



MAPSSS

Maltese Association of Parents
of State School Students

SPECIAL NEEDS AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MALTA AUDITED BY THE EUROPEAN AGENCY EXTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

MAPSSS REVIEW AND COMMENTS

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1.0. Introduction

This is the Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students (MAPSSS) review of the audit report that has been prepared by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education on behalf of the Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta. The report, entitled: *Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta Audited by the European Agency External Audit Report* has been developed as a result of work conducted throughout 2014 by staff and consultants from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education **within a Maltese context.**

In its Introduction, the report explains in detail the Audit approach and objectives as well as key milestones within the Audit. It gives a historical background for Special Needs in Malta as well as on recent developments. The report also explains the Standards for the Audit, which MAPSSS found well set out and explained. MAPSSS in general agrees with the conclusion of this Report that *'Many system factors reinforce an integrative approach for some learners, rather than an inclusive approach for all learners'*.

2.0. MAPSSS' Position:

2.1. Feedback on Current National Policy, Implementation and Approach

In general MAPSSS found that the Audit Report gave a very good picture of the actual situation in schools where Special Needs and Inclusive Education are involved. MAPSSS finds that the following Findings and Recommendations particularly interesting and of concern. The Association agrees that the way forward to ensure quality education for all the children should de facto address the points below as indicated in the Audit report:

'In relation to how effectively schools are enabled to implement inclusive education, the Audit data indicates that various system factors result in schools being only partially enabled to effectively implement inclusive education. Many system factors reinforce an integrative approach for some learners, rather than an inclusive approach for all learners.' [Executive Summary, pg 13, par2]

We agree with the recommendations presented in this Report *that will be necessary to further develop effective policy and practice for inclusive education.* Some examples of which are listed below:

¹ Full Report available on <http://education.gov.mt/en/resources/News/Pages/News%20items/Inclusive-Education-Audit-Report.aspx>

- *creating clarity around the concept of inclusion through national dialogue, leading to a review of legislation and policy;*
- *re-focusing support to increase the capacity of colleges and schools to meet the needs of all learners;*
- *establishing a national training body to ensure the development of appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding for all education leaders, teachers and support personnel;*
- *providing support to schools to help them to develop a curriculum to engage all learners and to use evidence-based assessment, teaching and learning approaches to meet diverse needs; and*
- *promoting self-review at all system levels and using information to inform further improvement.*

MAPSSS agrees that the current national policy for special needs and inclusive education is not adequately tailored to the Maltese context as it is fragmented and hence the implementation is not coherent². Our understanding of Inclusion Education is not physical integration into schools **and more needs to be done to ensure a proper understanding of the meaning of Inclusive Education within the local scenario**

We believe that this is the situation especially with children referred to as having complex special needs. Unfortunately we are having most of them **being inserted in the system** and not being able to have them included as should be **the case** with all children. This is further reinforced with the feedback received from the online Survey³. Thus, surveys are presented as good assessment tools allowing for a clear picture about the current status of inclusive education in Malta

2.2. Lack of Expertise and Absence of Adequate Procedures

Of interest and concern is the Findings Chapter⁴ where the Audit Committee found that there are a good number of professionals who feel unprepared for inclusive education. In view of this, we recommend that teachers and learning support assistants are encouraged to attend continuous professional development courses on Inclusive Education. Such encounters should not be limited to lectures on research carried out abroad but it should also involve discussions and workshops on real life situations that teachers and LSAs experience within the Maltese context. Continuous professional development specifically catered for the local scenario creates a supportive network and an effective implementation of suitable strategies rather than isolated initiatives that do not facilitate progression which therefore become counterproductive by hindering the scope of inclusive education.

As stated on Page 49, para. 4.2.1:

“According to the data collected, no stakeholder group considers that the initial or in-service training for SMTs, teachers, LSAs or other educational professionals fully meets the demands that these

² Chapter 3; pg. 41 par. 3.2.2 of the Report

³ pg. 44, para 3.2.4 of the Report

⁴ Chapter 4; pg. 49 para 4.2 of the Report

professionals face in schools. Data from the on-line survey indicates that the integrative approach promoted by different system-level factors (as discussed in Chapter 3) is further reinforced by the content and focus of existing professional training routes. Most respondents – SMTs, class teachers, LSAs and kindergarten staff – feel only partially enabled to implement inclusive education as a result of their initial training. Teachers in particular do not feel adequately prepared through their training to implement inclusive education. **Less than 20% consider that their initial training has fully enabled them to effectively meet learners' diverse needs.** Their initial training also failed to empower them to work collaboratively with others, including working effectively with parents.'

Moreover, as reported on Page 69/70, para 6.2.3:

'Within the resource centres there is a pool of skills and expertise that does not appear to be used effectively to support capacity building within mainstream schools. There is real potential for the resource centres to have a clearer role in supporting mainstream school staff – rather than individual learners. By working with mainstream teachers within, for example, co-teaching situations, the valuable expertise of resource centre staff could be used in a way that would contribute more effectively to capacity building and would benefit a far wider range of learners than those identified as having the most complex learning needs.'

This is of particular concern when one considers that in Resource Centres where all eligible students have complex learning/special needs, the teachers have the same training given to all other teachers in mainstream schools and contrary to what the Report states on pg. 69-70, in the majority, the teachers in Resource Centres *are not specialised* in special needs. An **anomaly** is seen in this Audit Report as the current local scenario on Resource Centres lacks the desired expertise to meet the expected inclusive education standards. Indeed, lessons in these Centres are adapted but there is no evaluation by any qualified entity on which methods and educational approaches are working and which are not. Education professionals know their subject very well and how to teach it. They do adaptations the way they know but not how they should for this specific stakeholder that is meant to benefit from their adaptations. For example, teaching a child with Down Syndrome is not the same as teaching a child with Autism. Staff do not know how to tackle behavioural problems and these difficulties are usually resolved by calling the parent to come for the child and take the child back home. There were situations where staff or children themselves were hurt in such episodes.

Parents have reported that although teachers are very good subject teachers and do their utmost to adapt subjects to the students, with all the challenges they face, it is a fact that in a whole school where all the students have special/complex needs, **there needs to be a specialised consultant/supervisor/psychologist** whose sole role will be that of coordinating and seeing that lessons are adapted as should be and that both teachers and students are given the necessary support and expertise back up. This is especially felt in the instances where staff is faced with challenging behaviour due to the complex needs of their students.

Parents wish to have in place **proper behaviour programmes** and a **qualified person to supervise these programmes** to help these students adapt themselves with others and be able to continue to live as active members of society as opposed to being secluded/institutionalised once they grow up. In order for this objective to be attained, society, mainly the education sector needs to adapt to the

needs of these children by setting up appropriate inclusive educational structures. Additionally, one has to also be proactive with these behaviours to **avoid unnecessary accidents at schools**. Since it is lately been obvious that certain conditions are rising in numbers such as students having autism and behaviour challenges this has to be given proper priority.⁵

MAPSSS feels that there should be at least one person as the reference person who is specialised in special needs and takes over issues and behavioural problems so the parents are assisted and the stakeholders actually given a true and fair chance at inclusive education. The reference person should, given the special nature of different conditions of these stakeholders, be allocated to a restricted group quoted as overwhelming. The reference person by having too many stakeholders to deal with will undoubtedly be counterproductive to the inclusive education that these initiatives aim to achieve.

Moreover, such educators should have a screening process in terms of experience in education within these settings. Most teachers in Resource Centres are new graduates that while being well versed in their subjects lack the special know-how required in these Centres. On the other hand new young staff has the energy and enthusiasm needed in these centres to embrace new initiatives and training. MAPSSS feels that providing adequate expertise within these Centres has a threefold benefit: First, it ensures that inclusive education is a right given to all children, regardless of their diverse needs. Secondly, by empowering teachers through continuous professional development and experience one is creating a safe environment for both the educators and the children, especially since a level of aggressive or uncontrolled behaviour tends to be present in the Resource Centres as well as in Mainstream schools. Thirdly, Parents of these stakeholders will have more reassurance and guidance as opposed to facing a continuous dialogue gap where the education care of these children is still mainly the sole responsibility of these Parents. MAPSSS feels that the school-home dialogue in this context needs to be strengthened with the primary point of departure being that of first gaining the special expertise in these Centres and main schools where applicable.

It is only when this expertise is attained that educators in these settings can be of true assistance to both students and parents. Educators in these sectors lack both expertise and support. Resultantly, a defensive response is provided to the concerned parent to the detriment of the students' educational and social development as ultimately without constructive feedback parents cannot reinforce positively what the Centres aim to achieve with these students nor will Parents be empowered to fully support their children in gaining the required life skills. Consequently, MAPSSS suggest a more in-depth analysis of what constitutes good practice in these Resource Centres and which practices need to be improved upon. Failure to take proactive action is considered as a breach of the mandatory education.

⁵ <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> and <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/printversion/37022/#.VTfhRt03IV>

2.3. Resource Centres Partnership with Mainstream Schools

Although we agree with the concept of resource centres supporting mainstream schools we feel that we have to first strengthen the skills and expertise of teaching staff at resource centres as well as having a specialised point of reference on site at school to coordinate and support the staff.

It is only after strengthening this base at the resource centres that we can start to then think of having these places supporting mainstream schools.

2.3.1. Resources available Impinge on Children's Progress

Another issue that needs to be addressed within resource centres and which was not taken into consideration in the Audit Report is an analysis of whether there are sufficient human resources to man the resources available on site such as Multi-Sensory Rooms and whether these resources are being used effectively, if being used at all.

2.3.2. Resources: Over Crowding

The Issue of the risk of over-crowding in resource centres needs to be addressed too as it seems that students reaching sixteen years of age, being the age when one normally finishes off from compulsory secondary education, do not have the facility to move to a post-secondary setting due to lack of space. Consequently, these children are remaining in the same centre. This issue should be immediately addressed in the absence of which the amount of students reaching the age to move on is going to increase every year and **this can limit or hinder the ability to accept new students aged eleven plus who also require these specialised services.**

It has also been noted that once there are vacancies to move on from one educational level to the other, children do not progress by age but rather move by means of an assessment/interview and only a limited number of students are chosen depending on the number of vacancies available within the next educational setting We believe this to be unjust and unfair on these students. The selection process that allows a student to progress is not a transparent process. Moreover, such a state of fact is discriminatory in itself as there is an evident disparity of treatment of how children progress in mainstream schools and Resource Centres. For various plausible reasons such as age, safety, different physical development stages and for stimulation reasons, students should move according to age. The assessment/review process should be a both transparent and accountable to Parents. Responsibility should be assumed in terms of increasing the number of placements/physical space for such progression to take place.

2.3.3. Resources: LSAs and Statementing Procedures

In relation to statementing procedures, Malta still faces the issue that there is a lack of **replacement for LSAs in mainstream schools⁶ with the consequence that students were forced to stay at home**, especially in cases of a one to one LSA. MAPSS calls on the state to address this issue correctly. Parents have, for good and justifiable reasons and on several occasions refused the LSA appointed at random either from the same school or when an on-call LSA was used since these children have

⁶ Chapter 5 of the Report

very particular needs and the provisional LSA would be new to them and not know how to handle their specific needs. This very often ended to be of detriment to the children with particular needs and parents were called in by the school to take their child back home since the educators and school staff could not handle the situation. In order to avoid such dependency, a system of rotating LSAs should be adopted so that the needs of the child are known to at least 2-3 LSAs and a system of continuity is thereby ensured.

MAPSSS also notes that Statementing procedures are long and cumbersome. A student who requires an LSA but fails to be appointed one tends to fall behind the mainstream education syllabus. Moreover, a long absence of assisted education tends to leave a negative impact on these students since they may suffer exclusion on basis of irregular/challenging behaviour. There is also a spill over on to the other students in the mainstream classroom scenario.

Parents have also reported that children with special needs who are exempted from sitting for mandatory exams, have no other option but stay home for a whole week or more, as the services of LSA are used to provide assistance to other students actually sitting for their exams. On such occasions, at least adapted assessments should be provided for special needs students and/or other activities prepared in areas that could help their development. Apart from denying the student their rights to attend school, this will also ease some of the problems that working parents have to face when their children are forced to be kept absent from school.

As stated in the Audit Report, Page 63, para. 5.2.5:

*'Within national legislation and policy, there is a lack of clarity regarding inclusion and rights-based approaches. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) are not integral to national legislation. The rights-based approach underpinning these normative instruments is not therefore clear within education policy. **This lack of clarity leads to situations that can be interpreted as an infringement of rights. For example, there are reports of some instances where learners with SEN were excluded from school when an LSA was absent and no replacement could be found.**'*

One can latch this argument with the Audit Report arguing on pg. 66 last paragraph:

*'It can be argued that the current system of support is perpetuating a view that classroom support is an end in itself, instead of being a means to enable class teachers to meet a wider range of learning needs in their classrooms. Such high levels of 1:1 support are also leading to calls for the establishment of **separate 'units' within mainstream schools where groups of learners with SEN can be educated together in potentially more efficient ways.** These calls appear to offer an attractive solution to the pressures faced by many schools and individual teachers of managing classroom support effectively. However, an expansion in segregated provision is clearly understood by many stakeholders to be a retrograde step. For some learners it would limit their rights to an inclusive education and, at a system level, the development of separate specialist provision would not address the need to undertake widespread capacity building in all mainstream schools and classes.'*

MAPSSS is of the opinion that one might wish to consider that opening a separate 'unit' within a mainstream school need not necessarily be viewed as a *retrograde step* but rather as a **possibility**, a chance or opportunity for students with complex needs of still staying in mainstream schools and

having **some** of their educational needs met in these units. This could be done as one of the pilot projects, in an identified school where there is great concern for particular students and these can benefit from such structures. One has to keep in mind that certain disabilities limit the student from actually integrating as the context of the mainstream environment can be repulsive to them rather than facilitating the inclusion. A direct consequence of this can be that the student is left excluded, segregated and confused, when in certain cases this leads to difficult if not violent behaviour. Unfortunately this is a scenario of common occurrence, exposing the lack of services and support in the mainstream schools, and the resources centres alike to cater for such exigencies. MAPSSS believes that the system should be adapted to fit the needs of these children and as such challenges the approach to inclusion of children with special needs either within mainstream education or compulsorily through all mainstream educational activities, where this is not always in the child's best interest. Having expertise back up will also assist parents in taking informed decisions on which is the best schooling/activity options depending on the needs specific to their child; something which perhaps parents and educators are not currently able to do on basis of a wrong interpretation and approach to the concept of inclusive education. A Christmas concert audience may improve the development skills of mainstream students but may be detrimental in many ways to special needs students with autism and ADHD for instance. The negative impact can take place subjectively within the students themselves or objectively on basis of social pressure to behave in a certain way (for example, ADHD students may not fare well on a stage setting and consequently, the child's self-esteem may be impacted). Consequently, inclusive education in a mainstream schooling scenario should also help create awareness as opposed to judgement. Only then can education be deemed to be really inclusive.

This could be one way of **the system adapting itself rather than the child has to adapt himself for the system**. The use of 'units' can, although labelling is not recommended, be presented under an attractive name such as has been done with 'nurture groups' and with the proper support would not be viewed as segregation but rather as an adaption. These can be utilised for students when the LSA is not at school as they still can attend the unit which they have already been accustomed to rather than depend on one person and remain at home until an LSA is available again. **The main point at issue here is that the educational system has to cater for alternative options – based on target professional actions - when the need arises to address difficult behaviour/stress/time-out periods rather than opting for an easy way out by expelling the student back home.**

3.0. Concluding Remarks

The Audit highlighted three critical levers considered as essential actions in the shorter term as these will underpin all future development.

1. Develop a stakeholder platform for discussion and agreement on key issues for inclusive education.

2. Audit current resourcing levels and identify possible models for more flexible resourcing.

3. Develop pilot projects to examine inclusive teaching and learning approaches.

Finally, the Audit suggested the development of a ten-year plan for education with wide stakeholder consultation and cross-party agreement to ensure that current plans for an inclusive system are implemented and sustained in the longer term.'

MAPSSS agrees that a stakeholder platform is set and that this platform should consider parents as equal contributors to this discussion. Such discussions should include parents of children with special needs and parents of children in main stream education in order to facilitate understanding and collaboration between all parties for the best interest of all the students. Moreover such platforms should be established at different scales and not limited to a national discussion but should take place even at college or school bas, as one has to respect the identity, dynamics and context of different schools, otherwise the implementation of the outcomes of such discussion may not be transferred from print to practice in class.

The development of pilot projects should be considered in small scales in different contexts in order to facilitate the assessment of such projects and hence make it easier to implement reform. However, outcomes of pilot projects should not be considered as cast in stone realities but only as procedural guidelines in order to respect the child's needs and individuality. Flexibility allows for a child-centred approach which is further ensured by the teachers and LSAs professionalism that is continuously supported by professional development courses.

Moreover, in order to secure a child-centred approach as set in the Framework for Education Strategy (MEDE 2014) for children with special needs and those in main stream education, it is imperative that the number of students in class is less than 20 but more than 10 students in order to ensure an adequate group dynamic exists that allows for real inclusion and not simply physical integration in class.

The State is responsible to providing the necessary assistance to actualise the right of adequate provision of education to all children.

Finally, MAPSSS would like to thank all those within the Education System including school management teams, INCOs, teachers and learning support assistants who through their professionalism and dedication see to the wellbeing of the students in their care and live the true meaning of Inclusive Education.

MAPSSS Committee

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