

## **Chapter #27**

### **TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES IN STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MALTA: A CASE STUDY**

**Victor Martinelli, Mario Cutajar, Martina Debattista, & Amira Mangion**

*Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta*

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores teachers' awareness of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) in primary schools. Data was collected through questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews carried out with teachers teaching Years 2, 3, and 4. This study revealed that teachers who supported students with SEBD were more aware of strategies to be used in the classroom than those who never supported such students. However, the strategies adopted were largely self-devised. These included establishing a good relationship with the student and keeping daily routines consistent. All respondents expressed the desire to be provided with further training opportunities. Training would help teachers gain a deeper understanding of SEBD and develop strategies to manage such challenges more effectively.

*Keywords:* social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), education, teachers, strategies, primary school.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This study is particularly relevant to the current situation of social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) in Malta because of the varying discourse and debate about the issue of inclusion and how such children could be excluded (Fenech, 2012). It examines issues central to teachers' awareness of SEBD. Specifically, the goal of this study was to explore and describe how school systems respond to the needs of children with SEBD and examine the preparedness of teachers to address these needs at the level of the individual child in an inclusive setting. It also examines the historical background, risk factors and current developments in SEBD research. Given the nature of the intricacies of teaching and managing children with SEBD, we underpin this complexity with theoretical perspectives. Our intention in this paper is to give central place to primary school teachers' perceptions of the behaviours of students with SEBD and explore the form of professional training and strategies necessary to help them manage children's behaviour more effectively in the specific context of the Maltese educational system.

#### **2. BACKGROUND**

Given that the United Kingdom can be considered to be one of the pioneers in addressing the education of SEBD students, and that the Maltese Islands share a colonial past of over one and a half centuries with the UK, this impacted the foundations of the Maltese educational system. It is for this reason that we shall begin by referring to the legal context central to SEBD in the UK. The notion of SEBD emerged in the UK in the 1990s, but its

roots can be traced back decades. Reference to SEBD had already been made in 1944 using different terminologies (Squires, 2012). The UK Education Act of 1944 (Legislation.gov.uk, 1944) explained how students labelled as maladjusted or educationally sub-normal received special education in distinct schools. It was not until the publication of the Warnock Report in 1978, followed by the UK Education Act of 1981 that such labels were replaced by less stigmatising terms like learning difficulties and special educational needs which covered a broad spectrum of difficulties or disabilities, including SEBD.

The term SEBD was first acknowledged legally within the English Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in 1994. It was then amended in the 2001 version as indicated by Armstrong (2013). An important sub-strategy of this Code was the organisation of policy agendas to enhance educational practice, including the change in teachers' perception of pupil behaviour and its potential causes. Kay (2007) emphasised that the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice was designed to support teachers in identifying, assessing and supporting students with SEBD. The duties presented in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 are part of the said Code and included the rights of students with SEBD in the education sector. Subsequently, the Equality Act 2010 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2010) aimed to provide tailored treatment and equal educational opportunities to individuals, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, including those with SEBD. A year later, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government launched a consultation document entitled *Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability* (Department for Education, 2011). This document suggested a different approach to better support children with SEN and disability. The *Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (Department for Education, 2014) was enshrined in the Children and Families Act 2014 – Childrens, 2014. Although it is not without its detractors, it is of particular relevance to the field of special education. It drives for early intervention and the growth of developmentalism and emphasises adulthood, employment and independence, with the individual ideally being managed from birth through to a productive life (Penketh, 2014). The SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2014) refers to the issues discussed in this study as falling under the umbrella term of social, emotional and mental health.

SEBD is a wide-ranging term that is generally used in Education to refer to those students who exhibit difficulties in behaviour, emotions, and relationships, which are so persistent that they inhibit children's learning and development (Visser, Daniels, & Macnab, 2005). Cooper (2010) provides a broader application to the term and remarks that SEBD is often found across the field of social policy, including Social Well-being, Mental Health and Criminal Justice, besides Education. Cooper and Cefai (2013) observed that in Education, the term SEBD is generally associated with those students who exhibit disturbing or disruptive behaviours that can hinder their ability to socialise with others or regulate their emotions. Breen, Edgar, Farrell, Kealey and McFadden (2014) describe the behaviour of these students: seeking to distract by using humour or violence; attracting positive attention by provoking the teacher; and disrupting classroom-learning activities. The social difficulties of students with SEBD include the challenges they experience in establishing relationships with peers and the subsequent developing of confrontational relationships with teachers (Diener & Milich, 1997). Furthermore, in these situations, there is a good likelihood that these students develop feelings of depression and low self-worth (De Leeuw, De Boer, Bijstra, & Minnaert, 2018).

Macleod (2010) observed how the term SEBD is so broad and vague that it often overlaps with labels such as disaffected, disengaged, disruptive, and, challenging and with disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant

Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder (CD). These labels and disorders are, in fact, all linked to external behaviours. These behaviours, which Cooper and Cefai (2013) qualify as 'acting-out' (disruptive behaviours) and 'acting-in' (withdrawal, low self-esteem, exclusion, and extreme fear) can pose a threat to the child's health and safety, particularly in students who do not share their difficulties but internalise their emotions. The reason is that these students are less likely to draw their teachers' attention to their state of mind since they do not cause any apparent disruption to the learning process (Bennathan, 2003).

There is concurrence among researchers that children diagnosed with SEBD exhibit frequent emotional or behavioural difficulties within or across specific settings (Ayers & Prytys, 2002). Jones, Dohrn, and Dunn (2004) contended that "students with emotional and behavioural problems differ from other students in the frequency, intensity, and duration of their behaviours" (p. 71). It is not the behaviour itself that determines whether the student has SEBD or not, but the gravity of the behaviour and the length of time it is manifested (Fovet, 2011). Reflecting this diversity, the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2014) paragraph 6.32, refers to SEBD tangentially under the caption of social, emotional, and mental health difficulties. The term encompasses a wide range of social and emotional difficulties such as withdrawal and isolation, challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviours. Underlying these disorders may be mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders or physical symptoms that are medically unexplained.

Cefai, Cooper, and Camilleri (2008) reported that about 10% of Maltese students exhibit traits of SEBD. Looking at some international research, this compares with the 10% proportion established internationally (Goodman, 1997; Meltzer, Gatward, Goodman, & Ford, 2000). Another study based on Danish teachers' perceptions suggested that 10% of the school population has serious behaviour difficulties (Egelund & Hansen 2000), while Dutch teachers estimated that about 11% of students exhibit SEBD (Smeets, Van der Veen, Derriks, & Roeleveld, 2007). While in the past, there was a trend to see SEBD as a problem residing within the child, a biopsychosocial approach explains how the critical elements in the child's life like predisposition, home, peers, school, and community contribute to its development (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). Recently there has been a shift from the traditional academic instruction to one that tries to educate the student holistically through social and emotional learning and skill-building that are essential to lifelong achievement and happiness (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

During the second half of the twentieth century, it was the norm in Malta, to refer to individuals with behavioural problems as maladjusted or handicapped (Bartolo, 2001). The 1974 Education Act (Laws of Malta, 1974) made provisions for these individuals. This Act decreed that students with some mental, emotional or physical handicap were to attend a special school.

The term SEBD was introduced locally around 2003 and eventually became associated with nurture groups (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017) within an inclusive education system. The *National Minimum Curriculum* (NMC) (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 1999) and the *Inclusive Education Policy* (Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education, 2000) were introduced to enhance inclusive education for all Maltese students (Cefai & Cooper, 2006). This reform saw the introduction of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), today known as Learning Support Educators (LSEs), to support students with Special Educational Needs. In Malta, nurture classes were created to provide support to schools, and as part of an early intervention strategy to mitigate and counteract the effects of SEBD within an inclusive setting and enhance schools' capacity to respond to diversity (Cefai & Cooper, 2011). Currently, teachers are expected to cater for the diverse needs of students (Verhoeven,

Aleتمان, Rots, & Buvens, 2006), and this can only be accomplished through the implementation of inclusive educational practice (Pit-ten Cate, Markova, Krischler, & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2018).

The aim of inclusive education is not to simply integrate students in mainstream education but to enhance the overall participation of the students in different classroom activities (Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2014). Inclusion in education is a process and approach that nurtures diversity and promotes equal opportunities for all students, no matter what their needs and abilities are. It is the way of addressing student diversity by improving participation in classrooms and reducing segregation in education (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2017). Nel, Engelbrecht, Swanepoel, and Hugo (2013) emphasised the dignity of inclusive education whereby "every student is viewed as a child/human being first with his/her own specific needs and is not stereotyped and/or labelled because of poverty, illness, disability or any other barrier to learning" (p. 785). Conscientious and professional teachers organise and manage the spatial structure of their classrooms for students with SEBD such that it becomes a predictable and comfortable environment which facilitates positive relationships with peers and adults (Schloss & Smith, 1998; Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008).

Inclusive education is underpinned by several interrelated values, some of which include equality, participation, community, compassion, and love (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). These can assist in fostering fruitful relationships and social engagement among students with SEBD. Barton and Armstrong (2008) and Cole (2005) argued that inclusive education can be a hard and complex process and should be interpreted in various ways. Giangreco (2007) acknowledged this complexity but emphasised that students with different needs and abilities should take part in common educational activities while pursuing personally suitable learning outcomes with tailored support and adaptations. Inclusive education can only be successful if students are provided with a child-friendly environment where they can enhance their learning and development, no matter what their needs and abilities are (Itfaq, Shujahat, & Khanum, 2017).

Teachers' attitude and their interaction with students is a significant factor that defines success in teaching students with different needs and abilities (Foreman, 2008). When teachers demonstrate a positive attitude towards these students, they are more likely to develop effective strategies to support them and thus make a success out of inclusion (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). Similarly, a healthy collaboration between the teacher and LSE facilitates the sharing of knowledge about the student's emotional state and improves overall management (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

In Malta, teachers' views and teaching skills central to SEBD diverge considerably. Some teachers believe that they are not fully equipped with the necessary skills to manage students' behavioural difficulties (Papantuono, Portelli, & Gibson, 2014). They are concerned about their effectiveness as educators and feel that they need more training and assistance (Nias, 1989). Kindzierski, O'Dell, Marable, and Raimondi (2013), and Cefai and Cooper (2006) opined that most teachers have very little knowledge of the best practices for teaching students with SEBD due to lack of training. Most teachers feel that they need more training and support and want to enhance their knowledge about what triggers challenging behaviours and the strategies that can be implemented to manage such behaviours (Childerhouse, 2017).

Various strategies can be used with students with SEBD (Lukowiak, 2010) and teachers should be knowledgeable about such strategies since SEBD students respond differently to diverse approaches (Jensen, 2005). Additionally, teachers need to know that forcing students to work might evoke extreme fearfulness in them (Nieman & Shea, 2004). Chhetri (2015) found that teachers believe that they learn about teaching students with SEBD when they

start working with them through a laborious process of trial and error. Teachers' ability to integrate tactile activities in their planning has been found to minimise problematic behaviours, particularly when they use visual timetables (Burton, 2006; Parsonson, 2012; Obaid, 2013; Spriggs, Mims, van Dijk, & Knight, 2017).

When working with students with SEBD, teachers experience a range of behaviours, from the defiant to the dangerous (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olorunda, 2009). Hence, these students challenge teachers at pedagogical and emotional levels. This means that, without adequate training, teachers may find themselves growing anxious, stressed, depressed and frustrated. Training encourages teachers to develop an understanding of SEBD, an awareness of strategies to manage SEBD and consciousness of when to raise concerns (Breen et al., 2014) and consequently experience less anxiety and frustration. Moreover, teachers can become effective when they learn by doing; they learn through reflective practice such that critical reflection leads to the best way to improve the education of their pupils (Meierdirk, 2016).

Classroom management is a significant characteristic of the teaching experience, which, if ignored, can lead to escalations of difficult and challenging behaviours. Teachers' lack of training and experience can affect their efficacy when dealing with SEBD (Cassady, 2011). Hence, teachers should be trained how to manage their classroom effectively since this increases students' engagement which, in turn, decreases the disruptive behaviour that is often displayed by students with SEBD (Postholm, 2013; Smeets, 2009). Moreover, classroom management has a dual role: to establish specific rules and routines to conduct various classroom activities; to give explicit information on academic and social responses required for learning (Brophy, 1996; Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). Equally important is the teacher-LSE relationship and their response to the student's needs. At a professional level, the relationship between the teacher and the LSE should be underpinned by the sharing of knowledge about the child's emotional state, the ability to create facilitative resources and the provision of another educator in the classroom (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

The absence of a primary caregiver can create insecurity for the child, which can lead to challenging and aggressive behaviours (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2011). In this case, parent-school partnership and collaboration with LSEs become other important aspects of school improvement and success (Katz & Miranda, 2002). More specifically, parents' involvement in their child's education tends to affect positively the pupil's classroom behaviour, self-esteem, and engagement (Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007). Inversely, a lack of parental involvement can be inimical to the successful outcome of managing a child with SEBD at school, because of the need for an ongoing, honest parent-teacher collaboration (DiJohn, 2015).

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study were to 1) explore teachers' knowledge of SEBD, 2) examine their ability to respond to children's needs in an inclusive setting, and 3) consider their views about their continuing professional development in the area.

### **4. DESIGN**

The non-probability sampling techniques (purposive and convenience sampling) was adopted to select the sample of 180 teachers from 29 Maltese primary schools, within the State Colleges located in a particular geographical zone in the Maltese islands. Only eighty

self-completed questionnaires were collected for the study. Ten teachers working in the same primary schools with students with SEBD were randomly selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. The 11-item questionnaire covered necessary demographic information such as gender, years of teaching experience and the grade taught at the time. The majority of the questions focused on: the respondents' understanding of the term SEBD and whether they perceived it to be different from 'maladjustment', their years of experience of teaching children with SEBD and the strategies they found to work best with such children. The final questions tapped whether respondents felt that their initial teacher education was adequate to assist them in responding to the needs of children with SEBD. The interview schedule based on 9 questions explicitly concentrated on issues of strategies used with children thus affected, cooperation with learning support educators, the stress experienced in dealing with classroom situations involving children with SEBD and respondents' general preparedness for their work with such children.

## 5. METHOD

The research method adopted the interpretative paradigm and descriptive approach to "understand the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003, p. 22). We sought to comprehend how the respondents and interviewees interpreted their role in teaching students with SEBD, as well as the world presented by the participants, which "will be glossed with meanings ... of those people who are their source" (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 17). Furthermore, piecing together the participants' social constructions and the meanings they attributed to them, including their verbal and non-verbal communication, their tone of voice and facial expression helped us gain a more robust and comprehensive understanding of their reality as suggested by Klein and Myers (1999).

Our position in this regard is underlined by Burrell and Morgan (1979). They maintained that social science researchers, directly or indirectly, approach their research via four philosophical assumptions: ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology. They sustained that assumptions about human nature are linked to issues of an ontological and epistemological nature, since these address the relationship between human beings and their environment. They argued that ontology helps the researcher understand the different ways in which the world around us can be investigated and understood and whether the collected data is real or the product of the participants' perception. Burrell and Morgan (1979) added that the assumptions of an epistemological nature deal with how researchers understand and communicate the knowledge that is collected.

Furthermore, as suggested by Burrell and Morgan (1979), human nature assumptions help researchers establish if the environment conditions the actions of human beings (mechanistic view), or if human beings play a leading role in the creation of their environment (deterministic stance). Finally, according to these sources, the fourth set of assumptions of a methodological nature focuses on the methodology researchers employ to conduct their studies. Burrell and Morgan also contended that the first three assumptions mentioned above have direct implications for the kind of study undertaken.

We employed the descriptive analysis method to summarise the data that emerged from the questionnaires, as stated by Best and Kahn (1998) since it allowed both the researcher and the reader to visualise and interpret the collected data. Hence, the descriptive analysis was the best method to describe the basic features of the study rather than presenting data through graphs and statistics, which can only provide simple summaries.

Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and their anonymity was respected. The tally approach was followed to analyse the questionnaire data. The responses of the close-ended questions were grouped in a frequency table, to minimise repetition of data, whilst the data from the open-ended questions were analysed by recording the codes in a frequency table. Hence, we could outline the most common key terms used by the respondents. For the analysis of the qualitative data, we used the effective thematic approach as advocated by Haralambos and Holborn (2008), since we planned to identify the themes that emerged. For this procedure, we followed the six significant guidelines (becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for the themes; reviewing the themes; defining and naming themes, and producing the report) established by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## 6. FINDINGS

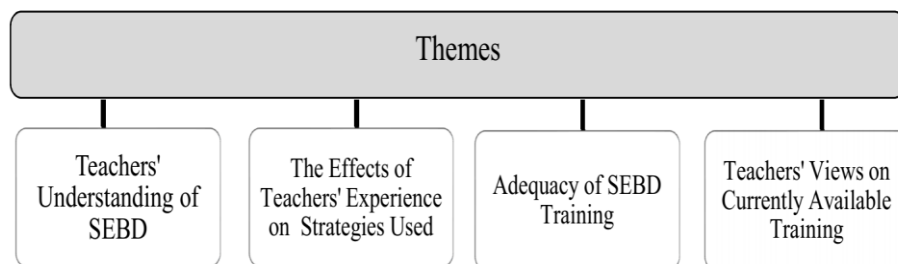
### 6.1. Demographics

The data collected from the survey, together with the interviews, helped us analyse: the aim central to teachers' current knowledge of SEBD, strategies they used to attend to the needs of students with SEBD, and the secondary aim of acquiring information on what can assist teachers to grow professionally and develop skills that enhance the pedagogical process for SEBD students. The following is a breakdown of the 80 respondents answering our questionnaire; eight (10%) were male, and 72 (90%) were female. Thirty-one respondents (39%) were teaching Grade 3, 25 (31%) were teaching Grade 4, and 24 (30%) were teaching Grade 5. Thirty-two (40%) of respondents had been teaching for 1 – 5 years, 12 (15%) had been teaching for 6 – 10 years, 10 (13%) had been teaching for 11 – 15 years, nine (11%) had been teaching for 16 – 20 years, and 17 (21%) had been teaching for over 21 years.

### 6.2. Questionnaires

The data obtained from the collected 80 questionnaires generated four themes, as explained in Figure 1.

Figure 1.  
Four themes that emerged from the questionnaires.



The respondents' understanding of the term SEBD varied and ranged from *children who are troubled and cause trouble to an issue that includes ADHD and anxiety*. When asked about the relationship between the terms maladjustment and SEBD, the majority saw the two terms as dissimilar. A good number recorded that SEBD occurred regardless of the environment; some considered maladjustment and SEBD as two different conditions and a few recorded that SEBD was a more complex term than maladjustment. A smaller number

considered the two terms to be similar. The majority of this cohort claimed that both conditions were characterised by the same traits such as those demonstrating physical and verbal aggression, whereas a few claimed that maladjustment caused SEBD.

The participants' responses about behaviours emanating from SEBD varied between 'acting-out' and 'acting-in' behaviours. Acting-out behaviours ranged from outbursts of extreme anger, persistent bullying of other children, aggression, constantly challenging and contradicting teachers, to arguing with the teacher. The most commonly identified acting-in behaviours were: withdrawal, and being antisocial and shy around children.

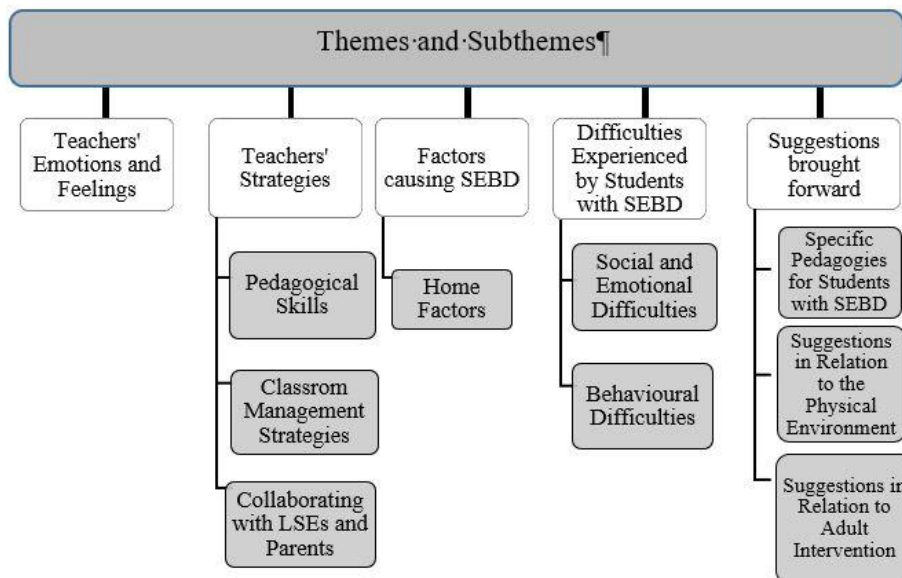
Sixty, of the 80 questionnaire respondents, had the experience of teaching students with SEBD, and 57 of them, indicated that their preferred strategy was establishing a good relationship with the student. The same group suggested counselling, positive reinforcement, focussing on the child's strengths, attending a nurture class and maintaining a constant routine. The other three respondents, with no experience of teaching students with SEBD, indicated patience and focusing on the child's strengths as possible strategies.

Items in our questionnaire also addressed the issue of the appropriateness of training that would support teachers with knowledge and skills to help them meet the needs of students with SEBD. Forty-five respondents claimed that their University teacher training course gave them specific skills to meet the needs of students with SEBD; the remaining 34 respondents were uncertain about this claim. None of the respondents claimed that the training they received prepared them very well for teaching such children. Overall, the majority concurred that their training gave them some level of skills, albeit limited.

### 6.3. Interviews

Ten interviews were conducted, which generated the themes and sub-themes illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.  
A thematic map presenting the five themes and nine sub-themes that emerged from the interviews.





All 10 interviewees reported that they had worked with SEBD students throughout their careers, some of whom claimed no formal preparation in teaching such students. As a result, these interviewees experienced stress when working with students with SEBD. They attributed this to their lack of formal preparation and felt unable to understand and deal with the student's behaviours, particularly when they could not devise appropriate intervention strategies (theme 1). Interviewees suggested several ad hoc strategies that could be executed in the classroom, but in their narratives, they did not put forward specific evidence-based intervention exemplars. Interviewees voiced the need for formal training in SEBD and improved staffing ratios in classes with children with SEBD.

We identified pedagogical and classroom management strategies as two of the subthemes falling under the theme of Teachers' Strategies in Figure 2 (theme 2). Teachers remarked that when they observed students regularly and kept a running record of events, they could track students' progress, helping them to identify events triggering inappropriate behaviours. They stressed the importance of a safe classroom environment, where students experiencing family problems and parental separation, which were cited as the primary causal factors of SEBD (theme 3), could feel secure. Such a positive classroom environment served to establish trusting relationships. Teachers collaborated closely with LSEs (another subtheme we listed under the second theme, Figure 2) by sharing schemes of work, planning the day's schedule of activities, and exchanging important information in a bid to address daily challenges. One interviewee explained how together, teachers and LSEs identified triggers of unacceptable behaviours and worked together to circumvent such occasions. In one such case, the LSE (who worked very closely with and knew the student much better than the teacher) guided the respective educator about which strategies to adopt with him. Other interviewees suggested parent partnerships in the learning process. They claimed that parents were a useful source of information on how they handled and dealt with their children at home. This offered the opportunity for mutual learning because parents could also learn from how their children's needs were addressed in the classroom, which could be adopted and continued at home.

Interviewees opined that students with SEBD found it challenging to voice their thoughts and express emotions. They claimed that children with SEBD exhibited two separate classes of problematic behaviours; loneness and aggression (theme 4). These affected children's social development with deleterious effects on class participation. Aggressive behaviour that included rough play and hitting others tended to characterise children with SEBD. This fuelled distrust and unhealthy relationships. Moreover, difficulty with following routines and general impulsivity hindered learning in such children. While on the one hand, students with SEBD would act-out by throwing tantrums, others could act-in and suffer in silence.

These interviews helped us to identify three additional sub-themes: specific pedagogies, school environment and adult intervention (theme 5). There was consensus among interviewees that group work was one of the strategies that would improve children's social skills. The use of a graphic timetable was another strategy which interviewees agreed gave the students some idea of the day's proceedings. Another strategy involved spending time in multi-sensory rooms and attending nurture classes; this relieved children's classroom induced stress (Figure 2, theme 5 above). Interviewees concurred that these two environments provided the ideal atmosphere for the students who enjoyed some quiet time and could express their emotions, frustrations and anger through play. Two interviewees claimed that gardening released some of the students' anxiety, enhanced concentration skills and improved socialisation skills.

## 7. DISCUSSION

We contextualised the four themes (Figure 1) that emerged from the questionnaire data in the reviewed literature. A robust emergent theme was that the majority of respondent teachers were knowledgeable about the concepts surrounding the umbrella term of SEBD as Breen et al., (2014) claimed in their research. Respondents' concurrence, that students with SEBD were not only prone to misbehaviour but also found it challenging to communicate their emotions, and that such behaviour could hamper the individual's socialising ability, found support in the research of Cooper and Cefai (2013). Likewise, the respondents' position on a real difference between 'maladjustment' and SEBD found concurrence with Cooper and Cefai (2013). Their experience that children with SEBD generally display extreme outbursts of anger and aggression concurred with Breen et al., (2014), Cooper and Cefai (2013), and Kaiser and Rasminsky (2011).

The data continued to draw attention to the way teachers' experience impacted on how they managed pupils with SEBD. It emerged that their experience stood them in good stead because they were more resourceful and mentioned more strategies than those who had never supported such pupils. Their experience helped teachers to teach and guide pupils when correcting those with SEBD rather than coercing them to do something, in line with Nieman and Shea's (2004) claim. Our finding that experience armed teachers with many strategies to support children with SEBD, in contrast to those with no experience concurs with Cassidy's (2011) findings.

Disconcertingly, there was consensus among the respondents that their tertiary level training in the Faculty of Education had left them unskilled in developing an evidence-based approach to SEBD. Such a finding suggests that initial teacher training courses may not equip educators with the necessary skills to manage students with behavioural difficulties as claimed by Papantuono et al. (2014). The reported dearth of professional training in SEBD sheds light on the quality of the existing available training, which explains the general lack of practical strategies and skills that teachers possess. We agree with the findings of Smeets (2009) and Childerhouse (2017) that such training would be the way forward for teachers to manage and help students with SEBD develop socially acceptable behaviours.

This part of the article discusses the issues that emerged from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The exemplars provided by the interviewees, were central to the adaptation of content related pedagogy. This involved the application of tactile activities as found in Parsonson (2012) and Obaid (2013) and helped us to identify the sub-themes of content related pedagogy, classroom management strategies and collaborating with parents and LSEs. Given the emergent sub-themes, we came to an understanding of the importance of teacher strategies in minimising problematic behaviours. We also understood, as emphasised by Schloss and Smith (1998), and Wannarka and Ruhl (2008) that conducive classroom environments need clear rules, routines and positive relationships if they are to minimise children's unacceptable behaviours. Furthermore, as advocated by Devecchi and Rouse (2010), we recognised that close teacher-LSE collaboration benefits children. Contrary to Michael et al's (2007) study, this same mindset as evident in the data did not feature so strongly in fostering and sustaining a partnership with parents. Only one interviewee mentioned parental involvement. This suggests that Maltese educators do not recognise the importance of a family-school partnership. We believe that schools need to explore and develop wider collaborative practices with their stakeholders.

## 8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Further research in this area could address more directly the specific knowledge base and skills that teachers possess in relation to SEBD, and the level of support they require to adequately respond to children's needs at a systemic level. Teachers participating in this study indicated that they needed ongoing emotional support as well as adequate professional preparation. This can, in part, be achieved by continuing professional development, and future research may consider this issue as one of its focal points.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

Issues of emotions and stress were central to SEBD students and teachers. These led us to understand how difficult it is for SEBD students to build and maintain relationships with their peers. This impacted on relationships and fuelled feelings of depression and low self-worth as claimed by Diener and Milich (1997) and De Leeuw et al. (2018), hence affecting the social and emotional development of SEBD students as claimed by Cooper and Cefai (2013). We conclude, as Camilleri and Cefai (2013) claimed, that on their part, teachers' ineptitude in responding to these needs, which they believed were caused by the home environment, could very well fuel their anxiety as stated by Papantuono et al. (2014). Lukowiak's (2010) call for effective approaches with SEBD students, is underpinned by the reference that interviewees made to several strategies. These strategies echo findings by Burton (2006), Obaid (2013), and Spriggs et al. (2017), and were a leitmotif in this study. On a different plane, the majority of the interviewees recognised the positive impact that the physical environment had on SEBD students in line with Postholm (2013) and Smeets (2009). The use of multi-sensory rooms and nurture group settings was a popular suggestion indicating an awareness of the impact that adults could have on students' behaviour. This continued to accentuate parental partnership, ongoing training of staff and the employment of a teacher assistant in every class as in Breen et al. (2014).

All students are eligible for the provision of appropriate support in their learning and behaviour in schools. This right is enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). In the case of those students presenting with SEBD, mainly because of their acting-out and acting-in behaviours and the challenges these pose to teachers, one cannot but provide teachers with the opportunity for continuous professional development in SEBD to ensure that such students get their full entitlement to an education. Primary years teachers should be well equipped to meet the needs of these students and to develop an effective repertoire of strategies that are tailored to the student's individual needs, ensuring that class time becomes an engaging and fruitful experience for all.

Being a small- scale study conducted in a limited geographical area, and tapping only the primary school sector, creates its limitations. These limitations are compounded by a questionnaire response rate of 45%, by incomplete questionnaire items and only relatively few participants consenting to be interviewed. Nevertheless, in spite of these limitations, this study contributes to another facet of research in this area, particularly given its local flavour.

## REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M., & Miles, S. (2008). Making education for all inclusive: Where next? *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 38(1), 15-34. doi:10.1007/s11125-008-9055-0
- Albrecht, S. F., Johns, B. H., Mounstevan, J., & Olorunda, O. (2009). Working conditions as risk or resiliency factors for teachers of students with emotional and behavioural disabilities. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(10), 1006-1022. doi:10.1002/pits.20440
- Armstrong, D. (2013). Educator perceptions of children who present with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties: A literature review with implications for recent educational policy in England and internationally. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(7), 1-15. doi:10.1080/13603116.2013.823245
- Ayers, H., & Prytys, C. (2002). *An A to Z practical guide to emotional and behavioural difficulties*. London: David Fulton.
- Bartolo, P. A. (2001). Recent developments in inclusive education in Malta. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 6(2), 65-91.
- Barton L., & Armstrong F. (2008). Introduction. In: L. Barton & F. Armstrong (Eds.), *Policy, Experience and Change: Cross-Cultural Reflections on Inclusive Education. Inclusive Education: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (vol. 4, pp 1-4). Springer: Dordrecht.
- Beacham, N., & Rouse, M. (2012). Student teachers' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and inclusive practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 12(1), 3-11. doi:10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01194.x
- Bennathan, M. (2003, Spring/Summer). Proving that nurture groups work. *SEBDA News*, p. 26(newsletter of the Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Association).
- Best, J. W., & Kahn, J. V. (1998). *Research in Education* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. Retrieved from <https://ww2.odu.edu/~jritz/attachments/reined.pdf>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Breen, M., Edgar, K., Farrell, T., Kealey, H., & McFadden, C. (2014). *Guidance on Identifying and Supporting Learners with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. Retrieved from [http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/inclusion\\_and\\_sen/sebd/sebd-guidance\\_identify\\_and\\_support.pdf](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/inclusion_and_sen/sebd/sebd-guidance_identify_and_support.pdf)
- Brophy, J. E. (1996). *Teaching problem students*. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (2019). *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis: Elements of the sociology of corporate life* (Routledge revivals) London: Routledge.
- Burton, S. (2006). "Over to you": Group work to help pupils avoid school exclusion. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 22(3), 215-236.
- Camilleri, L., & Cefai, C. (2013). Identifying the factors that influence change in SEBD using logistic regression analysis. *World Journal of Education*, 3(4), 96-104.
- Cassady, J. M. (2011). Teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism and emotional behavioural disorder. *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 2(7), 1-23.
- Cefai, C., & Cooper, P. (2006). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in Malta: an educational perspective. *Journal of Maltese Education Research*, 4(1), 18-36.
- Cefai, C., & Cooper, P. (2011). The introduction of nurture groups in Maltese schools: A method of promoting inclusive education. *British Journal of Special Education*, 38(2). doi:10.1111/j.1467-8578.2011.00500.x
- Cefai, C., Cooper, P., & Camilleri, L. (2008). *Engagement time: A national study of students with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in Maltese schools*. European Centre for Educational Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health.
- Cefai, C., & Pizzuto, S. A. S. (2017). Listening to the voices of young children in a nurture class. *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(3), 248-260. doi:10.1080/13632752.2017.1331987
- Chhetri, K. K. (2015). *Investigation teachers' concern and experiences in teaching children with special educational needs in Bhutan* (Unpublished Master's thesis). Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved from [https://eprints.qut.edu.au/84747/1/Kishore%20Kumar\\_Chhetri\\_Thesis.pdf](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/84747/1/Kishore%20Kumar_Chhetri_Thesis.pdf)

- Childerhouse, H. (2017). *Supporting children with 'Social, emotional and behavioural difficulty (SEBD)' in mainstream: Teachers' perspectives* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/16546/1/HChilderhouse2017.pdf>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2003). *Research Methods in Education* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Cole, B. A. (2005). Mission impossible? Special educational needs, inclusion and the re-conceptualization of the role of the SENCO in England and Wales. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 20(3), 287-307. doi:10.1080/08856250500156020
- Cooper, P. (2010). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in young people: The challenge for policy makers. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 2(1), 4-16.
- Cooper, P., & Cefai, C. (2013). *Understanding and supporting students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties: A practical guide for staff in schools*. University of Malta. Euro Centre for Educational Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health.
- Cooper, P., & Jacobs, B. (2011). *From inclusion to engagement: Helping students engage with schooling through policy and practice*. London: Blackwell.
- De Leeuw, R. R., De Boer, A. A., Bijstra, J., & Minnaert, A. E. M. G. (2018). Teacher strategies to support the social participation of students with SEBD in the regular classroom. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 33(3), 412-426. doi:10.1080/08856257.2017.1334433
- Department for Education. (2011). *Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability - consultation* (policy paper). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/support-and-aspiration-a-new-approach-to-special-educational-needs-and-disability-consultation>
- Department for Education. (2014). *Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- Devecchi, C., & Rouse, M. (2010). An exploration of the features of effective collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants in secondary schools. *Support for Learning*, 25(2), 91-99. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9604.2010.01445.x
- Diener, M. B., & Milich, R. (1997). Effects of positive feedback on the social interactions of boys with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: A test of the self-protective hypothesis. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 26(3), 256-265. doi:10.1207/s15374424jccp2603\_4
- DiJohn, G. M. (2015). *Effective and efficient parent-teacher communication*. (Unpublished Master's thesis) MAED dissertation. Saint Catherine University, St. Paul, Minnesota. Retrieved from <https://sophia.stkate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=maed>
- Egelund, N. & Hansen, K. F. (2000). Behavioural disorders in Danish schools: a quantitative survey. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 15(2), 158-170. doi: 10.1080/088562500361592
- Fenech, L. (2012). *Nurture Groups for Pupils with SEBD: Inclusion or Exclusion?* (Unpublished Master's thesis) M.Ed. Dissertation. University of Malta, Malta.
- Foreman, P. (2008). *Inclusion in action* (2nd ed.). Sydney: Cengage.
- Fovet, F. (2011). Towards a new construct of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16(3), 249-262. doi:10.1080/13632752.2011.595089
- Giangreco, M. F. (2007). Extending inclusive opportunities. *Educational Leadership*, 64(5), 34-37.
- Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38(5), 581-586.
- Haralambos, M., & Holborn, M. (2008). *Sociology*. London: Collins.
- Itfaq, K. K., Shujahat, H. H., & Khanum, N. (2017). Inclusive education in government primary schools: Teacher perceptions. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 4(1), 32-47. doi:10.22555/joeeed.v4i1.1331
- Jensen, M. M. (2005). *Introduction to EBD*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Jones, V. F., Dohrn, E. A., & Dunn, C. (2004). *Creating effective programs for students with emotional and behaviour disorders: Interdisciplinary approaches for adding meaning and hope to behaviour change interventions*. Boston, MA.: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

- Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (2011). *Challenging behaviour in young children: Understanding, preventing, and responding effectively*. Boston, MA.: Pearson.
- Katz, J., & Miranda, P. (2002). Including students with developmental disabilities in general education classrooms: Educational benefits. *International Journal of Special Education*, 17(2), 14-24.
- Kay, J. (2007). *Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties: A guide for the early years*. London: Continuum.
- Kindziarski, C. M., O'Dell, R., Marable, M. A., & Raimondi, S. L. (2013). You tell us: How well are we preparing teachers for a career in classrooms serving children with emotional disabilities? *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties*, 18(2), 179-195. doi:10.1080/13632752.2012.726327
- Klein, H. K., & Myers, M.D. (1999). A set of Principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive field studies in Information Systems. *MIS Quarterly*; 23(1), 67-93. Doi:102307/249410
- Lane, K. L., Gresham, F. M., & O'Shaughnessy, T. E. (2002). Identifying, assessing, and intervening with children with or at-risk for behavior disorders: A Look to the Future. In K.L. Lane, F. M. Gresham, and T. E. O'Shaughnessy (Eds.), *Interventions for children with or at risk for Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. (pp. 317-326). Needham: Allyn & Bacon.
- Laws of Malta. (1974). *Education Act. Act 39 of 1974*. An act to consolidate and reform the Law related to Education in Malta. Malta Government Gazette No. 12,993.
- Legislation.gov.uk. 1944. *Education Act 1944*. [online]. Retrieved from <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/educationact1944/>
- Legislation.gov.uk. 2010. *Equality Act 2010*. [online]. Retrieved from <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents/enacted>
- Legislation.gov.uk. (2014). Children And Families Act 2014 - Childrens. Retrieved from <http://www.ccinform.co.uk/legislation/children-families-act-2014/#adoption>
- Lukowiak, T. (2010). Positive behavioral strategies for students with EBD and needed supports for teachers and paraprofessionals. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals, Winter*, 40-52.
- Macleod, G. (2010). Identifying obstacles to a multidisciplinary understanding of 'disruptive' behaviour. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 15(2), 95-109. doi:10.1080/13632752.2010.480881
- Meierdirk, C. (2016). Is reflective practice an essential component of becoming a professional teacher? *Reflective Practice*, 17(3), 369-3788.
- Meltzer, H., Gatward, R., Goodman, R., & Ford, T. (2000). *Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in Great Britain*. London: Stationery Office.
- Michael, S., Dittus, P., & Epstein, J. (2007). Family and community involvement in schools: Results from the school health policies and programs study 2006. *The Journal of School Health*, 77(8), 567-87. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2007.00236.x
- Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education. (2000). Inclusive Education Policy Regarding Students with a Disability (Ministry of Education). Retrieved from [https://education.gov.mt/en/resources/documents/policy%20documents/inclusion\\_of\\_students\\_with\\_disability.pdf](https://education.gov.mt/en/resources/documents/policy%20documents/inclusion_of_students_with_disability.pdf)
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment. (1999). *Creating the Future Together*, National Minimum Curriculum, Malta: MEYE.
- Nel, M., Engelbrecht, A., Swanepoel, H., & Hugo, A. (2013). *Embracing diversity through multi-level teaching: For foundation, intermediate and senior phase*. Cape Town, South Africa: Juta.
- Nias, J. (1989). *Primary teachers talking: A study of teaching as work*. London: Routledge.
- Nieman, P., & Shea, S. (2004). Effective discipline for children. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 9(1), 37-41. doi:10.1093/pch/9.1.37
- Obaid, M. A. S. (2013). The impact of using multi-sensory approach for teaching students with learning disabilities. *Journal of International Education Research*, 9(1), 75-82. doi:10.19030/jier.v9i1.7502
- Papantuono, M., Portelli, C., & Gibson, P. (2014). *Winning without fighting: A handbook effective solutions for social emotional and behavioural problems in students* (1st ed.). Malta: Malta University Publishing.

- Parsonson, B. S. (2012). Evidence-based classroom behaviour management strategies. *Kairaranga*, 13(1), 16-23.
- Penketh, C. (2014). Invention and repair: disability and education after the UK Coalition Government. *Disability & Society*, 29(9), 1486-1490. doi:10.1080/09687599.2014.948751
- Pit-ten Cate, I. M., Markova, M., Krischler, M., & Krolak-Schwerdt, S. (2018). Promoting inclusive education: The role of teachers' competence and attitudes. *Insights into Learning Disabilities*, 15(1), 49-63.
- Postholm, M. B. (2013). Classroom management: What does research tell us? *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(3), 389-402. doi:10.2304/eej.2013.12.3.389
- Reyes, M., Brackett, M., Rivers, S., White, M., & Salovey, P. (2012). Classroom emotional climate student engagement and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(3), 700-712. doi:10.1037/a0027268
- Rodriguez, C. C., & Garro-Gil, N. (2014). Inclusion and integration on special education. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 191, 1323-1327. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.488
- Schloss, P. J., & Smith, M. A. (1998). *Applied behaviour analysis in the classroom* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA.: Allyn & Bacon.
- SENDA (2001). *Special educational needs and disability act 2001*. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2001/10/contents>
- Smeets, E. (2009). Managing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in schools in the Netherlands. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 1(1), 50-63.
- Smeets, E., Van der Veen, I., Derriks, M., & Roeleveld, J. (2007). *Zorgleerlingen en leerlingenzorg op de basisschool* [Pupils with special educational needs and special needs education in mainstream primary schools]. Nijmegen / Amsterdam, The Netherlands: ITS / SCO-Kohnstamm Instituut.
- Spriggs, A. D., Mims, P. J., van Dijk, W., & Knight, V. F. (2017). Examination of the evidence base for using visual activity schedules with students with intellectual disability. *Journal of Special Education*, 51(1), 14-26. doi:10.1177/0022466916658483
- Squires, G. (2012). Historical and socio-political agendas around defining and including children with special educational needs. In D. Armstrong (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in special educational needs: Considering the whole child* (pp. 9-24). London: Open University Press.
- United Nations. (1989). *Rights for every child – Convention on the rights of the child*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Verhoeven, J., Aelterman, A., Rots, I., & Buvens, I. (2006). Public perceptions of teachers' status in Flanders. *Teachers and Teaching*, 12(4), 479-500. doi:10.1080/13450600600644350
- Visser, J., Daniels, H., & Macnab, N. (2005). Missing: Children and young people with SEBD. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 10(1), 43-54. doi:10.1177/1363275205050884
- Wannarka, R. & Ruhl, K. (2008). Seating arrangements that promote positive academic and behavioural outcomes: A review of empirical research. *Support for Learning*, 23(2), 89-93. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9604.2008.00375.x

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to express their thanks to all the participants in this study and particularly to those who offered to be interviewed.

## AUTHORS' INFORMATION

**Full name:** Victor Martinelli

**Institutional affiliation:** University of Malta

**Institutional address:** Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida MSD20280, Malta

**Biographical sketch:** Victor Martinelli is an associate professor at the University of Malta and has been lecturing in Educational Psychology and Education in general for many years. As a practising educational psychologist, he has an interest in specific learning difficulties and special educational needs and has published in these areas over these last years.

**Full name:** Mario Cutajar

**Institutional affiliation:** University of Malta

**Institutional address:** c/o Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida MSD20280, Malta

**Biographical sketch:** Dr. Mario Cutajar, is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Malta with an educator's career spanning over 4 decades. His main areas of research comprise intra- and inter-school collaboration, educational leadership, and governance and governing of schools. He published papers in Maltese and international peer-reviewed journals and reviewed several books and official documents.

**Full Name:** Martina Debattista

**Institutional affiliation:** University of Malta

**Institutional address:** c/o Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida MSD20280, Malta

**Biographical sketch:** Martina Debattista majored in Early Childhood Education from the University of Malta. She works as an Early Years teacher in a state school, teaching year 2 children.

**Full Name:** Amira Mangion

**Institutional affiliation:** University of Malta

**Institutional address:** c/o Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida MSD20280, Malta

**Biographical sketch:** Amira Mangion majored in Early Childhood Education from the University of Malta. She is currently teaching an early years class of children from very diverse social and ethnic backgrounds.