. (2023) advocated for more efforts in education and broader societal structures to holistically support neurodivergent people, particularly ADHDers and autistic people.

### **The Consequences of Ableism**

The critique of diagnostic criteria adds to the understanding of how the complexities of ADHD and autism are often misrepresented, perpetuating further assumptions and misconceptions. Bajada et al. (2021) highlighted that, stemming from dominant discourses shaped by hierarchies of power, ableism, and the medical model, these assumptions and misconceptions result in a disservice across settings. Ableism, as defined by Yu (2014), frames disability as a deviation from the norm, privileging neurotypical functioning and portraying neurodivergent behaviours as deficits to be corrected. Powell (2021) suggested that ableism is historically linked to eugenics, an ideology that upholds the belief that genetic makeup determines a hierarchy of human value based on how closely the body and mind conform to dominant norms. This concept privileges the non-disabled and contributes to the systemic oppression of disabled people by portraying them as lesser beings in society. Although eugenics is largely rejected today, its ideological residue remains embedded in contemporary ableist structures that privilege neurotypical functioning and behaviour (Campbell, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2019). These structures perpetuate systemic inequality and the social exclusion of disabled people (Da Silva & Hubbard, 2024). Consequently, neurodivergent people are often compelled to mask their differences to avoid oppression.

### **Masking Pressures**

The practice of masking involves the hiding or suppression of a neurodivergent person's natural behaviours to 'survive' within the constraints of neurotypical expectations. It is known to be widely used by autistic individuals in settings where neurodivergent traits, like avoiding eye-contact and hand-flapping are met with disapproval (Mosher Syharat et al., 2023; Radulski, 2022). Masking

behaviours have also been observed in ADHDers, particularly during adolescence, when the pressure to conform often leads them to suppress hyperactivity through a calm outward appearance. This can also involve mimicking attentiveness or feigning understanding in order to avoid stigma and disciplinary action (Falzon, 2019; Koelma, 2025). While often considered as a coping mechanism to navigate hostile environments, literature increasingly links masking to long-term negative effects on mental health, including anxiety and a diminished sense of self-worth (Rivera, 2023; Sparrow & King, 2024; Stanich, 2024).

### **Schooling: A Site for Normalisation and Integration**

The pressures of conformity are reflected in schools, where autistic and ADHD students are frequently expected to adhere to neurotypical norms (Bartolo, 2010; Sparrow & King, 2024). Drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of the "panoptical gaze" and Sullivan's (2015) ideology of control, Bajada et al. (2021, p. 7) pointed to how schools act as compasses of judgement, enforcing standardisation and normalisation. Similarly, Vlachou and Papananou (2015) highlighted educational settings as microcosms of society that mirror broader norms, expectations, and inclusion levels. In this context, Mitchell and Schneider (2000) argued that society's judgemental mechanisms determine the acceptable from the deviant, thereby deciding the fate of oppressed individuals through a contemporary eugenic lens. To emphasise this view, they employed the expression "prosthetic intervention" (p. 7) to refer to the correction of physical or mental divergences, so that a person is 'able' to integrate within specific contexts.

Parallel to the above notions, Brock (2023) expressed concern that the manner in which the education system translates a diagnosis into interventions can reflect dangerously counterproductive tendencies, particularly when support is provided without adequate background knowledge or expertise. The general public's view of inclusive education as mere placement that was highlighted by Kischler et al. (2019) gave evidence of how lack of knowledge can lead to misunderstandings. A

significant case in point is that, despite representing very distinct concepts, the terms integration and inclusion are often used interchangeably (Bartolo 2001, 2010; Valente & Danforth, 2016). Integration is achieved via mere placement and is related to the charity and medical models of disability that reinforce an ableist perspective (Rieser, 2012). By contrast to genuine inclusion that provides students with the necessary accommodations to thrive holistically, stopping at integration places the burden on students to adapt to the norm (Valente & Danforth, 2016). This logic is reflected in the use of official educational tools that aim to regulate student behaviour and progress.

### **Standardised Expectations for Integration**

A subtle yet powerful example of this integration-focused approach can be seen in how support goals are frequently framed around condition-specific behaviours that reflect neurotypical expectations. Increasingly, individual education programmes (IEPs) are generated through digitised platforms that operate on ableist assumptions and tend to produce generic, deficit-oriented goals with limited personalisation (Bray & Russell, 2018; Kurth et al., 2022). Examples of such platforms include the MySchool (2023) and Unikum (2024) IEP portals. Bray and Russell (2018), Kurth et al., (2022), and Sjöberg (2014) critiqued the use of these tools for promoting behavioural conformity and compliance. Aligning her critique with Foucault's notion of discipline and power, Sjöberg (2014) contended that the way such IEP systems promote internalised surveillance and objectification reinforce normative ideals under the guise of support. This argument was similarly echoed by Bajada et al. (2021) and further extended by Callus and Bajada (2023), who highlighted how the IEP process often excludes the child's voice, thereby reinforcing, hierarchal, top-down, adult-driven control.

In this vein, Nakra (2018) and Hat Talk (2022) strongly criticised the inclusion of behavioural goals that compel autistic students to perform socially normative acts, such as making and maintaining eye contact, describing them as inappropriate and distressing. The tension between intention and impact was clearly illustrated by Robison (2008), who associated making eye contact

with pain. Berroyer (2023) reinforced this, linking forced eye contact to significant physical issues like increased heart rate and sickness. Similarly, Camilleri (2015) highlighted the unrealistic expectation of sitting still for long stretches for ADHD students. Shapiro (2010) opposed this expectation, describing such demands as extremely challenging, if not impossible, due to the core characteristics of ADHD (APA, 2022), including impulsivity, hyperactivity, and difficulty with sustained attention. Despite their well-intentioned objectives to foster participation and learning, such goals often imply that success depends on suppressing neurodivergent traits. Rather than embracing diversity, they signal that neurodivergent students must conform to mainstream norms to be accepted (Team AGU, 2023; Slee & Tait, 2022).

Underlying such practices is a broader ideological issue: efforts to enforce conformity risk reproducing a eugenic logic, one that frames neurodivergent behaviours such as those associated with autism and ADHD, as undesirable deviations from societal expectations. By constructing these differences as deficits to be corrected, the education system reinforces the notion that acceptance is conditional upon meeting predetermined standards. As noted by Díez, (2010) and Gow et al. (2020), despite progress since the early days of inclusive education, and the extensive documentation celebrating the value and beauty of diversity, the primary focus of inclusion remains rooted in physical presence and integration rather than genuine inclusion.

The barriers to meaningful participation and engagement were reflected in Bajada et al. (2021), who illustrated how inclusive education practices in Malta often fail to make students feel valued and truly included within the school community. Bajada et al. (2021) also suggested that educators' focus on normalisation, categorisation, and individualised labelling of disabled students perpetuate a system where students are bound to feel different and ostracised rather than included. Supporting this argument, Spaeth and Pearson (2023) held that most educators tend to base their goals and strategies within an integration model that centres neurotypical norms. Such a narrow approach often results in reduced consideration and support for the diverse learning needs and styles

of different students, thus disabling their rightful entitlement with a complete disservice in their regard.

Within this frame of mind, educators' misconceptions can reinforce the internalised belief among disabled students that their diversity is not only their fault but also a flaw that must be corrected to function within a community (Rivera, 2023). Such tendencies conform with Bajada's (2019) findings, which underscored the persistence of a medical approach to inclusive education, with educators and other inclusive education 'specialists' focusing on correcting students' impairments instead of supporting their diversity and potential via adequate accommodations. Stopping at integration ultimately undermines the core concept and sustainability of inclusive education. It also violates the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006), which not only acknowledges the ever-evolving nature of the concept of disability but utterly rejects any form of discrimination and ableism that take away from disabled people's inherent dignity and rights. Altogether, the shortcomings of inclusive education point to the urgent need for a shift in how it is conceptualised and practised, moving beyond integration models towards approaches grounded in rights, recognition, and the authentic perspectives of disabled people (Valente & Danforth, 2016).

### **Toward Emancipatory Inclusion**

The need for a more emancipatory approach is evident in how exclusionary environments can diminish disabled children's access to everyday participation and belonging. This imperative is clearly reflected in the opposing realities highlighted in the collection by Beckett and Callus (2024): attitudinal and environmental barriers restricted Francesca's ability to experience a typical childhood, particularly in relation to recreational activities (Adam-Smith, 2024); in contrast, Ralph benefitted from an early-years setting where his neurodivergence was celebrated and his voice respected, exemplifying the core of genuine inclusive education, whereby disabled students' rights, voices, and perspectives are affirmed (McAnelly, 2024).

Building on the UNCRPD principles, which are grounded in both the social and human rights models of disability (Degener, 2016a, 2016b; Lawson & Beckett, 2021), the vision of inclusive education provides a foundation for addressing the challenges faced by neurodivergent students. The UNCRPD's General Principles (United Nations, 2006, Article 3) emphasised respect for and acceptance of difference as part of human variation. They also promoted full and effective participation and inclusion in society. These principles closely align with the philosophy of embracing all forms of cognitive variation, including neurodivergence. Such an approach challenges the normalization of ableist standards and underscores the need to recognise neurodivergence as a unique and valuable aspect of human identity (Yu, 2024).

Dismantling embedded structural inequalities and promoting environments where neurodivergent individuals can holistically thrive without the need to conform requires recognizing the nuanced ways in which ableism seeps in and operates within society. Ableism manifests in both overt and covert forms, creating systemic barriers that perpetuate exclusion and pressure neurodivergent people to suppress their traits in order to fit dominant norms (Kaur, 2023; Nario-Redmond, 2019; Yu, 2024). The social and human rights models of disability, call for the removal of these socially constructed barriers and the recognition of every person's right to dignity, autonomy, and full participation (Degener, 2016a; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). Ultimately, countering the dangerously long-lasting effects of ableism and the oppressive pressures to which neurodivergent students are subjected entails that society gains a thorough understanding of their experiences by bringing their voices at the forefront (Quirk, 2024).

### **Voices: A Pathway to Genuine Inclusive Education and Well-Being**

Beckett and Callus (2024) observed that the lives of disabled children and adolescents are often subject to adult control, not only in their everyday experiences, but also in how their stories are represented within disability studies research. Similarly, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry

(2024), along with Legault et al. (2021), highlighted that neurodivergent people continue to experience oppression due to lack of visibility and authentic first-person representation in literature. They argued that this imbalance must be addressed through the active participation of neurodivergent people. Walker (2024) and Garcia (2024) underscored the value of engaging directly with neurodivergent people by involving them in both discussions and research processes, since their "perspectives can provide new layers of creative insights into literature" (Walker, 2021, p. 8). Therefore, centring and elevating disabled students' voices is a powerful way of bringing their realities centre stage and exposing pervasive social hierarchies (Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Psaila, 2015, 2017). Congruent to Walker (2021) and Garcia (2024), Vlachou and Papananou (2015) argued that disabled students' voices should be recognised as an invaluable source for enabling true progress in education, by raising awareness of systemic barriers and promoting alternative practices that prioritize equity and respect for diversity.

The importance of listening to disabled students' voices is a recurring theme in the literature about inclusive education (Calleja et al., 2017; Callus & Farrugia, 2016; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Psaila, 2015). In line with the idea of emancipatory disability research by Stone and Priestley (1996), French and Swain (2004) stated that "inclusive education is unlikely to succeed unless young disabled people and disabled adults are fully involved" (p. 169). Notwithstanding, Horgan et al. (2023) held that in assessing service provision, the voices of disabled students are only occasionally solicited. In this vein, Calleja et al. (2017) and Psaila (2015, 2017) emphasised that, while the opinions and perspectives of educators and parents are often looked into, the real-life experiences of disabled students are frequently overlooked. Bajada (2019), Bajada et al. (2021), Callus and Bajada (2024), and Psaila (2015, 2017) highlighted the discrepancies in inclusive education by bringing forth the power dynamics within the system, where students' voices are often absent or muffled by 'more knowledgeable' others, and where the status quo prevails as a result. Bajada (2019) argued that the dominant discourses operating in the name of inclusive education adhere to the outdated paradigm of 'special

education needs', where students are seen as problems to be managed rather than individuals with unique strengths and capabilities. Such power dynamics denote a significant misalignment between policy and practice. This calls for a fundamental shift towards emancipation by looking into the lived experiences of disabled students.

Stone and Priestley (1996) suggested that disabled people's emancipation is intrinsically tied to making their personal experiences political, with the researcher serving as an agitator to unveil and articulate their holistic realities. Aligned with this perspective, this study recognizes young neurodivergent adults' unique strengths, struggles and insights. It therefore aspires to centre their voices in the hope of contributing to a shift away from the entrenched practices and prevailing power dynamics in inclusive education that often marginalize and exclude neurodivergent students, ultimately hindering their path to emancipation.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the evolution of inclusive education and presented relevant research that highlighted the gaps between policy and practice, with particular reference to the Maltese context. The various lacunas presented highlight the critical need to centre neurodivergent students' voices to support their holistic well-being and potential, which is the primary focus of this study. The next chapter outlines the qualitative methodology employed to voice young neurodivergent adults' perspectives on inclusive education.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I present the methodology that enabled me to explore the perspectives of eight neurodivergent young adults on inclusive education in Malta. I begin by outlining the philosophical and conceptual frameworks that shaped the research design. This is followed by an overview of the research method, participant recruitment, and the data collection process. I then explain the thematic analysis approach used to interpret the data, followed by the ethical considerations that guided this research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the methodological limitations that shaped the scope and interpretation of the findings.

### Research Paradigm and Conceptual Framework

This research is driven by my axiological commitment to inclusivity, dignity, and epistemic justice for disabled people. The central question guiding the study is: What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on inclusive education? This inquiry is explored through three sub-questions, which, following Kumar (2019), I carefully constructed to examine how neurodivergent young adults perceive and interpret their educational experiences, articulate their beliefs, and express their ideas about meaningful inclusion.

Given education's role in elevating people's quality of life (UNESCO, 2025), and reflecting wider societal norms (Vlachou & Papananou, 2015), it is a powerful force that can either empower or oppress disabled people (Mitchell & Schneider, 2000). Viewed within the social sciences as both instructional and a complex socio-cultural institution (Atkins & Wallace, 2012), education demands a methodological approach that captures its multi-layered realities. Accordingly, an open-ended qualitative methodology was chosen to reflect the nuanced subjective experiences of neurodivergent students (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

The study's qualitative framework is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology that values neurodivergent people's personal perspectives (Denicolo et al., 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It also assumes a relativist ontological position that acknowledges multiple socially constructed realities (Buckler & Moore, 2023; Willig, 2013), consistent with a social constructionist view of meaning as shaped through culture, discourse, and interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Sandu, 2016). This methodological approach is widely advocated in educational research, particularly when exploring complex, multi-dimensional realities (Lichtman, 2023).

The conceptual foundations of this research include the social model of disability which locates barriers within societal structures and attitudes rather than in individuals' impairments (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2010); the human rights model, which centres dignity, autonomy, equity and participation (Degener, 2016a; United Nations, 2006, Article 1); and a neurodivergent-affirmative perspective that recognises neurodiversity as a valid form of knowledge and identity. Alongside resisting systemic injustice (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Jackson-Perry, 2024; Garcia, 2020), these frameworks advance the liberation of marginalised and oppressed groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens, 2024; Walker, 2021).

### **Research Method**

Building on the epistemological and conceptual foundations of this qualitative study, I used semi-structured interviews to gather rich, meaningful data. This method, widely recognised for its flexibility and relational nature, allowed me to guide conversations while creating space for participants to introduce unanticipated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Marx, 2017; Patton, 2015). Open-ended questions (Appendix 1) encouraged reflective, detailed responses (Kumar, 2019), enabling participants to discuss different stages of their education in a fluid and natural way. This approach fostered a dialogic space in which interaction enabled a deeper understanding of participants' social and emotional educational contexts (Cohen et al., 2018).

The balance between structure and openness in semi-structured interviews was particularly effective for neurodivergent individuals with varied communication styles (Ignacio, 2024). It enabled me to rephrase questions, offer additional processing time when needed (Brett & Wheeler, 2021), and use prompts and probes sensitively to minimise overwhelm and support participant comfort (King & Horrocks, 2019). This approach not only honoured the individuality of each participant's communication needs, but also facilitated the emergence of nuanced insights into their experiences of inclusive education. The data collected were then analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines. This approach complemented the flexibility of the semi-structured interviews, as it allowed themes to emerge naturally in response to participants' accounts.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Once ethical approval from the University of Malta (Appendix 2) was granted, I began the recruitment process. My initial aim was to recruit eight neurodivergent young adults, aged 18 to 25, who are autistic and/or ADHDers, with formal diagnoses, statements of need, and had in-school LSE support during their compulsory education in Malta. Any potential participants who had previously attended the school where I have worked since 2011 were not eligible to participate, in order to minimise any conflict of interest.

Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Emmel, 2013; Patton, 2015), I started by emailing gatekeepers of organisations that work with or support neurodivergent people to request their assistance in sharing the study information with potential participants. Since this initial outreach yielded limited responses, I shared a public social media post to expand reach (Appendix 3). Additionally, snowball sampling was used, whereby those who had already expressed interest referred others who might be willing to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Patton, 2015). In view of further recruitment challenges, I eventually broadened the criteria to also involve those diagnosed later or who had not received LSE support. Though it diverged from the original sampling plan, this

shift enriched the study by capturing the perspectives of those whose neurodivergence was unrecognised or unsupported, offering deeper insights into barriers they faced in mainstream education (Azzopardi et al., 2023).

Eventually, eight participants fitting these broader criteria were purposefully selected. Three males and two females had received formal diagnoses and support during compulsory education, including the assistance of an LSE. The remaining three females were diagnosed in their teens and had not received in-school support. All participants attended post-secondary education. The diversity in diagnostic and support histories added depth to the findings, particularly highlighting disparities between supported and unsupported educational journeys.

### **The Interviews**

Participants were given meaningful choices throughout the research process, including their preferred interview language (Maltese or English) and format (online or in person), to enhance comfort, accessibility, and autonomy. These considerations were particularly important given autistic individuals' frequent preference for English over Maltese (Debono, 2023; Muscat, 2024), and the potential for unfamiliar environments or social settings to create additional stress (Black et al., 2023). Of the eight participants, five chose to be interviewed in English, while three opted for Maltese. All eight opted for online interviews conducted via Zoom. This platform was particularly appreciated by participants who felt more at ease engaging from their own home due to possible sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or executive functioning challenges.

These participant-led choices fostered a more relaxed environment and contributed to the collection of detailed and explicit information (Swart, 2019). While six participants kept their cameras on, two had them off due to technical difficulties in enabling video. Most participants were emotionally expressive, particularly when recalling experiences of frustration or exclusion in school. In the two interviews conducted without video, emotional cues were still discernible through changes in

tone, speech pattern, and pace (Barnwell, 2025). Three participants became visibly emotional and needed to pause briefly before continuing. In each case, I offered to pause or reschedule the interview and reminded them that they could skip any question or end the interview at any point. All preferred to continue after a short break.

At the end of each interview, I referred the participants again to the list of psychosocial support services provided in the participant information materials. I also used encouragement and reassurance where appropriate and remained attentive to emotional cues throughout. All participants also expressed their willingness to support me further by offering to be contacted again if I needed clarification or additional information. The interviews ranged from 42 minutes to 1 hour and 32 minutes in length, with an average duration of approximately 1 hour and 3 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach, the analysis involved repeated readings, iterative coding cycles (Appendix 4), and the development of themes grounded in participants' perspectives. This process demanded ongoing reflexivity to mitigate the influence of my positionality as a learning support educator working in the field of inclusive education, which could otherwise compromise the authenticity of the findings (Brown & Wild, 2022).

The transcription process offered an initial point of engagement with each participant's narrative and emotional tone, helping shape my early interpretations (King & Horrocks, 2019). VLC Media Player® was used to slow playback speed, enabling careful and repeated listening, which ensured accuracy and depth during transcription. Following Barnwell's (2025) recommendation to preserve emotional and embodied meaning, I occasionally revisited the interview recordings during analysis to ensure that emotional nuance was not lost in transcription.

Guided by Braun and Clarke (2022), the use of reflexive thematic analysis aligned with the study's exploratory nature and its aim of capturing subjective experiences. This method positioned me, as the researcher, as an active participant in the analytic process, thus gaining understanding and constructing themes through deep engagement with the data. While primarily data-driven, the research questions served as a guiding framework to maintain focus on the study's aims. To support this process, I read and re-read transcripts to deepen familiarity and allow patterns to emerge more naturally. I began the first coding cycle by bolding key text segments. In the second, I revisited transcripts with deeper insight, refining codes and colour-coding them for ease of reference to patterns. In a third cycle, I added handwritten notes and numbered codes to track recurring patterns and support theme development. The themes that emerged were then grouped, supported with illustrative quotes, and linked to relevant literature. This layered process was also advocated by Saldaña (2021) and Miles et al. (2018).

Themes were refined over time through iterative analysis, involving constant comparison and re-evaluation of codes and patterns. Informal member checking was used to ensure that emerging interpretations aligned with participants' intended meanings (Mertens, 2024). As agreed in advance, I re-contacted participants after the interviews to clarify my interpretations and, where relevant, to request further information that may not have been fully conveyed during the initial conversation. Participants responded either in writing or via audio messages, offering clarification, elaboration, or confirmation at their own pace. I also engaged in reflexive note-taking to remain critically aware of how my positionality could influence the interpretive process (Brown & Wild, 2022). This analytic rigour supported the identification of four overarching themes:

- The Power of Teachers
- Systemic Misfits: One Size Does Not Fit All
- Transitions and Progressions: The Ongoing Impact of Inclusive Education

- Defining and Redefining Inclusion

These themes reflect both systemic and attitudinal barriers, as well as participants' evolving perceptions of inclusion and their suggestions for change.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative research may involve participants sharing personal reflections that may be emotionally sensitive or socially identifiable. In small-population contexts like Malta, anonymity can be particularly challenging (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). Acknowledging these risks, I drew on the guidance of Elsherif (2024) and Miles et al. (2018) who emphasised the importance of strong ethical awareness when handling private experiences.

Throughout this study, I was mindful of these concerns and made careful design choices to minimise identification risks and preserve participant trust. All procedures followed the ethical standards for qualitative research and aligned with the University of Malta's research ethics framework. To begin with, any potential conflict of interest or undue influence was avoided by excluding individuals who had previously attended the school where I have worked, as mentioned above. Moreover, all the recruited participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights through an information letter (Appendix 5) and consent form (Appendix 6). This included clear statements that participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer any question, and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. In anticipation of potential emotional distress (Elsherif, 2024), I also provided a list of disability and psychosocial support services with the information materials (Appendix 7).

Interviews were conducted in a respectful, participant-led manner, with each participant choosing their preferred interview format and language. If participants became distressed during the interview, they were offered the option to pause for a moment or reschedule entirely. I also made

sure to remind them of their right to skip questions or end the interview. Moreover, I referred to the psychosocial support list at the end of each interview.

Anonymity was prioritised throughout. As Elsherif (2024) noted, proactive measures are key to protecting identity. While gendered pronouns were retained, this decision was based on the relevance of gender to the research findings. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and written material. No identifiable details about schools, educators, or co-occurring conditions were included. Age was reported in a general bracket (18–25), and diagnostic labels like autism or ADHD were not linked to individual participants. Instead, the inclusive term neurodivergent was used consistently to preserve confidentiality while maintaining thematic relevance. Furthermore, all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device, accessible to me alone. The pseudonym key and any potentially identifying information were stored separately in encrypted files. In line with the approved data management plan (Appendix 8), all materials will be permanently deleted after March 2026.

### **Methodological Limitations**

While the study's methodological approach offered several strengths, such as its alignment with the research aims, ethical sensitivity and participant-led design, the limitations that may have influenced its scope and interpretation must not be overlooked.

Firstly, my professional background as an LSE shaped my positionality. As researchers purposefully connect their knowledge and experiences to their research focus (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019), my role provided valuable contextual insight and facilitated the flow of the conversations with participants. However, it also introduced the potential for bias, as my interpretations could have been influenced by my own professional assumptions about inclusive education. To mitigate this, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the research process (Brown & Wild, 2022), including critical self-reflection, informal member checking with participants and discussions with my supervisor. These

strategies helped ensure that emerging themes were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than shaped by my own preconceptions (Mertens, 2024).

Another challenge involved the use of online interviews, which may have limited the visibility of non-verbal communication. While most participants had their cameras on, the framing and the absence of video during two interviews reduced access to body language, such as hand gestures, which can be valuable in qualitative interviewing. Additionally, as noted by Mogaji et al. (2024), distractions in participants' environments may also have affected responses.

In addition to these practical challenges, sampling limitations also warrant consideration. Recruitment was based on a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Emmel, 2013), which, while effective for identifying information-rich participants, carries an inherent risk of sampling bias (King et al., 2019). This is particularly true when participants are recruited through existing networks or gatekeepers, as those who are more confident, articulate, or connected to neurodivergent communities may be overrepresented. Taken together, these methodological considerations provide important context for interpreting the findings that follow.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the qualitative methodology underpinning this study. It included its philosophical and theoretical foundations, as well as the data collection and analysis methods deemed most appropriate for generating rich insights from participants' first-hand experiences. It also addressed the ethical considerations and key methodological limitations that may have influenced the breadth and depth of insight derived from the findings. The following chapter presents the study's findings, organised into four overarching themes. These themes reflect participants' experiences of inclusive education and highlight both systemic and attitudinal factors that shaped their educational journeys.

## Chapter 4: Analysis of Findings and Discussion

### Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings from a thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews conducted with neurodivergent young adults aged between 18 and 25 (Table 1), about their perspectives on inclusive education. As outlined in the thematic framework table (Table 2), the findings suggest that inclusive education is strongly influenced by both attitudinal and systemic factors, shaping neurodivergent students' academic and social experiences in varying ways. Four key themes were elicited as the participants' insights were coded and analysed in line with the following research questions:

- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on their inclusion during compulsory schooling?
- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on their inclusion after compulsory schooling?
- What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on how inclusive education can better support the diverse needs of neurodivergent students?

The four themes focus on the role of teachers in shaping students' experiences, the systemic structures that influence inclusive education, students' experiences with academic transitions, and the need to redefine inclusive education based on neurodivergent people's perspectives. The first three themes critically examine both the positive and negative aspects of students' experiences, acknowledging both the strengths and shortcomings of inclusive education. The final theme shifts the focus toward the participants' aspirations for change, offering a vision for an education system that is not only inclusive in theory but also in practice.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Male/Female	Stage of Diagnoses	Support	Education/Employment
Jordan	Female	Early teens	No support	Tertiary education/ In employment
Taylor	Female	Early teens	No support	Tertiary education/ In employment
Sky	Female	Late teens	No support	Tertiary education/ In employment
Alex	Female	Early years	F/T 1/1	Dropped out of post-secondary/ In employment
Sam	Female	Early years	F/T 1/1	Dropped out of post-secondary/ In employment
Morgan	Male	Early years	F/T 1/1	Dropped out of post-secondary/ In employment
Jes	Male	Early years	F/T 1/1	Dropped out of post-secondary/ In employment
Max	Male	Early years	Shared support	Tertiary education

Table 2

*Thematic Framework*

	Themes	Sub-Themes
ATTITUDINAL	1. The Power of Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching Approaches: Pathways or Roadblocks to Inclusion?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers' Attitudes: The Power to Include or Isolate</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Price of Difference: Bullying, Discipline and Neglect</li> </ul>
SYSTEMIC	2. Systemic Misfits: One Size Does Not Fit All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overlooked and Misunderstood: Stereotypes, Gender Bias, And Late Diagnosis</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standardised Accommodations: Rigid Frameworks, Missed Needs</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The LSE Paradox: Systemic Support or Stigma?</li> </ul>
	3. Transitions and Progressions: The Ongoing Impact of Inclusive Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curriculum Overload: When Learning Becomes Survival</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shattered Dreams, Unbroken Spirits: Pushing Through the Struggle</li> </ul>		
PERCEPTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS	4. Defining and Redefining Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summing It All Up: Perspectives on Inclusive Education</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A Neurodivergent-Affirmative Vision for Change</li> </ul>

## The Power of Teachers

As the participants reflected on their education, teachers emerged as a defining influence on their learning experiences. Their instructional methods, attitudes, and disciplinary practices shaped students' academic success, belonging, and self-worth throughout their schooling. This theme explores teachers' pivotal role in determining whether neurodivergent students thrive or struggle in an education system meant to support their holistic growth.

### Teaching Approaches: Pathways or Roadblocks to Inclusion?

Participants linked their subject preferences and engagement levels to the teaching methods employed in the classroom. Lesson delivery influenced their ability to process information, enjoy learning, and succeed, as well as their perception of teachers. Participants often categorized teachers as either "good" or "bad", depending on whether their instructional methods were engaging and conducive to their learning or ineffective and unsupportive of their learning styles.

Jordan noted that a teacher's "good [PowerPoint] presentations" and ability to "break down" concepts "helped [her] understand" English literature. Similarly, Sky and Taylor recalled a teacher who "always made learning fun" by incorporating "real-life examples" and "hands-on learning". Like Max, Morgan and Jes valued concise notes that included pictures to help understanding, and highlighted text for maintaining focus. They also recounted how strategies like time-out cards and movement breaks implemented for the entire class supported their engagement.

The benefits of visuals that support sequencing and knowledge consolidation were also highlighted by Alex and Sam, reinforcing their value in effective teaching approaches. However, despite the well-documented benefits of visual aids in learning, an approach advocated by Temple Grandin (Armstrong, 2012; Combs, 2023), all participants reported inconsistent access to these aids. Sam recalled: "I usually don't have visuals at school. No... my mom does prepare the visuals for me". Alex and Jordan also mentioned their mothers in line with this support provision. In view that parents

of neurodivergent children may already face significant challenges (lao, 2024), their need to compensate for the lack of appropriate instructional strategies further exacerbates their stress and limits their opportunities for a balanced family life.

Additionally, Alex expressed uncertainty about visual aids being included in her education: "Maybe I have to think... the LSE", implying that visual supports were sporadically provided, possibly by the learning support educator (LSE), rather than being consistently integrated as a universal classroom tool through teacher-LSE collaboration. While a lack of teamwork is considered poor practice for inclusive education (Mitchell, 2014; Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997), Sommer et al. (2021) and Williams (2025) suggested that memory retention in neurodivergent students is enhanced through repeated exposure and multimodal learning. Within this perspective, Alex's uncertainty may reflect inconsistent reinforcement, potentially weakening knowledge consolidation and impeding memory retrieval, factors which may explain her difficulty recalling whether visual supports were used.

The fact that all participants favoured diverse and multi-sensory methods for addressing their neurodivergent needs is consistent with literature advocating for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Fovet, 2024; Hall et al., 2024; Rao et al., 2023). UDL promotes multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, thus accommodating diverse learning needs and styles (Hall et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2014). Unfortunately, participants also implied that such inclusive practices were the exception rather than the norm. Instead, traditional didactic instruction was dominant. Many described passive, lecture-based teaching as disengaging and "boring" (Sky), with teachers "just talking and reading out of their notes" (Taylor), leading them to "lose track without knowing" (Jes).<sup>1</sup> Alex and Sam likewise reported struggling to understand classroom instructions, highlighting how limited modes of delivery failed to support their processing needs. The absence of interactive or

<sup>1</sup> "bla ma trid tintilef"

multisensory strategies left lessons monotonous, with students expressing frustration at being expected to learn through "just printed text" (Morgan).<sup>2</sup> Max likened this to being left to "row on your own"<sup>3</sup>, while Morgan exclaimed: "That's not the way! Is that a lesson?!"<sup>4</sup> Beyond disengagement, rigid teaching methods created unnecessary barriers. Jordan recalled how rapid dictation, even during tests, left her with "half-written questions or no question written at all", making it impossible to complete her work. She described this as failing "by default", illustrating how inaccessible instructional methods set neurodivergent students up for failure.

The "good" teaching approaches align with Armstrong's (2012) advocacy for a strengths-based approach that fosters neurodivergent students' success. Conversely, the "bad" approaches reflect Spaeth and Pearson's (2023) critique of the persistent integration model and Rieser's (2012) view of this model as a disservice to disabled students. Participants' frustrations also mirror Yu's (2014) argument that ableism oppresses disabled people through exclusion, as they were unjustly denied meaningful access to the curriculum and the learning process. In a similar way to Taylor, Jordan exemplified this experience: "And in the meantime, I don't know what's happening. I don't know what we're talking about... I didn't know what the content was!" Such a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach aligns with Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education, where students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants.

In contrast, real inclusion is about meaningful engagement. As Jordan highlighted, UDL and "good" teaching are contingent upon teachers' willingness and flexibility in addressing diverse learning needs. Similarly, Max, echoing the sentiments of most participants, recognized that true inclusion stems from teachers who have a genuine passion for teaching, rather than those who "just

<sup>2</sup> "kitba biss"

<sup>3</sup> "taqdef għal rasek"

<sup>4</sup> "Dak mhux xogħol! Mela dik lesson?!"

do it to earn a pay cheque".<sup>5</sup> These findings align with Mallia's (2017) observation that a lack of teacher commitment can compromise the quality of inclusive education, reinforcing the pivotal role that teacher disposition plays in either enabling or obstructing meaningful inclusion.

### **Teachers' Attitudes: The Power to Include or Isolate**

While teaching methods shaped engagement, participants' accounts showed that teachers' attitudes profoundly impacted their self-perception, well-being, and overall outlook on life. Their experiences reflected a spectrum of teacher dispositions, with some fostering belonging through care and motivation, and others dismissing, ignoring, or humiliating students for their differences. Teachers' support extended beyond academics. A teacher's keen observation led to Jordan's diagnosis, while Sky recalled being "referred to the school counsellor" by a "kind teacher". Participants described "good" teachers using recurring terms such as "supportive" (Taylor), "patient" (Sam and Alex), "encouraging" (Max)<sup>6</sup>, and "helping" (Jes)<sup>7</sup>, which made them feel valued and capable.

Reflecting the dynamic described in Ralph's account of positive teacher interactions facilitating inclusion and pride in neurodivergent students (McAnelly, 2024), Sam linked positive teacher interactions to peer inclusion: "The teachers told me, 'Hi [Sam], how are you?'... the students, the teachers made me feel welcome there". This suggests that teachers' attitudes reinforce inclusive behaviours among students. This aligns with Zammit's (2020) research, which highlights how adults' attitudes, whether positive or negative, shape the wider school community. In contrast, when Alex was first asked about her experiences she enthusiastically responded, "I like the LSEs so much!" Her repeated association of support with the LSEs denotes a potential overreliance on learning support educators, thus reflecting the possible confinement of disabled students to their care. This mirrors

<sup>5</sup> "mhux speċi għall-paga biss".

<sup>6</sup> Jagħmlulek kuraġġ

<sup>7</sup> Teachers tajbin jippruvaw jgħinuk

findings by Camilleri (2015) and Mallia (2017), who documented teachers' detachment from disabled students, delegating their responsibility entirely to LSEs.

Passive teacher roles reinforce dependency on LSEs, restricting students' social interactions. Zammit's (2020) findings indicated that adult attitudes permeate school communities. From this perspective, teacher passivity tends to foster broader school indifference toward disabled students within the school community. Beyond social marginalization, such indifference contradicts key principles of scaffolding, that is, the temporary support to help students progress towards independence as highlighted by Bruner (1996) and Vygotsky (1978), and peer-mediated instruction, which emphasize peer interaction for developing social and academic skills (Bandura, 1977; Harris & Meltzer, 2015). This lack of exposure also prevents neurotypical students from understanding and valuing neurodivergent peers, hindering efforts toward a more inclusive society where disabled people are accommodated and valued. This broader societal exclusion is reflected in Francesca's story, as presented by Adam-Smith (2024), where attitudinal and environmental barriers severely limited a disabled child's access to the ordinary experiences of childhood.

Jordan underscored teachers' role in fostering social connections: "I didn't have that many friends... and teachers, they didn't really make the effort to try and help me". Apart from a few "good" teachers, Jordan described many as "mean" and "terrible", disengaged from their role as educators. This disengagement particularly affected quiet students. Jordan recalled a parents' day when a teacher stated that "As long as [Jordan] stays quiet", she was not a concern. Taylor and Max similarly described that they were "not an issue" (Taylor) and "barely notice[d]" (Max)<sup>8</sup> due to their quiet nature. These findings reveal how quietness was treated as a more desirable trait by teachers. Consequently, they reflect a passive form of exclusion, where students who did not demand attention or exhibit disruptive behaviour were overlooked and left unsupported. This pattern was noted in

<sup>8</sup> Tant kont kwiet li lanqas kienu jagħtu kasi

Camilleri's (2015, p.67) observation of teachers' 'love' for quiet students, via a research participant "trying hard" to behave according to teachers' expectations. Supporting this, Boon (2024) noted that quietness is often a learned strategy to fit in rather than an inherent trait. Armstrong (2012) similarly argued that student behaviour often reflects environmental pressures rather than personality, calling on educators to challenge assumptions and actively engage all students.

Passive exclusion also emerged in Sam's frustration with teachers who "used to leave [her] alone", told her to "practice more!", "pay more attention!", and taught "in Maltese, which [she] didn't understand". These ableist attitudes reflect what Sparrow and King's (2024) identify as the marginalising effects of rigid teaching methods on neurodivergent students, and align with Swargiary's (2024) documentation on language barriers contributing to student isolation. In Sam's case, such inaccessibility likely influenced her decision to withdraw from her post-secondary studies, highlighting the real consequences of ineffective communication within inclusive education.

Similarly, Sky's isolation stemmed from teachers' indifference to her social struggles. She recalled being left alone at playtime in kindergarten while teachers did nothing: "I used to go to a table. And all the kids would move tables. As if I had the plague". This pattern persisted, with teachers actively discouraging social interactions by "tell[ing] the other students to ignore [her]". Rather than fostering inclusion, these teachers normalized peer exclusion and oppression. Oppressive attitudes also emerged in Taylor's, Jes's, and Morgan's experiences, where teachers belittled them for asking questions with remarks like, "Did you think you were still in primary?" (Morgan)<sup>9</sup>, predicted their failure, and "rolled their eyes" (Taylor) at their questions. Jes also recalled a teacher deliberately mismatching assignment front sheets to test students' attention, an unfair disadvantage for neurodivergent learners who may struggle with such details (Boon, 2024). Taylor's statement, "I

<sup>9</sup> "Mela ħsibt li għadek il-primarja?"

didn't feel safe asking questions", illustrates how these attitudes created an unwelcoming, intimidating environment.

With such behaviours, teachers fail in their ethical responsibility of addressing the well-documented needs of disabled students and fostering their sense of belonging (Armstrong, 2012; Boon, 2024; Camilleri et al., 2017; Richey, 2024; Sparrow & King, 2024). Despite inclusive education policies emphasizing diversity (MEYR, 2022a), these accounts reveal persistent ableism, both overt, through mockery and public humiliation, and covert, through inaction and dismissiveness. In either form, ableism left students feeling like outsiders in spaces where they should have belonged, a sentiment echoed by Legault (2024), who reflected on feeling excluded from academic settings due to the dominance of neurotypical norms. Following Yu (2014), ableism perpetuates oppression by reinforcing the deficit model, which frames neurodivergent students as less capable and undeserving of attention. Consequently, this contributes to hierarchal privileging that prioritises neurotypical functioning (Campbell, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2019).

### **The Price of Difference: Bullying, Discipline, and Neglect**

For some neurodivergent students, their challenges were met with punishment rather than understanding. Despite being a quiet student, Jordan was repeatedly sent to the headteacher's office "for the stupidest of reasons, like forgetting a book at home". This excessive disciplinary action extended to her parents, who were summoned to the school "every week" and repeatedly told that her challenges were disciplinary issues. Similarly, Sky felt "disliked" by teachers for being different. One teacher struck her with a ruler, claiming she would "go to hell" for using "[her] left hand". Another dismissed her for giving a scientifically accurate answer that fell outside the lesson's objective. Others "snapped" their fingers at her and "threatened [her] multiple times with detention for not holding eye contact". Meanwhile, when peers damaged her belongings or played cruel pranks, teachers dismissed their actions as "kids being kids".

Rather than being a celebration of diversity, these experiences reflect an abuse of authority that oppresses and marginalizes students. Teacher-led bullying and complacency toward peer bullying align with findings by Rodgers and Kalyn (2022) and Sparrow and King (2024). Since educators play a crucial role in bullying prevention, their failure to intervene, or worse, their participation, reinforces harmful power dynamics and emboldens perpetrators (Burger et al., 2022). This erodes neurodivergent students' sense of belonging, exacerbates mental health struggles, and, in some cases, triggers emotional outbursts (Sparrow & King, 2024), as noted in Sky's communication about "scream[ing] and cry[ing] not to go to school". Educators' failure to recognize neurodivergence-related behaviours further fuelled frustration. Taylor also recalled witnessing a neurodivergent peer being unfairly reprimanded: "They shout[ed] at him for something stupid like fidgeting... instead of helping him!"

Collectively, these experiences of punishment and bullying reflect a rigid, authoritarian disciplinary approach that, as Sparrow and King (2024) argued, penalises neurodivergent students for minor infractions often linked to executive functioning difficulties and inherent traits. This aligns with Camilleri's (2015) and Woodward's (2024) findings, which illustrate how neurodivergent traits are often misinterpreted as defiance, leading to punitive and exclusionary actions. These patterns also echo Bajada et al.'s (2021) discussion of the panoptical gaze, where schools function as punitive surveillance mechanisms akin to prisons (Foucault, 1977), as well as Demie's (2022) findings on institutional targeting of disabled students through disproportionate punishment. Such approaches run counter to Zammit's (2020) emphasis on the importance of avoiding discipline-driven responses, underscoring a broader lack of understanding around neurodivergence.

The misinterpretation of neurodivergent behaviours as mere misconduct not only marginalises students, but also risks overlooking twice-exceptional students (those who are both gifted and have a disability), as teachers often focus on perceived deviant behaviour over strengths (Kennedy et al., 2011). Sky's experiences of dismissal exemplify this failure, reinforcing an oppressive

banking model as described by Freire (1970), that stifles students' engagement and development. Her experience also reflects Mallia's (2017) findings, highlighting how inclusion in practice remains contingent on the disposition, knowledge and initiative of individual educators, rather than being structurally embedded.

Building on Taylor's earlier account of her peer being unjustly reprimanded for fidgeting, the incident further illustrates a distinct failure to recognize self-regulation strategies, with educators reacting punitively rather than supportively. In contrast, Max's occupational therapist enabled him to self-regulate discreetly, using fidgets without attracting negative attention: "He [occupational therapist] told me to keep [the plasticine] under the desk so I wouldn't look at it... and it wouldn't make noise".<sup>10</sup> Taylor's and Max's contrasting experiences highlight unequal access to effective coping strategies. Since such strategies are typically provided by external professionals (Mary, 2025; Sparrow & King, 2024), this disparity underscores a fundamental equity issue, where students receiving specialist support can navigate school more effectively, while those without such resources struggle and face punishment for behaviours arising from unmet needs. Hennekam et al. (2024) echo this disparity, noting that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to receive equitable support. This lack of equity aligns with the arguments of Turnbull et al. (2020) and Rainforth and York-Barr (1997), who emphasise the importance of integrating therapeutic and behavioural support services within the school system, to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can access the tools they need to thrive.

Ultimately, greater equity in students' access to appropriate support tools, combined with improved teacher knowledge, might have prevented the cascading stress Taylor described when reflecting on teachers' punitive reactions to her peer's fidgeting: "I get frustrated because they're telling him to stop when he can't stop. I get distracted easily... and then it distracts not only me but all

<sup>10</sup> Kien jgħidli minn taħt il-mejda [il-plasticine] biex ma toqgħodx tħares lejha... u ma tagħmilx ħoss

the class". This account highlights the broader consequences of failing to recognise and value neurodivergence. This aligns with Kelly and Pohl's (2018) findings that the negative reinforcement of neurodivergent behaviours suppresses individuality, increasing distress and disengagement. Additionally, as Woodward (2024) argued, when authority figures frame difference as inherently wrong, students experience what Sky described as "emotional neglect". Sky's experience further illustrates the impact of negative reinforcement. Labelled as "weird", her diversity was "never celebrated" but "suppressed and punished". As a result, she resorted to masking:

So I used to hide my special interests as much as possible... instead of avoiding eye contact, I used to have a very, very intense stare... I used to literally sit on the playground in the corner and look at groups and study their way of speaking, study what games they played and then try and mimic them... I used to just watch National Geographic, but then I ended up watching Disney shows like Wizards of Waverly Place so I could blend in... but after years and years of doing it and still being bullied for it, I just internalised that I was broken, that I was a terrible person, that I wasn't good enough.

This narrative illustrates the emotional toll of internalized ableism. As Kaur (2023) argued, a toxic school environment forces neurodivergent students to suppress their authentic selves to fit into a system that fails to acknowledge, let alone support, their needs. Sky's deliberate shift from watching National Geographic to shows like Wizards of Waverly Place reflects an attempt to blend in by mimicking socially normative interests, using popular media as a script for belonging. Yet, despite these efforts, she continued to be marginalised and targeted, reinforcing the belief that she was inherently flawed. Rivera (2023), Stanich (2024), and Sparrow and King (2024) warned that masking can lead to serious mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and long-term emotional distress. Sky confirmed this: "And, of course, that [masking] led to quite intense mental health issues, which I'm still dealing with today". Ultimately, these findings highlight the profound impact of

teachers' attitudes on neurodivergent students' self-image, inclusion, and development. They reveal a concerning lack of adequate educator training in supporting neurodivergent learners, as well as a persistent gap between inclusive policy and practice. These issues will be revisited in the final chapter, where their implications are explored further.

Yet, while teachers play a crucial role, their ability to support neurodivergent students is often determined by the wider education system. Participants' accounts suggest that even when teachers are willing, the absence of structural recognition and coordinated support undermines the potential of meaningful inclusion. This highlights how micro-level challenges, particularly in classroom practice, are symptomatic of deeper systemic issues. Building on this, the following theme explores access to support provision, examining how recognition, accommodations, and services affect neurodivergent students' educational experiences.

### **Systemic Misfits: One Size Does Not Fit All**

Despite policies promoting inclusive education, research participants still recalled finding themselves struggling within a system designed with neurotypical learners in mind. While the previous theme focused on teachers' methods and attitudes, this theme shifts attention to the broader institutional structures that underpin those practices. Specifically, it examines how stereotypes, gender bias, rigid accommodations, and inaccessible learning support systems shaped their experiences, often forcing them to navigate education without the necessary recognition or assistance to thrive.

In the subsections that follow, the experiences of Jordan, Taylor, and Sky are foregrounded—not because they are more representative, but because their accounts provide particularly salient examples of how the intersection of late diagnoses, gendered expectations and entrenched misconceptions manifest in exclusionary practice.

### Overlooked and Misunderstood: Stereotypes, Gender Bias, and Late Diagnoses

The education system's failure to recognise, validate, and accommodate neurodivergent traits led to the widespread dismissal of the students who expressed them, shaping their access to support, academic experiences, and overall well-being. A striking pattern in this research was that, while the three male participants were diagnosed in early childhood, three of the five females remained undiagnosed until adolescence. These late diagnoses reinforce documented gender bias in neurodivergence identification, as female presentations, often characterized by subtle behaviours and stronger masking are less likely to be timely recognized (Attoe & Climie, 2023; Azzopardi et al., 2023; Craddock, 2024; Eaton, 2023; Mowlem et al., 2019; Muscat, 2022; Richey, 2024). In contrast, Alex and Sam were diagnosed in early childhood due to their more overt traits and higher support needs. Meanwhile, Taylor, Jordan, and Sky struggled without recognition for much of their schooling.

Jordan and Taylor, in particular, reflected on how their quiet and compliant nature contributed to their invisibility and late diagnoses: "I would obey the teachers. I was quiet in class" (Jordan); "I never really disturbed the class" (Taylor). Taylor further elaborated that "teachers didn't really understand people with [neurodivergence]" and that they "would hardly notice" students like her, who did not fit the stereotypical neurodivergent presentations. While these experiences involved teachers, they point to a deeper issue relating to the system's reliance on stereotypical, gendered-behaviour-based indicators and expectations. This reinforces the broader misconception that neurodivergence must be disruptive or outwardly visible to warrant attention, a belief that is deeply embedded in referral and identification processes. As a result, they confirm Connolly et al.'s (2024) assertion that "since neurodivergent differences and identities are largely invisible, [their] barriers can often go unaddressed" (p. 6).

A similar pattern emerged in Sky's case, where "the stereotypical form of neurodivergence" and the misconceptions about sterling academic performance not coinciding with support needs led

to the dismissal of her traits. Being a child who "was reading and writing by the age of three", a characteristic better defined as hyperlexia, her mother was told that "[she] couldn't be neurodivergent because [she] was too smart... was a girl... and [she] could speak, read, and write". Ironically, the decision to advance Sky by two levels took a U-turn and was dismissed because "[her] social skills were too lacking". This paradox reveals two critical failures:

First, despite recognizing her social difficulties, the school still withheld support. Given that social skills challenges are well-documented in neurodivergence (APA, 2022; Armstrong, 2023), this should have raised concern rather than being dismissed; a second oversight was the failure to identify Sky as twice-exceptional: a gifted student with additional support needs. The belief that neurodivergence is distinct from intelligence or strong verbal skills reflects a flawed understanding of its spectrum. It contradicts Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and aligns with Kaufman (2018) and Klingner (2022), who highlight frequent misdiagnoses in gifted individuals with coexisting disabilities. Building on Migneco and Zammit Endrich's (2015) research, whose findings revealed that while teachers acknowledge giftedness they often overlook its coexistence with disabilities, these findings confirm a similar trend.

Sky's dismissal from class advancement due to social differences that did not align with neurotypical expectations illustrates how giftedness is often treated as an isolated trait, detached from support needs. This aligns with Craddock's (2024) observation that neurodivergent traits are often "ignored or bracketed so that others can be focused on" (p.3). These findings emphasize the need for a more inclusive approach to neurodivergence, ensuring that gifted students do not fall through the cracks (Camilleri, 2015; Muscat, 2024). Like Sky, Jordan also recalled her needs being overlooked due to deeply rooted misconceptions and stereotypical expectations. Besides her quiet and compliant nature which may have camouflaged her neurodivergence and contributed to its initial dismissal, she also experienced significant challenges in social interaction and sensory regulation. These manifested in difficulties with reading social cues and concentrating in noisy environments

which often triggered sensory overload and led her to "cover [her] ears and cry". Yet her struggles were dismissed as behavioural issues rather than indicators of neurodivergence. Visibly emotional as she described her hardships, Jordan pointed out that even when a caring teacher eventually recognized her neurodivergence, she never received LSE support. She attributed this failure to being "considered high-functioning".

These experiences highlight deeply embedded gender bias and misconceptions that lead to students who do not fit conventional neurodivergent profiles being overlooked. This reinforces dominant discourses that create systemic barriers to inclusion. As Bajada et al. (2021) argued, misconceptions shaped by power structures and the medical model often perpetuate disabled students' difficulties. Underlying these findings is a significant manifestation of neurotypical privilege, which, as Connolly et al. (2024) noted, often results in the full complexity of neurodivergent needs being misunderstood or dismissed. Another study by Connolly et al. (2023) similarly observed that this neglect often compels neurodivergent students into cycles of stress and feelings of inadequacy, leading them to suppress their authenticity:

"I thought, what's wrong with me?" (Jordan);

"I actually thought I was hopeless" (Taylor);

"I realized that maybe there was something wrong with me... So that contributed to me masking and me putting myself in more harmful situations" (Sky).

Taylor's, Jordan's, and Sky's delayed recognition and misinterpretation of their neurodivergence reinforce the importance of timely diagnoses, as emphasized by Gabbay-Dizdar et al. (2022), Miller et al. (2018), and van 't Hof et al. (2021). Their experiences further support Sparrow and King's (2024) critique of education systems failing to keep pace with evolving perspectives of neurodivergence. Ultimately, these findings illustrate how schools often operate within a binary framework, assigning students rigid labels instead of recognizing the complexity of intersectional

identities, as highlighted by Crenshaw (1991) and Ojedokun (2023). Such a framework reinforces neurotypical norms, preventing neurodivergent students from accessing the support they need.

### **Standardized Accommodations: Rigid Frameworks, Missed Needs**

For students like Jordan, Taylor, and Sky, misconceptions, late diagnoses, and bureaucratic barriers, such as reliance on formal documentation and strict eligibility criteria, shaped their access to support and perspectives on inclusive education. After her diagnosis, Jordan reflected on how "a quiet room and extra time helped [her] a lot" during exams "because [she] didn't panic as much". However, her daily needs remained unrecognized, sometimes even exacerbated: "I didn't understand the instructions... And then the teacher, she gave me extra work... at the time, the only support I needed was just clear instructions".

Sky's experience further illustrates the rigidity of standardized, one-size-fits-all accommodations. Despite never needing extra time in exams, she was automatically granted it based on a predefined neurodivergence criteria. She likened this to a "menu" system: "I call it a menu because you have this label, therefore you need this, this, and this". Yet, her actual needs, such as compensating for "extreme sensory issues" with "headphones" and "sunglasses", required individual approval from teaching staff, prompting her to question: "Why should someone ask for permission to use sunglasses in a classroom?" Her frustration aligns with Mamo's (2023) study, which highlighted students' struggles with accommodation access being left to teaching staff discretion. Jordan's experience with an empathetic educator who allowed her to present privately, and spared her the stress of public performance, further underscores inconsistencies in accommodations and the lack of a needs-based approach.

These findings support Lovett et al. (2018), who argue that accommodations should be based on individual needs rather than predetermined criteria. They also align with Camilleri et al. (2019), who found that simple accommodations are often unnecessarily restricted, creating additional

learning barriers. Sky's experience further reveals the systemic rigidity negatively impacting neurodivergent students. Before being granted the "great" accommodation of a "smaller room" for exams, she endured distressing conditions due to misconceptions that denied her support:

in a hall, you had a bigger capacity for students. There was a lot more pen clicking. I could hear the pen on the paper... when you're flipping the page, people moving on their chair... the more space you have, the more it echoes as well. So, all of these things led to a much worse sensory environment.

Sky's experience aligns with Woods (2007), who critiques the reliance on formal diagnoses and bureaucratic approval before granting accommodations, jeopardizing the success of students whose disabilities go unnoticed. It also contradicts inclusive education policies (MEYR, 2022a, 2022b), which advocate for proactive approaches to accessibility. These findings echo existing research (Camilleri et al., 2019; Mamo, 2023; Tyrrell & Woods, 2018), which calls for empowering students and moving away from rigid, standardized frameworks that may not meet their individual needs. Sky reinforced this by emphasizing the importance of "see[ing] people as people" rather than reducing support needs to a binary "black or white" classification. Similarly, Woods et al. (2010) advocate for a universal and flexible approach, ensuring support is based on students' actual needs rather than restrictive eligibility criteria.

The failure to provide sensory-friendly learning environments even discouraged students from actively seeking accommodations. Taylor, despite being eligible for special exam arrangements, chose not to apply. Besides finding the process "a bit of a hassle to go through", she preferred a regular exam room because "the people who had severe [neurodivergent traits] were not there, so they didn't distract [her] like they used to do in class... they were in the special arrangements room". Here, the system acted as a deterrent to support, revealing a paradox: exam rooms are expected to be quiet, yet the "distraction-free" space was perceived as disruptive. Taylor's experience, like Sky's,

challenges the assumption that standardized accommodations automatically benefit all neurodivergent students. Her perspective aligns with Lovett et al. (2018) who found that not all neurodivergent students require a separate exam setting to function successfully. This further supports Camilleri et al. (2019), Mamo (2023), and Tyrrell and Woods (2018), who advocate for tailoring accommodations rather than assigning them based on diagnostic labels.

Taylor's case calls into question the presumed benefits of 'quiet rooms' and emphasises the need to assess accommodations on an individual basis. Moreover, her experience reflects broader concerns about standardized support, mirroring the rigid, pre-set goals found in digitised Individual Education Programs (IEPs), which often operate like drop-down menus of generic targets rather than frameworks for student-tailored support (Bray & Russell, 2018; Kurth et al., 2022; Sjöberg, 2014). This rigidity extends beyond individualized accommodations to the broader learning environment, where physical and sensory barriers limit engagement. Alex's reluctance to attend school because "it [the environment] gets too noisy" highlights how poorly designed environments create barriers rather than facilitating inclusion. Following Ross (2025) and Schaefer and Wojnicz (2024), access to a quiet space and noise-cancelling headphones could have helped Alex navigate the environment more successfully, fostering a more accessible and supportive learning experience.

Beyond sensory barriers, some students were also side-lined in fast-paced and unsupportive work-based learning settings. Jes recalled struggling to keep up in his placement at post-secondary level, not due to lack of ability, but because he lacked the opportunities for independent engagement: "I couldn't keep up with doing things... because they wouldn't give me a chance to do the work myself, and I would end up being side-lined".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Sam also encountered placement challenges, where the hectic environment and lack of structured guidance left her feeling lost and "alone". Rather

<sup>11</sup> "ma kontx inlaħħaq nagħmel l-affarijiet ... għax ma kinux ituni çans nagħmel ix-xogħol jien u kont nispiçça nitwarrab".

than fostering active participation and autonomy, these experiences left both Jes and Sam feeling excluded. Crucially, their accounts suggest that placements not only shape educational outcomes, but also mirror the structural realities neurodivergent young adults are likely to encounter in the workplace. This reflects Vlachou and Papananou's (2015) observation that schooling experiences often replicate broader societal structures. The obstacles described further resonate with findings by Bhuiyan et al. (2022), Hennekam et al. (2024), and Hotte-Meunier et al. (2024), who highlight how employment settings often disadvantage neurodivergent people, marginalising them and potentially reducing their socioeconomic mobility. Jes and Sam's challenges in these placement settings thus offer a concerning preview of the systemic barriers that may persist beyond education. This reinforces the need for a proactive, flexible, and person-centred approach to work-based learning, one that not only supports current educational inclusion but translates into more equitable participation in future employment contexts.

### **The LSE Paradox: Systemic Support or Stigma?**

While environmental factors shape students' access to education, structured human support also plays a crucial role in fostering inclusion. Rutherford's (2012) view of paraeducators as key to accessibility resonated with Alex, Sam, Jes, Morgan, and Max, who described them as stabilizing figures who helped them navigate the neurotypical environment of compulsory schooling. Max received shared support, while the other four had one-to-one assistance throughout compulsory education.

Morgan, Max, and Jes noted that their LSEs supported their attention and fostered their independence and self-confidence. Max credited his LSE with helping him focus using a sand-timer and develop better study skills: "Because it's like [with the timer] you can see time passing with your own eyes, so you keep focused and do not get lost... I started becoming more confident in my

studies".<sup>12</sup> Morgan added that his LSE "even used to take notes for [him]"<sup>13</sup> and Jes valued his LSE's emotional support: "when I transitioned to secondary school I went through a difficult period, and the LSE was very understanding".<sup>14</sup> However, as they matured, the male participants felt increasingly uncomfortable with LSE support. Max recalled being questioned: "They tell you, 'Do you have an LSE? But why? Do you have a problem? Because you don't seem to have one'".<sup>15</sup> This stigma resonated with Morgan and Jes, who, when asked about the idea of receiving direct LSE support at post-secondary level, expressed deep reluctance, despite the difficulties encountered without it.

In alignment with Camilleri (2015) and Falzon (2019), who highlighted students' growing discomfort with being associated with an LSE as they matured, the participants' accounts also reflect a tension between the need for support and a developing sense of identity. While LSEs initially played a crucial role in Jes, Max, and Morgan's education, their growing awareness of social norms led to the internalization of ableism and stigma. As a result, they became reluctant to be perceived as different through direct support provision. Similarly, despite never having an LSE, Taylor shared similar concerns, admitting having mixed feelings about it in secondary school: "It could be that in secondary, I thought of it like that [being ashamed] ... I don't know if it would make me more anxious or if it would confuse me. I don't know". This shift in perspective reflects the persistent influence of ableist attitudes embedded in the deficit model (Yu, 2014), where support is framed as a marker of deficiency rather than a tool for inclusion. As noted by Mueller (2019), who cited Erikson's (1977) theory of identity formation, the participants' discomfort reflects their search for autonomy and self-concept, while navigating stigma and societal expectations within a neurotypical environment. This

<sup>12</sup> Għax qisek ħa tara b'għajnejk il-ħin għaddej qisu biex inti tagħmel moħħok hemm u ma tintilifx... Iktar bdejt insir kunfidenti fl-istudju".

<sup>13</sup> Anke n-notes kienet tiktibli".

<sup>14</sup> "fil-bidu tas-sekondarja għaddejt minn perjodu ħażin, u l-LSE kienet tifhimni ħafna".

<sup>15</sup> "Jgħidulek għandek LSE inti? Imma għax għandek problema? Għax ma tidhirx li għandek xi problema".

internalization unconsciously undermines the affirmation of their neurodivergence, which is essential for fostering empowerment (Garcia, 2020; French & Swain, 2004).

Similarly, both Alex and Sam embodied Erikson's (1977) concept of identity development, particularly in balancing autonomy with support. While open to LSE provision at the post-secondary level, they both replied with a firm "no" when asked if they ever wanted parental intervention at school. This suggests that while they viewed LSE support as a tool for empowerment, they simultaneously asserted their adolescent identity by distancing themselves from parental influence. In doing so, they align with the social and affirmative models of disability, (Oliver, 1990; French & Swain, 2004), reinforcing Kittay's (2011) argument that support and autonomy are not mutually exclusive.

Moreover, Sam preferred a post-secondary LSE system similar to her secondary school experience, where "[she] had friends, different types of subjects, different teachers, and different LSEs". Her comfort in a dynamic and varied school setting as opposed to primary school challenges the stereotypical notion of neurodivergent people's desire for sameness, as described in the DSM-5 (APA, 2022). Instead, it supports Hacking's (2010) view of neurodivergence as heterogeneous, ultimately reinforcing the idea that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. However, Alex and Sam's willingness to continue receiving LSE support may also indicate a shift away from the autonomy discussed earlier, raising potential concerns about LSE dependence (Falzon, 2019; Webster & Blatchford, 2019).

Furthermore, other issues with LSE support were highlighted: "Sometimes you get an LSE who is hard to get on well with" (Jes)<sup>16</sup>; "You don't always find a good LSE" (Morgan).<sup>17</sup> These comments illustrate that the effectiveness of this support provision depends on human factors such as willingness, knowledge, and professional aptitude (Falzon, 2019). Such inconsistencies highlight the

<sup>16</sup> "ġieli jkollok LSE ma tkunx tmur tajjeb magħha"

<sup>17</sup> "Mhux dejjem ikollok LSE tajba".

need for an LSE provision that ensures adequate support while fostering independence and autonomy. For students like Jordan and Sky, the inconsistency of this provision was even more pronounced. For them, LSE support was entirely absent and non-negotiable. Their exclusion reflects structural barriers where bureaucracy and eligibility criteria dictated access to support (Woods, 2007). Such a framework perpetuates stigma (Brion-Meisels, 2014), as seen in Jes, Taylor and Morgan's refusal of support at certain points during adolescence in an effort to avoid being labelled. This stigma arises from LSE support being contingent on a formal statement of needs, which categorises students as disabled and reinforces a deficit perspective (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Yu, 2024).

These findings underscore a troubling paradox: while LSEs have the potential to facilitate inclusion by serving as a universal tool for equitable access within a social model and human rights framework, they can also reinforce dependence. Moreover, beyond being bound by bureaucratic constraints, this provision is often shaped by entrenched deficit-based perceptions (Brion-Meisels, 2014). Nevertheless, even when such accommodations are adequately in place, their efficacy can be jeopardised by macro-level practices that shape how students experience their journey across educational levels. The challenges participants described in accessing meaningful support were particularly intensified during periods of transition, where academic demands increased and existing support structures often became less reliable. The next theme examines how shifting and heightened expectations, along with evolving pressures, affected continuity, inclusion, and students' ability to engage meaningfully and sustainably in their education.

### **Transitions and Progressions: The Ongoing Impact of Inclusive Education**

The transition from one educational stage to another presented significant challenges for most participants, particularly when support structures were inconsistent or removed altogether. This theme

delves into how curriculum overload, rigid assessment methods, and inadequate preparation for independence affect students' academic progression and holistic well-being.

### **Curriculum Overload: When Learning Becomes Survival**

Beyond limited support and rigid accommodations, all participants identified an overloaded curriculum and inflexible assessments as major challenges to their academic progression. For many, the issue was not understanding the material but rather the overwhelming volume they were expected to process within rigid timeframes. Some participants questioned the relevance of certain subjects in post-secondary vocational settings, where additional coursework felt more like an academic burden than a meaningful learning opportunity. In contrast, Sam valued practical, skills-based subjects, noting how ICT knowledge benefited her summer job. This contrast highlights the importance of meaningful curriculum over its one-size-fits-all inefficiencies that hinder progression (Ross, 2025).

The relentless focus on syllabus coverage and exam preparation for academic progression left little room for deeper engagement, creativity, or consolidation of learning. Taylor, visibly frustrated, recalled how Secondary Education Certificate exam pressure dominated her final secondary year: "I was so very overwhelmed... they like bombarded us... 'Go home and study'... first day of school!" Similarly, Jordan described how this high-pressure approach shaped the entire learning experience: "Teachers made it very, very stressful, and students were just stressed by the amount of work they had to do". Sky criticized the system's emphasis on syllabus completion over meaningful learning: "School... it's cramming this much syllabus... even if teachers want to, there's not much room for creativity". Max, furthermore, noted how study demands forced students to sacrifice their well-being: "You have to make sacrifices. Like hobbies... you have to give them up to focus on school"<sup>18</sup>. Rather

<sup>18</sup> "Bilfors trid tagħmel saġrificiċċi. Bħala hobby... bilfors trid taqta' minnhom biex qisek tiffoka fuq l-iskola".

than supporting student growth, this system demands sacrifices, forcing students to prioritize academic survival at the expense of their well-being.

Stress and anxiety also resonated with participants as they reflected on their struggle to learn Maltese. While two participants faced this challenge until the end of compulsory education, the others had to endure it at post-secondary level, making their progression even harder. All but one participant expressed frustration at how Maltese became an additional, unnecessary obstacle in their academic journey. This aligns with Frendo's (2018) observations that Maltese proficiency is a key determinant of students' academic progression. The structural emphasis on Maltese was reflected in participants' experiences. Sam and Alex found the language especially overwhelming at all levels, describing it as the subject they "hated" the most. Additionally, Sky shared how she "had to repeat [her] Maltese O-Level three times", while Taylor had to attend extra lessons to pass. Meanwhile, Jordan, Morgan, and Jes never obtained their Maltese O-Level qualification. Jordan noted how this qualification requirement, even when irrelevant to a student's field of study, left many feeling trapped, knowing it could hinder further education. Echoing participants' frustrations, Taylor described the endless workload tied to the subject:

"Maltese O-Level! You need like to have an infinity of poems and poems!"

The Maltese language issue is particularly pressing for neurodivergent students on the autistic spectrum. Debono (2023) and Muscat (2024) highlighted these students' innate preference for English over Maltese, where the compulsory element of the Maltese language further exacerbates their challenges, making the system even less accessible. Entry requirements vary across institutions. While the University of Malta has introduced exemption pathways for students experiencing specific learning difficulties (University of Malta, 2017), participants who had to engage with Maltese post compulsory education in other institutions suggested that such exemptions were either not offered or not applied in their cases. Such incongruence indicates that these accommodations may not be implemented uniformly across the sector. Furthermore, access to exemptions is often contingent on

formal diagnosis and disclosure (Camilleri et al., 2019; Mamo, 2023). Considering issues related to late diagnoses and stigma (Azzopardi et al., 2023), not all students will be in the position to provide such documentation. These factors can potentially lead students to miss out on the support they may need to succeed.

Jes's experience further illustrates how an overloaded curriculum, focused on content delivery rather than comprehension, alienates students instead of supporting them. The struggles encountered upon his transition to post-secondary education contributed with a toll on his mental health: "Constantly writing notes... How can you keep up? How can you remember everything!... I even fell into depression... it affected me very badly".<sup>19</sup> The sheer volume of material and a lack of structured guidance left him struggling to keep up. Curren et al. (2024) emphasised that education should never come at the cost of students' mental and emotional health. However, the system continues to operate on rigid assumptions about the 'successful' student. This rigidity aligns with Ellis et al.'s (2023) critique of an education designed around the typical student who understands, communicates, concentrates, and completes tasks within predetermined timeframes. While education policies promote inclusivity and value diversity (MEYR, 2022a), the underlying assumption of a standardised learner remains unchanged, leaving no room for variations in cognitive processing, learning pace, or engagement styles. As a result, students who diverge from the norm are left to navigate an inflexible sink-or-swim system.

This survival-based approach mirrors Barton's (1997) critique of market-driven education, where economic efficiency, competition, and performance statistics precede student well-being and holistic learning. Within this framework, students are not nurtured as adaptable, lifelong learners but are instead placed in a state of constant academic survival, where learning becomes an exhausting

<sup>19</sup> ""Il-ħin kollu nikteb n-notes... Kif ħa tilħaq! Kif ħa tiftakar kollox!... jien anke depression qabditni... affettwatni kerha ħafna".

race against time rather than an enriching process. Parallel with Barton (1997), Curren et al. (2024) argued that structuring education around workforce readiness is too narrow an objective, given the significant role schooling plays in shaping students' long-term well-being. When policies prioritise standardised benchmarks over individual needs, students are conditioned to equate their personal worth with academic success, leading to chronic stress, burnout, and anxiety which are often common in neurodivergent students (Wyk, 2025). Instead of supporting diverse learners, this rigid, high-pressure system reinforces a culture of self-sacrifice, where exhaustion is normalised as a prerequisite for achievement.

### **Shattered Dreams, Unbroken Spirits: Pushing Through the Struggle**

All participants pursued post-secondary education. Nevertheless, not all completed their intended courses. For Alex, Sam, Morgan, and Jes, their enthusiasm quickly turned into disillusionment as they found themselves navigating an education system that made little to no effort to accommodate their needs. Despite post-secondary institutions' inclusive support (MCAST, 2023; University of Malta, 2017), their transition was overwhelmingly difficult. Jes revealed that while the standardized accommodations were reasonably effective in addressing his co-occurring disability, they fell short in meeting his neurodivergent needs, making his progression very difficult: "I didn't finish the course because, as things turned out, I lost hope".<sup>20</sup> Morgan described how, despite demonstrating his neurodivergent needs to the inclusion department, post-secondary education functioned on a "sink or swim" mode, where students either adapted to the system, or were left behind: "No support at all. You either keep up, or you fall behind".<sup>21</sup> With no viable alternatives, he was compelled to drop out: "Because of the system... I couldn't continue. It was too difficult!".<sup>22</sup> Sam

<sup>20</sup> "Ma spiccajtx il-kors għax kif ġew l-affarijiet qtajt qalbi".

<sup>21</sup> "Għajjnuna ta' xejn, jew tmexxi jew daqshekk tintilef".

<sup>22</sup> "Minħabba s-sistema... ma stajttx inkompli. Kienet wisq iebes!"

and Alex shared these struggles. Alex reluctantly admitted that without support, "[post-secondary] is very difficult", and Sam said, "I'm quitting because I didn't pass".

These realities first call into question the expectation that neurodivergent students who previously relied on full-time one-to-one support should seamlessly adapt to a neurotypical environment without such assistance. Neurodivergence is widely recognized as lifelong (APA, 2022). Therefore, such an assumption reveals a troubling contradiction. As Rutherford (2012) highlighted, LSEs are essential for disabled students' inclusion. However, the abrupt withdrawal of their support at the post-secondary level implies that these students are expected to outgrow their neurodivergence, disregarding their ongoing need for structured accommodations. As Morgan, Jes, Sam, and Alex shared their experiences, systemic gaps transpired. Jes found studying long notes without guidance demoralizing: "extremely long notes! When I asked what I needed to study, they wouldn't tell me. And because I have [neurodivergence], it was quite challenging not to have some guidance".<sup>23</sup> Sam and Alex recalled being left to process only verbal instructions, without adequate guidance or demonstrations in busy and noisy environments. The lack of structured support discouraged them from attending classes, exacerbating their difficulties.

The fact that the four participants who dropped out had previously benefited from full-time one-to-one support, as opposed to Jordan, Taylor, and Sky, who navigated school without support, and Max, who only received shared assistance, raises a second equally pressing concern: whether the support provided in compulsory schooling was truly adequate to prepare students for independence and the realization of their full potential. Falzon (2019) and Webster and Blatchford (2019) argued that excessive support may inadvertently hinder self-determination, fostering dependency that leaves students struggling once it is withdrawn. While Max's schooling gradually eased him into lecture-

<sup>23</sup> "noti twal ħafna... meta kont ngħidlihom xi rrid nistudja ma jgħidulix...U minħabba... li għandi [neurodivergence] kienet tkun daqsxejn challenging li ma jkollokx daqsxejn gwida".

based learning, Alex, Sam, Morgan, and Jes faced a sudden unstructured transition. These findings strongly suggest that, without carefully balanced interventions and progressive scaffolding (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978), neurodivergent students risk being unprepared to navigate neurotypical environments independently.

On the other hand, Sky described her unsupported schooling as "doing life on hard mode". While both she and Jordan found the freedom of post-secondary life liberating in contrast to compulsory schooling, they also needed time to adjust to the busy environment. Sky, in particular, noted that the intensity of back-to-back lectures often resulted in physical and mental exhaustion. Unlike peers who had LSE support, Sky, Jordan, and Taylor developed their coping mechanisms out of necessity rather than systemic support (Black et al., 2024). Their resilience, however, does not imply that assistance is unnecessary. Instead, it highlights the need for a balanced, person-centred approach (Woods et al., 2010), where support is balanced with scaffolding techniques. As Asbell-Clarke (2023) noted, this process necessitates a careful understanding of when to fade assistance to foster metacognition and autonomy, equipping students with the skills needed for independent learning and long-term success.

Like Sky, both Morgan and Jes found their own strategies to cope with post-secondary education as best they could, secretly recording lectures and taking slide photos to compensate for the lack of support: "I used to record lessons secretly... because they wouldn't allow it" (Jes).<sup>24</sup> Morgan confessed that recording lessons "was the only way for [him] to retain information".<sup>25</sup> Though they ultimately both dropped out, their efforts reflect self-determination and a positive approach to neurodivergence. Their self-devised strategies suggest that a more gradual transition with progressively reduced support might have offered a better chance to adjust to the post-secondary

<sup>24</sup> "Kont nirrekordja l-lessons bil-moħbi... għax ma jħallukx".

<sup>25</sup> "kienet l-unika way biex inżomm l-affarijiet f'moħħi".

dynamics, particularly since both expressed a desire to resume their studies once they felt better prepared to navigate the system. By the time that the interviews took place, all participants had demonstrated resilience in their own way, with each of them either pursuing tertiary education, engaging in employment, or both. Holistically, their journeys suggest that, while the education system may have failed most of them in different ways, they still found alternative pathways to success, albeit not without significant personal effort.

The participants' experiences emphasise the need for a thorough understanding of the multiple, intersecting factors that may impinge on students' progression in education. In this vein, the recent Early Leaving from Education and Training Strategy (MEYR, 2023a) and its classification of disabled students as 'high-risk' warrant further scrutiny. While it is commendable that this strategy acknowledged the challenges neurodivergent students face in educational environments, it must also critically engage with long-term implications of current support provisions. The findings presented here underscore the importance of ensuring that support provisions are not only designed to address barriers but also empower students towards autonomy and long-term success. Without such proactivity, supports risk being limited in scope or fostering dependence, ultimately undermining the very outcomes they seek to promote. The final theme builds on this by exploring participants' holistic reflections and perspectives, along with their suggestions for making inclusive education more accessible, sustainable and meaningful: "something that students will hold on to" (Jordan).

### **Defining and Redefining Inclusion**

Participants took pride in contributing to this research, hoping their experiences would help shape a more inclusive system where other neurodivergent students would not have to endure their same struggles. Toward the end of their interview, they were invited to reflect on the overall value of inclusive education and share their vision for meaningful change. Their insights pointed toward an education system that is more accessible, supportive, and empowering for all learners.

### Summing It All Up: Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The reflective prompts offered participants the opportunity to consolidate their thoughts on the personal, academic, or social impact of inclusive education. Although many of their responses echoed ideas discussed in earlier themes, this final theme draws together the aspects they identified as most meaningful or impactful in shaping their holistic growth. Ultimately, their perspectives revealed a complex reality: one in which inclusive education benefitted some in certain ways yet, excluded others, highlighting the inconsistencies in its implementation.

Despite acknowledging its flaws, Taylor, Morgan, Jes, Max and Sam valued inclusive education for the opportunities it provided, particularly in social connections and academic growth. Max reflected: "I had lots of friends... many of whom I still talk to today. Academically, I also progressed in my studies".<sup>26</sup> Sam also noted that inclusive education kept her "motivated" to "participate" and "learn". The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education report (2018) also highlighted these benefits in contrast to segregated settings that diminish them. However, the report underscored that inclusive education success depends on the quality of systemic and attitudinal practices. This reflects concerns raised by most participants about its conditional nature, being accessible primarily to those who can adapt to the system's expectations, and its implementation contingent on individual educators.

Unlike the others, Jordan and Sky shared strongly critical perspectives. Jordan recalled school with dread: "I wouldn't say school helped much... I used to dread going every day". While some teachers encouraged her, she ultimately felt unworthy and unsupported. Sky shared similar frustration: "I graduated despite inclusive education, not because of it". Though she appreciated some teachers who celebrated her differences, she felt let down by those who failed to offer

<sup>26</sup> "ħbieb kelli ħafna... ħafna minnhom għadni nkellimhom sa llum... academically wkoll, avvanzajt fl-istudju".

meaningful support. Alex, in contrast, struggled to name any benefits at all, becoming visibly distressed when asked. However, she suggested that better-trained teachers could have made a difference, hinting at challenges she found difficult to articulate. Jordan and Sky also grew emotional, reinforcing the reality that for many, inclusion was more of an emotionally complex struggle than a support system.

These diverse perspectives highlight a disconnection that Sky starkly underscored: "It's one thing to have inclusion written down in a school policy. It's another thing to actually implement it and live what you preach". This aligns with Psaila (2015, 2017) and Sparrow and King (2024), who argued that inclusion policies often fail to translate into effective daily practices.

### **A Neurodivergent-Affirmative Vision for Change**

Besides critiquing the system, participants also offered clear, practical solutions. A key universal recommendation was a flexible, student-centred curriculum and the need for students' voice to extend beyond the classroom. Consistent with Garcia (2020) and Walker (2021), Max emphasized the need to involve students in discussions regarding changes and when evaluating strategies. In addition, Morgan and Jes advocated for "tailored programs"<sup>27</sup> and the possibility for courses to "be extended over a longer period".<sup>28</sup> In agreement with Morgan and Jes, Taylor emphasised the need for a "safe space" and "a point of reference", even beyond compulsory education, to ensure that neurodivergent students feel heard and supported. Having structured support systems would bridge communication channels, allowing students to share concerns, receive guidance, and access necessary accommodations without unnecessary delays. This aligns with Calleja et al. (2017), who emphasized that inclusive education must actively nurture student voice and individual needs. The participants' advocacy for interaction parallels Freire's (1970) and supports

<sup>27</sup> "programm apposta għalik"

<sup>28</sup> "il-kors ikun imqassam fi iktar snin"

Noonan's (2023) view of inclusive teaching facilitating a space where students can actively participate and thrive by "entering classroom dialogue" (p.110).

The significance of UDL was strongly reinforced. Supporting Hall et al. (2024), Jordan stressed that "not every child is going to learn the same way". All advocated for a shift from rigid, content-heavy curriculum models to approaches that accommodate different cognitive styles. Sky and Taylor expanded on this, emphasizing the relevance of practical skills in education. Sky suggested: "not just academics, but general life skills, things that will help a person live a happy and healthy life". Taylor added: "things that we need to know like tax, money... not just for the exam". These perspectives align with Sam's view of ICT proficiency as a key tool for employment, reinforcing the idea that education should equip students with skills relevant to their future careers. The emphasis on practical, future-oriented learning aligns with educational policy frameworks that advocate for meaningful and relevant learning experiences that foster intrinsic motivation, lifelong learning and personal growth (MEYR, 2022a).

Furthermore, participants emphasized the urgent need for better teacher training and manageable class sizes as interrelated factors that directly impact inclusion. Supporting Galea (2018) and Micallef (2018), Alex suggested the need to "change teachers" a remark that reflected a broader call for improved teacher competence and understanding. In accordance, Taylor and Sky stressed that teachers require specialized training in neurodivergence, mental-health first-aid, and inclusive teaching methods to proactively accommodate students' needs. However, as participants noted, even well-trained teachers struggle to provide individualized support in overcrowded classrooms. Supporting Altenhofen et al. (2016), many felt that large class sizes hindered meaningful student-teacher interactions, limiting engagement and support. Similarly, reflecting Blatchford and Russell (2020) and Sparrow and King (2024), Morgan, Jes, and Max observed that smaller schools and classes foster a stronger sense of identity and enhance inclusion.

Another key recommendation made by the participants concerned the need to shift away from traditional, time-constrained assessment methods: "My course has a lot of written exams... every month. It's stressful!" (Taylor). All participants felt this caused significant stress and failed to reflect neurodivergent students' true abilities. Jordan captured this frustration: "If your memory fails you, you fail the exam". Participants strongly advocated for alternative assessments over time-constrained exams. Their critique aligns with Tai et al. (2023), who question the validity of assessments that operate from a deficit model, blaming students, rather than evaluating whether assessment methods are fit for purpose. Participants argued that assignments provide deeper engagement, flexibility, and a more accurate representation of knowledge: "An assignment is better than an exam or test. You have time to prepare for it and conduct proper research" (Max).<sup>29</sup> Beyond academic accuracy, alternative assessments promote inclusion and belonging. In this vein, Sam emphasized the importance of validation, noting how receiving applause after a presentation gave her a sense of happiness and belonging. This reinforces Brennan De Vine (2022) and Scorgie and Forlin (2019), who argue that true inclusion is achieved when students feel valued and meaningfully engaged in the school community.

Ultimately, the participants' recommendations reflect those of the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (2017), which called for more engaging and relevant educational structures and a shift away from rigid methods that risk discouraging students from continuing beyond compulsory schooling. Their voices reinforce a crucial point: inclusive education is not about physical placement in mainstream classrooms. It is about an environment where all students feel supported, valued, and able to thrive. This vision echoes Article 24 of the UNCRPD (United Nations,

<sup>29</sup> "assignment aħjar minn eżami jew test. Ikollok ċertu ħin biex tipprepara għalih... tagħmel ir-riċerka sew".

2006), which affirms the right to inclusive education through strengths-based practices that empower disabled students to reach their full potential and participate fully in society.

### Conclusion

This chapter presented the analysed findings from eight semi-structured interviews with neurodivergent young adults about their experiences and perspectives on inclusive education. The findings reveal that inclusive education is shaped by both attitudinal and systemic factors, with students' experiences fluctuating based on the institutions they attended and the teachers they encountered. While some participants benefited from having encountered a number of supportive educators, and from accommodations that suited their needs, others faced rigid structures, inflexible teaching practices, and a lack of understanding of their learning profiles. These inconsistencies highlight the gap between inclusive education policies and their real-world implementation, where inclusion often depends on individual educators rather than being a consistently embedded practice. Beyond teachers, systemic structures further influenced participants' ability to thrive in education.

Altogether, the findings underscore a powerful message. Despite their hardships, all the participants affirmed their value as neurodivergent people by sharing their experiences and perspectives. They demonstrated that, far from being mere passive recipients of a system, they are active contributors advocating for meaningful change and a more inclusive future through emancipation. Their perspectives provide critical insights into the realities of inclusive education and how the system can evolve to better support diverse learners. Ultimately, their voices highlight the need to move from policy-driven inclusion to a value-driven, practice-based approach (Norwich, 2022), one that prioritises flexibility, individualized support, and a genuine commitment to neurodivergent voices (Garcia, 2020; Walker, 2021).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Chapter Overview**

In this chapter, I synthesise the key findings drawn from the perspectives of eight neurodivergent young adults. I restate the research purpose, summarise the main insights identified through thematic analysis, and reflect on the broader implications of these findings. I also outline the study's contributions, acknowledge its limitations, and offer recommendations for future research. I bring this study to a close with a personal reflection on the significance of amplifying neurodivergent voices, followed by a concluding summary that highlights the vital implications of their insights for reimagining inclusive education.

### **The Purpose of The Study**

This study adopts a social, human rights-based, and neurodivergent-affirmative approach to disability, as emphasised in the work of Degener (2016a) and Lawson and Beckett (2021). Guided by these frameworks, and drawing on the work of Walker (2021) and Garcia (2020) who advocated for the centrality of neurodivergent voices in the pursuit of emancipation, the main research question guiding this study was:

What are neurodivergent young adults' perspectives on inclusive education?

To explore this inquiry, I set out to foreground the voices and reflections of neurodivergent young adults on their experiences of inclusion during and after compulsory schooling, as well as their views on how education systems can better support neurodivergent students. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with eight participants aged 18–25. In addressing the main research question, this study surfaced tensions between participants' personal realities and the inclusive values promoted in educational policy, raising concerns about how inclusion is enacted in practice.

## Summary of Key Findings

### Theme 1: The Power of Teachers

Teachers played a pivotal role in shaping participants' educational experiences, facilitating or hindering their inclusion. Inclusive teaching approaches that aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles helped students engage and feel valued. Contrastingly, didactic, text-heavy instruction led to disengagement and struggle. Moreover, teachers' attitudes either validated students' identities and fostered their sense of belonging, or undermined their sense of self, leading to feelings of alienation, inadequacy, and shame. The most impactful teachers showed empathy and flexibility, whereas others displayed indifference or punitive responses to neurodivergent traits.

Furthermore, overreliance on LSEs signalled a detachment from inclusive teaching and contributed to students' marginalisation within the broader classroom community. This detachment was further reflected when teachers ignored peer bullying or enacted oppressive behaviours themselves. Ableist norms and expectations pressured most students to suppress their authenticity in an effort to avoid humiliation and conform to neurotypical expectations.

### Theme 2: Systemic Misfits: One Size Does Not Fit All

This theme illustrates participants' struggles navigating a system shaped by neurotypical assumptions and misconceptions about neurodivergence. Female participants particularly highlighted the impact of gender bias and delayed diagnosis. The failure to acknowledge twice-exceptional students and those with less overt behaviours compounded oppression and limited access to early intervention. These shortcomings contributed to long-term struggles with identity, self-worth, and belonging.

Rigid diagnosis-dependent systems created additional barriers, while standardised accommodations often failed to address students' unique and diverse challenges. In some cases, the system reinforced stigma, leading students to avoid support altogether in order to mask their

differences. In others, it fostered a sense of dependence, which stifled progress and left students disheartened, ultimately leading to disengagement and burnout.

### **Theme 3: Transitions and Progressions: The Ongoing Impact of Inclusive Education**

The transition from compulsory schooling to post-secondary education posed significant challenges for neurodivergent students due to overloaded curricula, rigid assessments, and a lack of preparation. While some appreciated the increased autonomy of post-secondary education, most experienced it as a survival-of-the-fittest environment marked by academic pressures and inflexibility that amplified disengagement and fatigue, ultimately undermining emotional well-being and progress. The mandatory and intensive workload associated with the Maltese language emerged as a specific barrier to progression. Participants' experiences revealed that the abrupt withdrawal of support, coupled with one-size-fits-all systems left them unprepared for post-secondary demands. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated notable resilience, developing personal coping strategies and maintaining a strong desire for independence and self-determination.

### **Theme 4: Defining and Redefining Inclusion**

This final theme captured participants' reflections on the personal significance of inclusive education and their vision for meaningful reform. Some highlighted the value of inclusive settings in fostering social connection, academic growth, and motivation. Others conveyed more ambivalent experiences, shaped by inconsistency, exclusion, and emotional strain. An important distinction between being physically present and truly belonging was consistently noted.

Within a neurodivergent-affirmative vision for inclusive reform, participants called for greater recognition of neurodivergent voices in educational decision-making. They advocated for integrating practical life skills into the curriculum, more diverse and strengths-based assessment methods, and teaching approaches that reflect the principles of UDL. Their insights highlighted the pressing need for specialised teacher training, smaller class sizes, alongside a school culture that values and affirms neurodivergent identities.

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study offers critical insights into the systemic, pedagogical, and emotional landscapes shaping neurodivergent students' experiences in mainstream education. The findings reveal ongoing inconsistencies between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, pointing to urgent reform at both macro and micro levels. While inclusive education is clearly articulated in policy, its implementation remains uneven. Echoing Mallia's (2017) findings, this study reinforces that inclusive practice often hinges on the discretion of individual educators.

The disconnect between policy and practice raises pressing concerns that were highlighted in the early stages of inclusive education by Bartolo (2001) and Barton (1997). These concerns have since persisted and continue to be echoed in recent research (e.g., Bajada et al., 2021; Muscat, 2024). The adequacy of educator training in supporting neurodivergent students remains a key issue. This invites critical reflection on whether current support structures across the education system effectively equip educators to foster autonomy, self-advocacy, and long-term progression among their students. These enduring gaps underscore the need for policy to move beyond aspirational language and become more firmly grounded in the everyday realities of educational settings, responsive to the complex and varied needs of diverse learners. To achieve this, policies should be co-developed with those directly affected by them, including both students and educators. The following implications and recommendations are informed not only by thematic insights, but also by the concrete suggestions from participants regarding how inclusive education should evolve.

### Teachers as Gatekeepers of Inclusion

Teachers' instructional methods, expectations, and interpersonal attitudes had far-reaching effects not only on students' learning but also on their emotional wellbeing, sense of identity, and belonging. These findings position teachers not merely as curriculum facilitators but as frontline gatekeepers of inclusion. Reflecting the recommendations of Connolly et al. (2024), this study

underscores the urgent need for all educators to develop professional curiosity, emotional sensitivity, and the courage to critically examine the neurotypical privilege that underpins normative assumptions about behaviour and learning.

However, these capacities do not emerge automatically. Following UNESCO's (2020a) identification of negative mindsets as a key barrier to inclusion, it is imperative that teacher preparation programmes actively address these obstacles. Such programmes should foster reflexivity, adaptive thinking, and a critical understanding of neurodivergence as difference rather than deficit. Professional development must include sustained engagement with neurodivergence, emotional literacy, and unconscious bias. Greater attention should be given to less visible presentations of neurodivergence, especially in female students whose needs often go unnoticed. Teachers must develop the relational insight to respond to individual needs without defaulting to diagnostic labels.

Nevertheless, teachers cannot implement inclusion effectively without systemic support. Structural factors, such as class sizes, high-pressure curriculum demands, and lack of collaboration, exacerbate burnout and constrain capacity. Adequate mentoring is essential, particularly for newly qualified teachers who may have theoretical grounding in inclusive pedagogy but often lack practical experience in navigating classroom diversity and participating in collaborative, co-responsible systems. In parallel, curriculum design and assessment must be re-evaluated to prioritise meaningful, relevant learning that reflects student diversity and supports flexible pedagogy. Importantly, educators should be supported and recognised as central agents of inclusive transformation. Such recognition can foster motivation and sustained commitment to inclusive practice. Ultimately, inclusion must be structurally embedded through strong leadership, policy alignment, and a culture of collegiality, not left to individual goodwill.

## Reframing Support

This study revealed that rigid, diagnosis-based accommodation systems often failed to meet students' evolving needs and inadvertently constrained, rather than enhanced, neurodivergent students' development, an issue similarly critiqued by Mamo (2023). Moreover, the critical gap identified in the continuity of support across educational stages reflects an implicit assumption that students will outgrow their needs. This misalignment calls for more gradual, scaffolded transitions where support systems evolve in tandem with the student.

Collectively, these patterns highlight the need for a paradigm shift in how the education system conceptualises support, moving beyond static, deficit-oriented systems toward more proactive, student-centred frameworks. This includes rethinking curriculum design, assessment practices, and learning experiences that better reflect and respond to the diverse strengths of students. Embedding UDL across all educational levels ensures a strengths-based approach that benefits students through diverse pathways for learning and participation, while reducing reliance on rigid accommodation systems. When implemented broadly, UDL reduces stigma, supports autonomy, and fosters inclusive classroom culture.

This shift requires rethinking the dynamics between classroom teachers and LSEs to address fragmented provision and marginalisation of students receiving LSE support. Co-teaching models and clearly defined shared responsibilities can promote inclusion as a collective practice rather than an outsourced task. A transdisciplinary approach that values and integrates the expertise of teachers, LSEs, and allied professionals can improve outcomes for all learners, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with limited access to external services. Ultimately, as advocated by Rainforth and York-Barr (1997), Mitchell (2014), and Mulholland and O'Connor (2016), shared ownership and collaborative practice across disciplines can reduce inequities and provide more consistent, holistic support for all learners.

### **Strengths and Contributions to Knowledge**

In response to calls by Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry (2024) and Legault et al. (2021) to address the underrepresentation of neurodivergent voices in research, this study adopts a critical, neurodivergent-affirmative perspective that challenges prevailing hierarchies and the technical framings of inclusive education (Bajada et al., 2021; Psaila, 2017). Through a voice-led critique, it reconceptualises inclusion as a dynamic, relational experience, highlights tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, and offers practice-relevant recommendations grounded in the experiences of neurodivergent students.

Building on this perspective, this research foregrounds how neurodivergent students negotiate identity, belonging, and autonomy within ableist and deficit-based systems. The findings also shed light on the potential invisibility of neurodivergence, particularly among female students, showing how gendered assumptions and diagnostic delays can contribute to their marginalisation, an issue recently underscored by Azzopardi et al. (2023). This invisibility is often compounded by the normalisation of quietness and compliance, which can lead educators to overlook students' unspoken struggles. This study further draws attention to the underestimation and misunderstanding of twice-exceptional learners, whose coexisting giftedness and support needs often go unrecognised. Ultimately, it underscores educators as key in shaping access to support and recognition.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of neurodivergent young adults, several limitations must be acknowledged. The findings primarily reflect the views of verbally articulate autistic and/or ADHD participants. They exclude the perspectives of other neurodivergent profiles, thus affecting transferability (Schreier, 2018). Moreover, since the study relied on retrospective accounts, participants' recollections may have been shaped by time, emotional

significance, or current interpretations. Some may have struggled to recall or articulate distressing experiences, potentially affecting the depth or breadth of the data (Elsherif, 2024).

Finally, qualitative research introduces the risk of subjective interpretation. Non-verbal cues may have been misread (Keegan, 2009), and despite ongoing reflexivity throughout the analysis process, the inherent flexibility of thematic analysis may have influenced coherence (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, my positionality as a learning support educator may have shaped data generation and interpretation (Brown & Wild, 2022). Additionally, the study was conducted within the Maltese educational context, thereby limiting the generalisation of findings to other cultural settings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study offers valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of neurodivergent young adults within inclusive education, it also opens several avenues for further exploration to deepen and broaden understanding.

#### **1. Broaden Neurodivergent Representation**

Future studies should include a broader range of neurodivergent profiles to uncover more nuanced patterns of inclusion. This includes exploring twice-exceptionality and intersectionality, examining how overlapping identities are recognised, supported, or overlooked in educational contexts (Crenshaw, 1991; Sparrow and King, 2024).

#### **2. Adopt Participatory and Emancipatory Approaches**

Involve neurodivergent individuals as co-researchers to help shift power dynamics and generate knowledge grounded in collaborative, justice-oriented inquiry (Stone & Priestley, 1996; Walker, 2021).

#### **3. Explore Real-Time and Longitudinal Experiences**

Complement retrospective accounts and counter recall bias with real-time, observational and longitudinal studies (Elsherif, 2024) across educational stages (primary to tertiary). This can illuminate evolving experiences, transitions, and the long-term impact of inclusive practices.

#### **4. Investigate Different School Contexts**

Exploring how contextual dynamics, such as school size and type (state, private, church schools), impact the implementation of inclusive practices can reveal how institutional environments shape access to support, the effectiveness of accommodations in meeting individual needs, and students' sense of belonging.

#### **5. Evaluate Teacher Training and Systemic Support**

Following Galea (2018) and Micallef (2018), who highlighted gaps in teacher preparation and systemic support, future research should examine how professional development, leadership, class size, and curriculum design influence the implementation of inclusive education.

#### **6. Compare Across Cultural Contexts**

Comparative research across countries can highlight how cultural, structural, and policy differences shape inclusion, offering insights to inform and refine local practices. In parallel with Mertens (2024), such research must be designed with explicit awareness of power hierarchies and contextual dynamics that influence educational equity.

### **Personal Reflection**

Armstrong (2001) likened inclusive education to tending a garden where each student is a flower with unique needs, growing patterns, and beauty. Some may not thrive in rigid soil or under

harsh light, but that does not make them any less remarkable. It simply means their environment must change. This image stayed with me throughout this research.

As an educator who values diversity, I thought I understood inclusion and knew how policy and practice often fail to meet. But sitting with the stories of eight neurodivergent young adults brought the first-hand impact of that gap into sharper focus. During interviews, I felt the weight of their experiences. As a researcher, I stayed composed; as an educator, I was profoundly moved. Their stories challenged me to reflect on the influence we hold as educators: we can nurture or harm; we can validate or silence. Every interaction carries that responsibility.

I wrote this dissertation with care, integrity, and a deep commitment to the participants who trusted me with their stories. Perhaps the most powerful insight was the distinction between integration and belonging. Physical presence in a mainstream classroom does not guarantee emotional safety, recognition, or participation. It was only in the small moments that participants felt seen, celebrated, or accepted. Though brief, these moments were remembered years later, revealing the lasting impact of relational and responsive practice.

For such moments to become the norm, neurodivergent voices must be heard respectfully and meaningfully. These voices can challenge assumptions, disrupt deficit narratives, and reimagine what meaningful inclusion can look like. Ultimately, inclusive values must be embedded systemically and supported by a culture that allows every student to grow, thrive, and truly belong. Until then, inclusion will remain an illusion for many.

### **Conclusion**

In this study I foregrounded the voices of eight neurodivergent young adults whose insights emerge from a group that is too often marginalised in educational discourse. Their reflections reveal critical gaps between policy and actual experience in inclusive education, challenging the field to move beyond tokenistic integration and toward meaningful belonging. The findings contribute to

both scholarly and practical understandings of inclusion. While this work represents only one step in an ongoing journey, it is grounded in the hope that it may inform future research, policy, and practice that truly honour neurodivergent learners.

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## Appendix 1

<b><u>Introductory Questions</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? (hobbies; family; schools attended; pets; neurodivergent profile; age of diagnosis...)</li> <li>• What are you currently doing? (Studying/ working/ at home...)</li> <li>• Is there anything you are aspiring to? (dreams; hopes; jobs...)</li> </ul>
<b><u>Q 1: THE GENERAL EXPERIENCE (Sense of Belonging; Safety etc)</u></b>
<p><b>1. <u>How was your school experience as a whole?</u></b></p> <p><i>PROMPTS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did/do you feel included? (friends; peers; teachers; LSEs; etc.); How? / Why?</li> <li>• Did/do you feel safe? (to participate; ask questions; make mistakes; disclosing your condition)</li> <li>• Did your parents/guardians ever have to intervene?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Q 2: TEACHING AND LEARNING</u></b>
<p><b>2. <u>What can you tell me about the lessons, teaching methods and your learning experience?</u></b></p> <p><i>PROMPTS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were/are lessons meaningful, clear and engaging for you?</li> <li>• Were there subjects or lessons you enjoyed (or struggled with) more than others? Why?</li> <li>• Did anything or anyone in particular make a subject or lesson better/worse than another for you? If yes in what ways?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Q 3: ASSESSMENT</u></b>
<p><b>3. <u>How do/did you feel about demonstrating your knowledge? (homework; tests; exams)</u></b></p> <p><i>PROMPTS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are/Were some types of assessment easier or harder for you? (oral tests, timed exams, assignments)</li> <li>• Do/Did you feel you had fair chances to show what you knew?</li> <li>• Which assessment method do you prefer?</li> </ul>
<b><u>Q 4: MEETING NEURODIVERGENT NEEDS (SUPPORT)</u></b>
<p><b>4. <u>How well do you feel you were catered for and supported? (lessons; exams; activities; making friends)</u></b></p> <p><i>PROMPTS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools/special arrangements? (LSE; accommodations/adaptations; coping mechanisms) If yes, what were these and were the provisions helpful enough?</li> <li>• If no, what kind of support would you have needed?</li> <li>• Did any teachers, or educators in general (LSEs, SLT etc.) understand your needs and make any efforts to support you?</li> <li>• Any differences with changes in schools/teachers/LSEs?</li> </ul>
<b><u>REFLECTING ON INCLUSION AND SUGGESTING IMPROVEMENTS</u></b>
<p><b>5. <u>Looking back, how did inclusive education impact you on a personal, academic and social level?</u></b></p> <p><i>PROMPTS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any outcomes you associate with inclusive education. What did it give you, if anything? Its most valuable outcome perhaps...</li> </ul>

- Do you think that what you are doing now is connected to your experience of inclusive education?

**6. Based on your experience, what changes and improvements would you suggest to make inclusive education more effective for neurodivergent students?**

**PROMPTS**

- What would have helped you feel more included or better understood?
- Is there anything you'd like to say to teachers, school leaders, or policy makers?

**Mistoqsijiet Introductorji**

- Tista' tgħidli ftit affarijiet dwarek? (*passatempj; familja; skejjel li attendejt; pets, in-newrodiverġenza tiegħek; l-età meta kellek dijanjosi*).
- X'qed tagħmel bħalissa? (*Tistudja, taħdem, id-dar...*)
- Hemm xi haġa li qed taspira għaliha? (*ħolm, tama, xogħol...*)

**M 1: L-ESPERJENZA ĠENERALI (SENS TA' APPARTENENZA, SIGURTÀ, EĊĊ.)**

**1. Kif kienet l-esperjenza tiegħek fl-iskola b'mod ġenerali?**

**PROMPTS**

- Hassejtek inkluz/a? (*ħbieb; għalliema; LSEs, eċċ.*) Kif? Għaliex?
- Hassejtek sigur/a? (*biex tipparteċipa; tistaqsi mistoqsijiet; tagħmel żbalji; titkellem dwar id-dijanjosj/newrodiverġenza tiegħek*)
- Ġieli kien hemm bżonn li l-ġenituri jew il-kustodji tiegħek jintervjenu xi darba?

**M 2: IT-TAGĦLIM**

**2. X'tista' tgħidli dwar il-lezzjonijiet, il-metodi ta' tagħlim u l-esperjenza tiegħek bħala student/a?**

**PROMPTS**

- Kont tifhem? Il-lezzjonijiet kienu ċari, interessanti, u adattati għalik?
- Kien hemm sugġetti li jogħġbuk, kienu interessanti jew li sibt diffiċli? Għaliex?
- Kien hemm xi haġa jew xi hadd li għamel xi sugġett aħjar jew agħar għalik? Kif?

**M 3: L-ASSESSJAR**

**3. Kif kont tħossik meta kellek turi dak li tkun tgħallimt? (HW; testijiet; eżamijiet)**

**PROMPTS**

- Xi tipi ta' assessjar kienu aktar faċli jew diffiċli għalik? (*testijiet orali, eżamijiet bil-ħin; assignments*)
- Hassejtek li kellek ċans ġust biex turi x'taf?

- X'tippreferi bħala mod taq' assessjar?

#### M 4: APPOĠĠ GĦALL-BŻONNIJET NEWRODIVERĠENTI

4. Kemm tħoss li kont ipprovdut/a bl-appoġġ li kellek bżonn? (fil-lezzjonijiet, fl-eżamijiet, f'attivitajiet, biex tagħmel ħbieb)

##### PROMPTS

- Kien ikollok xi għajnuniet jew adaptations? (*LSE, akkomodazzjonijiet, strategiji*) Jekk iva, x'kienu u kienu ta' għajnuna?
- Jekk le, x'tip ta' appoġġ taħseb li kien ikun tajjev għalik?
- Kien hemm xi għalliema jew edukaturi oħra li kienu jifhmu l-bżonnijiet tiegħek u pruvaw jgħinuk? (*LSEs; SLT, eċċ.*)
- Kien hemm xi differenzi bejn skola u oħra, jew għalliema differenti?

#### RIFLESSIONI FUQ L-INKLUŻJONI U SUĠĠERIMENTI GĦALL-BIDLA

5. Meta tħares lura, l-edukazzjoni inklussiva kif affettwatek fuq livell personali u soċjali?

##### PROMPTS

- X'benefiċċji esperjenzajt bis-saħħa tal-edukazzjoni inklussiva?
- Taħseb li dak li qed tagħmel illum huwa riżultat ta' edukazzjoni inklussiva?

6. Skont l-esperjenza tiegħek, x'tibdil jew titjib tirrakkomanda biex l-edukazzjoni tkun iktar effettiva u inklussiva għal studenti newrodiverġenti?

##### PROMPTS

- X'kien jgħinek tħossok iktar inkluz/a jew mifhum/a?
- Hemm xi ħaġa li tixtieq tgħid lill-għalliema, heads of school, jew dawk li jfasslu s-sistema edukattiva?

19/04/2025, 09:59

University of Malta Mail - Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed



Marion Parnis <marion.parnis.18@um.edu.mt>

**Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed**

1 message

SWB FREC <research@um.edu.mt>  
To: Marion Parnis <marion.parnis.18@um.edu.mt>  
Cc: Anne-Marie Callus <anne.marie.callus@um.edu.mt>

10 June 2024 at 08:46

**REDP Application ID:** SWB-2023-01071

Dear Marion Parnis,

Since your supervisor has confirmed that the changes have been carried out AND/OR the gatekeepers' permissions have been obtained and uploaded (as per email below), your ethics application regarding your research titled *Inclusion or Illusion? Amplifying Neurodiverse Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education* has been **approved**.

Faculty Research Ethics Committees are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University of Malta, except in the case of sensitive personal data. In this regard, your ethics proposal **does not need to be sent to UREC-DP**. Hence, **you may now start your research**.

**Disclaimer:** The research team should note that only the English versions of the documents submitted have been reviewed by FREC. It is the duty of the research team to ensure that all documents in Maltese (or any other language) are faithful translations of the English version.

Regards,



**Faculty Research Ethics Committee**

Faculty for Social Wellbeing



Website: [www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics](http://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics)



On Fri, 7 Jun 2024 at 09:05, Anne-Marie Callus <anne.marie.callus@um.edu.mt> wrote:

With regard to the ethical clearance application in subject, I confirm that I am aware that, as the dissertation supervisor, it is my responsibility to ensure that all feedback from FREC has been processed and any requested changes have been made.

I hereby confirm that I have reviewed the student's application and confirm that the student has implemented all the changes requested by FREC.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ik=3113d7cb2d&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1801455671998586394&siml=msg-f:1801455671998586394>

1/2

19/04/2025, 09:59

University of Malta Mail - Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed

Anne-Marie



**Anne-Marie Callus | Associate Professor**

PhD (Leeds)

**Head of ACCESS Disability Support Unit**

Department of Disability Studies - Faculty for Social Wellbeing



Out Now: *The Lives of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities* (co-edited with Angharad Beckett) (Routledge Advances in Disability Studies series)

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<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ik=3113d7cb2d&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f:1801455671998586394&siml=msg-f:1801455671998586394>

2/2

## English



I am a student reading a Master of Arts in Disability Studies at the University of Malta. I am interested in how/whether inclusive education helps neurodivergent young adults learn and prepares them for their future. Do you learn differently because of neurodivergent conditions, especially autism, and/or ADHD?

Did you have the support of a learning support educator (LSE) at school?

Are you between 18 and 25 years old?

Can you spare an hour to share your opinions and experiences with inclusive education?

If your answer to the above is YES, please contact me to participate in my study!

Your personal details will be kept confidential at all times.

**YOUR VOICE MATTERS! YOUR VOICE CAN HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

Please contact me at [REDACTED] or send me a private message for more information.

## Malti

Jien studenta qed nagħmel Master fl-Istudji tad-Diżabbiltà fl-Università ta' Malta. Jien interessata nkun naf aktar dwar kif l-edukazzjoni inklussiva tgħin studenti newrodivergenti jitgħallmu u tfejjihom għall-futur tagħhom.

Titgħallem b'mod differenti minħabba newrodivergenza, speċjalment b'kundizzjonijiet bħall-awtiżmu u/jew l-ADHD?

Kellek is-sapport ta' LSE fl-iskola?

Għandek bejn 18 u 25 sena?

Tista' tagħti siegħa biex taqşam l-opinjonijiet u l-esperjenzi tiegħek dwar edukazzjoni inklussiva?

Jekk it-twegħiba tiegħek għal dan t'hawn fuq hija IVA, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattjani biex tipparteċipa fl-istudju tiegħi!

Id-dettalji personali tiegħek jinżammu kunfidenzjali f'kull ħin.

**IL-VUĊI TIEGĦEK IMPORTANTI! LEĦNEK JISTA' JAGĦMEL ID-DIFFERENZA!**

Jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattjani fuq [REDACTED] jew ibgħatli messagġ privat għal aktar informazzjoni.

EXAMPLE OF CODING CYCLE

Like I was explaining like with the boy. But for me it's more about like the system itself, because like, I don't know how to explain this for example, with me, it was more like if they saw me like not attentive, like I had the Maltese teacher, she would get my attention shed be like [redacted] focus, so that was good. other teachers would like not take any notice like they will just continue with their lesson. Others would get angry, you know, like, they just like started shouting. But I was never like, I never really disturbed the class. I was like, quiet and stuff like that. So, like that if you don't understand in class, then that's not an issue. So, I it's more like, I just feel like the teachers didn't have enough knowledge about [redacted] and stuff like that, to be honest.

REGARDING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE, WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT THE LESSONS? WHAT WERE THEY LIKE?

You know, I mean, as in, like, I had lessons where, for me, they would just be boring. And I would just like zone out, you know?

WHEN WOULD THAT HAPPEN? WHAT KIND OF LESSON WOULD THAT BE?

Like, for example, when a teacher just like talks and talks and talks and talks and just doesn't like, there's no interaction happening, like, even up until now, like my lectures [redacted] like, it's still the same, like, there are teachers who just talk and just like read of the notes. So I just zone out and it's just like, I come out of the class saying like what happened? I wouldn't remember anything. And then I go home and have to read all the notes to try to understand

First Coding (Bold)

Like I was explaining like with the boy. But for me it's more about like the system itself, because like, I don't know how to explain this for example, with me, it was more like if they saw me like not attentive, like I had the Maltese teacher, she would get my attention shed be like [redacted] focus, so that was good. other teachers would like not take any notice like they will just continue with their lesson. Others would get angry, you know, like, they just like started shouting. But I was never like, I never really disturbed the class. I was like, quiet and stuff like that. So, like that if you don't understand in class, then that's not an issue. So, I it's more like, I just feel like the teachers didn't have enough knowledge about [redacted] and stuff like that, to be honest.

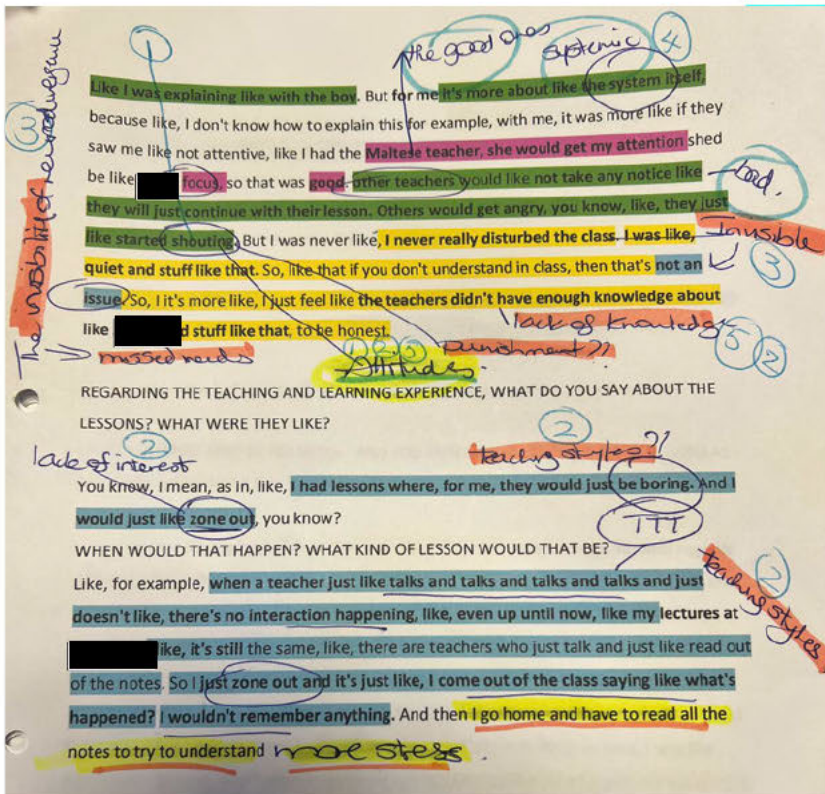
REGARDING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE, WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT THE LESSONS? WHAT WERE THEY LIKE?

You know, I mean, as in, like, I had lessons where, for me, they would just be boring. And I would just like zone out, you know?

WHEN WOULD THAT HAPPEN? WHAT KIND OF LESSON WOULD THAT BE?

Like, for example, when a teacher just like talks and talks and talks and talks and just doesn't like, there's no interaction happening, like, even up until now, like my lectures at [redacted] like, it's still the same, like, there are teachers who just talk and just like read out of the notes. So I just zone out and it's just like, I come out of the class saying like what's happened? I wouldn't remember anything. And then I go home and have to read all the notes to try to understand

Second Coding (Colour)



Third Coding (Notes/numbers)

## Appendix 5

[Date]

## Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Marion Parnis and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Arts in Disability Studies. I am presently conducting a research study for my thesis titled Inclusion or Illusion? Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education. For the purpose of this research neurodivergence can be in the form of autism and/or ADHD. This research is being supervised by Prof Anne-Marie Callus.

This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the perspectives of neurodivergent young adults who are autistic and/or ADHD on Malta's inclusive education system. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of the effectiveness of inclusive education, and whether it accomplishes its intended objectives of including neurodivergent students. The study will also seek to investigate if and how neurodivergent students benefit from inclusive education in ways that help them for their future. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview with me, face-to-face or online via Zoom. This will take approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions, in Maltese or English, depending on your preference, about your experience in education (primary/secondary/post-secondary etc); what and how you learned at school; whether you were happy at school; whether school helped you achieve your dreams; how schools can become better at helping neurodivergent students like you. As a potential participant, you must be able to recollect and reflect on your past experiences and communicate them effectively in any way possible, even via Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC). It is important that as a potential participant, you did not attend [REDACTED], [REDACTED] from 2011 onwards. This is a specific measure to exclude any potential conflict of interests in the study, since I have been working in the school as a learning support educator since 2011.

All the data collected will be audio recorded. In this study, pseudonyms (fake names) will be used so that your identity will be kept confidential. Any names of people or places (like schools) that you mention will also be kept confidential. The information obtained will be stored on a password protected computer and destroyed after use (March 2026). Only I, and if necessary my supervisor, will have access to the recordings and transcripts.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. In other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published and before I start the results chapter), and unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that no form of compensation will be given. Through your participation you can remember things you may not like. However, you can either refuse to answer a particular question or have a break from the interview. You will also be provided with information about support groups that can help you with any stressful feelings that might come along with the interview.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and erased after March 2026.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone on [REDACTED] or by e-mail [REDACTED]. You can also contact my supervisor on [REDACTED] or via email [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Marion Parnis  
[REDACTED]

Prof Anne-Marie Callus  
[REDACTED]

[Data]

## Ittra ta' Tagħrif dwar Riċerka

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Marion Parnis, studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master fl-Istudju tad-Diżabilità. Ir-riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi jismha: Inclusion or Illusion? Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education. Għall-iskop ta' 'din ir-riċerka newrodiverġenza tista' tkun fil-forma ta' 'awtiżmu u/jew ADHD. It-tutor tiegħi hi Prof Anne-Marie Callus.

B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka. Hawn taħt issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involvement tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li li nesplora l-perspettivi ta' żgħażaġh adulti newrodiverġenti awtistiċi jew/u ADHD dwar is-sistema tal-edukazzjoni inklussiva f' Malta. Sehemek f' dan l-istudju jista' jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar l-effettività tal-edukazzjoni inklussiva, u jekk din twettaqx l-għanijiet tagħha li tinkludi studenti newrodiverġenti. L-istudju se jfittex ukoll li jinvestiga jekk u kif studenti newrodiverġenti jibbenefikaw mill-edukazzjoni inklussiva b'tali mod li din tgħin hom għall-futur tagħhom. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, tintalab biex tiegħu sehem f'intervista semi-strutturata miegħi ta' madwar siegħa, b'mod fiżiku jew onlajn fuq Zoom. Waqt l-intervista ser tkun mistoqsi/ja dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek fl-edukazzjoni (primarja/sekondarja/post-sekondarja etc): x'kont titgħallem u tagħmel fl-iskola; jekk kontx kuntent; jekk l-iskola għenitix tikseb l-għanijiet tiegħek; kif l-iskejjel jistgħu jsiru aħjar biex jgħinu studenti newrodiverġenti bħalek. Il-mistoqsijiet jistgħu isiru bl-Ingliż jew bil-Malti skont il-preferenza tiegħek.

Bħala parteċipant importanti li tkun tista' tiftakar u tirrifletti fuq l-esperjenzi passati tiegħek u tikkomunikahom b'mod effettiv b'kull mod possibbli, anke permezz ta' Komunikazzjoni Awmentattiva u Alternattiva (AAC). Barra minn hekk, sabiex jiġi evitat kull kunflitt ta' interess, studenti li attendew l-iskola [REDACTED] mill-2011 'il quddiem ma jistgħux jiġu rrekjutati għal dan l-istudju. Dan peress li jien ilni naħdem bħala learning support educator fl-istess skola mill-2011.

L-informazzjoni miġbura ser tiġi rekordjata f'awdjo. F'dan l-istudju, se jintużaw psewdonimi (ismijiet foloz) sabiex l-identità tiegħek tinżamm kunfidenzjali. Kwalunkwe

isem ta' nies jew postijiet (bħal skejjel) li ssemmi se jinżammu kunfidenzjali wkoll. L-informazzjoni miksuba tinħażen fuq kompjuter protett bil-password u tingered wara Marzu 2026. Jiena biss ser ikolli aċċess għar-reġistrazzjonijiet u t-traskrizzjonijiet. Is-superviżur tiegħi ikollha aċċess għal dawn f'kas ta' bżonn.

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju tkun kompletament volontarja. Fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħżel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqget ittiehdet fl-intervista miegħek tiffassar dment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata u qabel ma nkun fil-kapitlu tar-riżultati), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinżamm anonima.

Jekk tagħżel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek tinkludi dawn ir-riskji: li tiftakar f'xi episodji passati li jqanqlulek skumdità jew stress. Madankollu, tista' jew tirrifjuta li twieġeb mistoqsija partikolari jew tiegħu pawża mill-intervista. Se tingħata wkoll informazzjoni dwar gruppi ta' appoġġ li jistgħu jgħinuk b'xi sentimenti jew ħsibijiet stressanti li jistgħu jitqanqlu matul l-intervista.

Bħala parteċipant/a, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u Heġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak tiffassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingħabar fl-istudju ser tkun miġbura f'forma anonima u tiffassar wara Marzu 2026.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-hin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, fiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq [REDACTED] jew fuq [REDACTED]. Tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutor tiegħi fuq [REDACTED] jew elettronikament fuq: [REDACTED]

Tislijiet,  
Marion Parnis

Prof Anne-Marie Callus

## Appendix 6

**Participant's Consent Form**  
**Inclusion or Illusion: Amplifying Neurodivergent Young**  
**Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education**

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Marion Parnis. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before the writing of the results chapter and before publication), and unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a semi-structured interview in which the researcher will ask a set of questions to explore how and whether inclusive education supports neurodivergent students to be included and learn alongside peers and be prepared for their future. I am aware that the semi-structured interview will take approximately an hour. I understand that the semi-structured interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me and that the interview can take place face-to-face or online via Zoom.
4. I understand that my participation entails that I may remember unpleasant situations from my past experiences at school.
5. If I feel that the interview has distressed me in any way, I may make use of the support services information that Ms Marion Parnis will give me at the beginning of the interview. I am aware that this document comprises a list of free services.

The document also includes fee-paying services which I understand I will have to pay for should I decide not to use free services.

6. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by: being disseminated to help raise awareness and make inclusive education better for other neurodivergent students with my condition.
7. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
8. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and erased after March 2026.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

**MARK AS APPLICABLE**

I agree to this interview being audio recorded.

I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

11. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A or a name that is not my own].
12. I am aware that should the semi-structured interview be held online, Ms Marion Parnis will use Zoom and will activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. Ms Parnis will only audio record the session.

13. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code or name that is not my own will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only Marion Parnis will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and destroyed after March 2026.

14. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

15. I did not attend [REDACTED] since 2011.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Marion Parnis

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Prof Anne-Marie Callus

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## **Fomola ta' Kunsens tal-Parteċipant**

### **Inclusion or Illusion: Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education**

Jien, hawn taht iffirmit, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex nieħu sehem fl-istudju li qed isir minn Marion Parnis. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispjega t-termini tal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju.

1. Inghatajt informazzjoni bil-miktub u verbali dwar l-iskop tal-istudju; Kelli l-opportunità li nagħmel mistoqsijiet u kwalunkwe mistoqsija li kelli għet imwiegħba bis-sħiħ u għas-sodisfazzjon tiegħi.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jien liberu li naċċetta li nipparteċipa, jew li nirrifjuta jew inwaqqaf il-partiċipazzjoni fi kwalunkwe hin mingħajr ma nagħti l-ebda raġuni u mingħajr ebda penali. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, nista' nagħzel li nirrifjuta li nwiegħeb kwalunkwe mistoqsija li ssir. Fil-każ li nagħzel li nirtira mill-istudju, kwalunkwe dejta miġbura mingħandi tifhassar sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli (pereżempju, qabel il-kitba tal-kapitolu tar-riżultati u qabel ma tiġi ippubblikata), u sakemm it-tfassir tad-dejta ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka, fliema każ għandha tinzamm f'forma anonima.
3. Nifhem li għejt mistieden/mistiedna biex nipparteċipa f'intervista semi-strutturata li fiha r-riċerkatriċi Sa Marion Parnis se tistaqsi sett ta' mistoqsijiet biex tesplora kif u jekk l-edukazzjoni inklużiva tappoġġjax bi sħiħ studenti newrodivergenti biex jiġu inklużi biex jitgħallmu flimkien ma' sħabhom u jkunu ppreparati għall-futur tagħhom. Jiena konxju/a li l-intervista semi-strutturata se tieħu madwar siegħa. Nifhem li l-intervista semi-strutturata għandha ssir f'post u f'hin li jkun konvenjenti għalija u li l-intervista tista' ssir wiċċ imb'wiċċ jew onlajn permezz ta' Zoom.
4. Nifhem li l-partiċipazzjoni tiegħi tinvolvi li niftakar sitwazzjonijiet mhux pjaċevoli mill-esperjenzi tal-passat tiegħi fl-iskola.

5. Jekk inħoss li l-intervista tkun qed toħloqli xi forma ta' stress nista' nuża l-informazzjoni tas-servizzi ta' appoġġ li s-Sa Marion Parnis se tagħtini fil-bidu tal-intervista. Jiena naf li dan id-dokument jinkludi lista ta' servizzi b'xejn. Id-dokument jinkludi wkoll servizzi bi ħlas li nifhem li se jkolli nħallas għalihom personalment jekk niddeċiedi li ma nużax servizzi b'xejn.
6. Nifhem li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalija mill-parteciċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka tista' tibbenefika lil ħaddieħor billi: tkun imxerrda biex tgħin biex titqajjem kuxjenza u tagħmel is-sistema tal-edukazzjoni inklussiva aħjar għal oħrajn li huma newrodiversi bil-kundizzjoni tiegħi.
7. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Dejta (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika, u fejn applikabbli, nitlob biex titħassar id-dejta li tikkonċernani.
8. Nifhem li d-dejta kollha miġbura se tinħażen f'forma anonima u titħassar mat-tlestija tal-istudju u wara Marzu 2026.
9. Jien ġejt ipprovdut/a b'kopja tal-ittra ta' informazzjoni u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola ta' kunsens.
10. Jiena konxju/a li, billi nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa hawn taħt, qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex din l-intervista tiġi rekordjata bl-awdjio u konvertita għal kitba/test kif ġiet rekordjata (traskritt).

#### **IMMARKA BISS KIF APPLIKABBLI**

- Naqbel li din l-intervista tiġi rekordjata bl-awdjio.
  - Ma naqbilx li din l-intervista tkun irrekordjat bl-awdjio
11. Jiena konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti fil-kitba, jew f'forma anonima, jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem jew kodiċi magħmul – eż. risponent A jew isem li mhux tiegħi]
  12. Jiena konxju li jekk l-intervista se ssir online is-Sa Marion Parnis se tuża Zoom u tattiva l-funzjoni Require Encryption għal endpoints ta terzi persuni SIP/H-323. Marion Parnis Updated by UREC on 18 July 2022

se tirreġistra bl-awdjo biss matul is-sessjoni.

13. Jiena konxju/a li għad-dejta tiegħi ser jintuża psewdonimu; jiġifieri, l-identità tiegħi mhux se tiġi nnotata fuq traskrizzjonijiet jew noti mill-intervista tiegħi, iżda minflok, jiġi assenjat kodiċi jew isem li mhuwiex tiegħi. Il-kodiċi li jorbtu d-dejta tiegħi mal-identità tiegħi se jinħażnu b'mod sigur u separat mid-dejta, f'fajl encrypted fuq kompjuter protett bil-password tar-riċerkatriċi, u Marion Parnis biss se jkollha aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat jitqiegħed f'kabinett/kexxun msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant f'dan l-Istudju se jinħażen b'mod sigur u jiġi eliminat wara Marzu 2026.

14. Jiena konxju/a li l-identità u l-informazzjoni personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati fl-ebda pubblikazzjoni, rapporti jew preżentazzjonijiet li joħorġu minn din ir-riċerka.

15. Jien ma attendejtx l-iskola [redacted] mill-2011 'il quddiem.

Qrajt u fhimt id-dikjarazzjonijiet ta' hawn fuq u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-Istudju.

Isem il-partiċipant/a: \_\_\_\_\_

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

Data: \_\_\_\_\_

Marion Parnis

[redacted]  
[redacted]

Prof Anne-Marie Callus

[redacted]  
[redacted]

This support services list is related to disability, psycho-social or mental health and well-being services. The last two services are generic support services which can be accessed 24/7

**Name of student researcher: Marion Parnis**

**Course: Master of Arts in Disability Studies**

**Student researcher's contact email:** [REDACTED]

**Student researcher's contact number:** [REDACTED]

**Name of research supervisor: Prof Anne-Marie Callus**

**Research supervisor's contact email:** [REDACTED]

**Research supervisor's contact number:** [REDACTED]

**Title of Research Study:**

**Inclusion or Illusion? Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education.**

Dear Participant,

I hope this email finds you well.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your participation in this study. I appreciate your involvement and cooperation throughout this entire process.

I would like to remind you of the aims of this study;

This study was not anticipated to cause you any distress and the interview questions were formatted in as sensitive a manner as possible; however, if your participation has led you to experience any distress or discomfort for whatever reason, then below I have included some information about services that offer professional support that you might find helpful.

If you require any additional information or wish to report any concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact both myself, on [REDACTED] or my research supervisor on [REDACTED]

Kind regards,

Marion Parnis



The Malta Autism Centre provides specialist intervention to individuals across the autism spectrum throughout the different stages of their lives.

Email: [centre@autism.org.mt](mailto:centre@autism.org.mt)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/autismcentremalta/about>

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The Malta Dyslexia Association is a voluntary association which was founded in 1985 by parents and professionals who were concerned about those children who in spite of their intelligence and overall ability were struggling to develop literacy skills. This can lead to anti-social behaviour, bullying, illiteracy, depression and unemployment.

Email: [maltadyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:maltadyslexia@gmail.com)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/MaltaDyslexiaAssociation/about>

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ADHD Malta supports, educates and embraces ADHDers and their family members and offers information and guidance to the general public, especially educators, and other professionals working closely with families of people with ADHD.

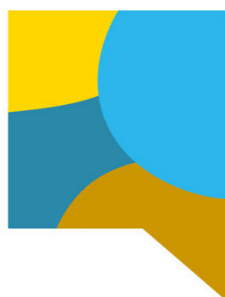
Mob: 7729 7800

Email: [adhdmalta@gmail.com](mailto:adhdmalta@gmail.com)

Address: 238, Ta Ganni, Triq il-Htajriet , Mosta, Malta

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ADHDMalta>

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CRPD: Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability  
CRPD supports and guides disabled people in the achievement of their rightful entitlement and a good quality of life. It is committed to eliminate barriers through any form of direct or indirect discrimination towards disabled people and their families.

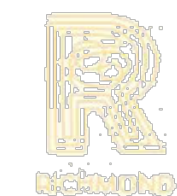
Address: CRPD, G5 Offices, Salvu Psaila Street, Birkirkara, Malta

Contact number: 2226 7600

Email: [helpdesk@crpd.org.mt](mailto:helpdesk@crpd.org.mt)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/crpdmalta>

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live

living solutions, educational programmes, as well as counselling services.

Email: [info@richmond.org.mt](mailto:info@richmond.org.mt)

Contact number: +356 21 224580/ 21 482336/ 21 480045

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Richmond-Foundation/108406366013786>



**Aġenzija Sapport** is the national agency for persons with disabilities and their families. It provides professional services to enhance the quality of life of disabled people. Services range from social work assessments and interventions – including children's services, community services, residential services, day services, sign language interpretation, assessments and recommendations in assistive technology, driving assessments, workshops, blue badge service, as well as a number of schemes.

Email: [sapport@gov.mt](mailto:sapport@gov.mt)

Tel: 22568000

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sapport.malta>

[fsws.gov.mt](http://fsws.gov.mt) **Support line 179**

This is Malta's national helpline acting to provide support, information about local social welfare and other agencies, as well as a referral service to individuals who require support. It is also a national service to individuals facing difficult times or a crisis. Their primary mission is to provide immediate and unbiased help to whoever requires it.



[kellimni.com](http://kellimni.com) is an online support service in which trained staff and volunteers are available for support 24/7 via email, chat and smart messaging. This service is managed by SOS Malta.

<http://kellimni.com/>

Contact number: 21244123/21335097

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kellimni>

Din hija lista ta' servizzi ta' support relatata ma' servizzi ta' saħħa mentali jew saħħa psikosoċjali. L-aħħar żewġ servizzi huma servizzi ġeneriċi li huma aċċessibli 24/7.

**Isem tal-istudenta riċerkatriċi: Marion Parnis**

**Kors: Master fl-Istudji tad-Diżabilità**

**L-imejl tal-istudenta riċerkatriċi:** [REDACTED]

**Numru tat-telefon tal-istudenta riċerkatriċi:** [REDACTED]

**Isem ta' min jissorvelja r-riċerka: Prof Anne-Marie Callus**

**L-imejl ta' min jissorvelja r-riċerka:** [REDACTED]

**Numru tat-telefon ta' min jissorvelja r-riċerka:** [REDACTED]

**Titlu ta' l-Istudju-Riċerka:**

**Inclusion or Illusion? Amplifying Neurodivergent Young Adults' Voices and Perspectives on Inclusive Education.**

Għażiż/a Parteċipant/a,

Nittama li tinsab tajjeb/tajba.

Nixtieq nieħu din l-opportunità biex niringrazzjak tal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju. Napprezza l-involvement u l-kooperazzjoni tiegħek matul dan il-proċess kollu.

Nixtieq infakkrek l-għanijiet ta' dan l-istudju;

Dan l-istudju ma kienx antiċipat li jikkawżalek diffikultà u l-mistoqsijiet tal-intervista ġew ifformattjati bl-iktar mod sensitiv possibbli; madankollu jekk id-diskussjoni wasslitek biex tesperjenza kwalunkwe tbatija jew skumdità għal kwalunkwe raġuni, hawn taħt jien inkludejt xi informazzjoni dwar servizzi li joffru appoġġ professjonali li tista' ssib utli.

Jekk teħtieġ xi informazzjoni addizzjonali jew tixtieq tirrapporta kwalunkwe tħassib dwar dan l-istudju, jekk jogħġbok toqgħodx lura milli tikkuntattja kemm lili, fuq [REDACTED] jew lis-supervizur tar-riċerka tiegħi, Prof Anne-Marie Callus, fuq [REDACTED]

Tislijiet,

Marion Parnis



Il-Malta Autism Centre jipprovdi intervent speċjalizzat lill individwi li jaqgħu taħt l-ispettru tal-awtiżmu matul l-istadji differenti ta' ħajjithom.

Imejl: [centre@autism.org.mt](mailto:centre@autism.org.mt)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/autismcentremalta/about>



Il-Malta Dyslexia Association hija għaqda volontarja li twaqqfet fl-1985 minn ġenituri u professjonisti li kienu mħassba dwar dawk it-tfal li minkejja l-intelliġenza u l-kapaċità ġenerali tagħhom kienu qed ibatu biex jiżviluppaw il-ħiliet tal-litteriżmu. Dan jista' jwassal għal imġieba antisocjali, bullying, illitteriżmu, dipressjoni u aqgħad.

Imejl: [maltadyslexia@gmail.com](mailto:maltadyslexia@gmail.com)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/MaltaDyslexiaAssociation/about>



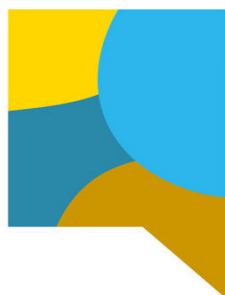
ADHD Malta tappoġġja, teduka u tħaddan lill-persuni li għandhom il-kundizzjoni tal-ADHD, kif ukoll lill-membri tal-familja tagħhom. Hija toffri informazzjoni u gwida lill-pubbliku ġenerali, speċjalment edukaturi, u professjonisti oħra li jaħdmu mill-qrib mal-familji ta' persuni b'ADHD.

Kuntatt: 7729 7800

Imejl: [adhdmalta@gmail.com](mailto:adhdmalta@gmail.com)

Indirizz: 238, Ta Ganni, Triq il-Htajriet, Mosta, Malta

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ADHDMalta>



CRPD: il-Kummissjoni għad-Drittijiet ta' Persuni b'Diżabilità tappoġġja u tiggwida lill-persuni b'diżabilità fil-kisba tal-intitolament leġittimu tagħhom sabiex ikollhom kwalità ta' ħajja tajba. Hija kommissa li telimina dawk l-ostakli abbażi ta' kwalunkwe forma ta' diskriminazzjoni diretta jew indiretta lejn persuni b'diżabilità u l-familji tagħhom.

Indirizz: CRPD, G5 Offices, Salvu Psaila Street, Birkirkara, Malta

Kuntatt: 2226 7600

Imejl: [helpdesk@crpd.org.mt](mailto:helpdesk@crpd.org.mt)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/crpdmalta>



**Richmond Foundation** tappoġġa kemm individwi li qed jesperjenzaw problemi ta 'saħħa mentali kif ukoll dawk ta' madwarhom. Minbarra li tappoġġja individwi billi toffri għajjnuna terapewtika, Richmond Foundation tiggwida wkoll individwi billi tgħallem il-ħiliet meħtieġa biex jgħixu u jaħdmu b'mod indipendenti. Is-servizzi tagħhom jinkludu gruppi ta 'appoġġ, soluzzjonijiet ta' għajxien assistit, programmi edukattivi, kif ukoll servizzi ta 'pariri.

Email: [info@richmond.org.mt](mailto:info@richmond.org.mt)

Contact number: +356 21 224580/ 21 482336/ 21 480045

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Richmond-Foundation/108406366013786>



**Aġenzija Sapport** hija l-aġenzija nazzjonali għall-persuni b'diżabilità u l-familji tagħhom. Hija tipprovdi servizzi professjonali biex ittejjeb il-kwalità tal-ħajja ta' persuni b'diżabilità. Is-servizzi jvarjaw minn valutazzjonijiet u interventi ta' ħidma soċjali – inklużi servizzi għat-tfal, servizzi komunitarji, servizzi residenzjali, servizzi ta' matul il-jum, interpretazzjoni tal-lingwa tas-sinjali, valutazzjonijiet u rakkomandazzjonijiet fit-teknoloġija assistiva, valutazzjonijiet tas-sewqan, workshops, servizz ta' blue badge, kif ukoll numru ta' skemi.

Imejl: [sapport@gov.mt](mailto:sapport@gov.mt)

Tel: 22568000

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sapport.malta>

[fsws.gov.mt](http://fsws.gov.mt) **Linja ta' Appoġġ 179**

Din hija l-linja ta' għajjnuna nazzjonali ta' Malta li taġixxi biex tipprovdi appoġġ, informazzjoni dwar il-benesseri soċjali lokali u aġenziji oħra, kif ukoll servizz ta' riferiment għal individwi li jeħtieġu appoġġ. Huwa wkoll servizz nazzjonali għal individwi li qed jiffaċċjaw żminijiet diffiċli jew kriżi. Il-missjoni primarja tagħhom hija li jipprovdu għajjnuna immedjata u imparzjali lil kull min ikun jeħtieġha.



[kellimni.com](http://kellimni.com) huwa servizz ta' appoġġ online li fih persuni imħarrġa u voluntiera huma disponibbli għall-appoġġ 24/7 permezz ta' email, chat u messaġġi. Dan is-servizz huwa amministrat minn SOS Malta.

<http://kellimni.com/>

Tel: 21244123/21335097

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kellimni>

## Data Management Plan

NATURE OF DATA	
Data to be collected	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews Voice recordings and text
Expected size of the data set	8 semi-structured interviews
Software required to read or view the data	Voice recorder (mobile phone app)/ Zoom/MicrosoftTeams (in case of online meeting) laptop for the verbatim transcript.
Data anonymization	Pseudonyms
Secondary sources	NSO; relevant websites; relevant literature
Intellectual property rights for the data	researcher
DATA MANAGEMENT	
Person responsible for managing the data	Marion Parnis (student)
Metadata	Transcripts
Data storage	On personal password protected computer/laptop
Backup for data storage	Copy saved on drive
Secure storage requirement	Yes
Length of data storage	Until the final version of the dissertation is submitted (March 2026)
SHARING THE DATA	
Data available for sharing	Data that is relevant to the study and that does not disclose identities.
Data sharing availability	The participant will provide consent via a signed consent form.
Embargoes on data sharing	N/A
Commercial use	N/A
Privacy, ethical, confidentiality concerns, or patent/licensing issues in data sharing	N/A