

MALTESE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM.

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a global increase in the rate of students with autism, who regardless of their needs, are being placed in mainstream classrooms[1]. The successful inclusion of these students is dependent on teachers' perceptions[2]. In turn, this impacts students' development and learning. Yet, to date, no studies investigating teachers' perceptions and the factors that might be influencing them have been performed. Inspired by Vygotsky and Foucault's work, four external factors that could potentially influence teachers' perceptions were sought out, including (i) power in education, (ii) tests/exams and assessments, (iii) the discourse of labelling, and (iv) teachers' training and strategies.

AIMS

- Explore the Maltese teachers' perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism,
- Investigate whether the outlined factors could directly influence and change the way teachers perceive students with autism.

METHODS

After a comprehensive literature review on the subject, an online questionnaire based on the study's aims was developed. To test its psychometric properties, this newly-designed questionnaire was used as part of a recent pilot study. Respondents included 12 secondary teachers working in a randomly selected school. Data analysis was then carried out using SPSS.

RESULTS

Analysis of the pilot study revealed a strong correlation between the statements, making the questionnaire a valid and reliable tool. Preliminary results indicated that the:

- majority of Maltese teachers have negative perceptions towards the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream classrooms;
- the four outlined factors directly influence these perceptions.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' perceptions might have a massive impact on students for potentially the rest of their lives. Investigating these perceptions and the influential factors will help provide strategies to enhance the quality of inclusive education for students with autism.

[1] Özerk K., Cardinal D. (2020). Prevalence of autism/ASD among preschool and school-age children in Norway. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 24(4), 419-428.

[2] Mwayo A.W., Mathai M., Kuria M.W., Mutavi T., Vander Stoep A. (2020). Parents' and teachers' perceptions of factors affecting learning in Kenya. *Global Social Welfare: Research, Policy & Practice*, 7(3), 245-256.