

**Nurturing in a Year 4 Class:  
A Reflective Journey with Children with SEBD**

Christine Grech

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Education in  
Part Fulfilment of Requirements for the  
Degree of Master in Education (SEBD)  
at the University of Malta.

June 2009



L-Università  
ta' Malta

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# ABSTRACT

Christine Grech

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Numerous studies indicate that the rising concern of disruptive behaviour amongst children is an increasing, complex problem faced by many teachers (Cefai *et al*, 2008). Conversely, different studies demonstrate that some teachers are managing to implement an inclusive approach with children with social, emotional, behaviour difficulties, by eliminating any threat of failure or segregation in their classrooms thus every child feels understood and encouraged to modify inappropriate behaviour (Olsen & Cooper, 2001). Limited studies exist about this situation in the Maltese schools (Abela & Smith La Rosa, 2007). This qualitative research tries to shed more light on the dilemma faced by Maltese teachers when striving to teach an exhausting syllabus whilst implementing a truly inclusive attitude. Although attentive to how perplexing and complicated including all children can be, the aim of the journal of daily reflections on classroom experiences with children with SEBD is to provide an encouraging and positive approach for teachers. The accounts suggest that by nurturing the pupils' feelings and helping them recognise their emotions, the children were encouraged to alter their behaviour and the teaching objectives were reached. This research supports the findings of the recent national quantitative study by Cefai *et al* (2008) that when teachers manage to meaningfully, include pupils with SEBD the behaviour is positively modified.

**Master in Education in Social, Emotional, Behaviour Difficulties**

**June 2009**

|                 |                  |                               |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>SEBD</b>     | <b>INCLUSION</b> | <b>EMOTIONAL<br/>LITERACY</b> |
| <b>CHILDREN</b> | <b>NURTURE</b>   | <b>CIRCLE TIME</b>            |

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**Christine Grech  
M.Ed (SEBD)  
June 2009**

*Dedicated to the three special boys  
whom I had the pleasure to have in my class  
during the completion of this study.*

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

*As teachers are squeezed by policies and dictates that constrain their ability to cater for the needs of children, who are also exposed to social and personal stressors, it is not surprising that the disruptive behaviour of students seems to be on the increase.*

(Olsen & Cooper, 2001, p.22)

Informal conversations amongst teachers and professionals in the educational sector discuss the increase of challenging behaviour they are currently facing in schools (James, 2004). Such an occurrence is supported by numerous surveys and studies carried out both in Malta and internationally (Cefai *et al.*, 2008; Barbara, 2008; MUT, 2007; Ofsted, 2005; Cooper, 2001; Olsen & Cooper, 2001). Evidence shows that there is a steady incline on the list of children exhibiting social, emotional, behavioural difficulties - SEBD. Researchers have and are continuously carrying out studies that deal with this phenomenon, delving in the children's medical make-up and social background, with the aspiration of finding the cause of their challenging behaviour and thus seeking interventions.

While many are seeking to understand what is making children misbehave, others are simultaneously striving to implement a truly inclusive educational system (Cooper, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004; Olsen & Cooper, 2001).

Although children with SEBD falls under the orb of pupils with 'special educational needs' (SEN), there is a widespread conception that children with SEBD are seen by far more difficult to include than any other areas of SEN, mainly because these children, as oppose to physical handicapped children, give the impression that they have no special difficulty but are just defiant pupils (Cooper, 2006; Spiteri, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005; Visser, 2000; DfEE 1998, DfEE 1997).

Nevertheless, records also show that some teachers manage to meaningfully include such pupils with SEBD better than others (Visser, 2000; Cole, Visser and Upton, 1998). The key principles which keep emerging from research for a successful inclusion are the 'caring' and 'understanding' of the class teacher (Borg & Calleja, 2006; Cooper, 2006; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004; Visser, 2000; Montessori, 1999). Notwithstanding, such qualities must not be misinterpreted as a soft option from the teacher's side, but another way of dealing with disruptiveness (Visser, 2000). Thus, the teacher opts to tackle the

'inappropriate deed' and not the child. Therefore the focus is on helping the child opt for good choices.

For this to happen, it is necessary to win the children's trust and ease their anxieties by showing love and listening to them (Gonzi, *et al*, 2006), as this would help teachers when making judgments about the children's misbehaviour. Frequently, being disruptive and defiant is another way of calling out for help (Morris, 2005; Greenhalgh, 1994).

At the beginning of every scholastic year, teachers are informed about the children in their class by previous teachers, heads of schools, and other children, who are only too eager to recount tales of their peers' past iniquities. However, after the initial stage, which varies in its complexity as much as the diversity of every child, with appropriate communicating skills that makes it unnecessary for the children to behave badly to get what they want (Steiner, 2003), most of the children manage to fit in nicely, and by the end of the scholastic year, a certain amount of self management of behaviour can be reported by every child.

Teachers are virtually the first to perceive uprising concerns linked to the school-age children (Barbara, 2008). Nevertheless, the teacher's role in all its complexity is a paradox. Whilst granted with the task of guiding the pupils through an exhaustive syllabus and a constant uphill of academic achievements, she must duly educate her pupils in a holistic way, seeking to bring out the individuality of every child (Barbara, 2008; Cooper, 2006; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004). However, in reality, the final examinations are dominantly assigning the teacher the task to help her pupils to gain good marks. James (2004) argues that raising educational achievements and truly embracing inclusion by setting individual goals is a conflicting argument.

Improving academic achievements generally contradicts the philosophy of inclusion (Bartolo, 2005; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004; Visser, 2000). Promoting the individual child's strengths irrespective of his challenging behaviour, cannot simultaneously succeed with a mass programme for an intense syllabus (Cefai *et al.*, 2008; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004).

Therefore, the questions which this research addresses are:

- I. Is it possible for a teacher to simultaneously understand and teach all the pupils including those who exhibit defiance and disengagement?
- II. Does understanding and valuing such pupils promote positive behaviour?
- III. Can the dilemma of teaching and responding to the ever increasing social and emotional turmoil of the pupils be addressed?

This research aims to address the issue when the teacher creates a caring and understanding atmosphere in her class, her pupils, including children with SEBD, are more likely to behave thus learning is more successful because there is less disruptiveness in the class (Cooper, 2001). This study discusses whether teachers can make a difference in the school experience of children with SEBD (Cooper, 2006).

In Malta, the tripod of the educational system is the responsibility of the state, church and the private sector, with the largest portion under the state spectrum, followed by the church (Spiteri *et al*, 2005). Whilst entrance to the state schools is compulsory, the children enter the church school by a ballot, under the responsibility of the Curia. To attend the independent schools there is a predetermined fee.

This study is based in a church school. Church schools are highly in demand amongst parents, this is most evident from the large number of applications put in for the entrance ballot year after year. While up till now, in the state schools the children are streamed from Year 4, in the church schools both in the primary and secondary, all classes are of mixed abilities (Spiteri *et al*, 2005).

This dissertation commences by providing most-commonly used definitions of SEBD – Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and its existence in the discourse of young, school-age, children. This discussion is followed by a literature review of the available research about children with SEBD and their school experience. Subsequently, it sets out to give a view of the social-emotional development. To present the issue in a more tangible way, a qualitative study was carried out for a Maltese case, which study is sustained by discussion.

The conclusion summarizes the areas requiring further study to better understand what can be done to ensure that our children's school experience is an inclusive and positive one, hence promoting good citizenship for our future generation.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Numerous studies prove that the rising concern of disruptive behaviour amongst school-age children is an increasing, complex problem (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Visser, 2000; Cole, Visser and Upton, 1998). However, other studies show that many teachers manage to influence and positively modify the behaviour of their pupils and subsequently facilitate learning (Olsen & Cooper, 2001). Notwithstanding, limited studies exist about this situation in the Maltese schools (Abela & Smith La Rosa, 2007; Officer of the Commissioner for Children, 2006).

#### 2.1 Understanding the Child

The way teachers approach their pupils makes all the difference to the response they get (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Visser, 2000). Ample studies carried out in recent years show that when the teacher creates a safe and understanding atmosphere in the class, her pupils are more likely to behave thus learn more because there is less disruptive moments (Cooper, 2006; Borg & Calleja, 2006; Morris & Casey, 2005; Mosley & Sonnet 2005; Ofsted, 2005; Cooper, 2001). Mosley & Sonnet (2005) claim that if teachers want to be listened to, they need to talk and act in a way that invites listening. Consequently, when teachers demonstrate that they can listen just as well as they can talk pupils can feel free to talk and discuss their feelings openly, (Billington & Pomerantz, 2004; Cooper, 2001; Visser, 2000).

#### 2.2 Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties

*Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties among school pupils represent a unique problem within the educational sphere. No other educational problem is associated with such a level of fear, anger, frustration, guilt and blame.*

(Cooper, 2001, p.3)

The term 'social, emotional and behaviour difficulties' (SEBD) is a complex, multi-faceted term which is applied to any child deemed to experience behavioural difficulties such as, behaviour which interferes with the child's own learning or the learning of his peers; signs of emotional turbulence including sustaining attention, withdrawal from social situations and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Wilkinson, 2005; Cooper, 2001; Olsen & Cooper, 2001). All the above-mentioned difficulties together with other impulsive behaviour could

easily be a result of 'Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder'- ADHD (Cooper, 1999). Therefore, a child with ADHD is most often than not labelled as SEBD and declared to be very challenging to control in the classroom (Wilkinson, 2005).

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder is a chronic set of behavioural difficulties that can be altered hence badly disrupt the quality of the child's life. The term encompasses the developmental condition that compromise deficits in behavioural inhibitions, sustained attention and resistance to distraction, and the regulation of one's activity level to the demands of any particular situation namely, hyperactivity or restlessness (Barkley, 1997). Most predominant features include impaired response inhibition, impulse control, or the capacity to delay gratification. Thus, the child is often unable to stop and think before acting and to wait for his turn while playing games, conversing with others, or having to wait in line. Additionally, the child might find it hard to resist distractions while concentrating or working (Barkley, 1998).

Notwithstanding, studies have brought a shift from viewing emotional and behavioural difficulties as problems located within the child therefore, the 'medical model' towards a more context based approach, where behaviour is seen as a response to particular situation or environment such as school (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Cooper, 2001; Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Cooper, 1999).

Both quantitative (Cefai *et al*, 2008) and qualitative research studies (Leatherman, 2007; Gonzi *et al*, 2006), show that a child with SEBD can highly benefit from social inclusion through education. It is hence of crucial importance for stakeholders in education to enhance social inclusion of children with SEBD by making mainstream schooling more supportive (Hardman, Drew & Egan, 1999). It is advisable to promote strategies that involve changes at the whole class level rather than solely to the child within the class (Cooper, 2006; Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Wilkinson, 2005). In their national study Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri (2008) state that this can be achieved by adapting both the physical and social organisation of the classroom. Moreover, new strategies must duly be implemented by primary school teachers working either on their own or in collaboration with other school staff to sustainable support the child with SEBD to remain in mainstream classrooms (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Olsen & Cooper, 2001).

Although definitions and implications of SEBD are constantly contested through ongoing studies and different approaches, there is a mutual agreement that there is a need to consider the role that societal, family, and school environments play in improving the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties encountered by the child (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Cooper, 1999). Cooper (2006) argues that teachers tend to incorrectly label a child as unmotivated or disobedient because they find the behaviour of the child conflicting with rigid agendas. He adds that such label may lead to school failure and low self-esteem thus adding on their already existing problematic behaviour (ibid). Simply put, it is recurrently assumed that if the child is not behaving like the rest of his peers, the child is deviant or disordered and labelled with SEBD (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Arora & Mackey, 2004).

The child's experience and motivation within the school has a strong impact on his life outside school. Cefai *et al* (2008) suggest that teachers do their utmost to maximise the child's engagement with the social and educational settings by providing an environment that proves most appropriate to his present needs, which will serve as a stepping-stone to his future aspirations.

Whilst social and physical isolation destroy the positive development of a child with SEBD, communication and co-operation between child, together with his close family, and professionals are powerful tools for reaching a healthy biopsychosocial approach for the child with SEBD (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Cooper, 1999).

The biopsychosocial model is an approach to medicine that stresses the importance of a holistic approach. It considers factors outside the biological characteristics of the disorder. Cooper (1999) defines how the biopsychosocial approach triangulates the "bio", "psycho", and "social" aspects of the child to provide optimal, child-centred attention. In this approach, a child's social context and psychological well-being are key factors in his difficulties and progresses, along with his way of viewing the environment, his own beliefs and inner emotions (ibid). Consequently, the difficulties faced by the child can be emphasized and undesired behaviour is further accumulated through the child's negative reaction to the environment.

## 2.3 Emotional Literacy

*Students are taught the names of plants and insects, not to mention a lot of dead people, but not the names of their own feelings*

(Hein, 2005).

Emotional literacy is the ability to acknowledge and express feelings with specific feeling words. Emotional literacy helps our emotions to work for us instead of against us thus improving our relationships and our cooperativeness (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Morris & Casey, 2005). When we are skilled in Emotional Literacy, we can identify our feelings and our emotional needs. Additionally, we will be able to communicate these feeling to those around us. It is important to express our emotions in words to those around us in order to get the emotional support and understanding we need from others, as well as to show our emotional support and understanding to others (ibid).

Cooper (2001) asserts that the skill of Emotional Literacy can aid children with SEBD to identify their feelings and emotional needs. Thus, they will be in a better position to communicate their feelings to their teacher

Moreover, studies show that there is some psychological power in naming our feelings because our mind has a need to know what is happening, especially when we encounter difficulties (Grimshaw & Berridge, 1994; Morris & Casey, 2005; Hein, 2005). Nevertheless, Emotional Literacy is not a mere unleashing of emotions. Once aware of our emotions we must learn how to manage and control them for the benefit of both ours and as regards to those around us (Steiner, 2003; Mosley & Sonnet 2005). Additionally, Emotional Literacy enhances our empathy.

Emotional literacy seems to be an important asset when identifying the feelings of those around us. Therefore, Emotional Literacy empowers us to disarm or de-mask an unwanted attitude from others (Hein, 2005). In their national research study, Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri (2008) found that Emotional Literacy can be used as an effective tool to reach understanding and agreement amongst teachers and their students.

Some teachers might point out that a way of achieving the above and enhancing their relationships with their pupils, is an activity where the class layout is less rigid than the usual class set-up for subject teaching and where the teacher helps her pupils to become aware of their uniqueness, each with their strengths and difficulties, hence the pupils

show more tolerance towards one another (Ofsted, 2005). Some teachers, especially at the beginning of the scholastic year, work on adopting Peer Preparation Program (PPP) using a forum-like approach to help children talk and listen to one another. Another activity where emotional literacy can be taught is during Circle time.

## 2.4 Circle Time

*Circle Time has evolved over the years because it is found to promote better relationships, positive behaviour and self-esteem*

(Mosley, 2008, p. 20)

Circle Time (Roffey, 2006; Mosley, 1998) is a formal, structured space within the class where the teacher and her pupils share their feelings and experiences. Roffey (2006) explains how this provides an opportunity for the teacher to further learn about and explore the pupils' feelings on things that matter to them. It provides quality time for the pupils to practice communication and enhance relationships through listening and talking, empathy and social skills, as well as providing opportunities for personal reflection and the development of an emotional vocabulary (ibid). An important skill taught during Circle Time for the promotion of positive behaviour, is helping children to understand the consequences of their actions on others (Visser, 2000; Mosely, 1998). Circle Time sessions can be used as a forum for discussion and practical intervention in the case of behaviour challenges in the classroom (Ofsted, 2005).

Consequently, it can be claimed that teachers have been practising the concept of Circle Time since the beginning of formal education, and probably even before then (Mosley, 1998). Circle Time gained high reputation in Sweden in the early last century (ibid). Afterwards, two American authors, Ballard and Zimmerman, adopted and further worked on the idea of Circle Time in the 1970s and 1980s. Murray White was the first British writer to write about Circle Time, expanding the idea of having a space within the school curriculum into which each child is given the opportunity to learn and explore through the discussion of experiences and individuality without judgment.

Circle Time, based on Jenny Mosley's (1998) and Sue Roffey's (2006) approach, is a session held with the class that provides a relaxed atmosphere where children are encouraged to use emotional literacy to discuss everyday issues in their lives and through which will promote positive behaviour and self-discipline.

However, Circle Time must not be primarily used as a means of intervention in behaviour-management or to address pending behaviour issues in the class; hence punitive strategies, coercion, reprimand or correction have no place in an effective Circle Time session (Mosley & Sonnet, 2005). Circle Time cannot serve as a 'Quick Fix' for class problems, "Some classes are not ready for Circle Time" (Mosley 1998). Low-level disruption, tiredness, stress and a lack of effective and consistent behaviour policies mean that many teachers find that they are not yet ready for Circle Time.

The main aim of Circle Time is to equip the children with the important skills to thrive in life, such as effective communication, emotional literacy, anger management, peer mediation and conflict resolution. Subsequently, even the best-behaved classes would still benefit from circle time because the learning of such skills often leads to the enhancement of the behaviour (Mosley & Sonnet, 2005).

#### **2.4.1 The Effect of Circle Time in the Classroom**

*An individual's behaviour is embedded in the group dynamic.*

(Mosley, 2007)

Recently we are becoming more aware of the social and emotional development of the students (Cooper, 2006; Gray, 2002; Olsen & Cooper, 2001). We are shifting from the sole emphasis on the cognitive development of the children to paying due attention to their emotional literacy. Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner have all emphasized that cognitive development is intimately linked to the brain's construction of knowledge within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978; Stone, 1995; McClellan, 1994; Bruner & Haste, 1987). The impact on the students' performance and personal happiness has been recognised (Morris & Casey, 2005; Mosley *et al*, 2005). Elizabeth Morris draws a paradigm of the three factors which when linked together promote the holistic growth of the child - 'Affective' (feelings), 'Behaviour' and 'Cognition'. Moreover, the steady incline of reports of teachers facing challenging behaviour from their students calls for reconsideration in our approach in the schools (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; MUT, 2007; Ofsted, 2005).

Furthermore, there is a greater awareness on Positive Behavioural Support, which differs from the traditional "behaviour modification" because the intervention demands a commitment from the teacher towards the pupil (Haring & De Vault, 1996). Hence, teachers are working on changing the environment and responses in order to enhance

the pupils' experience of feeling successful and learning important skills that reduce or alter the function of the problem. Thus, interventions occur by observing the contexts which are triggering the behaviour, addressing the functional outcomes of such behaviour, and then helping the child opt for a more socially appropriate functional behaviour (Cooper, 2006; Haring & De Vault, 1996). Mosley (2008) asserts how this approach can be tackled through Circle Time by using activities where the teacher elicits solutions to difficulties faced by her pupils.

The Head of the United Kingdom National Union of Teachers, John Bangs (2004), told 'Children Now' that schools have long recognised the value of Circle Time. Fortunately, a raised awareness of Circle Time is helping it to gain a higher priority now in both primary and secondary schools. He said: 'It promotes children's self-confidence and it develops their respect for others. (Children Now, 2004).

During their formative years children participate in cultural practices and imitate others around them (Haidt, 2001). Therefore, during their schooling period children acquire basic principles of moral values and what is accepted as right or wrong (Visser, 2000; Visser, 2003). Consequently, classrooms can be seemed as promoters of good moral exemplars which will affect the students' progress towards a holistic education, including positive behaviour. Teachers are the pupils' primarily agents of moral change (Morris & Casey, 2005). Leatherman (2007) insists on the necessity of teacher's understanding as much as possible the children's surrounding factors and the impact of these on the social and hence their moral development.

Although, at all times teachers can deliver good examples and discourse about moral changes, Circle Time adequately encapsulates all the necessary elements to promote such moral changes (Mosley & Casey, 2005). Jenny Mosley (2008) claims that nowadays, we are seeing more chaotic children, children with "mental health needs" because "they constantly hear voices in their minds telling them what is happening at home, what they viewed on their television sets and much more".

In his book, 'Emotional Resilience', David Viscott (1996) defines how a hurtful experience if retained is turned into anger and the anger grows. Our children are recurrently experiencing hurt and anger without having the occasion to express such feeling. Due to these strong negative feelings contained inside them, our children are

consequently unsettled, jilted and off balance (Viscott, 1996; Visser, J.; 2000; Visser, 2003). When we hold on to a painful feeling, rather than express it, we start distorting it, ending up feeling angry without knowing why, which then lead to extremely disruptive behaviour (Viscott, 1996).

More often than not, children with challenging behaviour experience some level of social neglect or exclusion (Morris & Casey, 2005). Although teachers cannot solve their pupils' social difficulties, through Circle Time, they can help them recognize the emotions caused by their problems and help them promote self-management skills to acknowledge and to be in control of their feelings otherwise, both their learning and school experience will suffer (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008). Not only, having children who cannot handle their emotions will lead to poor relationships thus class disturbances (ibid).

*If we are to successfully include these children [SEBD], and not just contain them, we need to understand their emotional world, as much as the learning context.*

(Long, 2002, p.100)

It is being suggested that when helping pupils to talk about their feelings, teaching them 'feeling words' which they can use to understand and express their feelings is helpful (Mosley & Sonnet, 2005; Morris & Casey, 2005). Having teachers constantly using emotional words in their teaching, engages the children to use these words through activities such as discussions and activities that encourage expression of feelings (ibid).

## **2.5 The Paradox of Teaching and Including**

*The daily work with the child [with SEBD] falls on the teacher's shoulders and the weight of this adds onto the already heavy load of a demanding syllabus and the needs of the other twenty odd pupils in class.*

(Mercieca, 2004, p.58)

It seems like we are living in the 'golden age' in education where schools are including every child. All stakeholders in education are heartedly advocating inclusive education where every child, despite the challenges provoked must be included in class (Bartolo *et al*, 2002; Salend, 2001). However, such a humane notion supported by weighty studies and data analysis to prove that it the best way to teach all the children together has its blemishes (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008; Lloyd, 2000; Visser, 1999). The practical aspect of inclusion is provoking anxieties and frustration amongst the ones doing the hands-on part, hence the teachers (Lertherman, 2007; Benjamin, 2002; Helldin, 2000;

Lloyd, 2000). Shereen Benjamin (2002) calls inclusion the “cliché of the 21st-century” with educators using the terminology habitually without realising the commitment and laborious effort it demands from the teacher. Notwithstanding the unarguable request from the personnel responsible for policy making, the conflicting reality of inclusion and the teachers’ teaching load is sporadically tackled (Benjamin, 2002). Consequently, practising inclusion and focusing on improving the pupils’ academic reports is a paradox for teachers (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Mercieca, 2004; Benjamin, 2002).

Whereas all responsible for policy-making suggest creating inclusive classroom by using a truly caring and understanding approach of all pupils, in reality the teacher cannot reach such seeming equity because of the year-round pressing issue of the curricular demands (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Mercieca, 2004; Benjamin, 2002).

The ones suffering from this lamentable situation are not only the teachers per se but the pupils in the class exhibiting lack of compliance such as a child with SEBD because they are the pupils hindering and making inclusion and teaching impossible (Cooper, 2006; Olsen & Cooper, 2001). Therefore, this attractive, progressive ‘modus operandi’ which the education system embarked on to make justice to all children, is in reality discriminating children (Benjamin, 2002).

Everyday teachers’ stories and experiences are eliciting the unfortunate truth of how inclusion is malfunctioning in our classes (*ibid*). Children with challenging behaviour are enduring social isolation because they are constantly getting the message that the way they behave is socially unacceptable whilst the more compliant children are learning that to be socially correct one has to be submissive who must duly withhold any individual views.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the very recent, national quantitative studies (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008) and other international studies (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003) carried out to enquire into the effect of a caring and understanding attitudes in schools, there is still sparse qualitative research on how teachers perceive their own practice inside the classroom through personal reflections (Leatherman, 2007). There is still the necessity for narrative research which can offer insights and views of the teachers’ everyday stories rather than a mere set of variables and questionnaires to

investigate what helps in including and helping children with SEBD (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Leatherman, 2007). Subsequently, the following chapter will discuss and analyse my findings to try to shed more light on the arguments presented in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

*None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.*  
(Paley, 1990, p.xii)

Most often than not, a research study is instigated from a concern and a strong belief in a personal philosophy. Thus, the research is promoted by an interest from the researcher in a particular issue, whilst the methodology is the means through which the researcher attempts to bring awareness of the specific issue.

#### 3.1. Qualitative Research

Opting for a qualitative method, this research tries to shed more light on the dilemma faced by Maltese teachers when striving to teach an exhausting syllabus whilst implementing a truly inclusive attitude where every child, regardless of the challenging difficulties, is encouraged to opt for more appropriate and socially accepted behaviour. By means of qualitative research the study can provide a more humane picture of the current schools' situation, including the experience of the children with SEBD (Visser, 2000).

Another outcome of this qualitative research study is the empowering and subsequent change in the life of the participants and not merely a research study done on a particular sector of society (Truman *et al*, 2000). This is achieved because their stories and their experiences are made public. The pupils taking part in this study, for the first time in their school life, were asked what their views are, were asked to help their teacher to carry out a study, thus they felt important. Instead of being called off because of their disruptiveness in class, their teacher acquired their opinions and the very act of engaging in research is an act of power (Willow, 2000; Barnes, 2001).

When dealing with research on children from pre-school to secondary level, the most dominant field in the past has been the medical field (Willow, 2002; Barnes, 2001; Oliver, 1998). In this domain, using a quantitative research, the main aim is to investigate rather than understand the participants on whom the study is being held. Hence, to use children solely as the means to gather data and reach a result, and that once the end product is reached, there is no further links or consultation (Willow, 2002;

Barnes, 2001; Oliver, 1992). Subsequently, the researched children return to their routine life with an added label granted on them by the researchers and with the delusion that nothing shifted despite all the observations, testing and questions carried out on them (Willow, 2002; Barnes, 2001).

Often the medical sector sees children with challenging behaviour as biological malfunctioning, and thus their social needs are hardly ever tackled (Oliver, 1992). Moreover, children with SEBD are continuously considered unable to adjust to the system and to abide by the school's rules, let alone listened to (Truman, 2000). Society still needs to acknowledge that even children with SEBD have an opinion regarding their education and school decisions that concern them, and are yearning to be heard and understood by teachers and other stakeholders in the education sector (Pomeroy, 2000; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004).

By means of a qualitative research, this project will try to emphasize the importance of valuing, alongside with teaching, children with SEBD. When we ignore the needs of these minorities, we are building a society flawed with socially oppressed citizens (Finkelstein, 2001). If children are not given heed to their needs by being understanding, we are unconsciously creating our future society with citizens that have already suffered injustice and thus adopted negative ideas of those around them, be it their working place or home setting (Willow, 2002; Hamill & Boyd, 2002).

Through a reflective qualitative study of the understanding of this minority group of children with challenging behaviour that are subtly excluded from the class activities, the researcher aims to empower the participants and other children with SEBD (Cooper, 2001). Frequently, such children are deprived from equal educational opportunities and rights, and it is only by means of such an exposure of what they are experiencing that the educational sector can raise their self-esteem and have a sense of personal worth instilled in them (Gonzi *et al*, 2006).

Nevertheless, this qualitative research complements and supports recent quantitative studies carried out on the same niche. Most predominant is the very recent national study of students with SEBD in Maltese schools (Cefai, C., Cooper, P., & Camilleri, L. 2008). The latter findings show that when teachers manage to meaningfully, include pupils with SEBD the behaviour is positively modified (*ibid*).

### 3.2. Journal Writing

This qualitative study uses narratives research through a reflective journal where I wrote regular reflections on my class experiences with three boys, together with informal conversations with them and interviews with their parents.

The conversations were mostly extracted from Circle Time sessions. Circle Time, based on Jenny Mosley's (1996) and Sue Roffey's (2006) methods, was carried out once a week in class. During Circle Time sessions all the pupils were encouraged to use emotional literacy. The boys' participation throughout these sessions was recorded and then a summary of important discourse was extracted from transcriptions. Additional contribution was retrieved from casual feedbacks throughout the day and other instances of subtle yet genuine information retrieval.

The use of a narrative form of recording this qualitative research aims to facilitate an examination and more in-depth inquiry. Hardy (1977) argues that stories are a basic way of processing information and are much easier to remember than as a categorized list, because narrative makes the abstract concrete. Thus, whilst text of quantitative nature is predominately focused on rigor, empirical data and generalization, the narrative is more concerned with the creation of human empathic identities (Morse, 1981).

The use of first-person narration and reflections on classroom experiences with children who are exhibiting challenging behaviour, aim to serve as an affective source of information and encouragement to other teachers struggling in their teaching profession. Shrodes (1978) calls this the 'bibliotherapeutic effect,' adding that the narrative mirrors the drama of inner lives and gives a richer and more poignant understanding of human essence. Within this context, teachers may acknowledge their beliefs and behaviours toward children with challenging behaviour with greater reflection than before. Noddings claims that "stories have the power to direct and change our lives" (1991, p.157).

Studies show that the narrative form of doing research is the most influential medium amongst teachers (Leatherman, 2007; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001; Marlowe, Maycock,

Palmer & Morrison, 1997; Pinnegar & Carter, 1990; Kasprisin, 1987). Exemplars are Hayden's intimate classroom accounts which serve as a tool for inquiry and critique of theory and practice in the education of children with SEBD (Marlowe, Disney, & Maycock, 2003). Even MacCracken's writings about her personal experiences in teaching children whose lives are marked by emotional and behavioural difficulties had a remarkable effect in student-teachers lectures, discussions, and assignments (MacCracken, 1977; 1982). Bruner (1985) highlights the two different modes of learning; the logical or scientific and the narrative or intuitive, adding that whilst the former are based on textbooks and journal articles, the latter deals on stories and drama based on human situations and experiences.

Mary Jalongo and Joan Isenberg (1995) claim that stories about and by teachers are being increasingly used as a reflective tool in teacher education. Teacher stories are central to the type of inquiry and reflection that lead to professional development and personal insight (ibid). It is in the narrative mode that teachers consider daily dilemmas, examine their motives and misgivings, savour their successes, and anguish over their failures (Marlowe & Maycock, 2001).

### **3.3. The Participants**

The qualitative research focused on narratives of three boys, all labelled with SEBD, who in previous years continuously exhibited disruptive behaviour in class. Two of the boys are diagnosed with ADHD and learning difficulties, including Dyslexia. One has a shared Learning Support Assistant while the other is still in the waiting list to be statemented. The third boy was assessed by multi-disciplinary professionals at the Child Development Assessment Unit - CDAU but the reports showed that the boy has no specific learning difficulty. The three boys were 8 years old at the time of the project. Fictitious names, which were chosen by the boys themselves, were used in the narratives.

The fact that all participants are boys was not done on purpose and it would have been interesting to have members of mixed gender participating because then the contributions will be somewhat more wide-ranging. However, this gives more evidence to the ample research carried out, that boys are in the majority when it comes to children with SEBD (Cooper, 2001; Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Cooper, 1999). It could also be that

as many other studies elicited, girls with SEBD provoke less disruptiveness hence are less likely to be pointed out in a classroom of mixed gender (Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Cefai *et al*, 2008).

The parents of these children were important aids in the research, because they already had their children's trust and knew what their children's limitations and needs were (KNF, 2002). Therefore, they gave their own feedback by means of semi-structured interviews where they highlighted issues regarding their child's school experiences and behaviour changes and their opinion as parents. Their views are mentioned in the introduction of the analysis chapter where I give a brief description of each child together with some interesting facts with regards to each child's school experience. After duly explaining to the parents and children their participation in this study, using terms they can fully understand, they decided to be involved.

Another important participant in this study was the LSA, who has been with these children for the past three years. Although she is assigned to support only one of the boys, throughout the years, she offered her help to the other two boys especially when they were disruptive in class. Her feedback was given by means of interviews. Her opinion is inserted in my journal.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

*"It is up to the professionals to advise how a young person's wishes can be addressed in safety"*

(Billington, 2004, p.45)

Children, due to immaturity, are vulnerable and in optimum need of ethics protection (UNCRC 1989; KNF 2002). In this study, ethical considerations are crucial to prevent further labelling to these children (Gonzi *et al*, 2006). These boys are vulnerable because they are aware that they are in some way or another different from other children (Truman *et al* 2000).

It was very important to have a good relationship with the children taking part in the research, whilst clarifying the confidentiality (Truman *et al*, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). The consent of the children's parents was duly obtained. Another important issue was that the children and all persons involved were informed beforehand on the aims of the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### Analysis

This chapter presents narratives and reflections on my class experience to show that when the challenging behaviour of my pupils was understood in terms of its function, the children altered their misbehaviour and gained enough self-confidence to learn (Billington *et al*, 2004). The accounts indicate that by caring for the pupils' feelings and helping them recognise their emotions the pupils were equipped with the essential skills to alter their behaviour (Cooper, 2006). Furthermore, the stories, as I wrote them in my journal, reveal how despite having pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in my class, my teaching objectives were still reached. All the stories took place throughout one scholastic year in a Year 4 class of twenty-seven pupils with mixed abilities.

In the first part of this chapter I opted to introduce a summary of the three boys' school experiences which is elicited from the first pages of my journal. I believe that their past experiences need to be the introductory part of my narratives because our experiences make sense when seen as a part of a cycle of experiences and interactions with those around us. The following narratives also include the views shared by the parents of the boys and the LSA during the interviews. Thus, the following are direct quotes from my journal. Later on in this chapter I selected themes from my journal and discussed them.

#### 4.1. The Children in my Stories

##### John

*The boy chose John as his pseudonym name after his wrestling hero John Cena.*

John is widely known for being one of the naughtiest boys in school, a severe case of SEBD. In the past years, he was repeatedly reported for screaming, barking, knocking things and harming children in class. Additionally, he hardly did any schoolwork. On regular basis the Head of school used to call his mother to come and take her son home because he was uncontrollable.

John has a very sensitive inner core which he learnt to hide under a tough-guy-image. He is a very neat, orderly and organised boy, sorting all his belongings. He is a gifted athlete and a very good footballer. He plays fair respecting his opponents.

From the first day in my class, he started misbehaving, disrupting most our lessons and activities, and teasing and harming his peers. Therefore, I met his parents and asked them what they think should be done. They told me that they intend to take him to yet another psychologist. I asked them if I could join them and they were more than happy to let me join in, because they were confused on

how to explain John's behaviour problems to the psychologist since such problems were only school-based.

From our first greeting words, John's mother confessed that she was at a point where both her husband and she were at a loss on how to tackle their son's school behaviour problems. From the very start of our encounter, I explained the purpose of our meeting, thus I told her that I believed that we can make a difference if we worked in unison. Avoiding any 'why' questions as to John's behaviour problems, I asked her from where she thinks we should start. She explained that these problems were only school-based and that John has a good rapport attending football nursery and summer school. The assessment proved that John only had minor learning difficulties but no hyperactivity.

She showed her deep concern and hurt regarding the school's punitive measure of phoning her to come and get her son out of school. She described how she used to drive hastily, greatly agitated to arrive at school and check to what scale of mischief her son was up to. She also described the hurt and embarrassment she felt every time she either overheard someone speaking about her son or when other children use to tell on him when they came out of the school door.

She then shared some family experiences which she believes influenced her son's behaviour and her way of discipline. Few years back, her husband struggled hard with heart illness and had to undergo major operations and was hospitalized for months in the intensive care unit.

### **Carlton**

*The boy chose Carlton as his pseudonym name because he said it suited him.*

Carlton is a boy diagnosed with ADHD and learning difficulties. Carlton's name is very notorious in our school, especially amongst the teachers. He is assigned to a devoted and professional shared LSA. In previous years, he used to hate school and used to be very defiant and act out all the time.

Carlton is a very creative boy with a rich imaginary world as his daily refuge. He can rote learn pages of difficult names and description of his hobby: weapons. He has a talent in both drawing and kit assembling. He can hold an interesting dialogue with an adult especially on his favourite subjects; weapons, wars (including ancient wars) and scientific instruments. However, his mother commented on his difficulty in maintaining friends his own age, even outside the school.

When I arranged a first term appointment with his mother, she put me in the picture of Carlton's first years in the school, before he had a LSA, explaining how she had to quit her morning job because the Head told her to come and stay in class with her son, otherwise the school could not accept him anymore due to his disruptiveness. Hence, she came daily to school, and sat in class next to her son to control him.

Carlton's parents separated the year before he started attending his first year at school. It was turmoil and Carlton ended up the ping-pong ball jumping from one parent's house to another. Due to this constant shifting and owing to his

ADHD difficulties, the boy used to come to school without his homework and school books. This was an added hindrance in class.

In previous years, he used to have frequent and long time-out of the classroom, running about the yard to calm down. In the first month of this scholastic year, the LSA used to take him out with the intention of relieving me of his distractions. Then I discussed with her that his movement was not distracting my pupils or me and that we should work together, explaining that I was against class withdrawal. Now it is on very rare occasion that he needs to go outside to calm down. With his LSA's agreement, I adapt his work and she prepares different work when needed. We agree on how to tackle behaviour situations such as, during mass or when on school excursions.

### **David**

*The boy could not decide on a name so finally, he told me to use my son's name, David.*

David came to my class with a label of dyslexia and another bolder label of behaviour problems. He was known as defiant breaking all the class rules and disrespecting adults and his peers, not bothering to wait for his turn in class or in the school yard. However, from the beginning I realised he was not being naughty or oppositional, just could not help himself due to more underlying difficulties. From my assessment as a teacher, I believed that besides dyslexia he had also ADHD.

David is a uniquely kind and honest boy. He really tries hard to please adults. This is typical when he strives to read, flipping endlessly over books, especially when he gets my approving comments. He is very good in crafts and loves languages. During maths, he has his own way of problem-solving, which while different from the standard methods used in class is still functional.

I made an appointment with his parents early in the scholastic year and shared my concerns. I gained their permission to refer David for further assessment. The results came out indicating that David has severe ADHD, hence he was referred to the Statementing Board to be assigned with a learning support assistant in class.

In the previous years, he used to sit next to the Carlton's LSA, mainly because he was disruptive in class. However, she confessed that it was too much and she was ignoring her other pupils. Now he sits next to me and I try to ignore his impulsiveness and hyperactivity as much as possible. I encourage him to concentrate through constant prompting, straight to the point warnings, and cues, stickers and ongoing praising.

## **4.2 Treating All Children as Children**

*Organising classrooms as caring, inclusive, collaborative, prosocial and learning centred communities, where students feel safe and secure and connected with their teachers and peers, feel competent and confident in their learning, and support each other in building learning experiences related to their everyday life.*

(Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008, p.134)

Due to the apprehensive discourse among teachers of an escalation in the number of children exhibiting challenging behaviour in their class, many, in both child psychology and education fields are seeking to define the cause (Cefai, Cooper, & Camilleri, 2008). Teachers are amongst the front liners to experience such an uprising concern (Barbara, 2008).

Conversely, other teachers with close, daily contact with children labelled with SEBD demonstrate that by truly implementing an inclusive approach in their classroom, are managing to modify inappropriate behaviour (Olsen & Cooper, 2001). These educators are daily striving to eliminate any threat of failure or segregation in their classrooms, where every child feels he is understood and welcomed (Cefai *et al*, 2008).

This study corresponds to other studies which claim that when the teacher cares and understands all her pupils, even the minority group with challenging behaviour is more likely to behave thus there is more learning because there is less disruptiveness in the class (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Borg & Calleja, 2006; Cooper, 2006; Billington & Pomerantz, 2004).

*It is not right that the system which was created in order to help children now seems to work actively against them.*

(Mercieca, 2004, p.59)

Before I start relating my experience I need to state that I have no intention to take away any credit from the teachers' ongoing efforts to include and teach all their children. However, children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties learn quickly that the school system is not catering for their demands and thus make it their daily ritual to play up (Cooper, 2006). Despite all good intentions first thing in the morning, the child or sometimes the children seem to get up on the wrong side of bed and spend the day misbehaving (*ibid*). Any move from the side of the teacher, no matter how innocently or genuinely done, can trigger the child's functional behaviour and like he did so far, disrupt the class setting and define the class rules (Mercieca, 2004). It is as if these children are caught in a vicious circle of dynamics.

### **4.3 The Effect of Labels on Children**

Long (2002) argues that the labels teachers put on children promotes misbehaviour. Children with SEBD school experience have taught them that they are different. They are aware of their label and know it sticks hard on them from one year to another. Their

actions consequently relate to their label hence as Long (2002) says: 'self-fulfilling prophecy' because they are limited to that label, a label teachers decided to put on them.

The following story shows how labels conceptualised by a teacher will create what Argyis calls a "self-sealing process" (Argyis, 1993 in Kottkamp & Silverberg 2006). "Hence, when a child is described as problematic by a teacher, this child indeed has a problem, but one which to a significant degree is imposed upon him/her" (Kottkamp & Silverberg, 2006, p. 31). The boys in my study were labelled as problematic by their past years' teachers, thus it became an undeniable fact amongst all staff of our school, even to a nun living in the convent next to the school. Therefore, although she never taught these boys her judgement was limited and rather fixed for these three boys.

The moment I stepped in class first thing in the morning, the nun supervising the school corridors in the morning came barging into my class asking for the naughty trio; "it-tlett imqarbin gwappi tas-soltu" (I know she meant, John, Carlton and David), describing how today more than usual they were out of their places even though she told them to stop (some pupils arrive early in the morning, they are expected to go inside their classroom and sit down quietly!). Then she pointed to Carlton saying that he was the most defiant; "u dan il-percimesse." I interrupted her saying that there were no such 'the naughty three' in my class, only twenty-seven children with different characters. I added that I have children who are happy to sit down and read a book or play a board game and I also have children who are too energetic to simply sit down first thing in the morning after a whole night's sleep. I told her that my pupils know they are allowed to walk around the class, go to the toilet, and talk with their friends. She was speechless. The three boys looked surprised. Then when she left, Carlton came near me and with an enthusiastic expression, showed me the new scientific game he was playing with his two friends, explaining how by standing at one end of the room and his friend in the opposite corner they can send electronic signals through a battery devised apparatus. Throughout the day, they behaved. However, Carlton did not hesitate to relate this morning's mishap to his LSA when she came in class.

This incident happened at the beginning of the scholastic year. I had heard about the challenging behaviour of these three boys from the teachers, even from those who had never taught them. I even heard it from their peers in the first days in class. However, my determination to care for and understand each child placed in my class, helped me to look for discrepancies between what I had been told beforehand and what I actually experienced. Kottkamp and Silverberg (2006) argue that teachers see what they assume, and not what is really going on because they are influenced by 'theory-in-use'. These theories, or mental bodies, although difficult to identify, are deeply ingrained and have greater influence on how we act; they actually guide our behaviour (Kottkamp and Silverberg, 2006).

The three boys showed me that they were unconsciously engaging in this 'self-sealing process.' However, when they realised that my opinion of them was different from the rest, it encouraged them to behave and to feel confident to come and share their excitement of their new game with me. Even the sharing of the exciting feeling helped Carlton to participate in the day's learning and put aside the game because he articulated the emotions which might have otherwise hindered him from paying attention. Roffey (2006) claims that when children understand their feelings and emotions they improve their listening skills.

#### **4.4 The Fear of Failing to Learn**

A predominant factor that triggers bad behaviour is difficulty in learning and grasping the concept of the lesson taught (Hamill & Boyd, 2002). "[Consequently] much of their troublesome behaviour is in fact their attempt to avoid engaging with situations that are perceived as threatening to them" (Long, 2002, p.104). Disruptiveness is the safety valve to the anxieties and desperation faced by a child who cannot comprehend what the teacher is teaching and what she is asking from her pupils (Faupel, 2002). This explains why most of the disruptiveness starts the minute the teacher gives the school work and expects her pupils to start working in silence. Subsequently, when the child starts playing up because he cannot do what is asked of him the teacher judges this as a sign of laziness, defiance and oppositional behaviour (Hamill & Boyd, 2002).

Learning requires an amount of risk factor, especially in the context of a class of mixed abilities. Some children, more than others are aware that often their risks lead to failure (Long, 2002). Even though such failing belief is sometimes exaggerated or totally imaginary it is still emotionally destructive. Thus, it is essential that teachers diminish any fear or threat of failure by helping the children gain confidence to take such risks. Eliminating this distressing experience can help reduce misbehaviour. The following story elicits the threat felt by one of the boys and how he was helped to overcome his anxiety without needing to opt for his usual disruptiveness to free himself of such a burden. This is an example of a possible way of simultaneously teaching and understanding pupils exhibiting defiance and oppositional behaviour.

Today I prepared a test (the first from a series of monthly test) for the class and my pupils were feeling fretful. I told them that today should be one of their happiest days because they are going to show me how much work they are able

to work on their own. This seems to change their perspective of tests and exams and they smiled. However, one look at John told me he is not so confident, so pretending to be doing a routine change of places, I asked him to sit on the first table, next to me. Next to him I placed his best friend and a very quiet girl (I know John will not consider copying from his peers). Today's test is English, definitely not John's favourite. While I distributed the tests papers, he started coming out of his place and picking his peers' stationery. Calmly, I told him to sit down and make sure he writes his full name, adding that it would be a great pity if I did not know whose paper it was and gave all the marks to another pupil, after all the good work he did lately. Reluctantly, he sat down, wrote his name, dropped his pencil, and did not start. Then I reassured him that he knew them and he looked at the paper. Then he told me that he cannot understand what he has to do in the first exercise (did not even read it), which was of course the simplest one (underline the correct answer) so I helped him understand that the sentences were all about choosing the right verb, something we have done in class many a times. He picked his pencil and started. From time to time, he asked me trivial things which I answered with a reassuring voice. He tried all the exercises on the paper and finished with his peers.

When all the papers were collected and the class went out for recreation, the LSA came near me and told me that this was the first time that John worked a test quietly, on his own. She explained how he used to be all over the place on announcement of a test and how she had to walk out of the class with him dragging along the two pupils assigned with her. She explained that he hardly ever managed to do half his paper because even out of class it was very difficult to calm him down. She added that she hesitated from telling me all this prior the test because she wanted to see what will happen. I felt really proud of John's achievement and I am looking forward to correct his work. In the afternoon, when his mother came for him I told her that we had the test and how he worked quietly on his own. She was very happy.

Maybe the change in John's behaviour was triggered by the fact that from the start I reassured my pupils and moreover, on individual basis, I offered support. Teachers might argue that this is not a fair measure because I did not offer the rest of my pupils the same help, but the rest of my pupils did not need that amount of help. As Jane Leatherman (2007) argues, inclusion is achieved through equity and not equality. Giving the rest of my pupils a positive perception of tests and exams was enough to promote in them intrinsic motivation to pick their pencil and start answering the questions on the paper without further complaints. However, John needed more, and by helping John I was also helping his peers because I created a safe and appropriate atmosphere in class for all to persevere and succeed.

As for the other two boys, Carlton had his LSA to help him and for David I had prepared an adapted paper because he is diagnosed with dyslexia. However, I believed

that John was able to work the same paper as his peers on his own and because I reflected my belief on him it helped.

#### **4.5 The Overwhelming Emotions within the Child**

When pressured by the nature of teaching academic subjects, teachers' perceptions of the pupils as individuals with constantly shifting, emotions may be sidelined (Long, 2002). Teachers tend to focus their energy on attaining obedience from the children, missing out on their feelings (Leatherman, 2007). They seldom remember to ask their pupils how they feel about the decisions made and their relationships inside the classroom walls (Billington & Pomerantz, 2004; Cole, Visser & Upton, 1998).

In order to help my pupils be aware of and hence control their different emotions, I encouraged them to use feeling words during everyday discussions with them and more specifically by planned sessions, such as Circle Time, where they could further develop their emotional literacy skills through activities that help them reflect on their emotional experiences (Morris & Casey, 2005; Faupel, 2002). During these sessions, I teach my pupils adopt individual strategies of maintaining a positive attitude and to be in control of their emotions. In the following story, the benefits of these emotional literacy sessions are highlighted.

John started misbehaving the moment we started our first lesson. I asked him if he needs my help to start the schoolwork and he frowned and sulkily pushed the chair away from his table. I rephrased my question, asking him why he had such a sad face. Then he asked if we could have Circle Time first thing in the morning, I asked the rest of the class and they all agreed. When it was his turn to speak about his emotions, he said in a broken voice, that he was very upset and hurt because a boy in class has broke his promise to keep a secret and told the rest of the class his computer password for the 'Club Penguin' game. We then gave the boy being accused the chance to justify himself and after admitting that he wanted to be as good as John in this computer game, John offered to help him become as good as him.

Here I could have unjustly judged his sulkiness early in the morning with defiantness and by using some kind of punitive measure spoiled his, his peers and my day and not only no learning would have taken place but I would have reinforced the past years' negative label on John.

Another incident was when David could not contain his feelings of excitement mixed with anxiety for a highly anticipated event. Had this pupil not received the immediately

needed support and understanding for his overwhelming emotions, he would have been too restless to learn.

On a Friday, I am taking my class on a Treasure Hunt together with the parents, David has been too excited on the first days of the week that it seems like he is sitting on needles. He kept bursting out phrases, with no connection with what was happening in class. This morning (Thursday), I could not take it any more and I sharply told him to stay put and start trying to work out some of the work. It was then that I heard him say, more to himself than to me, that right then it felt like he was in a nightmare, “Qisni qieghed f’ inkubu”. It troubled me to hear him make such a statement and I promptly moved closer to him and asked him why it felt so. He told me that it felt chaotic today and he was very uncomfortable in class. Later, during Circle Time, he told me how he wished that he would close his eyes and when he opened them again, it will be time for the Treasure Hunt. He even asked me if there was any chance of me forgetting and subsequently leaving out the outing. I reassured him that there was no way I could forget such an event because even the Head knew and she will make sure I will not miss the outing. Then I tried to visually help David understand how many days are left by counting the pages on my diary with him. It helped because he smiled and went back to his place. It is difficult for child with ADHD to visualise the time and to form a clear idea of the sequence of the events.

Initially, I failed to be aware of his overwhelming emotions because I concentrated merely on attaining order in class rather than assert myself that all the pupils are feeling ‘good’ enough to learn. Although by now I knew that David needed special support in class due to his proneness to distraction, at that moment, from my point of view, there was nothing to provoke his agitations and consequently, disruptiveness in class, thus I failed to be sympathetic towards his anxieties, which were hindering his learning.

Ironically, this incident also made me empathise with other teachers who report having difficulties with children like David. Kohanek and Buka (1999, in Leatherman, 2007) found that factors such as the teacher’s concern of too many children in her classroom together with demanding school policies influence and affect the teacher’s success in implementing a truly understanding approach.

#### **4.6 Positive Reinforcement as a Behaviour Modification**

*Being social animals, we each have a strong need for approval from group members. It is through belonging to different groups that our social identity is shaped. To be approved of is to be valued and for children much of their early learning can be linked to the desire to be valued through pleasing others.*

(Long, 2002, p.107)

When dealing with behaviour challenges teachers sometimes put more emphasis on correcting and punishing disobedience (Long, 2002). Conversely, it benefits both teachers and children to listen to the needs, and carefully analyse the functional behaviour to determine why the child is misbehaving, what is triggering his misbehaviour and what is he getting by misbehaving (ibid). Subsequently, the child can be encouraged to use replacement behaviour which while serving the same function, is appropriate within the school system. Therefore, modification starts by seeking the situation or interaction that is provoking the functional behaviour, in this case manifested as misbehaviour (ibid). The following story relates how John misbehaved to avoid doing schoolwork.

In the past years, John hardly did any school work in class. During the interview, his mother explained how on regular basis, she used to phone the parent of one of his classmates and ask her for both the homework and the schoolwork (he did not copy the notebook). She then used to help her son do both work at home. She described how strenuous such a day by day process was for her son and herself. In previous years, when John felt the threat of failure, he disrupted the class, consequently, he would be sent out of class. Therefore, being sent out of class was the behaviour which served the function of avoiding the risk of failing. Another functional behaviour was when he used to be sent home after disturbing the class. Considering his older brother's bullying, going home during the day when his brother was not around must have been a relieving break for John.

Conversely, I use a different approach to encourage him to modify his functional behaviour, such as the sticker-rewarding system. I try to catch him being good and constantly praise his tiniest effort and encourage him to opt for good choices. Throughout my process to help him change his behaviour, I always separate the bad action from him as an individual, sustaining that it is a bad choice and never accusing him of being bad. Nowadays, he works cooperatively with his peers and is keen to ask me if he encounters any difficulty in the task assigned. Despite, today (first day after the Easter holidays) he started making a motor-like tedious sound with his mouth, whilst looking at the floor. I asked him if he remembered to bring the sticker-reward book (to remind him of the reward system without being threatening). He said yes. At one point, I even used an empathic approach to correct him; 'I am finding it hard to keep focused after the holidays, can you please help me out'.

By making use of positive reinforcement, John was helped to opt for a better behaviour, one which led to more contentment thus, promoting more good behaviour. Instead of opting to condemn his misbehaviour, I included him in class. Eliminating him by asking him to walk out of the class or ignoring him (which is still another way of excluding the boy) might have seemed like the most appropriate way of dealing with his disruptiveness, but instead I included him in class and asked for his participation. There was some truth in my lack of concentration after the holidays, which made me less competent in my teaching. Notwithstanding, he might have felt less confident to learn

after the holidays too, but as the educator, I chose to ask for cooperation rather than to punish him and blame the whole misshape on him.

Similar functional behaviour worked with Carlton. Carlton hated, and still does to some extent, writing. In previous years he used to create havoc in class just before the schoolwork was assigned and the LSA was pressured to take him out in the school yard to calm down. Afterwards, they would return and to avoid lagging behind in written work, she would copy his work for him. However, I discussed this issue with his LSA and we agreed to decrease his out of class intervals. In order to gain cooperation from Carlton, we used intrinsic rewards, even though, we had to keep changing these rewards because after a couple of months he would get annoyed and needed a different challenge.

Carlton is significantly, more focused in class, encouraged with the new goals on his 'target chart'. Hence he gained enough points for his token. Interesting is the fact that his peers encourage him to work on his points when he reached the top level.

As a first-step-option, extrinsic rewards are good with children because they are visually and tangible providing an incentive for their extra effort, a reward for deciding to alter their functional behaviour into one that at first might seem demanding. In addition, extrinsic rewards are successful with children because children are honest and know and are ready to admit when they do or do not deserve the reward. In fact, most often when they are asked to judge themselves, they underestimate themselves (Mosley & Sonnet, 2005).

A typical example of this is when John had one of his bad days and I repeatedly asked him to make good choices to no avail. On that particular day we had had a number of out of class disturbances including the rehearsals for the concert, spiritual session (both lessons with peripatetic teachers) and the school Christmas bazaar.

By the end of the day, when he (John) usually comes near me and choose the reward sticker, I did not remind him because I felt it is wiser to ignore it and let him decide whether he deserves a sticker. He did not come asking for a sticker.

The extrinsic reward system can get habitual and superficial and therefore short-lived, whereas the intrinsic reward is more deep-rooted, and gradually grants small but potential doses in the build-up of self-esteem (Long, 2002). The story related below presents a good example of how David built intrinsic reward.

David is improving in his literacy skills. Today he read during mass in front of all the people attending to the morning mass in the school chapel (I enlarged the passage for him beforehand and gave him a copy three days prior the day so he could study it at home with his father's help). An onlooker would find it hard to believe that the innocent-looking boy reading on the stool hidden behind the ambo, giving me glimpses to check on my approval, up until last year was labelled as one of the most defiant boys in school. When he finished his reading, his classmates, looked backwards to where I was and gave me the questioning look, tempted to applaud him as they usually do in class. He was so genuinely proud of himself and throughout the day kept reassuring me that he can work out the schoolwork on his own. I am amazed, not only his self-esteem is boosted but he is intrinsically motivated to strive in his academics. In the past years, he was on his worst behaviour during reading sessions, his teachers hardly ever bothered to ask him to read out loud in class. In his previous years' reading reports, he had 'non-reader' written down. Reading the liturgy from the ambo may not be one of the lessons found in the syllabus and not one of the lessons delivered in the classroom setup, but it surely achieved the objective to promote reading skills and behaviour modification.

Another type and very essential positive reinforcement, which aims to work as an intrinsic reward is trust (Morris & Casey, 2005). Teachers strive to gain the trust and respect of their pupils yet sometimes fail to show their trust in each child, and furthermore, to respect the child's decision on what he chooses to take on board Mercieca (2004) argues significantly on this issue when dealing with children labelled as different from the rest; "No matter what the referral form tells me about the child, I try to make a point of seeing the child with as open a mind as possible, and to take from the child what she or he wishes to give me" (p.57). The same can be said of the following account where I showed John that I trust him to know how to behave when with another teacher, even though at this point, he was still misbehaving in the presence of the music teacher and the spiritual director.

Since this week I have to be out of class due to Junior Lyceum exams' invigilation, I called him (John) next to me in the morning and asked him to do me a small favour, to help the substitute teacher if she needed some assistance regarding collecting handouts or whatever. I added that I trust him to be on his best behaviour. I told him she was my best friend and I wanted her to have a good impression of all my pupils. He nodded in agreement but I still needed to wait and see. Notwithstanding, when I later returned to the class, the teacher and the LSA told me that they all behaved, including John. I praised him and explained how proud of him his next year teacher is going to be.

#### **4.7 The Effect of the Environment on the Child**

The child's psychological well-being together with his way of viewing the environment, and inner emotions are key factors in his difficulties and progresses in school (Cole, Visser & Upton, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978 in Leatherman, 2007). 'If you feel good you

learn well' (Morris, 2003). Due to this, the behaviour problems can be emphasized and further accumulated through the child's negative reaction to the environment. Our children are recurrently experiencing hurt and anger without having the occasion to express such feeling. Consequently, in class they are chaotic because they cannot concentrate because they are exposed to difficult and problematic home experiences, thus our children have what Jenny Mosley (2008) refers to as 'mental health needs.' Education can help to repair and build pupils' self-esteem (Cole, Visser & Upton, 1998). Teachers are the pupils' primarily agents of moral change (Morris & Casey, 2005). However, as Leatherman (2007) claims, they can never substantially help their pupils if they do not try to understand as much as possible the children's surrounding factors that are having different impacts on them.

No one at school was aware of John's older brother bullying him until I showed John that I cared about him and about any troubling situation he was in. Through our daily interaction in class, he realised that I was there to listen to his needs. He knew I always tried to understand his actions and by time he was confident enough to share his emotions with me and to tell me about his brother's bullying. The following experience shows to what extent he was influenced by this sibling's abuse.

Being Valentine's Day, I decided that after their half-yearly exams, in the afternoon, we will do a nice card to our mums. John worked carefully on his (before, he never used to do crafts with us but nowadays, he is confident with his work). When it came to the wordings, he wrote, "To mum from your handicapped son, John". While I was going round praising their work, I saw his and was devastated. I told him that I will not accept that because it was a false statement. He shrugged. I asked him if I ever lied to him and thus he must believe it when I tell him that it was not true. He confessed how his older brother is always calling him a handicap.

He continued to relate how yesterday evening, when both siblings were on their own at home, his brother kept nagging him about being handicapped and that at one point his brother pushed him and he lost his balance and stepped on one of his favourite toy plane, bare-footed. He removed his socks and showed me the bruise. He went on telling me how the parents when they returned home, punished both of them for fighting. I then helped him recall the emotions he felt, the hurt, the anger, and we discussed that maybe his brother needed help with his self-esteem and how we can help him. Then I reminded him that he still needed to finish up his card, he brought his correcting-tape and arranged his card.

I believe that John was asking me for help when he wrote that phrase and let me see it. He tried to tell me that he had had enough of his brother's bullying. Subsequently, by

being attentive to my pupil's social difficulties and by promoting emotional literacy in my class, the child was able to explore his feeling, even though these were negative feelings and was able to manage them in a positive way. Had I been too concerned with the teaching, and ignored the pupil's hurtful experience I would have missed the opportunity to repair and build his self-esteem (Cole, Visser & Upton, 1998).

Understandably, teachers argue that attending to individual, social needs is impossible in a large class when the home problems are increasing and when this has to be done together with the teaching of academics. It is a constant struggle which teachers, although aware of this difficult task, need to strive towards helping all the children. Sometimes, we fail to cater for all, sometimes we fail completely. However, Mosley (1998) highlights how catering for the emotional needs can still be achieved in a large group such as the classroom; the teacher, aware of the child's situation, can do activities such as Circle Time and work on equipping all the pupils with appropriate and enough vocabulary to express their feelings within the group (Roffey, 2006). "Emotional literacy can be integrated in the daily delivery of the curriculum, but specific programmes such as Circle Time, may become a common feature of the classroom organisation" (Cefai, Cooper & Camilleri, 2008, p.134). The teacher can integrate such positive attitude through purposely chosen literacy books in both English and Maltese.

When John sat sulky, planning how to disrupt the lesson, I asked him why he was sad, and what was making him disappointed, adding that I felt that something was troubling him and thus hindering him from paying attention. I told him that I knew that he can be a very good boy. He told me that he could not improve his behaviour because he had mental problems. I was astounded, and asked him what makes him think that. Hesitantly, he told me that his elder brother is constantly telling him that he has 'brain damage' and that his parents knew it but were trying to hide it from John.

I feel confident that John knows that I am always ready to help him, hear him out, but I am also very much aware that back home he feels less secure. Therefore, there are still days when John is undermined by his brother's cruel comments, such as mentally sick, Dumbo and handicap. Aware of this, during the English reading, 'Mouse and the Bullies', which book relates the story of a boy being bullied, I tried to emphasize the importance to keep asking for help.

Attending to the individual need can be too overwhelming together with teaching the mixed abilities of all the pupils, she can still reach individual enhancement with the help of the whole class. Creating a class of pupils, and not merely a number of pupils placed together in the same class, can promote tolerance for diversity where all the pupils work together, help one another and empathise with their friends facing difficulties, even if

their difficulties are behaving in class and not being a nuisance during lessons. Every year, I work hard right from the start of each scholastic year, to build healthy relationships, not only between my pupils and myself, but also a good relationship amongst the pupils. At the beginning of the scholastic year I work on Peer Preparation Programme (PPP) as this helps the pupils to be aware that, we are all unique, each with our strengths and difficulties, thus the pupils are willing to help one another. Reflecting on my pupils, I realised that this year, despite the difficulties present in my class, there has been growth in the class as a unity.

This week, we had two big, school activities: the crowning of the Holy Mary and the school's Sports Day and in both occasions my class were exemplar in their behaviour and fair play. I felt really proud watching them participating. Most gratifying was observing the 'buddies' (pupils allocated to help the children with behaviour difficulties) silently and in a subtle manner, remind their friend to stay put or to stop fidgeting with the candle. At one point, Carlton tripped over his friend in front of him (his pacing was faster than the rest) but instead of creating a scene, his friends helped him up and continued with the procession. It was very evident to see that they were a class, one big group of children. I believe that the structure of the classroom and the classroom rules (which they made up), together with our weekly key session, Circle Time, helped us to strengthen our relationships and respect and accept each other with our diversities. The children's attitude changed from last September, where above all they were most willing to tell on their peers.

Another occasion when my belief was proven correct was during one of the second term's Circle Time session. In the first term I carried out a sociometric test<sup>1</sup> in class and the outcomes showed that John is not one of the favourite classmates. During the Circle Time session we discussed our friends.

The rest of the class showed their gladness that John's class behaviour has dramatically improved, adding that now they were willing to be his friends and to sit next to him in class. It was evident how much he enjoyed that moment of glory in comparison with the usual talk of disapproval from his teachers in front of his peers.

Such a positive attitude towards their peers helps the children with behaviour difficulties as much as the rest of the pupils.

Another noticeable achievement in Carlton is that he is much more confident to work and share ideas with his classmates, be they boys or girls. This was evident

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<sup>1</sup> The objective of the sociometric test was to analyse the class perception with regards to John. I ask them who their favourite partner in the classroom was because despite being popular in the school yard due to his athletic abilities, I wanted to check what his peers' view was when it came to having him sitting next to them in class. Primarily because I knew of John's difficulty to work in pairs and in a group and secondly because I wanted to find out what his peers thought of his disruptive behaviour during lessons. The sociometric test proved John on the controversial sector. Hence, whilst he was very popular at playtime, most of the pupils hesitated to choose him to sit next to them in the classroom.

during the school's yearly red letter day; the Sports' Day when every child is encouraged to participate and rewarded for participation. In the past years, Carlton's LSA together with the PE teacher struggled to persuade him to play fair and wait for his turn during such games. I watched him and encouraged him during games and he was great. At one point he even helped a girl to get up after they pumped into each other. Interesting to observe was his time-to-time checking on me and his LSA to check if we were approving of his behaviour and to get our appraises for any good move during his play.

#### **4.8 The Complexity of Inclusion**

Despite all the positive discourse on inclusion, teachers can and will experience disappointments whilst striving to modify the inappropriate behaviour and to help the children attain a sense of emotional control. The behaviour of a child is the growing of the child, a process, closely linked and influenced by the environment. Therefore, this process brings about both achieving milestones and losing direction, and teachers need to realise this. The teacher's role in the child's holistic growth is guiding, stimulating the child's inquisition to learn and providing an adequate environment to help the child grasp and use the acquired knowledge. Educating a child means guiding along the not-so-straight-forward road to what is socially demanded and accepted.

I experienced these downfalls more than I am ready to admit, especially with John. John was the hardest struggle I ever had to fight since my earliest teaching years. Probably, because he has the most intensive needs. Otherwise it could be because he was labelled as one of the naughtiest boys in school. Therefore, he believed that he is difficult. In addition, his past exclusions from the class and even school meant that he did not get as much learning as his peers and needed more effort to succeed academically.

John's disruptiveness is taking a twist on the increase. For two days this week, I had to deduct his sticker reward, and on another day, he agreed that he only deserves a small sticker. I called him next to me, and asked him if there was any problem that was annoying him, but he just shrugged and said no. While I was making some routine changes in the pupils seating place, a couple of times he asked me to change his place, which I did but still his behaviour did not improve much. I am ending up going home feeling demotivated and exhausted.

When faced with such setbacks in my teaching experiences, together with the pressure of helping all pupils to achieve academic progress, I feel discouraged and helpless. Suddenly, I undergo physical but predominately mental exhaustion and question myself if my commitment to create inclusive classroom is greatly failing. I ask myself whether other teachers are right when they say that some children, such as John, simply can not be included. These teachers have after all, much more class experience than I have. I ask

myself if I am being too naïve in believing that I can modify most challenging behaviour and have an inclusive approach in a class of such mixed abilities and simultaneously help all my pupils' progress in school.

On other occasions, instead of lack of motivation, I experience a great sense of uncertainty, doubting if I am being overly supportive to the pupils with challenging behaviour at the expense of the rest of the class who are, day in day out, willing to cooperate and abide with the class rules. In the following reflection I disclose such doubts after John refused to comply with the class rules and work in a group activity.

Sometimes, when I give him (John) extra attention and tolerate his disruptiveness more than I would usually with another pupil, I feel a big sense of guilt. I have my doubts whether I'm being totally fair with the rest of the class. I have these doubts especially by the end of the day when I reward him with a sticker. Although, I praise all my pupils' written work with stamps, stickers and positive comments, none of them get a reward for behaving, even though they always behave.

Experience has taught me that I will keep on having doubtful emotions as long as I will choose to give extra support and intense individual attention to a handful of pupils which by exhibiting challenging behaviour show me that they are encountering greater difficulties to adapt in class, be it due to outside the school factors or the school system itself.

In her study Shereen Benjamin (2002), found that many teachers argue that such principles of inclusion are very difficult to implement and are somewhat contradictory to what they are actually experiencing everyday in class where they have to simultaneously cater for the ever increasing challenging behaviour and teach such a complex syllabus to a class of mixed academic abilities. She inquires whether valuing diversity is merely "a cliché of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" and although inspirational such terminology instigated uproar of frustration from many teachers. Helldin (2000) also states that inclusive education will always be seen as a problematic term. In her narrative study, Leatherman (2007) examined the teachers' perspective of inclusive classrooms and their views on the principles of teaching and including all children with special needs. The study revealed that factors for successful inclusive classrooms include support from administrators, appropriate training for teachers and their consultation in decision-making. However, the most resounding factor that kept emerging was their commitment and attitude towards inclusions (Leatherman, 2007). In

addition, Knight (1999) makes similar claims regarding inclusive classrooms, “Teachers’ behaviour, attitudes, and skill, together with the peer acceptance of individual differences are important factors in the successful inclusion of students” (p.6).

Another common belief among teachers as the way to succeed with inclusion is to have extra support in class, mainly a learning support assistant to help the children with some level of social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. As I did with both John and David, and with all the good intentions of helping children, teachers hastily refer a child showing signs of not complying with the class system for a multi-disciplinary assessment of professionals, including an educational psychologist with the prime intention of getting a report with the weighty clause which states that: “the child benefits from an LSA in-class to help him cope”.

However, is such a standard procedure doing justice? Is such a procedure putting system-acceptable labels on children that simply need to be heard, cared for and understood, because the system is overwhelming for them? If we really reflect on our practices, are we really being inclusive? Inclusion means making the classroom a safe room for all children to grow holistically, irrespective of their individual difficulties, without the need to have a disorder attached to him/her. Is it the teacher’s responsibility to tend to the different needs by nurturing and creating a safe atmosphere where all children can learn, with the predominant lesson being the celebration of diversity? A teacher’s job is a commitment to educate, to care and understand in order to create the right atmosphere for all children to want to learn.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of these narratives is to highlight the implications of nurturing in a primary class, where, despite different challenges, I strove to make my pupils feel safe and understood. My aim is to give examples of how nurturing and treating all children as children thus they all belong to the class, though very complex and demanding, can be a possibility within our Maltese school context. However, my reflections include difficulties faced by teachers when striving to include children with challenging behaviour. Moreover, the outcomes of this study support the recent national quantitative study by Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri (2008) proving that children will make an effort to learn and engage socio-emotionally in class when the climate provided by the teacher is inclusive in a caring, safe and supportive approach.

## CHAPTER 5

### Comments and Recommendations

*In recent years social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in school have become a major challenge confronting not only the educational system but Maltese society as a whole. Many have been asking questions about the nature, distribution, causes and management of such difficulties.*

(Cefai *et al*, 2008)

There is a rising concern from teachers and professionals in the education division, about the consistent rise on the number of school-age children exhibiting social, emotional, behaviour difficulties – SEBD (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2006; MUT, 2006; Cooper, 2001). Ample studies support such an apprehension showing that disruptive behaviour in schools is an increasing, complex problem (Olsen & Cooper, 2001; Visser, 2000; Cole, Visser and Upton, 1998).

This dissertation tries to reconcile the dilemma faced by teachers having on one hand the commitment to attain all children, with the diversity they present in class and on the other hand to teach the demanding syllabus. Stakeholders in education are heartedly advocating the terminology ‘inclusive education’, without realising the commitment and laborious effort it demands from the teachers (Leatherman, 2007). In reality, practising inclusion and focusing on improving the pupils’ academic reports is seen as a paradox from many teachers (Cefai *et al*, 2008; Mercieca, 2004). Moreover, such a struggle is in reality discriminating the children with challenging behaviour because teachers are finding it very hard to include them in class (Benjamin, 2002).

However, other studies carried out in current years show that when the teacher creates a safe and understanding atmosphere in the class, her pupils are less likely to misbehave and disrupt the class thus learning is more flowing (Cooper, 2001).

The outcomes of this study support the recent national quantitative study by Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri (2008) proving that children will make an effort to learn and engage socio-emotionally in class when the climate provided by the teacher is inclusive in a caring, safe and supportive approach.

In the introduction we are offered a description of what is currently being debated amongst those responsible for the education of our children.

The literature review provides a constructive discourse to further examine implemented, good practice of inclusive classrooms, with reference to other similar qualitative and quantitative research. This chapter also gives short definitions of recurrently used terminologies in educational discourse.

The anthology of accounts quoted in the analysis, illustrate how certain challenging situations in class were effectively tackled by a teacher who chose to see all children as children, seeing their defiantness and oppositional behaviour solely as a way of asking for help from the adult present daily in class. Although, attentive to how perplexing and complicated including all children can be, the aim of the narration is to provide an encouraging and positive approach for teachers facing such a difficult task in their daily interaction with children with challenging behaviour. The main objective of this dissertation will be reached if other teachers and stakeholders in education engage with the narrations presented here and through them, experience their own reflective journey of their daily interaction with the children, contemplating on those unforgettably rewarding occasions when they really included all the children despite their challenges.

Marlowe and Maycock (2001) claim that by means of the narrative mode teachers can consider daily dilemmas, examine their motives and misgivings, savour their successes, and anguish over their failures. Teachers can do reflective practice recording on diaries. Another option can be to have colleagues offering support as mentors.

### **Recommendations**

*Qualitative research is not done for the purposes of generalization, but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific context and particular individuals.*

(Brantlinger *et al*, 2005, p. 203)

After every research study, the researcher realises that the research is a never ending procedure, it becomes clear that there are niches and areas where further studies and investigations are needed in order to be just to any study. Hence, recommendations to further investigate a particular area are rightly suggested. This is even truer when the research is relating stories, stories of children's and their teacher's class experience. As long as we are keen to read their stories, we are open to change, learn and evolve in our relationships with children (Walker and Underhalter, 2001). We owe this much to them. It is our responsibility because it is the children's ethical right to learn in the most

appropriate environment possible. Additionally, teachers use other teachers' stories to reflect on their own. A teacher's job can depart her from what is happening around her due to the demanding focus on her class activities. Thus it is crucial that teachers find time to read their colleagues' stories to help them unite and support one another in such a demanding, and rapidly changing educational system.

The findings from this study are limited to a group of boys with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties and their teacher hence should be duly considered as an evidence of these individuals in their particular context. Furthermore, it would be interesting to have a follow-up study of these boys to see how they are doing in their next year, with a different teacher noting whether they are behaving and conforming with the class rules or exhibiting challenging behaviour. It would be also interesting to see if their academic achievements are on a steady upgrade or having pitfalls.

Furthermore, we could delve deeper into the perception of administrators and policy makers, listen to their part of the story, explore how they perceive inclusive classrooms, after all they are the ones providing the resources and support for teachers. If they fail to acknowledge such fundamental component of teaching, that of the caring and nurturing from the side of the teachers and hesitate from consulting the teachers in important school policy making, the teachers might end up feeling as if it is a one way struggle and risk of enduring burnt-out due to the overwhelming weight of such an implementation (Leatherman & Niemeier, 2005). More impact is attained when all stakeholders in education assist the teachers by valuing and giving inclusion the well-deserved significance.

Although there is a sufficient body of studies, including quantitative studies that address inclusion within the class, there is still the need to study inclusion from a wider perspective; the parents (Leatherman, 2007). There is still limited research on what is the parents' opinion and belief of their children's inclusive education. We need to investigate if parents are satisfied or lamenting of the way inclusion is functioning with their children because only through their cooperation can we truly succeed in inclusion.

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# Appendix

## **CONSENT FORM**

Christine Grech  
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Willie Arena Street,  
Gzira. GZR1690

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Evidence shows that there is a steady incline on the list of children exhibiting challenging behaviour – SEBD. Professionals are delving in the children’s school experience, with the aspiration of finding the cause of their challenging behaviour and thus seeking interventions. Studies carried out in recent years show that when the teacher creates a safe and understanding atmosphere in the class, her pupils are more likely to behave thus learn more because there is less disruptive moments.

As part of my Masters in SEBD, my professional project will include case studies of pupils in my class. The foremost part of project’s content will be a reflective journal, which besides my reflections on the children’s behavioural improvement, will be complemented with informal conversations with the children. The latter will be mostly compiled through Circle Time participation. Important discourse from the children will be summarized from recorded sessions. Addition contribution will be retrieved from casual feedbacks throughout the day, which will provide subtle yet genuine information from the children. Additionally, the parents will give their own views by means of interviews where they will highlight issues regarding their children’s behaviour changes and their experiences as parents. Another important participant in this project is the facilitator, who has been with these children for the past three years. Her experiences will be collected from interviews.

The children and parents taking part in this study will benefit because their participation will empower them and subsequently, further change

their school experience. It is important to hear the children's and their parents' views when aiming at improving any policymaking, in the scenario of education.

### **Guarantees**

I will abide by the following conditions:

- I. Your real name will not be used in the study.
- II. Only the supervisor and the examiners will have access to the data.
- III. You will remain free to quit the study at any point and for whatever reason. In the case that you withdraw, all the records and information collected will be destroyed.
- IV. Deception in the data collection process will not be used.
- V. Conclusions from the research will be communicated to you either verbally or in writing.

### **Participant:**

I agree to the conditions.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

### **Researcher:**

I agree to the conditions.

Christine Grech

ID: 254165 (M)

\_\_\_\_\_

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

## FORMULA GĦAL KUNSENS

Christine Grech  
3, Kay Flats,  
Triq Willie Arena,  
Gżira. GZR 1690.

Tel: 21 331135  
evenstar@maltanet.net

Evidenza turi zieda fil-lista ta' tfal li qed ikollhom diffikultatjiet fl-atteggament tagħhom, kundizzjoni magħrufha bħala SEBD. Professionisti f'dan is-settur qed jindagaw fil-fond u jistudjaw l-esperjenzi tat-tfal fl-iskejjel, bit-tama li jiskopru l-kawża u b'hekk ikunu jistgħu jintervjenu. Studji riċenti juru li meta fil-klassi, l-għalliema toñloq atmosfera komda u li tifhem lit-tfal, l-istudenti jgħibu ruħhom aħjar u għalhekk jitgħallmu aktar għax m'hemmx xi jtllef it-tagħlim.

Bħala parti mill-istudju tiegħi fil-Masters, dan il-proġett ħa jinkludi każi ta' xi tfal mill-klassi tiegħi. Parti kbira mill-proġett ser tkun magħmula minn riflessjonijiet personali f'għamla ta' gurnal. Dawn ir-riflessjonijiet ser ikunu bbażati fuq il-progress tat-tfal fl-imgħiba tagħhom kif ukoll, bill-kontribuzzjoni tat-taħdit mit-tfal stess. Dawn ta' l-aħħar jigu migbura waqt sessjonijiet partikolari fejn l-għan hu li t-tfal jaqsmu l-opinjoni tagħhom. Mezz ieħor minn fejn jingabru l-kontribuzzjoni tat-tfal huwa mid-diskors ta' kuljum li jingħad fil-klassi. Dan joffri mod sottili imma ġenwin, ta' informazzjoni dwar kif qed jaħsbu t-tfal. Barra dan, ser ikun hemm il-partecipazzjoni tal-ġenituri permezz ta' intervisti, fejn jaqsmu l-opinjoni tagħhom rigward l-imgħiba tat-tfal u l-esperjenzi tagħhom bħala l-ġenituri. Partecipanta mportanti oħra f'dan il-proġett, hija l-falicitator, li ilha ma' dawn it-tfal għal dawn l-aħħar tlett snin. Hija taqsam l-esperjenzi tagħha waqt intervisti.

Kemm it-tfal, kif ukoll il-ġenituri li ser jieħdu sehem f'dan l-istudju, ħa jibbenefikaw għax il-partecipazzjoni tagħhom ħa tgħin hom biex iħossu hom importanti u għalhekk tinkuraġġihom biex jibdli l-atteggament tagħhom u l-mod ta' kif iħarsu lejn l-iskola. Huwa mportanti li nisimgħu x'għandhom x'jgħidu t-tfal u l-ġenituri meta ħa nippjanaw tibdil tal-liġijiet fil-qasam edukattiv.

## Garanzija

Jien nieħu r-responsabilita' li nsegwi dawn il-kundizzjonijiet:

- I. Jinbidlu l-ismijiet kollha u jingħataw wieħed fittizzju
- II. Is-sorveljant u l-eżaminaturi biss ikollhom aċċess għall-informazzjoni meħudha
- III. Ikollok il-liberta li tieqaf milli tippartecipa f'dan l-istudju x'ħin trid u għal liema raġunijiet  
trid int. Fil-kas li tirtira, kull informazzjoni li tkun tajt taqa'.
- IV. Ma jsirx l-ebda ingann fl-interpretazzjoni ta' l-informazzjoni li tkun tajt.
- V. Il-konkluzjonijiet li joħorgu mill-istudju jiġu magħrfa lilek b'mod verbali jew miktub.

## Partecipant

Jien naqbel ma' l-kundizzjonijiet.

Isem: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Data:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Riceratur

Jien naqbel ma' l-kundizzjonijiet.

Christine Grech

ID: 254165 (M)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Data:

Jiena naċċetta li l-għalliema tiegħi, Mrs. C. Grech tosservani fl-iskola waqt li nkun qed nitgħallem, nieħu sehem fil-lezzjoni ta' Circle Time, nilgħab u nieħu gost ma' sħabi.

I accept to be observed by my class teacher, Mrs. C. Grech at school whilst learning, participating in Circle Time sessions, playing and having fun with my friends.

Isem/Name .....

Data/Date .....

## **Interview with the parents**

1. Describe your child as a school boy/girl.
2. How would you describe your child's school experience from the first years until this year?
3. Describe any incidents with your child that happened during these past years of his schooling.
4. What are your concerns with regards to your child's behaviour problems?
5. What are your personal views regarding these behaviour issues?
6. Are your child's behavioural problems exhibited also at home?
7. Did you notice any change in you child in this last scholastic year?
8. Do you have any perceptions with regards to this change?
9. Can you relate any feedback shared with you by your child that struck you with regards to her school and class experiences?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add with regards to your child's school and class experiences? Do you have any queries or suggestions that you want to communicate with the Head of school or teachers?

---

## **Interview with the Facilitator**

1. How long have you been assigned with this child?
  2. How long have you been with the same class group?
  3. How would you describe these children?
  4. Are there any incidents or special occasions you would like to share?
  5. Is there a recurrent pattern in these children's class experience?
  6. Did you notice any change in their present class experience?
  7. If any, can you attribute this change to any aspect in particular?
  8. Do you have any suggestions with regards to these children's behavioural issues?
-

### **Intervista mall-ġenituri**

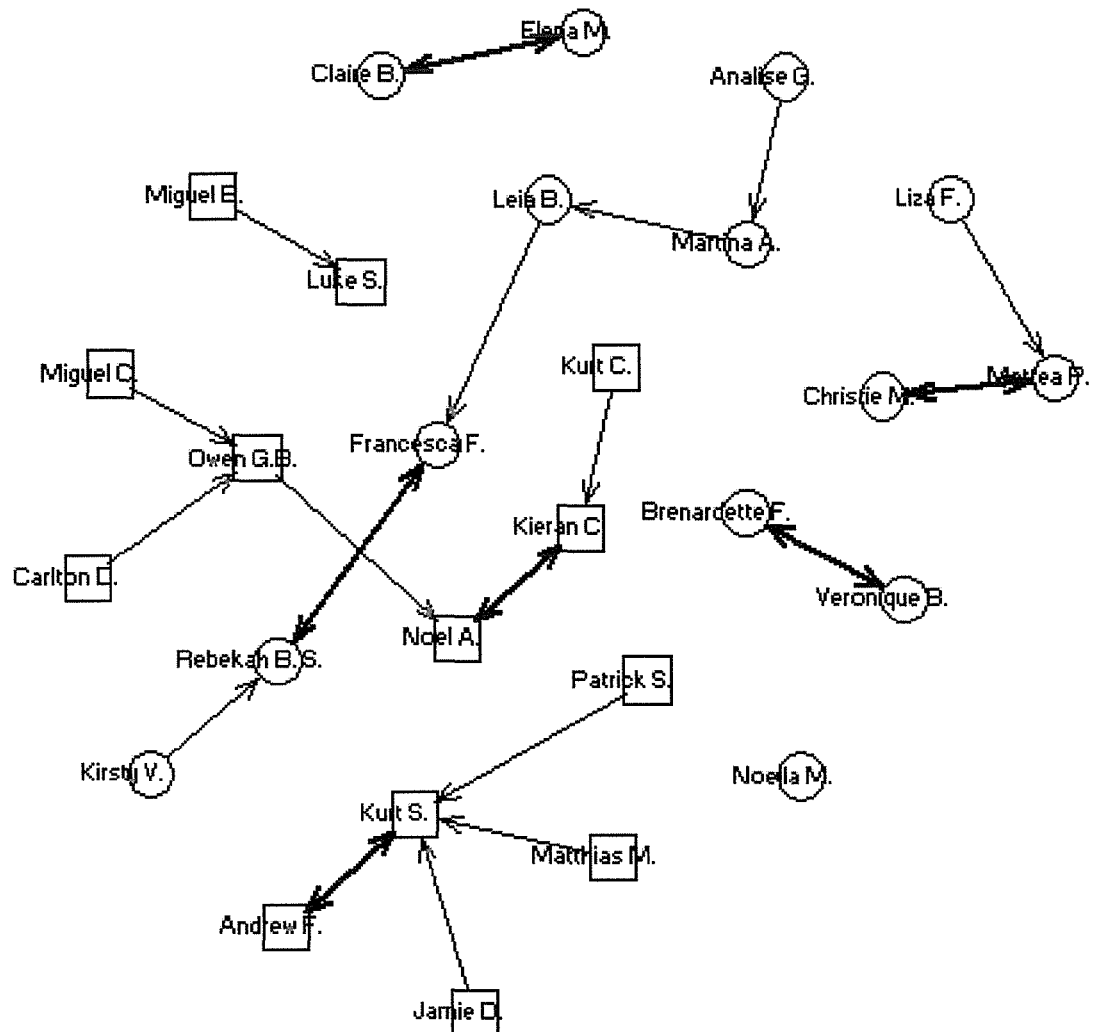
1. Iddeskrivi t-tiefel tiegħek b]ala tifel ta' l-iskola.
  2. Kif tiddeskrivi l-esperjenza tiegħu fl-iskola, minn l-ewwel sena sa issa ta' t-tifel tiegħek?
  3. Iddeskrivi xi incident li seħħ ma' tifel f'dawn l-añħar snin?
  4. X'inhuwa l-inkwiet tiegħek rigward l-imġiba tat-tifel tiegħek?
  5. X'inhuma l-idejat u l-opinjoniġiet rigward din l-imġiba?
  6. Din l-imġiba hija esebitha wkoll id-dar?
  7. Rajt xi kambjament fit-tifel f'din l-añħar sena skolastika?
  8. Għandek xi opinjoniġiet rigward din il-bidla?
  9. Tiftakar xi kas partikolari fejn it-tifel qasam xi esperjenza miegħek fuq l-iskola?
  10. Hemm xi ñaġa o]ra li tixtieq iżżied jew xi esperjenza tat-tifel tiegħek fl-iskola u fil-klassi? Jew forsi għandek xi suġġerimenti li tixtieq twassal lill-Kap ta' l-iskola?
- 

### **Intervista mall-facilitator**

1. Kemm ilek tgħin lil dan it-tifel?
  2. Kemm ilek ma' dan l-istess gruppta' tfal?
  3. Kif diddeskrivi li din il-klassi?
  4. Hemm xi esperjenzi jew incidenti fuq din il-klassi li tixtieq taqsam?
  5. Tara xi sistema li qed dejjem tirrepeti ruñha ma' dawn it-tfal?
  6. Innotajt xi bidla f'din il-klassi f'din l-añħar sena skolastika?
  7. Jekk iva, fuq xiex tikkontribwixi din il-bidla?
  8. Għandek xi suġġerimenti rigward l-imġiba ta' dawn it-tfal?
-

# Sociogram of Choices

Positive Question: I would choose to sit near these children.



Female Male

→ = one-way choice

↔ = mutual choice

48 % of choices are mutual

44.4 % have mutual choices.

School : St. Francis School

Teacher : Mrs. C. Grech

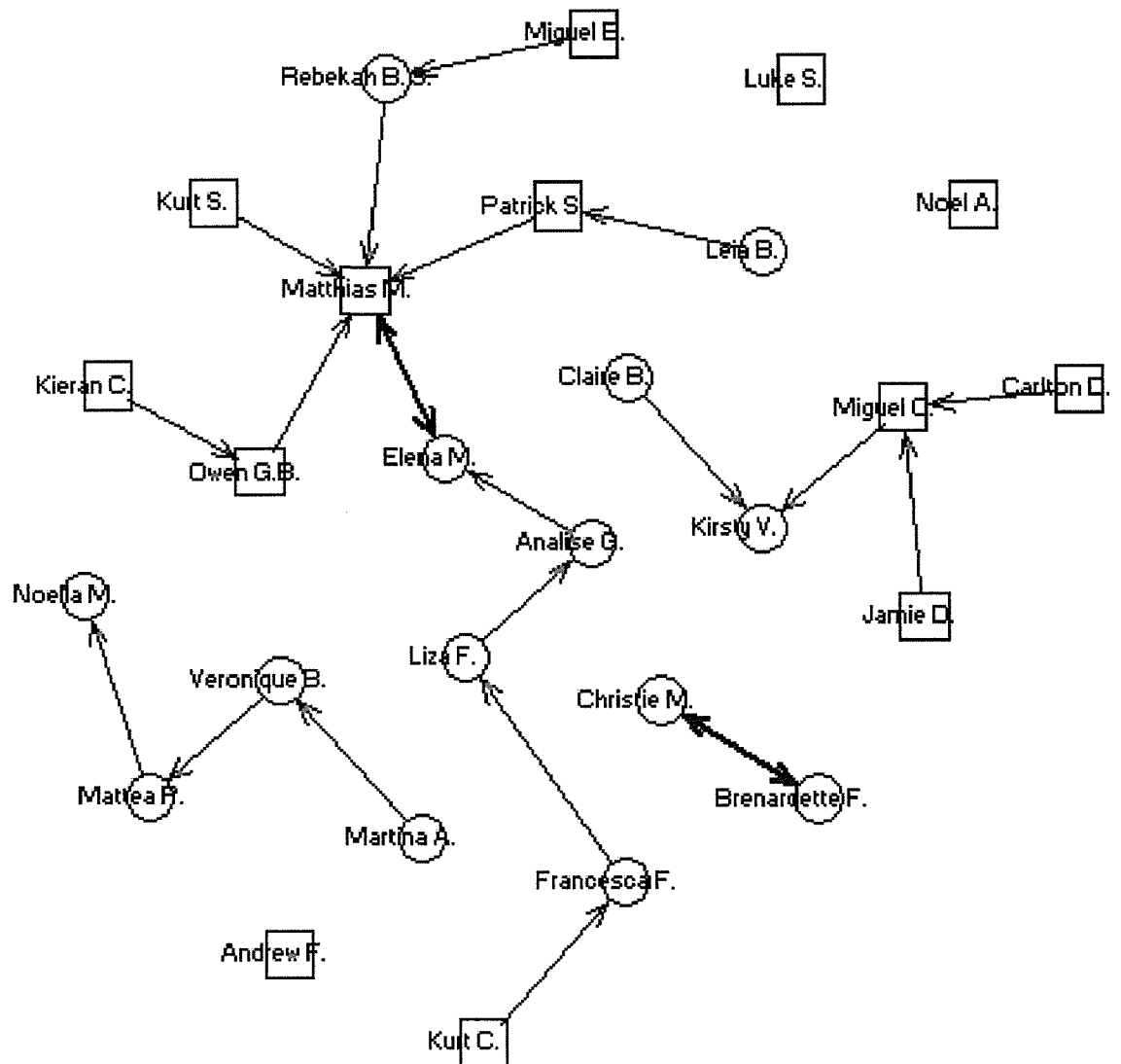
Period : Circle Time

Grade : Year 4

Date : 22-05-08

# Sociogram of Negative Choices

Negative Question: I would not choose to sit near these children.



Female (circle)    Male (square)  
 → = one-way choice  
 ↔ = mutual choice

School : St. Francis School  
 Teacher : Mrs. C. Grech  
 Period : Circle Time  
 Grade : Year 4  
 Date : 22-05-08

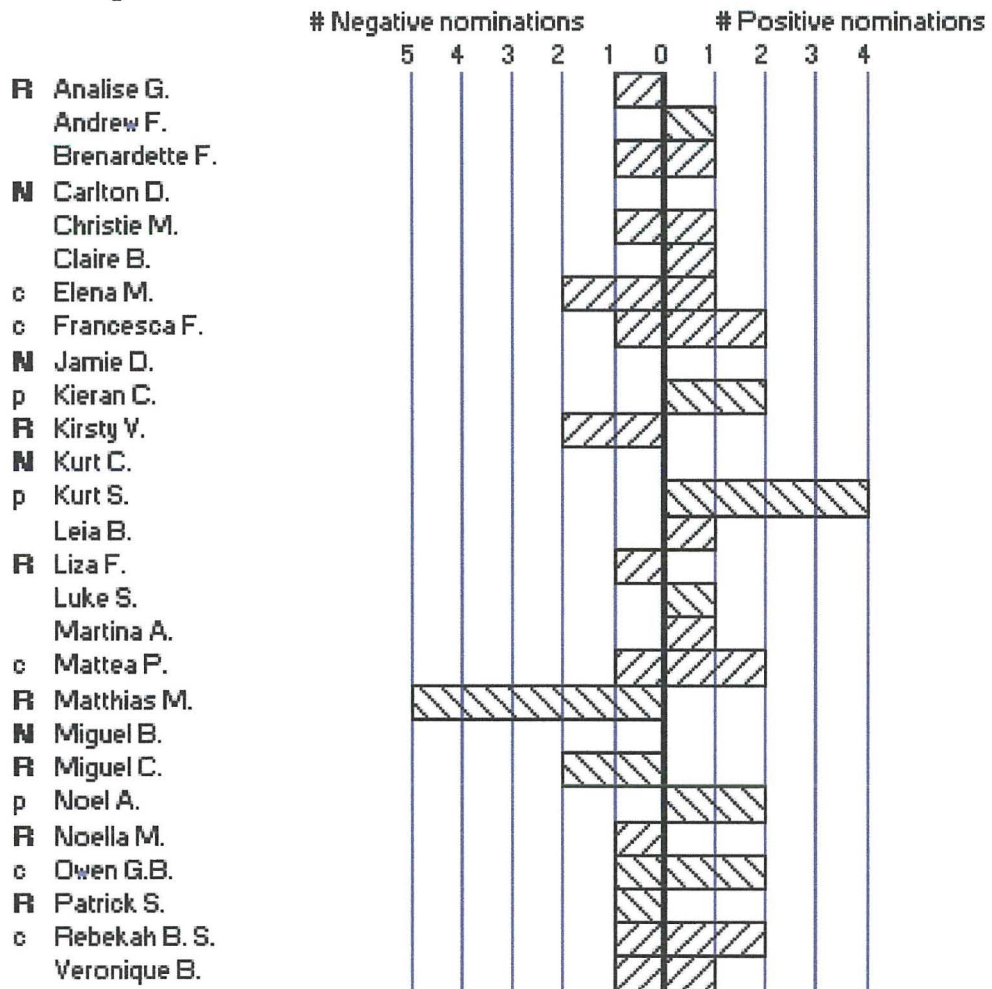
18.2 % of choices are mutual

14.8 % have mutual choices.

# Nomination Chart

Positive Question: I would choose to sit near these children.

Negative Question: I would not choose to sit near these children.



Student labels  
 p Popular  
 R Rejected  
 N Neglected  
 c Controversial

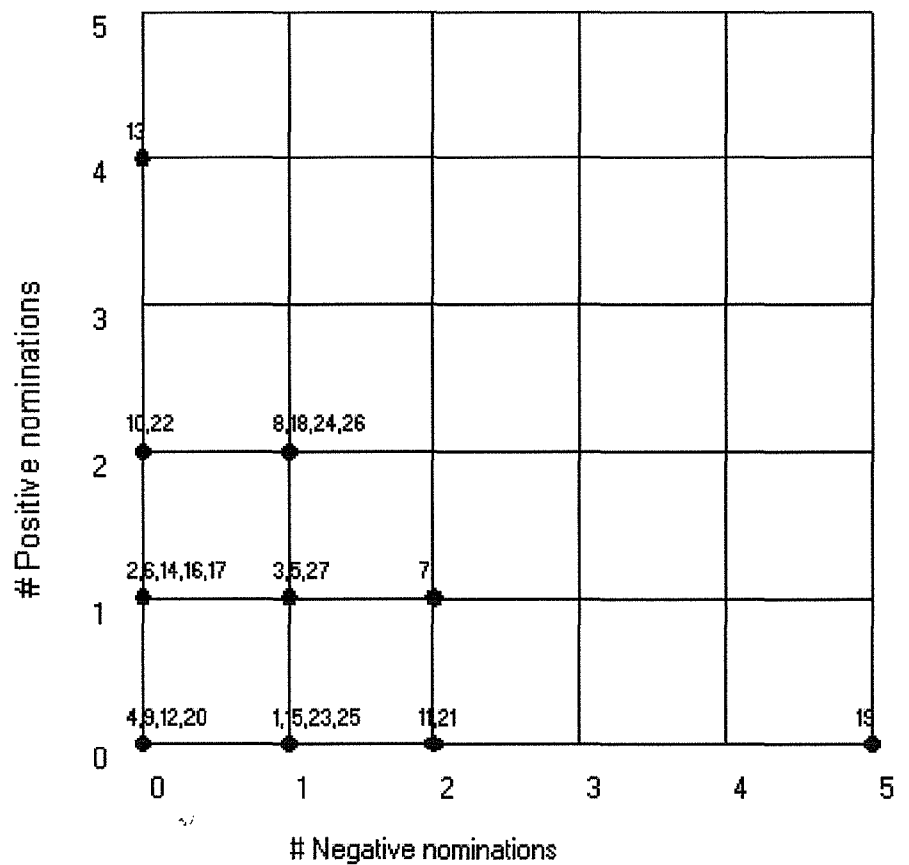
School : St. Francis School  
 Teacher : Mrs. C. Grech  
 Period : Circle Time  
 Grade : Year 4  
 Date : 22-05-08

# Socio-Map

Positive Question: I would choose to sit near these children.

Negative Question: I would not choose to sit near these children.

- 1 Analise G.
- 2 Andrew F.
- 3 Brenardette F.
- 4 Carlton D.
- 5 Christie M.
- 6 Claire B.
- 7 Elena M.
- 8 Francesca F.
- 9 Jamie D.
- 10 Kieran C.
- 11 Kirsty V.
- 12 Kurt C.
- 13 Kurt S.
- 14 Leia B.
- 15 Liza F.
- 16 Luke S.
- 17 Martina A.
- 18 Mattea P.
- 19 Matthias M.
- 20 Miguel B.
- 21 Miguel C.
- 22 Noel A.
- 23 Noella M.
- 24 Owen G.B.
- 25 Patrick S.
- 26 Rebekah B. S.
- 27 Veronique B.



School : St. Francis School  
 Teacher : Mrs. C. Grech  
 Period : Circle Time  
 Grade : Year 4  
 Date : 22-05-08