

Inclusive education: a qualitative leap*

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Abstract

This article aims at joining the debate triggered off by Vianello & Lanfranchi's (2009) article published in Life Span and Disability, 12 (1), 41-52. The Author highlights the situation of Inclusive Education in Malta and backs Vianello and Lanfranchi's hypothesis that children with intellectual impairment gain more when educated in ordinary settings.

The importance of implementing inclusive education in a 'good enough' way with ordinary teachers fully engaged with all their students, including those with intellectual impairment, has been highlighted.

The Author discusses the importance of empowering and supporting educators to include all their students in their ordinary classrooms and providing them with the necessary support, without creating structures which could lead to the teacher's disempowerment and the students' segregation and eventual exclusion.

If inclusive education is such a powerful tool for the development of children, not educating children in an inclusive environment could be seen as an abuse (an educational system's abuse) on the children whose development it is duty bound to facilitate.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Empowering Teachers, Peer Preparation Programmes, Educational Systems

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1. Introduction

Vianello and Lanfranchi (2009) suggested that Italian children with intellectual impairment due to genetic syndromes (students with Down syndrome, Williams syndrome, Prader Willi syndrome, Cornelia de Lange syndrome and Fragile X syndrome) assessed on psychometric tests seem to surpass the estimated projected development said to be imposed by their congenital condition. The authors also noted that the scores obtained, on various psychometric tests, by the Italian sample are higher than those found in international literature. These students seem to overcome, to a certain extent, the barriers of their congenital, 'physical limitations' or their 'deficits' and develop what may be called 'surplus'. The authors have indicated that this 'surplus' in Italian children with intellectual impairment could be the result of inclusive education.

Vianello and Lanfranchi's (2009) results are indeed very interesting. The effects of inclusion, when implemented in a 'good-enough' way, to steal Winnicott's famous words when he was referring to the 'good enough mother', may have positive effects on the cognitive, social, emotional, aids to daily living, level of self determination and quality of life.

Where does Malta stand with regard to inclusive education practices?

Meijer, Soriano and Watkins (2003) sustain that the present trend of the politics of education in Europe is moving towards the inclusion of children with disabilities and learning difficulties in ordinary schools with the necessary support for teachers from additional staff, teaching materials, in-service training and the appropriate technology. On the basis of the level of inclusive practices Meijer *et al.* (2003), divide different countries according to three categories:

- The *uni-directional approach*, where the majority of students are included in the same school thus offering one educational system with a variety of services focused at school. These countries include Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Cyprus.
- The *multi-directional approach* is said to offer a myriad of approaches for the integration of children with disability and learning difficulties between mainstream and special schools. Countries applying this system are Denmark, France, Ireland, Luxemburg, Austria, Finland, England, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland and Slovenia.
- The third category is the *bi-directional approach* which has two distinct educational systems: one type of school for typically developing children and the other for those with a statement of educational needs needing extra support. Students would attend either a special school or special classes in ordinary schools where they would not have access to the ordinary curriculum. Switzerland and Belgium adopt this system.

Until a few years ago I was convinced that the Maltese experience fitted in the multi-directional approach as there was an ever increasing trend to-

wards inclusive school practices and, therefore, towards the uni-directional approach. However, more recently, with the publication of various ministerial documents like: “For all children to succeed: A new network organization for quality education in Malta” (2005), “Inclusion and special education review” (2005) and, more recently, “Special schools reforms” (2009), the momentum and investment, in my opinion, has been shifted toward a more segregated education through the use of resource centres (formerly known as special schools), and learning zones as indicated in the reform which states that when the students’ ‘relative (*academic*) levels (*were*) not improving as expected, new learning zones will be set up within the mainstream secondary school. Students still not achieving the desired results may attend an out of school learning centre where specifically designed short and long term educational programmes will be offered. These new facilities can also provide an education *for* students showing significantly challenging behaviour’ (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005c, p. 44). Nurture rooms and groups have also been set up in primary schools for children with challenging behavior and children with disability are often taken out of class to work on a one-to-one basis in resource rooms. The reform ‘will work towards the reintegration of students from learning zones and learning centres into the mainstream education system,’ (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005c, p. 44) and is seen, by the Educational Authorities, as a way to ‘further consolidate the principle of inclusion’ (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005c).

The system, therefore, lately, seems to give greater importance to investing in these segregating structures and strategies rather than in truly inclusive schools.

On my visits to Italian schools, accompanying Maltese masters students, the Italian teachers we met give a clear message: children with disabilities are teachers’ responsibility like the rest of the students. They have the right to be educated with their peers. Segregation, in whatever form, is not an option. All children have the right to be educated with their peers and we therefore work on how best to include all students in our classrooms both with regard to the accessibility to the general curriculum as well as socially. Obviously the schools we visited were state of the art schools where educators were greatly supported. An excellent example are the schools we visited in Modena which are supported by MEMO (Multicentro Educativo Modena ‘Sergio Neri’).

Maltese inclusive education is still often seen as ‘the integration of children with disability’ and not as the philosophy underpinning all educational practices, although the National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education Youth, Employment, 1999a, 1999b) highlights various principles like, for example:

- principle 1, ‘quality education for all without undermining the principles of solidarity and co-operation’;

- principle 2, 'respect for diversity';
- principle 8, the state should provide 'an inclusive education' fully acknowledging individual differences and 'to professing as well as implementing inclusionary politics.'

The fact that the document talks about inclusive education ranking this principle as eighth could be interpreted that inclusive education is seen as an appendix and not as the underpinning philosophy of education.

Within this scenario, and the absence of a strong united movement which advocates for inclusive practices by parents and professionals, including educators and researchers, the educational authorities are finding it easier to create opportunities to be able to either move children out of ordinary schools and into special schools, and this sometimes happens after the primary school and more so at post secondary level, or having the students spend time in resource rooms, learning zones, resources centres or by actually encouraging the parents to send their children to special schools from the very beginning. The educational authorities emphasize the part of the Salamanca Statement which states that "special schools or units within inclusive schools may continue to provide the most suitable education for the relatively small number of children with disabilities who cannot be adequately served in regular classrooms or schools" (Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994). The working group set up by the Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment (2005) reinforces this as they believe that there are children who 'would gain more in a selective set-up and environment'. Who is going to decide this? (Tanti Burlò, 2007). The answer, as anticipated, is given by the Special Schools Reform (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009). "It is being recommended that a team of professionals (henceforth 'Team') is set up in order to evaluate the referrals and advise parents which educational institution is best suited for the particular student with a statement of needs" (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009, p. 20).

And once again, although the document 'For all children to succeed: A new network organization for quality education in Malta' (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005b) states that 'Inclusive education is the ideal model of education' the document goes on to declare that 'people are not ready for it' without adequate scientific backing. To be fair, this document, as well as that on the Transition from primary to secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2007b) have eliminated streaming, in State schools, from the age of nine years and introduced one secondary school, replacing two separate schools where students were admitted according to their examination results. However, although all children will now be attending the same secondary school they will be selected, set, divided, according to their abilities in the core subjects. The introduction of this setting has been indeed heavily criticized by many academics, as there is no strong evidence that this will improve all students' academic

performance. On the contrary it is actually those struggling students who do worse in such a system and who develop a lower level of self esteem (Hallam, 2002). Setting will not, in the long run, diminish the level of stress all stakeholders have been worried about even for children in the higher sets. What is even more worrying is that most children with disabilities and those who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills are being grouped together thus creating segregated differentiated classrooms, called foundation classes, which do not enhance inclusion and facilitate the development of a low level of self esteem.

2. Inclusion within a highly selective educational system. How did it all begin?

The first systematic attempt at including children with disabilities in Malta (children with disabilities were ‘mainstreamed’ in ordinary schools since the early 80’s), was made at the end of 90’s through an Action Research Project called *Including the Excluded*. The importance of training teacher-facilitator teams together and the implementation of the peer preparation programme were evaluated. The joint project was coordinated by the University of Malta, Institute for Child Development, now the *Programme for Inclusive Education*, in collaboration with the Eden Foundation and under the consultancy of the University of Padova (Tanti Burlò, Soresi, Nightingale, & Xuereb, 1997).

The project team worked around and within a strong exclusive educational philosophy, however, notwithstanding this strong culture of segregation, many children with disability were able to experience positive school life alongside their typically developing peers. To date, we can safely state that many students with diverse needs have benefitted from attending ordinary schools.

Teachers and facilitators - now called *Learning support assistants*, paraprofessionals in the U.S. (while they, now, undergo a two year university “evening part-time course” in Facilitating Inclusive Education or its presumed equivalent) together attended training sessions discussing issues on inclusive education, setting teaching objectives and individual educational programmes, collaborative teaching, the implementation of peer preparation programmes and assessing the level of inclusion through sociometric testing.

Five boys and two girls aged between 5 and 10 years were involved in this project. Five of these children were ‘graduates’ from Eden Foundation’s early intervention transdisciplinary programme. The inclusive group was compared with a control group. The effects on the level of inclusion and the children’s adaptive and academic progress were evaluated by means of (a) sociometric tests, (b) the administration of the *Vineland Adaptive Be-*

haviour Scales (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1984) and (c) the classes' academic reports.

a. Level of inclusion: sociometric tests

These were by far the most interesting findings and 'this is to the credit of those teachers and facilitators who have managed to develop a new and dynamic relationship between themselves and their pupils'. The children with disability in the inclusive class (the experimental group) were selected more often by their peers to be in their group than the designated child, with learning difficulties, in the control classes. Children in the inclusive classes also 'showed less indications of rejection than the control class (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 1997). These results were the same as those obtained in a later study by Cuschieri (1998).

Worth mentioning 'are the results obtained in the two classes where the facilitating programme for inclusion were not implemented and where the facilitator was not utilized as an integrating, inclusive force. In both classes, the total amount of actual choices and rejections given by the children are very limited indicating that the children in those classrooms have not formed many meaningful relationships with their classmates'.

On deeper analysis of the sociometric results it became evident that children in the experimental classrooms were more in tune with each other's feelings and they 'guessed' more accurately who would select them and who would least like to be with them. This shows a very developed sense of emphatic understanding in the experimental group. 'This is surely the primary aim of any educational system' (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 1997).

Vianello and Moalli (2001) maintain that direct experience of relating with a peer with disability is of utmost importance for the development of positive attitudes. The amount of time spent together is also an important facilitating factor although adequate training may also have its positive effects as shown by Tanti Burlò *et al.*, (1997) and Cuschieri (1998).

b. Adaptive behaviour

The children with disability in the inclusive classrooms improved in all the domains assessed on the *Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale* (Sparrow *et al.*, 1984), that is, communication, socialization, daily living and motor development. Dramatic improvement was evidenced in most children especially in the area of communication. The results are confirmed by the comments of the parents who stated 'that their children were speaking more clearly and that they are being understood by many more people outside the family circle' (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 1997).

Vianello (1990) had also confirmed that students with disability attending ordinary schools tend to have more developed social skills, which is reflected in the amount of chores they do and in the way they communicate and socialize. The adaptive behaviour of students in special schools were al-

so found to be less developed than those attending ordinary schools (Buckley, Bird, Sacks, & Archer, 2002).

Maltese adolescents with Down syndrome attending special school, after having attended inclusive schools, scored low in autonomy skills when compared with an Italian group of youngsters with Down syndrome, who attended ordinary schools and a community based programme for autonomy run in Rome (Micallef, 2006). Students who are transferred to special schools from ordinary schools seem to regress and lose a lot of their skills (Buckley *et al.*, 2002) This is also being said and highlighted locally by some parents especially with regard to communication skills. However this needs to be further researched.

c. Academic progress

Contrary to the opinion of many educators and parents at the time of the initial project, the results showed that the other students academic progress did not suffer because of the child with disability.

3. What could be considered to be the essential ingredients for successful inclusion?

Advocates for inclusive education were heavily criticized for the reason that children with disability should have not been allowed to attend ordinary schools before the teachers were properly trained to teach them. Over 25 years have passed and the same arguments remain dominant. It has become more and more evident that the successful inclusion of a child with disability, and of all children at that, depends on the learning environment the children are immersed in. Vianello and Moalli (2001) state that ‘a good way for preparing oneself for *inclusion*... is to begin to do it’ (p. 39) with schools and educators who would welcome and engage themselves with all students in a mixed ability environment, implementing universal design for learning, supported by strategies for cooperative teaching and learning. Cooperation and planning, especially person-centred planning techniques like MAPS (*Mapping an Action Planning System*) and IEPs (*Individual Educational Programmes*) for smooth transitions, enhancing self-determination and a better quality of life (Tanti Burlò, 2007a)

4. Present situation in Malta

4.1 The students

“It is estimated that 0.36% of the total student population attend special schools” (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009, p. 13). The following data clearly shows the ever increasing amount of children who are

being identified as having 'a statement of educational needs'. Before presenting that data some general demographic data: Malta has a population of 404,962, with a birth rate of 3,825 per annum. In the same year, the individual with disability were 712 in the age bracket 0-9 years, 1109 in the range 10-19 years (Census, 2005).

For students to receive extra support at school they have to have a 'statement of needs' drawn up by a psychologist. This report is presented by the school through the parents to the Statement Moderating Board. Requests for extra support have been increasing steadily year after year.

Table 1 - *Students with a statement of needs in Malta, 2000-2009*

<i>Type of school</i>	<i>2000 (1)</i>	<i>2005 (2)</i>	<i>2008/09 (3)</i>	<i>Oct/Nov 2009 (4)</i>
Normal school	614 (69%)	1508 (84%)	1588 (89%)	2614 (93%)
Special school	275 (31%)	286 (16%)	194 (11%)	~200 (7%)
Total	889	1794	1782	2814

Note:

(1) National Minimum Curriculum (Giordmaina, 2000, p. 27)

(2) Data calculated from Inclusive and Special Education Review (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005) pp. 22-23

(3) Data taken from *Special School reform* (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009)

(4) Personal correspondence with Special and Inclusive Education Network (05.01.2010)

As the above Table 1 indicates, there has been a sharp increase in the amount of students assessed with a 'statement of needs'. A breakdown of the amount of students in special schools shows an interesting pattern with almost a half of these students being over sixteen years of age. If we were to remove the 100 students within the 16+ age bracket the percentage of students with a statement of needs in Special Schools would be only 5.6% (Table 2).

Table 2 - *Students in special schools according to age 2008/09*

<i>Age</i>	<i>4-10 yrs</i>	<i>11-15 yrs</i>	<i>>16 yrs</i>	<i>Total</i>
Numbers	16	78	100	194

Data taken from *Special School reform* (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009) p. 10

There is, however, today, a growing trend to encourage parents of children with physical and or multiple disabilities either to send their children to special school for the whole week or to divide their week between 'normal' school and the resource centre. Parents and educators are attracted by the equipment, like the multisensory room, hydrotherapy pool and health care staff in the school.

The numbers in the schools for children with intellectual impairment have indeed dwindled. However, I suspect, that these numbers will begin to rise again, especially those of students over sixteen years of age since one of the resource centers (special schools), with the new reform, is now hosting students from 16 onwards. Many of these students would have attended ordinary schools till the age of sixteen after which they find themselves faced with very limited options for inclusive education (Equal Partners Foundation, 2007). In fact a post secondary school which had very successfully begun to welcome students with intellectual impairment has from this year closed it's doors to students who do not have a certain level of academic achievement. This is indeed a pity as students with intellectual impairment and their parents were full of praise for the positive experience they had lived.

There does not seem to be clear cut criteria for determining who can receive extra support, what type, to what extent and where.

It would be interesting to investigate the socio-economic background and level of education of parents of students attending special schools today, especially those at primary and secondary levels. Research conducted in 1992 in special schools showed that the level of the parents' education was rather low with the majority of them only having frequented till primary school level. It was not only the type and extent of disability which determined whether a child went to a special school or not (Tanti Burlò, 1992).

5. Supporting and consolidating good practices

We have managed to get most students in, more or else, inclusive settings and it is now important to support good practice, consolidate it and increase it so that all students will attend ordinary schools from the beginning and remain there without being taken out on a regular basis or even segregated in any way away from their peers.

5.1 *Early Intervention and inclusive education*

Before the beginning of the 90's early intervention was given on an ad hoc basis available only on an individual private basis. The collaboration between the University of Malta and the Eden Foundation saw the birth of important community based programmes, the *Early Intervention Pro-*

gramme and the *Inclusive Education Programme*. A transdisciplinary team was developed to support the early intervention of children identified with intellectual impairment. The children's progress was impressive. With the focus on a total means of communication programme (the use of flash cards with the written word, the verbal word accompanied by signing) around the development of motor, social and self-help skills, this spearheaded the children's level of communication, their engagement in the world around them, their level of self-determination and consequently, their quality of life. Parents saw that their children could learn and that they could learn a lot, much more than they ever expected. Graduates from the Early Intervention Programme attended kindergarten with a great eagerness to be with others and to participate in what is going on around them. An off shoot of all the work done through total communication was the child's ability to read. Many of our children with Down syndrome, for example, could sign to some 200 flash cards at the age of two and entered kindergarten with very good reading skills.

The positive effects of early intervention helped the children to be 'integrated' in ordinary schools. The parents were no longer satisfied with the practice, at the time, of having children with 'special needs' repeat the first two years of kindergarten to be then sent to a special school at age 6 or 7 because they were told that their child 'would not be able to follow the set curriculum', 'would not benefit and become frustrated' and that their child 'would disrupt the other children's learning'. The parents wanted their children to remain in their community or church school alongside their peers, part of their cohort community. The parents and professionals working with them were vindicated and saw the children flourish where inclusive practices were properly implemented.

There are presently three major entities offering early intervention. These are Equal Partners Foundation, INSPIRE (incorporating the Eden Foundation), and the CDAU (*Child Development Assessment Unit*). However, apart from the fact that not all programmes delivered are intensive and offered on a regular basis there are many children who still do not receive any early intervention services. Once again one needs to research on who is receiving the services and how regularly.

Buckley, Bird, and Sacks (2006) would agree with Vianello and Lanfranchi that profiles of children with Down syndrome can be changed with 'good enough' (*my addition*) practice of inclusive education. 'The teenagers with Down syndrome who have been included in mainstream age-appropriate classrooms do not show a weakness in communication skills relative to their social and daily living skills' (Buckley *et al.*, 2006, p. 52). They further sustain that the gains obtained through early intervention greatly diminish if the children attend special schools and the effects are even more negative if the children attend 'special classes' in ordinary schools. These children 'show the expected profile, with significant differences between

their communication, socialisation and daily living skills in the expected direction' (Buckley *et al.*, 2006, p. 52) Parents have witnessed this and have been articulating their concern with us. It is very worrying when a substantial number of students are sent to special schools rather than being sent to ordinary secondary schools with their peers.

Policy decisions need to be taken on evidence based strategies. Agius Ferrante (2008), a teaching support consultant responsible for students' accessibility to the general curriculum, in a primary and secondary church school, co-ordinated an action-research project and revised the schools inclusive practices adopting an all school approach. First and foremost the teaching support consultant is responsible for all the students' accessibility to the general curriculum, and her responsibilities are not restricted to those students with a statement of needs; secondary, all teachers were made responsible for all their students and thirdly the creation of 'teaching teams' between the class teacher and the L.S.A (Learning Support Assistant) in the primary school and the subject teacher and subject L.S.A. in the secondary school That is, the school abandoned the usual practice (still adopted in state schools and many of the other schools) 'for most facilitators (L.S.A.s) to follow the same child/children for two to three years, while the class moves onto another teacher annually' (p. 75). Agius Ferrante calls this a transition from 'children-pegged support' to a 'team-pegged' support (teacher-facilitator) in the primary level and a 'subject-pegged' support at a secondary level. The new approach was reviewed by all the stake holders, teachers, facilitators, students and parents and the Author concludes that all input from the various stakeholders in the school overwhelmingly indicates that this new approach is superior and more effective in all respects. She presents various quotes to emphasis the positive perception of this new approach (Agius Ferrante, 2008, pp. 84-85).

A student: *'The teacher and facilitator work better together'*

A secondary school student: *'Helps me more and the attention is on all of us'*

A parent, who does not have a child with disability: *'Having students with disabilities in the school is a very positive experience, both for the children and for us parents. Personally it impacted me as a parent understanding difference and intolerance. The new experience is definitely reaching far more of our students, supporting each student according to his needs, which after all is the Lasallian charisma'*

6. Educators' perceptions and attitudes

In an ongoing research project called *When educating becomes difficult* (Tanti Burlò, Camilleri, & Zucca, 2009) secondary school educators were asked to identify situations when they found themselves in difficulty to

teach. This research showed that educators are more concerned about the 'challenging' behaviour of both the individual child and that of part of the class rather than difficulty in teaching. Also Vianello's (1990) study, cited in Vianello and Moalli (2001), concluded that teachers are more prone to look at behaviour. 'The more a student does not disturb, the more the student is accepted' (p. 30).

Educators clearly indicated that they find it difficult to teach in low set level classes, low streamed classes and mixed ability classes. Children with disability are amongst the students in the low set, low streamed classes and mixed ability classes. These educators think that other educators are experiencing the same situation (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 2009).

When asked about different teaching techniques used many of the educators left this question out. The majority who did answer said that they often used frontal traditional style classrooms, grouped children according to their ability but also according to diverse abilities, said that they used differentiated and cooperative learning techniques. The majority said that they were not aware of universal design for teaching, mind maps and use of circle time in class. Only 15% of the teachers had said that they needed further training in teaching strategies (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 2009) and, in fact, 'although the majority of teachers are not trained in IEPs no teachers applied to follow a course in designing IEP's which was offered in 2002' (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2005a, p. 58). When asked what type of school would they prefer to teach in, the majority said that they would like to work either in a girls secondary school for bright students with either streamed or set classes or in a co-ed streamed secondary school. Inclusive schools were not on many of their wish list (Tanti Burlò *et al.*, 2009).

A lot of work still needs to be carried out to create a more positive environment for the development of schools to welcome children with diverse needs in every class having the teacher's total 'engagement'. Only 29% of the educators would like to see state schools turned into totally inclusive schools but at least only 10% were totally negative about having any resemblance of inclusive education.

Vianello and Moalli (2001) cite an earlier work by Vianello (1990) where he firmly upheld that teachers with a direct and engaging experience with students with disability would encounter less difficulties than an inexperienced teacher. The catch word, in my opinion, is '*engaging* experience' that is, an experience by educators who took it onto themselves to make inclusion happen.

In a research project carried out by third year psychology students, on the perception of teachers in state and church schools indicated that educators in church schools have a more positive attitude towards students with disability than those in state schools (Vv. Aa., 2006). Where can we find the reason behind this discrepancy? Are teachers in church schools more 'en-

gaged' with their students with disability, as Agius Ferrante (2008) indicated? Do they feel that they receive more support?

Teachers are actually more supported by learning support assistants in state schools. In church schools the ratio between L.S.A. (*Learning Support Assistant*) and students with disability stands at 1:1.4 and in State schools the ratio is 1:1.26 (Tanti Burlò, 2007b). Do teachers in state schools have less opportunities to 'engage' with their students with disability as the learning support assistants take such an active role which could lead to the dis-empowerment of the teacher? Although, the teacher has full responsibility of all the children in the class (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2007b) not all teachers take on that responsibility. The system in the state schools is also offering alternatives for the student with disability to attend the resource room (in the primary school) the learning zone (in the secondary school) regular visits and days spent at therapeutic centres, leisure centres and resource centres (special schools). This situation, I believe, does not always facilitate the teachers' 'engagement' with their students but might actually offer them the opportunity to opt out from supporting all the students in their class.

In Malta, the State education scenario is changing with the consolidation of educators having different roles such as: INCOs (Inclusion Coordinators, modelled on the English SENCO, Special Educational Needs Coordinator), Learning Support Assistants and Specialized teachers. The INCO facilitates 'links between Colleges and Resource Centres through networking activities' (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2007a, p. 19) linked to both ordinary schools and resource centres; Learning support assistants, many of whom are untrained and at times their "inappropriate utilization or excessive proximity.... has been linked to inadvertent detrimental effect (e.g., dependence, interference with peer interactions, insular relationships, stigmatization, provocation of behaviour problems" (Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004, p. 82); and specialized teachers for children with literacy difficulties, challenging behaviour and other impairments. With resource rooms, in primary schools; learning zones, in secondary schools, together with the heavy investment we are seeing in the resource centres (formerly: Special Schools) all these are providing educators, in my opinion, opportunities for segregation.

This could be hindering the empowerment of the class teacher from taking full responsibility for all the children in class. Other options are presented to the teacher and the parents, options which are made attractive with expensive 'toys' like the multisensory room and more therapeutic segregated services presented as essential for the child's improvement. "Some students with a statement of needs who attend mainstream schools may require services that can and are being offered in special schools. Such services include the use of the hydrotherapy pool, multi sensory rooms and specialised software and equipment such as communication aides that are

provided by special school” (Ministry of Education, Youth, Employment, 2009, p. 11) There is, therefore, a tendency to follow the medical model of disability so that many learning outcomes are ‘discipline specific’ and not ‘discipline free’ i.e. they are not learning outcomes “based on the educational needs of the student to assist him or her in pursuing valued life outcomes rather than the orientation of the various disciplines” (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1998, p. 4). If it is essential for the child to receive these services these should be either included during the student’s ordinary school life or offered after school. Working together, one can implement the role of the educator as defined by Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment’s (2007) Job Description Handbook through a model like VISTA which “gives the general educator an opportunity to assume ownership and responsibilities for teaching the student with disability” (Giangreco *et al.*, 1998, p. 20). Apart from the teacher, the parent is ‘closely involved in decision-making’ and is seen as being ‘elevated . as part of the team’ (Giangreco *et al.*, 1998, p. 19-20). Service recommendations need to be educationally relevant and necessary and ‘only-as-special-as necessary’. Giangreco *et al.*, (1998) believe that “the concept of *only as special as necessary* provided some families with an alternative way to think of what they wanted for their child” (p.18). This can also be true of the general education teacher and the rest of professionals involved with the child with disability.

What are therefore the implications of not educating children in inclusive schools with fully engaged teachers with their students and supported by a school based transdisciplinary team? Vianello (1990) and Vianello and Lanfranchi (2009) are convinced that if children with disability do not attend inclusive schools they will not develop ‘the surplus’ they describe and no change in the children’s profile will occur (Buckely, Bird, & Sacks, 2006). Can attending segregated services and education be seen as an added risk on the children perpetrated by the system, which is meant to provide for the development of their full potential? Could we call this ‘system added risk’ referring to ‘the further damage (psychological, social, physical) caused by the very same ‘caring system’ which is meant to intervene to create a facilitating environment for positive growth’ (Tanti Burlò, 1994, p. 43) of the child and family? It could well be.

Most of our Maltese children with disability are said to be attending ordinary schools. We now need to make sure that they are in inclusive settings, and remain there, learning with their peers with an empowered general education teachers equipped with the necessary teaching tools and supported by qualified personnel so that they will be fully engaged in the inclusion of all the children.

I have focused on Inclusive Education as providing that ‘good enough’ and facilitating environment where all children can be nurtured to their full potential, however, inclusive education is first and foremost a basic human

right for all children if we really believe that no child would be left behind in a truly inclusive participatory society.

As a conclusion I would report the story of Michael (fictitious name).

A few years ago we were supporting a boy, Michael, with multiple disabilities to attend his ordinary local school. His teacher and facilitators (learning support assistant) were perplexed because they thought that he would not be gaining from attending their school and needed a special environment, because, according to them, he needed special equipment. They had also visited the child who lived in an institution and found him to be asleep most of the time. They could not, at first, understand what benefit the child could receive from attending an ordinary school. We anticipated that they would have said that he needed to attend a multi-sensory room and this was arranged. He would attend a multi-sensory room once a week after school. Whether this affected his progress or not was really immaterial, the school was happy and the boy was taken on an outing. After three months I revisited the school and waited for Michael in his class. Michael was wheeled into the classroom asleep in his buggy. The children had already started their work. On entering the classroom all the children greeted him aloud, 'Good morning Michael, Good Morning Michael!'. Their chorus woke him and he started to move. His teacher then put the computer on and he became more and more alert. The children related with him by first stating *their* name, Michael also has visual impairment, and telling him that they were going to touch his hand. The bell rang and the students came up to Michael, stated their name, and told him that "its break time so we're off to the yard we go!". And off they went With Michael of course. As the children played together his facilitator approached me, with a big grin on her face and with great satisfaction asked: 'Do you like our multi-sensory room?' As I looked around there was Michael surrounded by his friends who were talking to him, telling him that they were going to touch his face, that they were going to take him around the playground. They were singing together, pushing his buggy to and fro with the wind in his face and the sun shining on them all.

After the initial fear and hesitation all the school welcomed Michael and the head mistress, who was so sceptical about the usefulness of having Michael in her school stated that she never thought that it was the other children who were going to gain so much from their relationship with Michael.

That is not the end of the story. Michael lived in an Institution and his peers would visit him twice a week throughout the summer months. This has never happened with any of the other children living in the same institution but attending special schools. No children ever came to visit them. Michael had become part of their lives; he had become a significant person in their community. Michael is an example of excellent practice of inclusive education supported by a transdisciplinary team made up of members coming also from different governmental and non governmental agencies.

Unfortunately Michael is not at present attending school because of his deteriorating health. This is indeed very sad because his peers and school are still waiting to welcome him back amongst them (Tanti Burlò, 2002, pp. 124-125) And Michael? He is once again asleep...

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