'Silenced voices': Exploring the experiences of Maltese Learning Support Educators working in state schools'.

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Abstract: This paper examines the roles, challenges, and lived experiences of three Learning Support Educators (LSEs) working in Maltese state schools, with a particular focus on the impact of socio-economic deprivation and systemic constraints. Two of the participants are based in primary schools. One supports a student in a socially deprived area who faces neglect and multiple life challenges. The other works as a Nurture LSE, offering essential emotional and behavioural support to children struggling with issues such as poverty, neglect, abuse, and poor hygiene. She reflects on the transformative potential of nurture groups in equipping students with coping mechanisms; while also highlighting the stigma such groups face from other educators, as well as the chronic underfunding that limits their impact.

The third participant is based in a Learning Support Zone (LSZ) in a state secondary school, where she supports students dealing with complex issues including low self-esteem, family trauma, parental separation, and economic hardship. Despite holding qualifications equivalent to those of a teacher, she describes the persistent lack of recognition for her role, noting how LSEs are systematically viewed as subordinate within the educational hierarchy.

Using a narrative research methodology, this study foregrounds the authentic voices of LSEs, providing insight into the often-invisible labour they perform. Their testimonies reveal the silencing and marginalisation they endure within a rigid system that undervalues their work. Bound by institutional hierarchies, resource limitations, and social stigma, these educators struggle to advocate for themselves—even as they play a crucial role in supporting some of the most vulnerable students. The findings call for urgent recognition, structural support, and a re-evaluation of the systemic positioning of LSEs within the education sector.

Keywords: Learning Support Educators, Nurture Groups, Learning Support Zone, Educational Hierarchy, Neglect, Abuse.

Introduction

During the first term of the 2024/2025 scholastic year, I paused my work as an LSE to focus on my PhD research. Since this was unpaid study leave, I began working with a local institute that offers evening, part-time courses for LSEs. In addition to delivering lectures in the evenings, my role involved visiting LSEs in their respective schools as part of their practice placement hours. This position required conducting interviews and reviewing the paperwork they compiled throughout their placement period. Over the course of the year, I mentored more than seventy LSEs, and the stories I encountered through this experience have served as both the foundation and inspiration for this paper.

Since I was unable to use the data gathered from these visits to write the present research paper, I took to social media to ask the LSEs who work in Maltese state schools; namely those working in Learning Support Zones, and Nurture Groups to come forward for an online interview. This study uses an opt-in approach, with social media being the gatekeeper. To safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, personal details and the names of the schools where the participants work will not be disclosed. Additionally, school locations will be purposely omitted, as Malta's small size makes it potentially unsafe to reveal certain details. Ensuring the safety and privacy of all research participants remains the top priority in this study; especially given the sensitive nature of the data collected.

The primary objective of this research is to highlight the experiences and challenges faced by LSEs in Maltese state schools, an essential yet often overlooked role in political discourse, media discussions, and policymaking. LSEs are generally an underutilised resource in schools because they are seen as caregivers rather than educators and facilitators of inclusion (Education for All, 2014).

LSEs carry out demanding and labour-intensive work, primarily focused on the care, support, and development of some of the most vulnerable children in our educational system (Vella Haber, 2023). However, they are not regarded as full members of the teaching staff, and as a result, they do not perceive themselves as such. This often leads to feelings of isolation and a lack of clear guidance from the class teacher (Cachia, 2019). Although LSEs are capable of contributing to the learning of all students, their capabilities are often disregarded and overlooked (Education for All, 2014).

LSEs frequently assume the role of the expert when it comes to their assigned student, thereby taking full responsibility for the student's progress (Bartolo, 2010). However, authentic inclusion is best achieved when all educators collaborate rather than work independently of one another (Winn and Blanton,

2005, as cited in Bartolo, 2010). Therefore, LSEs need to be reminded that they are facilitators, not owners, of inclusion; They cannot bear sole responsibility for students with disabilities, as ultimately, these students remain under the responsibility of the class teacher, even when supported by an LSE (Bartolo, 2010).

LSEs play a pivotal role in schools, serving as essential facilitators of inclusion and student support. However, the profession is often perceived as one of low status, low pay, and unskilled, cheap labour (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). LSEs frequently face lack of respect and appreciation (Cachia, 2019), contributing to a poor public perception of their work (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). This issue stems, in part, from the fact that teachers and LSEs undergo separate training, preventing them from fully understanding each other's roles and responsibilities and hindering effective collaboration for the benefit of students (Education for All, 2014).

Despite these challenges, LSEs are indispensable to the educational system (Vella Haber, 2023). They provide critical support to some of the most vulnerable students in our educational system (Crossley, 2022) Yet, their contributions often go unrecognized; Without directly engaging with LSEs, listening to their experiences, and acknowledging the dedication, compassion, and effort they bring to their work, one cannot fully appreciate the significance of their role within the educational system. This study seeks to amplify their voices, highlight their invaluable contributions, and advocate for greater awareness and appreciation of their crucial role in the Maltese education system.

Unveiling the Role, Challenges, and Impact of LSEs in Maltese Schools

One of my former students who was supporting a student with very challenging needs once told me 'I feel like I am everything, yet I am nothing'. This statement struck me because I often felt like this when I was working as an LSE myself. As an LSE, one often feels the weight of immense responsibility yet remains perceived as "just an LSE." In Malta, the derogatory term *"biċċa LSE"* is used to belittle and undermine the significance of the role, especially by those who lack understanding of the complex, multifaceted duties LSEs carry out (Vella Haber, 2023). This dismissive label reflects a broader societal failure to recognise the critical contributions LSEs make to the educational and emotional development of students.

Neoliberalism establishes a cultural hegemony that frames social issues such as class and gender inequalities as personal problems rather than systemic ones (Harvey, 2005, as cited in McHale, 2018). In class-divided societies caregiving roles are often viewed as low-status jobs performed by individuals with similarly low social standing (Lynch & Walsh, 2009, as cited in McHale, 2018).

Consequently, LSEs lack the power to influence meaningful change (McHale, 2018). From a Marxist perspective, capitalist economic structures benefit privileged groups while exploiting care workers, keeping LSEs trapped in low-paying positions with little opportunity for upward mobility (Davaki, 2016, as cited in McHale, 2018). Even when individuals recognise the structural forces that disadvantage them, they often feel powerless to change their circumstances (Vella Haber, 2023)

Drawing from my 12 years of experience as an LSE, as well as my involvement in lecturing and tutoring LSEs at various stages of their studies, I have had the opportunity to engage with professionals who have transitioned into this field from a wide array of backgrounds. These include careers in financial services, nursing, accounting, early childhood education, teaching, statistics, hairdressing, gaming, graphic design, engineering, and homemaking. Notably, many women are particularly drawn to the LSE profession due to its perceived family-friendly structure (Vella Haber, 2023). Camilleri-Cassar (2005) highlighted how traditional gender roles in Malta continue to position women primarily as caregivers, despite their academic and professional accomplishments. The enduring societal expectation of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker often places the burden of household and childcare responsibilities on women. As a result, women frequently face a dilemma between pursuing career progression and fulfilling familial duties. For those who strive to maintain both, the expectation remains that they adapt to their family's needs, while men are still commonly regarded as "helpers" rather than equal partners. Within this context, many women leave demanding professions in search of roles that offer more manageable hours and greater work-life balance—making the LSE role a common choice, even if it means compromising opportunities for career advancement (Camilleri-Cassar, 2005).

A recent Eurobarometer survey carried out amongst the Maltese population suggested that Feminism has gone too far; with almost half of the respondents agreeing that a women's duty is to take care of her family and her home (Galdes, 2024). This survey indicates that gender stereotypes in Malta persevere. Consequently, 69% of survey respondents agreed that family life suffers when a woman, specifically the mother has a full time job however 88% agreed that a woman should also be financially independent (Galdes, 2024). Thus, women often choose to become LSEs because the job flexibility allows them the opportunity to balance their maternal and family responsibilities while still contributing financially towards the family (Vella Haber, 2023). As a result, LSEs find themselves in constant caregiving roles, both at work and at home (McHale, 2018)

The diverse responsibilities of LSEs

LSEs often serve as a crucial link between home and school (Grech, 2019), particularly when students face social challenges such as poverty, addiction, or neglect. They are often the ones bridging this delicate gap, ensuring that students have access to clean clothes, food, school supplies, and emotional support. Whether it is offering a kind word, a listening ear, or a reassuring hug. LSEs frequently take on responsibilities that extend far beyond their official role (Bartolo, 2010).

However, many LSEs, especially those assigned to one-to-one students who spend most of their day outside the classroom, feel undervalued, perceiving themselves as mere babysitters rather than educators (Vella Haber, 2023). This lack of recognition leads to frustration, boredom, and isolation. In these cases, exclusion is not only experienced by the student but also by the LSE, reinforcing a sense of detachment from the wider school community. According to Devecchi et al. (2012), the marginalisation and exclusion of both adult support staff and the children under their care persist. The idea of student "ownership" in such scenarios is a complex issue that warrants further research in its own right.

Despite these challenges, LSEs are expected to collaborate with various professionals (MEYE, 2007) including occupational therapists, autism support specialists, and speech therapists, often having to implement their recommendations during school hours. Additionally, they must liaise with teachers and parents (Grech, 2019) ensuring that both are informed about the student's progress and future needs (Saloviita & Consegnati, 2019). Beyond these responsibilities, LSEs must also manage the bureaucratic aspects of their role, completing extensive documentation related to the student's development, particularly in preparation for the IEP meeting held in the first term of each academic year (Vella Haber, 2023). This meeting is a crucial component of the student's educational support plan.

Thus, unless one works closely with LSEs, engaging in meaningful conversations and witnessing their daily efforts, it is nearly impossible to grasp the full extent of their role within the school system (Bartolo, 2014). LSEs are frequently sidelined, their contributions overlooked and undervalued. Why? Perhaps it is because they are often seen as mere *"Bicca LSE"* (just an LSE) or because the majority of LSEs in Malta are women—women who, despite facing injustice, scapegoating (Vella Haber, 2023), and systemic neglect, remain reluctant to speak out for fear of losing their jobs, income, and stability. They feel powerless to challenge a system that has ignored them for too long. This research seeks to break that silence, shedding light on the realities of this

essential yet underappreciated profession and advocating for the recognition and respect that LSEs rightfully deserve.

Support services that assist students facing challenges and their educators.

The National School Support Services (NSSS)
The NSSS was established in Malta in 2009, following recommendations from the Inclusive and Special Education Review (MEDE, 2005). The department supports students, young people, and their families through educational psycho-social and inclusive services. The NSSS provides school visits, training for educators, and interventions, ensuring holistic development and equitable, high-quality education. Psycho-social and inclusive education services play a crucial role in shaping inclusive practices (Government of Malta, 2025). The NSSS has developed key policies, including the Inclusion Policy Framework, and has launched projects such as the Provision Mapping Tool, Autism-Friendly Guidelines, and multisensory learning rooms, enhancing learning environments across Maltese schools (Government of Malta, 2025).

The NSSS is dedicated towards enhancing the holistic development of all children by providing equitable and high-quality services that focus on their physical, social, emotional, psychological, cultural, and behavioural growth. One of the key initiatives under the NSSS is the implementation of NGs and LSZs (Government of Malta, 2025).

Introduced as a pilot project in 2008, the NG and LSZ programmes have expanded to over 60 schools across primary, middle, and secondary schools around Malta. Staffed by teachers and LSEs these groups provide targeted support to children and young people, fostering positive relationships and addressing individual needs (Pace, 2022). Through these initiatives, the NSSS aims to ensure that all children have the opportunity to achieve their full potential by actively participating in their learning process, thereby promoting their holistic development and well-being (Government of Malta, 2025).

A study conducted by Maria Pace, published in the International Journal of Nurture in Education, examines the characteristics and experiences of educators working in NGs and LSZs in Maltese schools. These specialised settings aim to support children and young people at risk of exclusion due to behavioural challenges. The study involved semi-structured interviews with eight educators—both teachers and LSEs, the study explored their personal characteristics, experiences, and the challenges they face in NGs and LSZs. Findings suggest that educators perceive their roles as catalysts for positive change, emphasising the need for personal attributes such as empathy, patience, and adaptability. However, participants also reported a perceived lack of understanding and support for the nurture approach among mainstream educators, highlighting the need for greater awareness and

collaboration within the broader educational community. Overall, the study highlighted the importance of NGs and LSZs in fostering the emotional well-being and academic success of vulnerable students in the Maltese educational system (Pace, 2022).

The Family Community School Link (FCSL) programme
In October 2024, the Maltese Government launched the Family Community School Link (FCSL) programme, aiming to strengthen connections between families, communities, and schools. This pilot project was implemented in four primary schools in Malta. The initiative focused on fostering a democratic culture within schools through an integrated approach that extends support to families and community entities (The Malta Independent, 2024). FCSL Outreach Officers have been engaged in these schools to facilitate this collaboration. Additionally, in October 2024, Prime Minister Robert Abela announced a pilot project targeting student absenteeism. Developed in collaboration with the MUT, it emphasises the interconnected roles of schools, communities, and families in addressing the rising absenteeism observed as students transition from primary to middle school (Government of Malta, 2024). Experts will work closely with these groups to find effective solutions, ensuring that no student is left behind in the educational system. This initiative is part of Malta's broader National Education Strategy 2024-2030, which seeks to promote social inclusion and reduce early school leaving through collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities (The Malta Independent, 2024). Besides tackling absenteeism, the FCSL programme and other outreach initiatives in Malta focus on improving parental engagement and support. Outreach officers work with families to create stronger home-school connections, offering guidance on how parents can support their children's learning (The Malta Independent, 2024). Student well-being and inclusion are also part of this initiative with an emphasis on promoting mental health awareness and providing emotional and social support to students struggling with school life. Furthermore, this programme targets students who are at risk through early intervention; the FCSL programme offers educational support through after-school programmes, homework clubs, and workshops to help students improve their academic performance (Government of Malta, 2024).

Nurture groups
Nurture groups, originally developed by Marjorie Boxall in the 1970s, are small, structured settings within schools designed to support children with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. These groups aim to provide a safe, nurturing environment that mirrors early caregiving experiences, fostering the development of attachment, resilience, and emotional regulation. Research highlights their effectiveness in improving pupils' self-esteem, behaviour, and academic outcomes (Boxall, 2002).

In her dissertation titled 'Nurture Groups for Pupils with SEBD: Inclusion or Exclusion?', Fenech (2012) examines the implementation of nurture groups in Maltese primary schools as a support mechanism for students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). The study aims to assess how these groups align with the principles of inclusive education.

Fenech (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members from two Maltese primary schools, including both NG and mainstream educators. The findings indicate that NGs are perceived as operating within an inclusive framework, given that students participate on a part-time basis. While engaged in these groups, students develop emotional literacy skills that enhance their interactions with peers and facilitate reintegration into mainstream classrooms.

The research highlights the importance of involving mainstream teachers in NG activities and maintaining effective communication between NG staff and mainstream educators. Teachers expressed a desire for more opportunities to actively participate in NG (Fenech, 2012). Additionally, the presence of NGs has had a positive ripple effect, contributing to a more nurturing school environment overall.

Based on the data collected, Fenech (2012) recommended improving communication channels among stakeholders to ensure continuity and smooth transitions for students. She also suggested providing mainstream teachers with additional in-class support, such as teaching assistants, to offer more individualised attention to students. Reducing class sizes is proposed to create a more nurturing atmosphere. Furthermore, the study identifies minimal parental involvement as a concern and emphasises; the need to address these barriers preventing active parent participation. Lastly, ensuring that nurture group teachers receive appropriate training is deemed crucial for the success of these initiatives (Fenech, 2012).

In an article titled 'The Introduction of Nurture Groups in Maltese Schools: A Method of Promoting Inclusive Education', Cefai and Cooper (2011) examine the implementation of NGs within the Maltese primary education sector. This research highlights the increasing social, emotional, and behavioural challenges faced by young students and proposed NG as a strategic intervention to address these issues. The authors argue that integrating NG not only supports the individual needs of children but also enhances the overall inclusivity of schools. Furthermore, they suggested that these groups can transform schools into resource centres for emotional literacy and parental education, thereby benefiting the entire school community. A key challenge identified is adapting the nurture group model to align with Malta's unique educational context while maintaining adherence to established therapeutic educational principles. The paper discusses the rising prevalence of social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties among children in Malta, which has

created a need for more inclusive and holistic educational practices. NGs are presented as a targeted response, offering small, structured, and nurturing environments for children who struggle to cope in mainstream classrooms. The authors emphasise that these groups help foster positive relationships, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (Cefai & Cooper, 2011).

Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of maintaining the core principles of NGs, such as creating a warm and predictable environment, fostering attachment relationships, and addressing children's developmental needs (Cefai & Cooper, 2011). The study further explores the challenges of adapting NGs from the British model to the Maltese cultural and educational context. These could include resistance from some educators, difficulties in resource allocation, and the need for ongoing professional development to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention. Despite these challenges, the authors argue that NGs have significant potential to transform Maltese schools into more inclusive environments (Cefai & Cooper, 2011).

Learning Support Zones
NGs and LSZs are both educational interventions aimed at supporting students with SEBD as well as those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. While they share common goals of promoting inclusion and addressing the holistic needs of students, they differ in their structure, implementation, and specific focus areas. However, both NG and LSZ aim to provide a safe, structured, and supportive environment for students who struggle to cope in mainstream classrooms. NG are implemented in primary schools, while LSZs are established in secondary schools; however, both share the same goal: fostering inclusion by equipping students with the skills needed to thrive in mainstream classrooms.

In her dissertation titled 'Students LSZ Experience with Specific Emphasis on Its Impact on Their Home and Work Environment' Cassar (2020) investigates the effectiveness of LSZs in Maltese secondary schools, focusing on their long-term influence on students' personal and professional lives. The study employs a qualitative methodology, conducting in-depth interviews with eleven adults who attended LSZ services during their secondary education. Through thematic analysis, Cassar identifies several key findings, notably the challenges faced by students with SEBD. Participants reported a range of difficulties associated with SEBD that negatively impacted students' academic performance. Cassar (2020) highlighted the positive impact LSZs had on these students, LSZs were perceived as secure environments offering nurture, understanding, acceptance, and empathy while contributing positively to the students' school experience.

However, Cassar (2020) noted that there was minimal engagement from the families of these students, suggesting a limited impact on the family unit as a

whole. Overall, the study found that LSZs primarily focused on developing key skills such as social interaction, independent living, and emotional literacy. These competencies, nurtured within the LSZ environment, were believed to equip participants with the tools needed to navigate future adversities, including those related to employment and workplace ethics. Cassar (2020) concluded that schools should serve as caring and inclusive settings for students with SEBD, emphasising the importance of involving parents and guardians as crucial stakeholders. She recommended re-evaluating inclusive policies to assess their practicality and effectiveness, ensuring necessary support is provided with a view to enhancing the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, especially families.

A study by Borg (2013) highlighted the positive impact of LSZs, noting that students felt better equipped to handle challenges in mainstream education due to the support received in the LSZ. Nonetheless, this study also identified challenges such as limited parental involvement and the need for improved reintegration strategies. Furthermore, research by Cassar and Abela (2023) explored the long-term effects of LSZ attendance on former students. The findings indicated that while students benefited from the support and developed skills that aided them in their personal and professional lives, there was minimal parental involvement during their time in the LSZs. Additionally, none of the participants were reintegrated into mainstream classes, highlighting a significant area for improvement in the LSZ framework. The key findings from this research suggests that participants viewed their time in LSZs as beneficial, helping them acquire social skills, independent living skills, and emotional literacy. These competencies were perceived to enhance their motivation and feelings of self-worth. LSZs gave students an ability to handle adversities in both home and work environments. However, the participants reported a lack of engagement from the parents which may have implications for the holistic support and development of students with SEBD (Cassar & Abela, 2023).

Moreover, an article in the Times of Malta Calleja (2023) discussed concerns about LSZs; affirming that while providing a safe space for students with SEBD, LSZs might inadvertently contribute to their isolation from the mainstream student body. The piece emphasised the importance of developing strategies to ensure that LSZs serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to full inclusion (Calleja, 2023)

Methodology

This paper focuses on the stories of three LSEs working in Maltese state schools; narrative inquiry was chosen as particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories and individual experiences; offering insight into the lived experiences of the participants (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000). By using narrative inquiry, this study focuses on understanding the meaning-making process of LSEs as they reflect on their role and the challenges they face within their role. Narrative inquiry focuses on the stories and narratives of research participants (Kim, 2016). As a methodology, narrative inquiry is epistemologically constructionist and ontologically relativist (Smith, 2013).

Framing Experience through Narrative and Dialogue
Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological framework for this research, as it aligns with a constructionist epistemology (Josselson & Hammack, 2021) and a relativist ontology (Smith, 2013). This approach acknowledges that psychological and social phenomena are subject to multiple interpretations, shaped through interpersonal interactions and embedded within broader cultural and historical contexts (Burr, 2015). These ontological and epistemological foundations render narrative inquiry particularly appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of Maltese LSEs working in state schools.

The study adopts a social constructionist epistemological stance, recognising that the meanings attributed to LSEs' narratives are socially constructed through dynamic interactions and influenced by prevailing societal norms, values, and power structures (Ponterotto, 2005). In this view, knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed within the dialogic relationship between the participant (the LSE) and the researcher (the interviewer). Through this collaborative process, meaning is negotiated, reinterpreted, and contextualised, enabling a richer understanding of how LSEs experience and navigate their roles within educational settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, as cited in Ponterotto, 2005). This process of reflective meaning-making is essential to uncovering the nuanced, often marginalised, realities of support educators working within complex institutional frameworks.

Research Questions
To gain deeper insight into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by LSEs working within NGs and LSZs, a series of semi-structured interview questions were designed. These questions aim to explore the personal motivations behind choosing the profession, the specific demands of working in alternative educational settings, and the preparedness and support available to LSEs in their roles. The interview also seeks to uncover the training required, the interpersonal skills necessary for effective practice, and the professional relationships that shape their day-to-day work. The guiding questions were as follows:
1. What encouraged you to become an LSE?
2. What is your experience as an LSE working in a NG/LSZ?
3. How does this role differ from being an LSE in a mainstream classroom?

4. How prepared do you feel to handle unpleasant situations that you encounter through your work?
5. Do you feel you are supported by other staff members; namely teachers and members of the SLT?
6. What training does this role entail?
7. What interpersonal skills must one have in order to perform this role effectively?

Participants

The participants in this study are three LSEs working in state schools, all of whom were selected based on their direct involvement in supporting students with diverse learning needs within the Maltese educational system. The participants were carefully selected based on their extensive experience working in LSZs and NGs, respectively. These environments provide essential support to students facing academic, behavioural and emotional challenges, allowing educators to develop a deep understanding of individualised care to meet the complex needs of these students.

Another participant was chosen for her experience working in a socially deprived area, where issues such as neglect and abuse are prevalent. Her insights were invaluable, as they shed light on the critical role of the LSE in addressing such challenges. LSEs working in deprived areas are often at the forefront of identifying and supporting students while they navigate complex family trauma and systemic challenges. This participant's experience underscores the importance of LSEs in recognising and intervening in situations of neglect and abuse, emphasising the need for them to be well-equipped with both professional training and emotional resilience.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews; all interviews were carried out through Zoom with the transcript function on to ensure that the actual words of the participants were used in the results and discussion section of this paper. Online interviews were chosen to accommodate the geographical distribution of the participants and to provide a flexible, comfortable environment for them to share their experiences. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and followed an open-ended approach, allowing participants to elaborate on their personal stories and perspectives. The use of a semi-structured format enabled the researcher to explore key topics while still giving participants the freedom to guide the conversation based on their individual experiences (Seidman, 2013).

Narrative research as a methodological framework is based on three key elements (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006 as cited in Ntinda, 2018): temporality, sociality, and place. These elements guided the inquiry process and must be explored simultaneously.

- *Temporality* refers to the study of events in transition, examining the past, present, and future aspects of people's lives and experiences. This study focused on participants past experience in inclusive education and what they believe needs to change moving forward.
- *Sociality* focuses on personal and social conditions, considering the feelings, desires, and moral perspectives of both researcher and participants, as well as the cultural, social, and linguistic contexts of the experiences. This study sought to understand interpersonal relationships that the participants had with their students and how they interact with colleagues, parents and the wider school community.
- *Place* refers to the specific physical location where events and experiences take place, in this case the experiences that the research participants narrated happened in a school context.

Narrative analysis

Narrative research focuses on understanding people's life stories as shared in their own words and within their contexts (Ntinda, 2018). It emphasises the significance of individuals' lived experiences and self-beliefs, aligning with social constructivism, which values the complexity of personal stories. Narrative research is a person-centred study, wherein the perspective of the storyteller shapes the resulting knowledge. The analysis of the data followed a narrative approach, where each interview was treated as an individual story. Unlike thematic analysis, which might break up the interview into themes, the narrative approach allowed the participants' voices to remain intact, with an emphasis on the flow and structure of their stories (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative inquiry is a flexible and practical methodology that incorporates elements of realism, postmodernism, and constructionism (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). It recognises that stories can exist on multiple levels, including those told by research participants, those created by researchers based on participants' accounts, and even the stories constructed by readers when engaging with this research paper (Riessman, 2008). This adaptable approach allows narrative inquirers to identify common themes across different stories. Consequently, narrative inquirers place importance on the temporality, causality, and meaning-making conveyed through these stories (Polletta et al., 2011).

After a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts, McCormack's (2004) approach to crafting interpretive stories was adopted to guide the narrative construction. The process unfolded as follows:

1. *Locating stories in transcripts:* I identified the participants' stories using Labov's (1972) framework, which outlines six key elements that stories typically include: abstract (a summary of the story), orientation (contextual introduction), complicating action (the conflict or new

event), evaluations (the participant's reflections during the story), resolution (how the conflict is resolved), and coda (the story's overall meaning, linking it back to the present).

2. *Excavating narrative processes:* As I reviewed the transcripts, I looked for instances where participants referred to previously shared stories, using narrative processes such as: Theorising: The participant attempting to make sense of their story. Augmentation: The participant adding details to a story they had told earlier. Argumentation: The participant introducing information that went beyond the initial story. Description: The participant providing detailed descriptions of people, places, or things. Through these steps, I uncovered the richness of participants' stories and their ongoing process of meaning-making.

A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to document impressions and reflections, as recommended by Josselson and Hammack (2021). Given my active role as a researcher in co-constructing the participants' narratives, it was essential to explicitly acknowledge my positionality and potential biases regarding the subject matter.

Ethical considerations

When conducting research it is of utmost importance to uphold the highest ethical standards and to safeguard the participants dignity and welfare (Kim, 2016). To ensure ethical standards were met, this study used an opt in approach, with social media being the gatekeeper. A poster was shared on social media inviting interested individuals to email me if they were interested in participating in the study. Interested participants were provided with an information letter outlining the details of the study and what their involvement would entail. The interviews were done through Zoom and transcribed through Zoom also, participants were informed of this prior to switching on the transcribe function on Zoom. Moreover, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and have their data erased. They were also free to skip any questions during the interviews.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, safeguarding the identities of the research participants was of paramount concern. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying personal details were carefully removed. Additionally, references to specific schools or geographic locations where participants work were deliberately excluded. Throughout this paper, every effort was made to preserve the integrity of participants' narratives without distortion (McCormack, 2000). To maintain the authenticity of their voices while making the findings accessible to a wider audience, everyday language was used in presenting their stories (Kim, 2016).

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Pseudonym	Sex of participant	Years of experience	Current Role	Other notes
Charmaine	Female	20+ years	Nurture LSE between two primary state schools	Spent over ten years working as an LSE mostly working with students who had SEBD before becoming a Nurture LSE.
Amy	Female	20+ years	LSE in a Secondary state school	Amy is an LSE in a state middle school, she holds a Master's degree.
Francesca	Female	12 years	LSE in a primary state school	Francesca has been an LSE for 12 years, she worked in two difference primary schools in Malta.

Results and Discussion
The experience of an LSE in a primary state school- Francesca's story

Francesca began her journey as an LSE at the young age of eighteen. Reflecting on her early days in the profession, she recalled feeling overwhelmed and unprepared. Assigned to support a student with Down syndrome on a one-to-one basis, she received minimal guidance or handover. Francesca described the uncertainty she faced:

> *I was very young. I was 18 years old. I started because I've always loved children, I've always aspired to working with children as well so that was my first motivator. However, I went in class the first day that I've started on the job and I had no training whatsoever. So I just went in class. I was assigned a one-to-one case which was a student with Down syndrome. I was given very little handover. And… I felt lost. I was new, I was young, I was asking for help from the class teacher. The class teacher was really helpful She guided me a lot and she also spoke to other LSEs on my behalf so that they can help me out, and give me the necessary documents that I need to fill and maybe some resources to start.' (Francesca)*

Francesca explains the positive relationship she had with this student:

> *It was very positive because we bonded, we had the connection. I loved her. She loved me back. So it was quite a positive experience.* (Francesca)

Francesca spoke candidly about her current role, emphasising that she often assumes the responsibilities of a caregiver to compensate for the difficult social circumstances many of her students face. She explained that while academic progress is important, it often takes a back seat to more immediate needs—such as developing life skills and basic self-care. For these students to truly thrive, she believes, they must first be equipped with the fundamental tools to navigate daily life:

> *A role of… caregiver, kind of a parent figure because the children that I work with in the school that I work in usually they tend to have a lot of needs and when I say needs, not just academic needs but also needs like basic skills, self-help skills, general life skills. So I feel that before I start targeting the academic the academics can wait, I have to start from the very basic things that for us we take for granted because our parents have provided us with the necessary skills. Unfortunately, from my experience, I see that the children that I have the opportunity to support often lack these.* (Francesca)

When asked to give examples of her current role Francesca disclosed:

> *I have a student, she is 11 years old and she still needs help when going to the bathroom. This is not because she has a disability, because she has learning difficulties and speech and language difficulties. But she also needs help to keep herself clean. Again, not because she is not capable of doing it by herself, but because she is not given the skill to do it, I have to remind her.* (Francesca)

Francesca was concerned when in the IEP it was mentioned that the student sleeps in nappies:

> *It was quite shocking to also learn during the IEP that the concerned student still wears a nappy at night. And again, not because she cannot go to the bathroom but because…The parent isn't comfortable with the child waking her up during the night to use the bathroom, so she puts her in nappies instead. (Francesca)*

Francesca was also alarmed that speech therapy sessions were not given importance, despite the LSE offering to go with her to these sessions:

> *She has severe language, and speech delays. So she needs to go to the speech therapy regularly.* (Francesca)

Francesca disclosed that despite the services available, which are free of charge, the student is still not making use of these services:

> *But again she's not being… taken to the speech therapy sessions…When during the IEP it was discussed, also I have to mention that from this year we had this special service that was introduced in our school it was… an initiative for these people to help support the parents. They were also invited to the IEP so that they will be able to support the parent. However, even with their support, we still haven't gone to one session of speech therapy, even though the child really needs speech therapy.* (Francesca)

Poor Hygiene

Francesca is deeply concerned about the poor hygiene habits of the student under her care—an issue that has persisted despite being addressed during the IEP meeting:

> *Some things that were discussed during the IEP meeting, even though we agreed upon them especially when it comes to hygiene the concerned student has very poor hygiene. So from morning the student has a certain odour that you can smell that clothes aren't washed, her hair is not clean, under the fingernails is very dirty.* (Francesca)

Francesca tried to tackle these issues by addressing them in the IEP, hoping for things to improve:

> *I created the IEP goals according to what me and the teacher thought was top priority and her self-care and these basic skills of knowing how to clean under your nails, wash your face, brush your hair and these were all goals that were created to help this particular student. Having said that… I feel that the concerned child can learn, she is able to learn. Even though she has learning difficulties when she feels that she's safe and that she's loved she shows that she really wants to learn.* (Francesca)

Francesca's biggest worry is that the parents of the students in the class of the girl she is supporting are complaining about her smell:

> *The smell… we had two notes sent from other students asking the teacher to change their place can you imagine?… In fact, now… Her desk is exactly next to mine. There is a bit of a gap, a small gap, and there is another student. But we had to leave a small gap because it happens they complain about her smell.* (Francesca)

When asked about the parent's reaction to these complaints, and how these complaints are tackled, Francesca explained:

We did voice our concerns, and when you tell the parent about the smell, she doesn't try and fix the situation she tells us that she washes. But her hair, her nails everything indicates that this is not true. When I told the parent if she stays in the bathroom with her, showing her how to wash? She told me no, I have to take care of her sister, I don't have time.' (Francesca)

'But we try and tell her like I mean, all you have to do is show her at least for a whole week, sit with her, you show her how she has to use the face cloth what are the parts that she needs to really foam. Nothing changes… Not even, her underwear, I know because when she bends down sometimes her trousers goes slightly down and I could see the rim of her underwear is the same for three days. (Francesca)

Communication
Francesca highlights her student's struggles with communication. the frustrations that result from these struggles, and how the LSE and the teacher tackle these difficulties to ensure the student is able to communicate with them:

She is very hard-headed, and she has a temper as well, because she gets frustrated, because she's not understood when she talks. So she uses drawings as a means to communicate. But, she knows that I'm there and even the teacher is there to listen, so at least she tries to speak with us. And she does show that she is willing to learn because she feels safe, she feels loved, she feels that we're giving her the attention she needs. (Francesca)

Francesca's words reflect a deep vocational calling—her care for her students goes beyond duty; it is rooted in genuine love and a heartfelt desire to see them thrive.

Neglect
Francesca explains how she suspects her student is being neglected at home. Heartbroken, Francesca points out that the student's struggles are a result of not being spoken to at home:

Maybe she has this particular routine at home, maybe she's given the tablet for many hours, I suspect that she's being left alone with no one to talk to. I mean, at school, I'm always talking to her, whether she likes it or not, she has to try and find a way to somehow communicate with me. (Francesca)

Francesca disclosed that she believes there is no effort to improve her language acquisition when she is at home:

I don't believe that at home it's the same. I believe that the child is not being… spoken to at home because if so, at least, some of the language would have been developed. I tell her, look at me, let's make eye contact, she tends to avoid eye

contact as well. After several times repeating, she does look at me, she does maintain eye contact and then… Ask me, how do you ask me that you want to go to the bathroom? She does try and ask. It's not very clear, but I can comprehend, and even the teacher can comprehend that she's asking to go to the bathroom. (Francesca)

Francesca firmly believes that her student has potential, but she is not being given the necessary support to achieve her goals:

So, I'm pretty sure that with constant support, and it has to be constant though, and with the speech therapy sessions, and with me supporting her at school, doing what the speech therapy is doing…I believe that she can. She has potential. (Francesca)

Going the extra mile
Francesca describes a profound sense of purpose in supporting her students:

I think four years out of seven, I supported students who did have some form of neglect who needed this extra support that should have been given from home and wasn't. Hygiene is almost always a problem. Simple hygiene, then we face other problems related to food because the food is always packed. Not a sandwich or fruit, these bake rolls, always bake rolls and not because this particular student didn't enjoy other food, because he used to show me with his eyes that he's assessing what I'm eating. For instance, a sandwich with ham, lettuce, and I would give him my food… It's very heartbreaking. (Francesca)

Francesca shared that she often feels powerless and unsupported, leaving her unable to assist her student beyond the school environment. She expressed her frustration, explaining that although she strongly believes her student needs speech therapy, the student's mother has not complied with the arrangements agreed upon in the IEP. Francesca also described the role of the Outreach Unit within her school:

Our hands are tied, we do try to ask for support, case in point this new support that the school was given. For instance, as soon as we returned from the holidays I knew that I had to attend speech therapy sessions with my student, I was supposed to go as well because I told the parent to fix the speech therapy appointments during school hours so I can attend as well, even though it's not held at school, but for me, I'd rather do that and know what's going on than having her not going. This was the third appointment that we've set that we didn't go to. Because the parent on the day of the appointment decides not to bring the child to school. Then what I did, I asked for permission to be able to phone the parent to ask if she's going to the speech therapy because I thought that maybe she forgot that the speech therapy session was in the morning. And the reason that she didn't bring her to school was so that she takes her directly from home to speech therapy then after she comes to school. So, to double check

I asked for permission to call, so if that was the case, I would leave school, meet them at the clinic and then return back to school together. We called three times, the phone was never answered, so then that was it. I mean, she didn't come to school the day that she was supposed to go. (Francesca)

Francesca explains that although her school has an Outreach Unit, she still feels unsupported:

I've reached out to these people of the outreach unit and I've told her, listen, we had to go to the speech therapy, the parents did not bring the student to school. Can you follow up? Can you call the parent? To see if she attended or not, because maybe she didn't get her to school, but at least maybe they went to the therapy session with her without informing the school. Then the person from outreach came to me with the answer. She managed to get hold of the parent. She called her and she told her that the appointment was cancelled. I don't know. I have my doubts. I have my doubts because this is the third time happening. (Francesca)

The people at outreach explained to Francesca that she needs to wait till the end of the month for her next appointment. Francesca contends that this is all wasted time, when the student desperately needs to attend these speech therapy sessions. Francesca has taken the responsibility upon herself to read literature on techniques used in speech therapy to help her student in the best way she can:

The people from outreach told me that that for now we will wait till the end of the month because that's when we have the next appointment. I didn't really agree with this, the thing is that time is passing. She will soon leave primary school. Another month would have passed. Another month… she could have got more support and that means another month me not helping her in her speech and language the way the speech therapist will help her because I do a lot of things. I read up on this and I try to learn how I can help her further to build her speech but again, I'm not a qualified speech therapist, so I'm sure that the speech therapist will be able to help more. But I am alone in this battle, the outreach people are not helping even though it is their job to bridge the gap between the home and the school. (Francesca)

Francesca complains that this service is not supporting her and her student, and she has no control over the situation. She disclosed that unless she runs after the Outreach Unit for a follow-up she is left with no answers:

They don't do so unless they are chased. For instance, in my case, I always have to go and ask, have you heard anything? Did she tell you that she's not going to take her to speech therapy? Can you please call her and check? (Francesca)

She disclosed that she had very high expectations for this programme, as in situations like hers where the hands of the LSE are tied, she believed that this programme would support her and others in the same situation. However she is left disappointed:

> *I was very hopeful, and I was quite looking forward to seeing the service working but again, it boils down to the individual. The service can be there but it has to be the individual who takes the necessary steps. I mean, if it would have been me, I would go around the classes and ask. Do you need any support? Is there anything we can do? Or at least see me walking in the corridor and ask me kif bqajt? Okay? No, it doesn't happen. You have to go. They are set in a particular room. They are always in that particular room. So we have to literally go, knock and ask directly. I mean, it's called outreach, but they're not reaching out.* (Francesca)

Child Safety Procedures

When asked about the protocol for involving authorities, particularly in cases where neglect is observed in a student receiving support, the following questions arose: Is the school responsible for reporting such cases? What typically happens in these situations, or what has happened in similar cases you have supported? Francesca explained:

> *We've never really talked about reporting to child's safety with the student I am supporting this year because unfortunately, everyone says that they are full up and everyone says that they cannot cope with the amount of work they have and that unless the child is abused or physically harmed it's pointless, but that's what they say, I don't know. But for this case, no. We didn't reach out yet. I mean, I don't feel that this is something that I have to do. Knowing that I am literally step by step always informing the school of the current situation.* (Francesca)

Francesca feels that it is not her responsibility to report such situations to the authorities; her role is to inform the school, and she does so every time an incident occurs. She shared an experience from previous years when she reported a case of abuse to the relevant authorities:

> *Let me tell you a story that happened a few years ago. It was in another school. I was supporting a student who used to live with her grandparents because her mom was… was in a mental institution, during the weekend once every month she would be able to go and visit her children and live with them at her parents' house. And I noticed that every time her mother is present during that weekend. The child comes back to school on Monday very different, very quiet and bruised but bruised not bruises that you can see. The child used to come near me. pull up her skirt and put it down again very fast. I could see these severe bruises on her thighs. And I started writing down every time that I see something different and I started recording this in writing. And I would ask*

her what happened to you pupa? Oh, she wouldn't answer but she wanted to somehow communicate that something is wrong. Obviously, I talk to the SMT, I talk to the teacher and I asked what are we going to do? I mean, this is something really serious….The final straw was when she came one day and she had severe bodily harm (the details of this have been erased to safeguard to identity of the LSE being interviewed). Oh, I'm like, what happened? Don't touch it. Miss, don't touch it. Oh, I said, that's it. That's it. I mean, the SMT knows about this. They're not doing anything. I have to do something about it because this… went on really far now. And… I wrote… a report obviously the teacher backed me up because also the signature of the teacher was needed so I put my name on it and I signed it. I put the teacher's name on it she also signed it. And we sent this report to the concerned authorities. When I called to follow up about this report and if they have received it. They asked for the student's name and I told them. The reply of the person that I spoke to was 'We know about that situation, they already had an open case, now the case is closed and it's going to remain closed.' Somehow The word got out that I reported and I found… a very big vandalism on my car and even on my tires. And nothing was done. I mean, I went through all this and then you start becoming scared as well because you don't know who you're dealing with. I did it because of the child, because I really wanted for this child to be removed from this situation, because the child wanted to tell me that she's being physically abused for sure, but nothing came out of it. (Francesca)

Francesca explained what this experience has taught her. However, she disclosed that she would still report to safeguard the students under her care:

That experience did teach me… but still I would do it again. I would report again, but I was scared, I have to admit that it taught me to be cautious because unfortunately, even though I took the extra step, I was the one who faced the consequences and still the child remained in the same situation. Then after that I spent another year there at that school and I asked for a transfer. I still have a picture of me and her. Sometimes I do try to look for her on social media to see what's become of her or how she's doing, but I've never found her. I mean, now she's a teenager, and I think she finished from school also, time passed. And it's like you never really forget these students, their memory lives in your heart. (Francesca)

Breaking point

Francesca revealed that she has reached a breaking point, contemplating a career change, as the emotional weight of her students' pain has become too much to bear, deeply impacting her own well-being.

I do speak to the teacher. She also became a friend of mine nowadays and I do tell her that I do love my job, but it's becoming very, very tiring. It does affect you even mentally because you start questioning how can a parent do this to

their children. I mean… I don't have children myself but I am witnessing severe neglect, and unfortunately for me this isn't a one-off case. (Francesca) There's only so much you can do, but I always keep on trying. But I am tired because I'm feeling too much for the student and it's not helping. I have been considering changing the job. Mainly because of… this thing you know this thing that the problems that I face at school are affecting me, are affecting me personally, are affecting also my general well-being because I do keep on thinking about the students even when I go home. (Francesca)

The evolution of a Nurture LSE- Charmain's story

In this section, Charmaine reflects on her journey to becoming a Nurture Learning Support Educator (NLSE) and the factors that inspired her to pursue this rewarding yet challenging role. She shares the motivations that led her to this career path and the personal experiences that have shaped her commitment to supporting students in a nurturing environment:

I worked for twelve years as an LSE in class. During those twelve years, mainly, I have worked with children with SEBD, or ADHD, or challenging behaviours. During those years, I have realised that although academics is very important there was something missing in class. And that was coping strategies, dealing with emotions, dealing with self-esteem, dealing with friendship issues. And I could never reach the students in that way.. you know in class the curriculum was rigid, it was so fast, the teacher is always in a hurry and the LSE has to cope, has to adapt papers and um… you know it's always in a hurry that these emotions, these internal struggles are never tackled. (Charmaine)

Charmaine emphasised the importance of prioritising students' well-being, stating that it should take precedence over academic achievement:

They were always set aside. And that always bothered me, to be honest because I know that children, when children are not feeling happy, something is missing inside of them. For them, Maths is not important. Maltese is not important. They are not going to concentrate, you know because they are not feeling okay. Feeling okay was the first priority for some children, before the academics. (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained how she was always drawn towards this career:

I always worked close with the nurture teacher and LSE even when I was still in class because I used to want to learn how I can manage in the classroom. I wanted to learn at least some small strategies I could use in class while I am with them. So, for example, a short circle time session together, even one-to-one, showing the emotional cards or the friendship cards using different strategies. I always wanted to know how to at least try to input a little bit of

what is being done in the Nurture class into the regular classroom.
(Charmaine)

The responsibility of the LSE in a nurture class
Charmaine explained that the role of the nurture LSE goes beyond academic support. It involves creating a safe and nurturing environment where students can build emotional resilience, self-esteem, and social skills. The LSE provides personalised care to address the individual needs of students, fostering their overall well-being while also supporting their learning journey. Ultimately, the role is about helping students feel valued, understood, and equipped to thrive both inside and outside the classroom:

> *It's different, first of all, because you always work with the same teacher. It's a team. So the team is there. It never changes or at least It's very hard to change, it's an advantage or a disadvantage. Because if you don't click.. You're either going to work for it to click or else you know, it's going to reflect on the team because it's very important to work in a team. As a team in a nurture class. And the role of the LSE there is to work alongside more than ever with the teacher. Because it's no longer the LSE at the side or at the back of the class. Just reaching out for one child or two children.. As a nurture LSE, your input is more important. Your input is throughout the whole lesson, the teacher relies a lot on me. He trusts in my knowledge of SEBD. So my input there is a lot. Apart from that we create resources, we create lessons and different programs, we try to design the class to make it feel like home, we try and make it the most welcoming possible, we have a living room and kitchen to give it that welcoming, homely feel.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained that in the nurture classroom they meet with various needs, and they try to help students who are encountering difficulties:

> *So in class, we keep some stuff, like, socks or scarves, uniforms that maybe parents donated when their children finished from school, some biscuits, some crips, some sweets, sometimes because we like to give some sweets at times because some children they have never had sweets, for example. We have a child who has never tasted chocolate, this child is neglected but the child is afraid, it is difficult.* (Charmaine)

When asked how the NG supports a student in a similar situation, Charmaine disclosed:

> *We try to make her situation better at least. For example, we went to the cinema day and I brought her a treat myself. So I go around and whoever is not munching on something, I give them something just I try not to show it to the others because for other children, even though they have, they would want from the teacher's treats. But I would know who does not have, because they don't*

give them from home and I give them myself. So I try to put it in the bag discreetly, I just whisper, listen, you have something good. (Charmaine)

Charmaine explains how they tackle different situations, depending on the unique circumstances:

When someone is feeling cold we give them a scarf even if they put it on their lap maybe and we wash it and we put it back for whoever needs it. Some children even come to school without socks, so we give them a pair of socks. So at least they are warm while at school. (Charmaine)

Charmaine revealed the fear that some children experience over seemingly simple acts of kindness, such as being given a pair of socks at school:

Some children refuse to take the socks home," she explained. "They tell us, 'No, we'll take them off.' We try to gently ask why, but not all children open up. However, we once had a child who told us that if she took the socks home, her mother would find out and she would be punished. She was very clear — she didn't want us to give her any socks. (Charmaine)

This heartbreaking reality highlights the deep-rooted fear and caution some children carry with them, even over basic necessities. When I probed further into this issue of why a parent would send their children to school without any socks, Charmaine opened up about the reluctance of the school administration to dig deeper into such circumstances:

So… without socks, that was always a question I also ask myself. Unfortunately speaking from experience whenever we had these kind of issues and we try to speak with the SLT or any other person involved in the school administration, they are unwilling to push things further up, unfortunately, because I think they are afraid. In Malta, everyone knows everyone, so they would rather keep quiet. (Charmaine)

Charmaine, visibly distressed, shared her frustration at the reluctance of members of the SLT and school administration to escalate serious concerns. Too often, she is met with the response that "nothing can be done." She deeply questions this inaction, voicing her fear that one day, the student in question might rebel — and when that happens, all the blame will fall on her. The deeper, painful realities — the years of abuse and neglect endured throughout the child's upbringing — will likely remain hidden and unacknowledged, leaving the true roots of her struggles ignored:

Whenever I went to the offices and, you know, I speak up for these children I was always told, Charmaine, nothing can be done. Okay, nothing can be done. But this child, what's going to happen with this child? Because she's…going to grow rebellious, she can either rebel and if a child who is upset, angry,

suppressing all those issues. One fine day she is going to explode. It's either she will hurt herself, or she will hurt others. What if she hurts others or hurts herself? What then? She will get all the blame and no one will ever understand why she did that… her history, the abuse and severe neglect she has suffered throughout her childhood.. Nobody will ever understand what she has had to endure. (Charmaine)

Charmaine revealed that the students are also fearful; they are afraid to speak up. They come to nurture for support, but nurture doesn't have all the solutions:

The children are being made to shut up, because whenever they talk…no one higher up, no one takes action it just stops at Nurture. Nurture hasn't got any solutions, we always try to tell our SLT. Listen, we can only report but once we report what's happening then? (Charmaine)

Charmaine emphasised that the role of NGs is not to offer solutions to these matters, but rather to report to those who are in positions of power. She explained the procedure that is followed when the Nurture team do report:

When we report, some people come to visit the school.. sometimes child safety services come, sometimes someone from counselling comes. They come, they speak to the child. They tell us no… there is nothing to worry about. We are always shocked at this. We tell them okay, so why are things coming up while they are in nurture? (Charmaine)

When asked why she thinks this is happening, Charmaine shared that these entities speak to the parents and they are forced to back off:

They speak to the parents, the parents are aggressive and they stop digging. This is very dangerous because it is a vicious circle. These children are going to grow up, and these problems will grow with them. (Charmaine)

Building Resilience: How the Nurture Class Equips Vulnerable Students with Coping Strategies
Charmaine, fully aware that the children's cries for help often fall on deaf ears, explains how, within the nurture setting, she and the class teacher focus on equipping students with coping mechanisms to help them manage their immediate circumstances. Their work centres not on changing the students' difficult realities, but on empowering them to navigate their daily struggles with resilience and hope:

'They can be given advice. So that advice they can take back at home, they can use it. Maybe they won't use it straight away, but listening today and listening tomorrow and learning to cope with whatever they are going through. We give them the skills to cope.. We can't change their situation because we're not

psychologists. We're not counsellors either, but all we can do is listen to them and help them to cope with their current situation. (Charmaine)

When asked to provide an example of this scenario; Charmaine explained:

Yes, so, for example, we had a child once, this child in particular is always scruffy: dandruff, dirty hair, a dirty face, dirty clothes, she didn't even know how to use a wipe. So she comes in the nurture class, I clean her face, I use dry shampoo on her hair, I try and brush it for her. I give her a clean uniform and wash her dirty uniform myself at school. Sometimes she brings other clothes that are dirty and I wash them for her at school, I do this to make sure she is presentable in class or else the others will not play with her because she smells bad. (Charmaine)
'She can't take care of her clothes herself because she told us that sometimes she tries to wash them with her hands with normal soap, shower soap, not clothes soap.. Can you imagine? (Charmaine)

Defining the Curriculum in the Nurture Class
Charmaine explained how she and the class teacher explore the needs of the students in order to create a tailored educational experience that prioritizes students' emotional and social development, focusing on fostering a safe and supportive environment where students can build confidence, resilience, and interpersonal skills. The curriculum is designed to meet the individual needs of students, helping them to develop a strong sense of self-worth. Charmaine explained how first they observe the students to determine their needs:

We observe the children…when they come to the sessions and they open up you literally learn their needs. Once you learn their needs, you can create a programme to suit their needs. You start to envision what you need to instil in these children so you can create a suitable programme for them. We speak together as a team, the teacher and I. We find videos, we create occasions where children learn in a pleasurable way so they can be happy. The most important thing is that we give them skills they can use at home. (Charmaine)
Even the warm-up activities, sometimes they are associated with the theme that we decide to cover. Every warm-up activity we create, it has a meaning in itself. So it's like the start of the session after the circle time because the circle time is something very important in a nurture class. But after that we go with the warm-up activity And after the warm-up activity, we show the students a video, we have a full discussion and then the activity that goes with it. Sometimes we end with relaxation, we put on relaxing music, we even do mindfulness or meditation sessions, these kinds of things so that they can relax before they go back in class. Sometimes we do the journal and the journal is very important.. it's amazing what children draw and write about their own journey, it is their secret diary. We never push them too much to share but if they want to share, they are safe to. (Charmaine)

When asked if students are keen on sharing during these sessions, Charmaine explained:

> *Mainly children do share, they are willing to share because they want to show us what they're going through and if they become comfortable with the rest of the group and they realise that the rest of the group are going through mainly the same difficulties as they are because we try to group them that way…. So they feel comfortable and they want to open up.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained that the grouping of students is intentional, designed to place individuals with similar needs in the same cohort. This approach helps students feel supported, as it reassures them that they are not alone in facing these challenges.

Neglect
Charmaine describes the various forms of severe neglect she has encountered while working in the nurture class and explains how these situations are addressed:

> *Sometimes together with the lunch, they have the leftovers from the day before. The lunchbox is not being washed from day to day, because if one washes the lunchbox, one would take away the leftover lunch and throw it away… No? I wash my son's lunchbox every day and I always remove the leftovers.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained that as a result a foul smell is created, the student removes the leftover lunch and eats the fresh lunch that sits on top of the left overs:

> *'It starts to smell, especially in summer. She leaves the leftovers and goes for the lunch she has ready, just a sandwich. It's always plain. She eats it plain because she likes it plain and I try not to question that because children normally want it plain or at least my son wants it plain as well.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine revealed that the school once offered fresh food, smoothies, cereals, and yogurts, at breakfast club. This food was a lifeline for students who lacked access to nutritious meals both at home and in their lunchboxes. Unfortunately, this practice ended during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not been addressed since. Now, students are provided with pre-packaged food like muffins and sandwiches, which provide little nutritional value.

Training
When asked if she had received any training to handle the situations she faces, Charmaine explained that she has primarily learned through experience. She shared that her LSE training does not equip her to deal with

these challenges, but noted that the training being offered is more of a reinforcement of what she already knows:

> *What I have learned is through experience and through obviously the studies but mainly through experience. I don't know, I think it's something it comes natural. What I have learned in the courses, it's an extra or else let's say it's a confirmation that what I am doing is right.* (Charmaine)

Charity-Driven Support: The Nurture Classroom's Struggle for Funding
When asked about who funds this sort of classroom Charmaine disclosed that before the Covid-19 pandemic they had a well-stocked classroom, however most of the things were taken from storage and they had to start from scratch with an empty classroom:

> *We're not given any funds, normally whatever we have at home and we don't need we try to bring it in school. Pre-Covid, our class was a bit different. It was fuller, we had a lot more stuff in our class but then due to Covid, our class was taken by another teacher and after Covid, they just gave us an empty class so it was up to us to literally work to fill it up again, most of the things we had pre-covid were taken from storage.* (Charmaine)
> *I get the things myself so I started building nurture myself going on Marketplace, finding stuff I could bring in class with very, very little money. I was also lucky because two pieces of furniture I found, I spoke to the person and I told them that I want them for a class and they gave them to me for free. This person was very nice, he even delivered the furniture to school for us. This was very helpful to us.* (Charmaine)
> *And other things I paid small amounts of money like the curtains and the cushions, sometimes my husband, he finds something and he brings it for us, but we are always after a bargain.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained that she strives to create a home-like environment in the nurture classroom, where students look forward to coming because the setup differs from that of a typical classroom. She shared that many of these students lack a stable home life and find comfort and safety within the nurturing space:

> *First of all, coming in class, seeing the class the way it is, it's not the normal classroom they go to every day. When they go in you can tell they are happy, most of our children, they don't have… they don't find everything at home, they do not find this warmth at home.* (Charmaine)

Challenging the Stigma: Understanding Teacher Resistance to Nurture Classrooms
Charmaine revealed that some teachers continue to stigmatise nurture classrooms, dismissing them as a waste of time. She stressed the importance of maintaining strong, collaborative relationships with these teachers, noting that without their referrals, many students in need would never access the support nurture classes offer. Charmaine also highlighted another challenge: during

staff shortages, often caused by illness, the first to be redeployed are the nurture teacher and NLSEs, further undermining the stability and effectiveness of the nurture programme:

> *It is a pity because. It's the first thing that happens when a child is normally referred. Some teachers, unfortunately, not all of them, but unfortunately some teachers, they try to resist because they just think that children want to be in nurture because they want to escape from the class, just because they don't want to work or they want to escape the classroom for a while. They sarcastically tell us that even they want to go there.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine identified a critical issue within the SLT, pointing out that members frequently fail to recognise the importance of Nurture in supporting students who require this service. She revealed that Nurture is often viewed as an "intruder" because it is managed by an external body, the NSSS, which means that the SLT do not have direct control over the service. This disconnection can undermine the potential of Nurture and its integration within the school's broader system:

> *In my case, my SLT is Um… Ara… they are not always on board. Nurture is an intruder…Nurture is a service. So it's not created by the school, the SLT is not managing the nurture but the outside services are managing the nurture so yes, it is a problem for them.* (Charmaine)
> *Whenever a teacher or an LSE is absent, they turn to the nurture class to replace. Although we try to support as much as possible because we understand that sometimes there are um… there are circumstances where, for example, four teachers are sick. So not all students can be divided into other classes. So we try to help, but we also try to explain that nurture is not an option. It is there to stay. The service needs to be given every day and continuation needs to be there.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine observed that many teachers and LSEs hold a distinct stigma toward Nurture teachers and NLSEs, often assuming that their roles are easier and less demanding. She explained that this misconception stems from a lack of understanding about the true nature of the challenges and responsibilities involved in supporting vulnerable students. Charmaine emphasised that while some may perceive Nurture staff as simply wandering the corridors, they overlook the profound emotional burdens and constant anxieties these educators carry for the children under their care—burdens that often go unseen amid the fast-paced routines of the wider school staff:

> *But, they don't know what I carry. They don't know that sometimes I know someone is passing through a difficult time, I just knock on the door and I look at someone who I know spoke to me about some difficulties. I just look them in the eye and I say something to make them feel better or to show them: listen I am here for you.* (Charmaine)

Charmaine explained that her nurturing role extends beyond students, as she also provides support to adults who are facing difficult times. She highlighted that her service includes offering care and assistance to her adult colleagues, recognising the importance of fostering a supportive environment for everyone within the school community:

> For example, we have a…teacher who is most of the time absent because she's not feeling well. So the LSE is managing the class on her own because they can't find a replacement at the moment. So what I do is I take my breaks there. Or whenever I have a free lesson, I offer myself to go there. (Charmaine)

Charmaine emphasised the importance of maintaining positive relationships with other staff members, noting that if there is any tension between the Nurture teacher or LSE, it can lead to a reluctance to make referrals by the class teacher. She explained that building trust and fostering a collaborative environment is essential to ensure that students in need of support are identified and provided with the necessary resources:

> You need to maintain good relationships with the teacher. So if a student and their class needs nurture, they will refer. (Charmaine)

Charmaine also stressed that it is also important to keep good relationships with LSEs working within the same school:

> I don't want them to be afraid of nurture. I want them to refer. I want them to ask for my help.' (Charmaine)

The Role of the LSE in the Learning Support Zone - Amy's story.

Amy outlines the role of an LSE working within the LSZ, describing how these learning zones in secondary schools are specifically designed to support students with SEBD, as well as other emotional and behavioural challenges. She highlighted the importance of creating a safe, structured environment that helps these students thrive academically and personally:

> In the learning zone we cater for students who have mainly SEBD as well as other behavioural issues. But then it got extended to other students. The programmes are there, they were set up in the learning zone, and depending on the observations, the referrals and on the feedback we get from the other educators from the nurture group in primary we decide which is the best programme for these students. (Amy)

Amy explained the distinct nature of her role in the LSZ, highlighting how it differs from that of an LSE working in the mainstream. She is responsible for creating a nurturing, structured environment where students can address the

challenges they are facing. Amy emphasises that her work involves a holistic approach, supporting students' overall well-being and helping them develop skills that enable them to thrive both inside and outside the classroom:

> *Basically, I assist the LSZ teacher in preparing the lessons, for example, if the topic is anger management, we always try to find a video clip that matches the lesson. We get the visual and the audio not just the teacher speaking; we try to touch the different senses. We also follow UDL (Universal Design for Learning).* (Amy)

Amy explained that part of their role in LSZ is a bureaucratic one:

> *And then there's also some paperwork in the learning zone that is very important. We fill in the Boxall profile for every student. This is a continuation of nurture.* (Amy)

Building Success Through Effective Teamwork
Amy highlights the crucial role of teamwork in supporting students, explaining how she collaborates closely with class teachers to develop tailored programmes that meet the specific needs of each student. She emphasises that this partnership ensures a more cohesive and effective approach to addressing both academic and emotional challenges, ultimately helping students succeed. Through shared insights and coordinated efforts, Amy and the class teacher work together to create an environment that fosters growth and development for every student:

> *Teamwork is always very important, because if you don't work together you can't prepare the lessons you aim to address to cater for the students and you can't reach your goal, so the teacher and myself we plan everything together, even which students will benefit from which programme.* (Amy)

Amy explains that sensitive topics are approached carefully in the LSZ, often using games and group activities to address various topics without singling out any individual student. This method allows students to engage with difficult subjects in a safe, non-threatening way, promoting open discussion while ensuring that no one feels targeted or uncomfortable. By using these indirect, inclusive approaches, Amy and the LSZ teacher create an environment where students can reflect on their emotions and experiences without feeling exposed:

> *For example if you have a student with bad hygiene habits we need to address hygiene issues immediately. We address a lot of different things, good hygiene, issues of neglect, poverty, students who are not given attention from their parents etc..* (Amy)

Identifying the Students Who Benefit in the LSZ

Amy explained that students who participate in nurture groups in Year 6 typically transition to the LSZ in Year 7. During this transition, they receive a handover from the nurture group educators, ensuring continuity of support. Additionally, Amy highlights that the team conducts observations in classrooms to identify students who may benefit from attending the LSZ, ensuring that those in need of additional assistance are properly supported:

> *Any educator or any SLT member can refer any student for the learning zone, but we also do observations in different classes. Both myself as an LSE and the LSZ teacher, we do observations in class, from that we get the feedback from the nurture teachers in year six, they give us a hand over.* (Amy)

Amy explained that the students she encounters in the LSZ come from diverse backgrounds, each with unique challenges. Some students attend because they have a tendency to get into trouble at school, struggling with behaviour management. Others are there because they suffer from low self-esteem, which affects their ability to engage in school life. Amy emphasises the importance of addressing these varied needs to ensure all students receive the support they require to succeed academically and emotionally.

> *We get various students, mainly students who get in trouble at school, so they get referred mainly from the SLT. For example, they get in fights easily, they disturb the lessons, we get the students that do not abide by the school policies and the school regulations. They disturb the lessons or the teachers so they are sent to us.* (Amy)

Amy explained that once students begin receiving support in the LSZ, they are provided with a tailored environment designed to address their specific needs.

> *Students have a maximum of two lessons per week, and the length of the program depends on how many sessions they need and it varies with every student. Some students carry on for two whole years. For example, some students just need one term or two terms, it all depends on the situation. (Amy)*

The Learning Support Zone in Student Development

Amy explained that the LSZ environment is intentionally designed to be different from a regular classroom. It offers more flexibility, unlike a traditional classroom, the LSZ emphasises smaller group settings, personalised attention, and a calming atmosphere that helps students with behavioural or emotional challenges thrive:

> *Our environment is very different from that of the classroom. It's like a home environment. We have a kitchenette, a couch, we also have a table and chairs but it's not a formal classroom setting, it is a homely setting, and we only have*

a maximum of eight students at a time… so we can give each student individual attention. (Amy)

Amy explained that the LSZ also offers an opportunity for students to make new friends:

They come from different classes within the same year group. So they get to meet with other peers during these sessions. (Amy)

Empowering Vulnerable Students: The Impact of the Learning Support Zone
Amy explained the significant impact the LSZ has in addressing challenges such as poverty, recognising the unique difficulties these students face. She emphasises the importance of tackling these issues with sensitivity and discretion, ensuring that students' circumstances are handled with care and confidentiality:

We have students that come to school without lunch, or not enough lunch. I tackled a situation where the mother had passed away, the children were living with the father and they were like four or five kids. And I don't think they were making ends meet. It was always a difficulty financially, if you have a normal job, it's always a struggle you know, but when the mother passed away the situation went from bad to worse. (Amy)
So our role in the LSZ is to tackle this, we see if this particular student has enough lunch and, for example, we have a cooking session not to make it obvious that we are offering food to just him, do you understand? Whatever intervention you do, it is always turned around as a whole group thing, not to pinpoint one student. That's beautiful. (Amy)

Amy disclosed that the school also gives assistance in cases of known financial struggles:

In cases of poverty, these students are offered like a ticket. That's given by the SLT and they go to the tuck shop with it and the tuck shop knows that they can give them extra food for free, but sometimes this help is not enough. (Amy)

Amy explained that the LSZ also provides uniforms for students who may be in need, ensuring that they have the appropriate attire to feel comfortable and confident at school. This initiative helps to remove barriers for students who might be facing financial difficulties:

We also have uniforms, we have students that finish school or go to secondary and uniforms don't fit them anymore. They bring them to school and donate them to the LSZ. We have a whole selection of uniforms. So, for those students who don't have an extra uniform, very often they don't tell you they don't have an extra one, but that they lost it and stuff like that. So they come to us and we

tell them, listen, you can keep it because this is extra. And we know that, you know that It's a genuine case. (Amy)

Amy remarked that sometimes by helping the child, you are also helping the family. This highlights the interconnectedness of student support, emphasising that addressing a child's needs often has a positive ripple effect on the entire family, improving their overall well-being and stability. There is a well-known quote that resonates with this sentiment: "If you want to change the world, start with the children." This speaks to the broader impact of supporting students, suggesting that helping one child can create positive change within their family and community:

> *We believe that teaching or passing the message to the child might help all the family you know at the end of the day. Sometimes it's not only about, for example, showering every day but it's um.. access to clean clothes, access to laundry detergent or a washing machine or a tumble dryer, it is this lack of resources that we need to address. (Amy)*

Challenging the Stigma: Understanding Resistance to Learning Support Zones
Amy revealed that the LSZ faces ongoing stigma, not only from some teachers but also from members of the SLT. She explained that this stigma creates a constant battle, as there are misconceptions about the value and impact of the support provided in the LSZ. Despite these challenges, Amy emphasised the importance of persevering and advocating for the students and demonstrating the positive outcomes of the LSZ, aiming to shift perceptions and foster greater understanding and support within the school community:

> *We get a lot of stigma from other colleagues. Students come in and tell me listen miss we have a … lesson the teacher doesn't want us to come because you're just going to LSZ and you're going to waste time because they don't do anything. That's what one particular student told us. Unfortunately, some educators do not see the relevance of emotional literacy. They don't understand that if they don't function well mentally, they can't function well academically. They don't relate the two things together, so we are all the time struggling with this and sometimes you're even struggling with the SLT as well and that's even harder. (Amy)*
>
> *All the time we have to prove ourselves to the SLT and to other colleagues. We were even asked to do something to promote LSZ. We try to promote in our school as well for them to understand the relevance but for example we did a booklet to explain what we do, the activities that we carry out, the sessions we do. However, the stigma is still there and still it is seen as a waste of time. (Amy)*

Amy expressed her concern that the LSZ is often unappreciated, and each year she fears that it might be discontinued at her school. Despite the significant positive impact the LSZ has on vulnerable students, she

highlighted the ongoing uncertainty and the struggle to ensure that it remains an integral part of the school's support system:

> *LSZ is not appreciated and it's always a question every year. Will we be allowed to offer this service again? The SLT, the head of school, fail to understand the relevance of these sessions.* (Amy)
> *The people from NSSS believe in learning zone, they are constantly trying to explain to heads of school. Sometimes the head tells them, listen we don't need the learning zone anymore, we want to shut it down.* (Amy)
> *So when you have a head of school that doesn't believe in this service, it is difficult to carry on.* (Amy)
> *We face a lot of attitudinal barriers.* (Amy)

Amy explained that while the inclusion policy emphasises the implementation of UDL, many educators are either unfamiliar with the concept or resistant to it. She notes that, too often, well-intentioned statements are included in official documents however they are never truly implemented in day-to-day teaching. Amy highlights this gap between policy and practice:

> *You have to practise what you preach. It's irrelevant if you have a lot of policies, a lot of nice words written black on white, then they're not made into reality in practice. For example with UDL, UDL is written in the inclusion policy. It should be done in every classroom. Why is it not? Some teachers, when I did my questionnaire for my master's, they don't even know what UDL is. Imagine how much they are implementing it if they don't know what it is! These strategies are not being adopted in their classroom. They are unaware of it.* (Amy)
> *The role of LSE, I think it's overlooked. We are not considered as professionals, we are not considered as capable educators. For example, I have a master's degree, but having a teacher that has a master's and having an LSE with a master's… it's not the same thing. We are not recognised, even by the SLT. I cannot understand why, because not being in charge of a whole class doesn't make you less, we are not respected as professionals.* (Amy)

Amy highlighted that this perception can undermine the important contributions LSEs make in supporting students, particularly those with additional needs:

> *When I started my master's, others told me, why don't you go for the Masters in Teaching and Learning? Sorry, I don't intend to be a teacher, to be recognised as having a master's. I want my master's in inclusive education, not to be a teacher, because that is my area. That is where I am comfortable working because that's what I love to do. And people don't get it. I think the only people that appreciate our work are the parents of the students we support.* (Amy)

A teacher has her class of students. I have my own group of students that I support. I mean, it's a different role, but it doesn't mean less, it doesn't mean that I'm not a professional as well. (Amy)

Amy explained that when she continued her studies at the degree level, they were promised a warrant as part of their professional development. However, she revealed that this promise was never fulfilled, as they were never actually given the warrant.

When I did my degree at university, we were promised…that we're going to have the warrant but obviously four years, I think, passed from that day and no warrant was ever given to us. They are all empty promises. (Amy)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research brings to light the profound and often invisible role that LSEs play within the educational ecosystem. Working at the delicate intersection between the school and the home, LSEs act not simply as academic facilitators but as crucial lifelines for students grappling with neglect, poverty, abuse, and emotional trauma. Their work requires an extraordinary blend of resilience, empathy, and professional skill. It demands that they carry not only the educational aspirations of their students but also the weight of their pain, their unmet needs, and their silent hopes for something better.

Yet, while their contributions are indispensable, LSEs often find themselves operating within a system that overlooks, marginalises, or underestimates their work. Instead of being recognised as core professionals whose insights and interventions shape students' lives, they are too often subjected to stigma, sidelined within school hierarchies, and constrained by a chronic lack of resources. The emotional toll of carrying this dual burden—supporting the vulnerable while being made invisible themselves—is immense and largely unacknowledged.

This study reveals that the most significant obstacles LSEs face are not the children's complex needs themselves, but the systemic failures that deprive them of the tools, support, and recognition necessary to meet those needs fully. Institutional inertia, rigid hierarchies, limited professional autonomy, and a culture that undervalues emotional labour all contribute to an environment where the very educators tasked with providing care and hope are left isolated and depleted.

If we are to foster truly inclusive and just educational environments, a radical reimagining of how we view and support LSEs is urgently needed. It is not enough to rely on their compassion or vocational dedication alone. Structures must be reformed to affirm their expertise, dignify their labour, and provide sustainable pathways for professional growth and self-care. Recognition must

move beyond tokenism to become embedded in policies, resourcing, and leadership practices that genuinely value the holistic work LSEs perform.

Moreover, as this research illustrates, supporting LSEs is ultimately about supporting the broader vision of education as a space for dignity, belonging, and transformation. When we invest in the well-being and empowerment of LSEs, we invest in creating school communities where every child—regardless of their background—is seen, heard, and given the tools to thrive.

In the spirit of more hopeful and humanising education, it is time to listen more carefully to the voices of LSEs. Their stories are not merely narratives of struggle; they are testimonies of perseverance, of quiet acts of care, and of belief in the transformative potential of every child. They remind us that education is not solely about knowledge transmission—it is about building a more compassionate society, one relationship at a time.

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