

## Joseph Burló and the Education of Children with Disabilities in Malta

**Anne-Marie Callus**  
University of Malta  
anne-marie.callus@um.edu.mt

**Abstract:** This article discusses the work of Joseph Burló in building Malta's special educational system from the 1950s onwards. It is based on information obtained from interviews with his daughter, Dr Marian Muscat Azzopardi, and one of the teachers who worked with him, Ms Mary Rose Zahra, as well as from the documents in the Burló Collection donated by Dr Muscat Azzopardi and other sources. The article provides brief information about Burló's career and the sociocultural context in which he worked, showing how his work contributed to removing the stigma associated with disability and improving the quality of life of children with disabilities. The article then discusses how Burló built connections with various persons to help him in his work and the outlook which informed his work, especially his emphasis on a holistic approach to child development and to catering for the various needs of children with disabilities. In the conclusion, the article reflects on the situation of the education of children with disabilities today and whether, and to what extent, the forward-looking spirit of Burló has been retained.

**Keywords:** Special education; history of education; children with disabilities; Malta

### Introduction

When Joseph Burló was in his late teenage years, in 1936, he won a one-year scholarship to study English literature at the University of Southampton in the UK. As a Maltese citizen, and a time when Malta had already been a British colony for 136 years, furthering one's studies in the UK was the thing to do (and to a certain extent, it still is (Malta Independent, 2021)). What was not obvious for Burló was the transformative experience that studying at Southampton would turn out to be.

The history of the education of children with disabilities in Malta starts from a very personal experience. Burló had a stammer and one of his lecturers at Southampton suggested that he went for speech therapy while there. The speech therapy worked and the seeds for what would become Malta's special education system were sown. Those seeds needed to germinate for a while, however. In 1938, he was back in the UK, this time for a two-year studying to become a headteacher at St Mary's College in London. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 necessitated a change of plans. He joined the RAF, training in the US as a pilot. 'His job as a pilot was to accompany ships across the Atlantic, to ensure their safety' (interview with Dr Marian Muscat Azzopardi). (The context in which this interview was held is explained in the next section. Hereinafter, quotes from the interviews held with Dr Muscat Azzopardi are referred to as MMA).

After returning to Malta, getting married and having his first of four children, he was back studying in the UK again, in 1949. This time, the seeds from the speech therapy sessions 15 years earlier began to bear fruit. It was to train as a speech therapist himself that Burló went to the University of Glasgow. 'He had realised the benefits of speech therapy. It had helped him a lot. It had helped him in his self-confidence. And he remained conscious of how much good speech therapy can do, of how much it can help' (MMA).

On returning, once again, to Malta, Burló would do much more than provide speech therapy sessions. He quickly realized the lack of educational services for children with disabilities in Malta in the early 1950s. With the cooperation and support of various persons, he went on to build the country's special education system, among other work that he carried out in the disability sector over the next three decades or so, until he retired in the late 1970s.

This article traces the work of Joseph Burló in providing Maltese children with disabilities with an education. It analyses this work within Burló's personal experience and sociocultural milieu. The analysis also considers the wider backdrop of the disabled people's movement. The awakening of this movement, especially in the UK and US, happened concurrently with the decades in which Burló was working in Malta. The article considers how he improved the quality of life of children with disabilities within the potential and limitations afforded to him in his specific context. The conclusion presents a reflection on the current situation of the education of children with disabilities in Malta, in the

light of Burló's legacy. The methodology used to obtain the information on which this article is based is described in the next section. It should be noted that, when referring to past documents, the same terminology is kept, even if it jars on the contemporary ear.

## Methodology

In 2019, I was contacted by Dr Marian Muscat Azzopardi, Burló's second child, who wished to donate a collection of documents belonging to her late father to the Department of Disability Studies in the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, at the University of Malta. The Burló Collection, which was eventually archived by the University of Malta Library, comprises letters, speeches, photographs, and other types of documents which provide rich information about the work of Joseph Burló in the disability sector in Malta. With agreement with Muscat Azzopardi, I applied for research ethics approval from the Faculty for Social Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee.

After obtaining this approval, I used the single question inducing narrative method (SQUIN, Wengraf (2001)) to carry out interviews with Muscat Azzopardi. The initial question was 'Can you please tell me about your father's work related to the items in the Collection?'. Over the course of three interviews, Muscat Azzopardi recounted her father's life story and commented on various items in the Collection, with a focus on the work that he did, the people who supported this work, and the way he approached and carried out his work. Quotations from these interviews are referred to as MMA.

After contact was established with the University of Malta Library regarding the archiving of the documents, it was agreed to hold an exhibition there to highlight Burló's work (University of Malta 2023), which was covered by Sarah Carabott, a *The Times of Malta* journalist. Her article (Carabott, 2023a) attracted attention from Mary Rose Zahra (née Abela), who had worked as a teacher with Burló. Through her daughter, she contacted me and Carabott and we held an interview with her. The interview featured in another article (Carabott, 2023b) and excerpts from it are referred to as MRZ in this article. In addition, in response to Carabott's first article, Joseph Farrugia contacted me and provided further information he had collected for the entry on Triq Joseph Burló in his book on the street names of Ħal Tarxien (Farrugia, J., 2007). This article analyses and discusses the information obtained pertaining to Burló's work on the education of children with disabilities.

## **Burló's work and its context**

As mentioned above, Burló's foray into the disability sector started with his training as a speech therapist, inspired by his own experience of benefitting from this intervention. When he returned to Malta in 1951, there was very little provision for persons with disabilities outside the confines of their family homes. The word 'confines' here is indicative. Most persons with disabilities were kept hidden at home, rarely if ever going out, because of the shame attached to having a family member with disability (Bonnici, A., 2005). If the family could not keep them, one of the very few options available was the St Vincent De Paul Hospital, a nursing hospital which had opened in 1892, as a long-term residence for elderly persons and those considered to be incurable (Cassar, P. 1965). Persons with disabilities were taken to live there regardless of age, even if they were children.

In 1947, two separate initiatives marked the start of work to improve the situation of persons with disabilities. The first was the setting up of the Polio Fund (which later became the Physically Handicapped Rehabilitation Fund) and the second was the start of Monsignor Mikiel Azzopardi's work with persons with disability in Malta (Camilleri and Callus, 2001). Azzopardi is widely credited as a pioneer of the disability sector, as he strove to provide persons with disabilities a life of dignity and care. He started by reaching them through house-to-house calls and also through a radio programme, *Call to the Sick and the Handicapped* (Gauci, 2022).

Azzopardi's story of how he sought to open community-based homes for persons with disabilities, having to settle for premises off the limits of Siggiewi, and of how he eventually set up the Dar tal-Providenza (Providence House) there in 1964, has been told many times (see for example Bonnici, A., 2005; Dar tal-Providenza, 2017). The profound impact that he had in improving the situation of many persons with disabilities is also widely acknowledged (Bonnici, A., 2005; Cuschieri, 1995). What is less known is the equally pioneering work that Burló was doing simultaneously.

Burló's daughter, Marian Muscat Azzopardi, recounted in her interview how, when her father came back to Malta in 1951, he carried out a survey.

*I remember him mentioning the survey. This is the way he used to put it: he wanted to carry out a survey of speech impaired children in Malta to see how many of them would benefit or needed to benefit from the services of a speech therapist ...*

*When he was carrying out this survey, I remember him saying over and over again that he realised how many other needs there were. How many other services, how many other fields of expertise that we didn't have and which were necessary in Malta. (MMA)*

With the knowledge we have today about different types of disabilities, it is not surprising to us that the 'survey of speech impaired children' took Burló beyond the needs of children who had speech impairments and those who were deaf. For example, Buckley (2003) mentions conditions such as autism, intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, and speech and language processing difficulties as some of the causes of communication difficulties in children. But Burló was not only learning about how different types of disabling conditions affected children's ability to speak. He was also realising that the unmet needs of these children went far beyond being able to communicate clearly, important as that was. In fact, he returned to the UK for another one-year course in which he specialised 'in all aspects of special educational treatment', as a document from 1972 found in the Burló Collection attests.

In this document, Burló also explained that he 'was given the task to set up special educational provision in Malta and Gozo' (Burló, 1972). He was not working alone, but often was the instigator and driving force behind the developments that enabled children with disabilities in Malta to start receiving an education, at a time when the disability service landscape in the country was bare. Burló had the hard task of discovering what work needed to be done, how best to do it, and of setting about doing this work. This also meant that Burló was shaping the form that special education would take in Malta. In doing so, and like Azzopardi, he had to challenge deeply entrenched negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Malta. On the other hand, he could tap into the expertise developed in the UK. Although Malta had been granted self-government in 1947, it was still a British colony and would remain so until it gained independence in 1964.

Burló was also working at a time when the education of children in Malta was undergoing massive changes, with the educational authorities dealing with the disruptive impact of the World War II on children's education (Cassar, G. 2019). In his *Medical History of Malta*,

Cassar, P. (1965) recorded that, as early as 1901, the then Director of Education remarked on the absence of special schools for disadvantaged children in Malta. He also noted that, following the introduction of compulsory primary education in 1946, the Maltese branch of the British Medical Association lamented the absence of specific provision for mentally defective children, who were exempted from obligatory attendance. Cassar, one of Malta's most prominent doctors at the time, himself wrote an article advocating for education provision 'for the educable mentally defective child' (Cassar, P. 1947, p. 159). It was not until Burló started the work discussed in this article, that a system for educational provision for children with disabilities began to be developed.

Back in 1943, while Burló was with the RAF, six-year old Mary Rose Abela (now Zahra) was mourning her mother, who died from typhoid, after damage from a bomb that fell in their neighbourhood caused sewage to infiltrate the water system. Zahra was taken to live with her aunt and, in her interview, she recounted how she was always encouraged to become a teacher. Although the educational reforms started in the 1940s included changes in the curriculum in girls' schools so that they too could go to university (Cassar, G., 2019), women and girls still met many restrictions. Zahra's schoolgirl hope of studying to become a doctor were quickly dashed within her family.

But, Zahra's interest in working with children with disabilities, also kindled when she was still at school, remained throughout her life. Growing up, she used to listen to Azzopardi's radio programme and, when she was 14, she wrote to him to help with a Christmas party that he was organizing, something which she continued to do. At the age of 17, she joined a religious group (The Legion of Mary) and, together with others, she visited older people at St Vincent De Paul Hospital every week. There, she would also meet children with disabilities – the same ones for whom Azzopardi was working to create more suitable homes. She remarked how the older residents acted as grandparents for the children, keeping them clean, feeding them, 'speaking to them, telling them a story, singing something for them. True, it was like they were at home. But the environment... I remember when we were still in the main road of the hospital, it was terrible'.

This experience stayed with Zahra. She spent two years working as an emergency teacher, as untrained teachers were called at the time (Bonnici, G., 1984). Then she went to teacher training college, which she

described as enabling her to become independent. After graduating, she spent a year teaching and then 'I got it into my head that I wanted to get a scholarship' (MRZ). She succeeded in her plan and in 1960, she went for a year to study at the Institute of Education, University of Liverpool, from where she obtained a 'Certificate in the Teaching of Handicapped Children'. She said that 'it was exactly the course that I wanted. Then it included also hospital teaching' (MRZ). Zahra recounted further how, when she returned to Malta in 1961, she could not go back to teaching in a school. With her new qualification, she did not fit into any existing structure at the time. She was sent to the Education Office and this was how she met Burló and started working with him to advance the education of children with disabilities.

By the time Zahra started her work, there had already been some breakthroughs. Burló (1972) identified the important milestones in the development of special education in Malta. The timeline starts in 1956, when Professor and Lady Ewing, from Manchester University, were invited to help set up the first two classes for deaf children. A British specialist teacher was then given a two-year contract to develop this work. In 1959, a centre for young blind people was established and blind children started receiving home tuition. Later that year, there were the first hospital classes and later on the first special school for children with intellectual disability, the Holy Innocents School for the Severely Subnormal at Wardija. In 1960, a class was created 'for all known blind children... attached to a normal school'. These classes and schools were attended by children all over Malta, including those living at Dar tal-Providenza (Burló, 1976).

In 1961, Burló was appointed special education officer (Schiavone, 1997). He then also started working on developing psychological services for students. He was made a member of a board, appointed by the Office of the Prime Minister, to study and recommend the setting up of psychiatric services for children and adolescents in Malta (Stilon, 1961). Progress on this front was slow since, five years later, the Malta Welfare Society for the Mentally Handicapped was pressing for the setting up of a Child Guidance Clinic (Sunday Times of Malta, 1966). Burló eventually set up the School Psychological Service' (Farrugia, J., 2007).

Meanwhile, in 1962, another two British experts were brought over: Butcher, to advise on the education of blind children; and Bartlett, to advise on the education of children who, at the time, were labelled

'educationally sub-normal' (ESN). The first ESN Children's Unit opened in 1963 as part of Pietà primary school.

Provision in Gozo started in 1964, with a survey of children with disabilities there and the attachment of two teachers from Gozo to special schools in Malta for them to gain experience. A year later, educational provision for deaf children in Gozo started, as well as a home teaching service for blind adults. A teacher was also sent to Canada on a 4-year educational psychology course.

Back in Malta, in 1966, a school opened for 'Emotionally Maladjusted Boys' and in 1967 special classes in two primary schools 'for backward pupils'. Another two such classes were set up in Gozo in 1970. Burló's (1972) document ends in 1971 when a 'Unit for severely handicapped children [was] set up at Pietà Primary School together with a peripatetic home teaching system to home bound physically [sic] handicapped pupils'.

Behind these milestones is a story of hard work, including overcoming many barriers. A significant obstacle was met in ensuring that all children with disabilities got as far as leaving their home to go to school. Azzopardi's struggle, to move people out of cellars to Dar tal-Providenza (Bonnici, A., 2005), was mirrored by Burló's own door-to-door visits to talk to parents 'discussing with them how their children could benefit if they would join these education centres' (MMA), that is the newly opened special schools. Muscat Azzopardi recounted how this work was 'emotionally disturbing' for her father. Zahra joined Burló in this enterprise. She spoke of how, as a young woman, she sometimes had to be accompanied by a police officer to speak to parents about sending their children with disabilities to school. The work of Burló, Zahra, and other teachers who worked in the new special schools under his leadership was pioneering not only because they were providing these children with an education which was, until that time, nonexistent in Malta. It was also ground-breaking because they chose to associate themselves with children with disabilities in the first place. Zahra spoke of how in the 1960s, if she was at a dinner and someone asked what she did, they would be revulsed to hear that she worked with 'handicapped children'. 'Not while eating' she would be told (MRZ).

Part of Zahra's work was teaching in the hospital classes, which had been set up in 1959 so that children who were hospitalised could continue with their education. She thus ended up working in a hospital,

but not the way she had envisaged when she had aspired to become a doctor. However, while Zahra was busy breaking many disability taboos, together with Azzopardi, Burló and others, she could not overcome barriers faced by women. When she got married, she had to resign, because the law at the time forbade married women from working. She returned to teaching in 1981, when the law changed. She immediately chose to teach at the special school in Wardija. When asked about whether attitudes had changed by then, she replied that people 'were more polite... I would meet more educated people, you know. They tell you that you're courageous and things like that' (MRZ).

The outlook towards persons with disabilities had thus at least changed from being completely negative and rejecting to a more positive, albeit condescending, attitude. It is safe to speculate that the change was partly due to the pioneering work carried out by Azzopardi and Burló and all those who, like Zahra, chose to work closely with them, among other factors. That work, in turn, was also supported by those in authority, as seen in the next section.

### **Burló's connections**

With our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, it is easy to see the effect of colonialism in Burló's work. As Zammit (1988) wrote, '[t]he period of British rule over Malta, stretching for a century and a half, is highly significant because during this time many characteristic aspects of Maltese social, political, and economic life became firmly established' (p. 163). Therefore, for Burló, the UK was the obvious reference point. There is also a practical side to this stance. As a British colony, it was UK-based scholarships that Burló could benefit from and British expertise that he could most easily learn from and emulate. The documents in the Burló Collection show that, after he started his work in special education, Burló travelled to different countries for various conferences, including: to Zurich for the International Congress on Logopedics and Phoniatics (Burló, 1953); to Rome for the Assembly of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (1959); and to Hanover for the Third International Conference of Educators of Blind Youth (1972). However, British expertise remained his reference point.

This does not mean that Burló adopted the British model wholesale. Even if he had wanted to do that, it would not have been possible. He had to work within the specific sociocultural context of Malta at the time. Within this context, Burló used all the connections he had to further the

cause of persons with disabilities. Muscat Azzopardi remarked how, despite the politically turbulent time that Malta was passing through then, Burló found backing for his work from everyone, regardless of their political beliefs.

He also had the backing of his immediate superior, the Director of Education JP Vassallo:

*one thing I can say is that my father had doors open to him, no matter what party. He had doors open because what he was asking for was for other people and not for himself, naturally. He hardly ever had difficulties at the level of the Director of Education. Mr Vassallo went out of his way. He was a household name in our house. He worked well with my father. So from that level and at the level where he needed certain funds, he always found support. I think it's because it was obvious that he wasn't doing it out of personal interest. (MMA)*

Burló used Malta's status as a British colony to the advantage of his work. Apart from the UK scholarships he had obtained, Burló also sought to maximise his time in the UK with visits to various institutions where he could observe at first hand examples of good practice. For example, in 1954 he received a reply from the National Institute for the Deaf acceding to his request to be put 'in touch with centres dealing with deaf children, both on the medical and the educational side' during an upcoming visit to London (Valmos, 1954).

Furthermore, as attested by Muscat Azzopardi:

*What also helped – again the colonial part of it – was that the wives of the governors were totally involved. The governors' wives used to like to get involved in this. They wanted to do something on a philanthropic basis. They were doing it naturally out of the greatness of their heart. I remember Lady Laycock, Lady Grantham, and Lady Dorman with a lot of respect and with a lot of fondness. They used to help. They used to get involved in philanthropic work because they took an interest. (MMA)*

These women were the wives of the three governors who ruled Malta from 1954, shortly after Burló started his special education work, until independence was granted in 1964. Dorman was then appointed Governor-General and stayed on until 1971. In the Burló Collection, there are newspaper reports of Lady Grantham visiting the Deaf Children's Unit (The Review, 1960) and Lady Dorman visiting the special school at Wardija (Times of Malta, 1966). Such visits would have

served not only to raise awareness of the work being done in these schools, but also to elevate its status.

The governors' wives' input was based very much of what we today recognise as the charity model of disability (Goodley, 2011). But the context was one in which Azzopardi was struggling to find a decent home for persons with disabilities who were locked in their houses or placed in a home for older persons. Burló was himself knocking on doors to convince parents not to be ashamed of their children with disabilities and allow them out of the house to attend the newly opened special units and schools. By the time Zahra joined in this work, in the early 1960s, there was still resistance to this idea, as seen above. That the governors' wives were ready to associate themselves with work that Zahra was not allowed to speak about in polite company is significant. Even if it was charity-based, given the extremely low status afforded to persons with disabilities in Malta at the time, these high-status women were showing themselves to be willing to associate with children whose very families were often ashamed of. Burló also collaborated with different entities within Malta. He received referrals of children with disabilities from, among others, the hospital (Burló, 1958), the police (Macelli, 1972), teachers of other children with disabilities (Attard, 1973), and St Vincent de Paul Hospital (Burló, undated a).

Even when considering only his efforts for the education of children with disabilities, his achievements are impressive. Many documents in the Burló Collection show that he was held in high respect. For example, in 1961, he received an invitation to attend a meeting with parents of handicapped children regarding the formation of a parents' association (Albani, 1961). There are also several letters from trainee teachers asking to visit one of the special schools. Interestingly, one of them was from Frank Mallia (1966), who would later himself become a highly respected Special Education Officer (Mallia 1995).

Many letters also have a personal touch which show the sound relationships Burló enjoyed with those he collaborated with, even on a personal level. Letters from his British contacts frequently asked after his wife and their children. One of the letters from Lord Grantham invited him and his family to tea at San Anton Palace, the Governor's official residence (Grantham, 1962). Muscat Azzopardi herself remembered the Governors' wives 'with fondness', as quoted above. She also remarked on how, in a letter to Mr A. Sutcliffe, Chief Education Officer in Lincoln (Burló, 1961), her father mentioned 'being stationed there during the war

when he was with the RAF. My father knew that this would carry weight' (MMA).

These snippets show how Burló built sound personal and professional connections with those he came into contact with to develop and implement plans for building an education system for children with disabilities. The selflessness of his approach was highlighted by Muscat Azzopardi, who mentioned how he never accepted any gifts. Burló was also invited to give speeches and lectures and write articles. In a letter to Prof. David Boswell, regarding a lecture he delivered at the University of Malta, he asked for his fee to be sent to the Dar tal-Providenza. For him, it was enough that his 'minimal' and 'modest contribution' raised awareness about 'the plight of the handicapped' (Burló, 1978).

Burló very rarely referred to obstacles he met in his writings. However, the letter sent in 1958 referred to 'obstacles and difficulties, and a fair share of misunderstandings' in setting up the first class for blind children and to his having 'grave doubts' that he would be given funds to visit the UK 'when economy is the keyword' (Burló, 1958). The hurdles that Burló had to overcome were referred to by Farrugia J. (2007) and also mentioned in a letter from Joe Falzon (1987), himself a highly respected Professor of Education at the University of Malta (Farrugia, C. 2020). Falzon thanked Burló for encouraging him to continue studying, helping him in his studies and for all that he learnt from him. Regarding the setting up of special education in Malta, he wrote:

*those who are my age and were in some way involved in this work know that the greater part of this work development was done by you single-handedly; they also know how many difficulties and obstacles you met; they also know how you managed to overcome these obstacles through your strong will to help the handicapped.*

Similar tributes are recorded by Rossi (2004) and Farrugia, J. (2007).

All this work certainly kept Burló extremely busy. A letter from Frances Dean (1966) stated 'I hope that you are not over-working too badly. I think I fear that this is something of a "pious" hope'. However, Burló's life was not just about work. He had a holistic outlook towards life, not just for him and his family, as Muscat Azzopardi attested, but also for children with disabilities, as seen in the next section.

## **Burló's outlook**

Burló held a holistic focus on the educational and other needs of children with disabilities. He understood the need for these children to benefit from good quality education, but not in mainstream schools:

*He emphasised over and over again that the teachers in mainstream schools were good teachers and were doing a good job. But these children [with disabilities], unless given help, would not be able to benefit from the good teaching that was going on... For example, unless you learnt lip reading or sign language or unless you learnt Braille for reading, you wouldn't be able to benefit even from the very good schools that we had... He wanted the children to be with other children, but at the same time he realised that these needs had to be met in order for them to be able to benefit and to be able to reintegrate into mainstream. (MMA)*

In a series of television programmes broadcast in 1967 titled 'Bil-Hasra Biss Ma Tghix' [You Cannot Live By Pity Only], Burló saw pity as the starting point of taking action to help persons with disability advance in their life, through education, vocational training, and employment opportunities (L-Orizzont, 1967). In making this argument, Burló drew heavily on Christian teaching, especially the parable of the Good Samaritan. He argued that all those who saw the man who had been attacked by the robbers pitied him, but only the Good Samaritan's pity was of any use because it prompted him to take action and give the man what he needed.

Christian values informed Burló's work and are referred to in his speeches and articles. For him, charity and rights are complementary:

*All can, and indeed have a duty to, lend a helping hand to their less fortunate neighbours... in order that the handicapped child of today may be helped to successfully overcome his disability and grow into a contented, self-supporting and self-respecting member of the society of which he is a member in his own right'. (Burló (1959, p. 177)*

One of the rights that Burló fought for was for children with intellectual disabilities to receive Holy Communion, as explained by Muscat Azzopardi. In a deeply religious society (Zammit, 1988), fighting for this right was a significant way of affirming the humanity of the children concerned. Dean (1966) imagined 'the pleasure you [Burló] will have had this Friday when some of the children made their first Communion'. It was also part of looking at child development holistically and not only focusing on the strictly educational aspect (Burló, 1954). His holistic

outlook can also be seen in his argument that in order to treat ‘speech disorders one must take into account the particular need of the speech defective’ (Burló, 1956). Furthermore, while the setting up of speech clinics was important, ‘it is necessary for these clinics to be part of a larger system concerned with the well-being of the child’ and where various professionals work together (Burló, 1951).

The need for multi-disciplinary input is emphasized also in Burló’s (1972) summary of special education in Malta. He ended the document by observing that its development depended ‘on ancillary services such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy, on psychological services and on facilities for specialised [sic] training of dedicated teachers and ancillary staff’. Furthermore, he stated that such services were needed before, during, and after school, including for ‘vocational guidance and suitable employment opportunities’.

Burló outlook is also characterised by a child-centred approach. His commentary on the Survey on Child Needs in Malta (Burló, 1956) included a number of vignettes of children treated at the speech clinic that he had set up and how they benefitted from the interventions. The focus is on the importance of understanding each child as a unique individual, with their particular characteristics and circumstances, which also comes out in a talk by Burló broadcast during Education Week (Burló, 1957). Seventeen years later, he was still making this point:

*Here I want to say also that there are no blind, deaf, and so on, but a boy who has a severe hearing or sight loss and how children are all different from each other as well, the impairment, whatever it is does not have the same effect on everyone. (Burló, 1974, author’s translation)*

Burló was aware that children’s difficulties were not necessarily innate but a product of their environment. In her interview, Zahra also noted that in their work they ‘were seeing how much the environment counted’ (MRZ). Through his work, Burló could also see that, when the child’s circumstances were improved, their lives could also improve, a point also highlighted in a chapter on ‘Special Education for the Handicapped’ (Burló, 1959). His focus was on reducing impairment effects as much as possible and helping persons with disabilities on an individual level. In an undated speech, he wrote that:

*Modern society needs no justification for removing a few of the obstacles which every handicapped person finds in his path. (Burló, undated b)*

Commenting on his 1959 chapter, Muscat Azzopardi remarked that:

*In the same way, that he was a pilot in World War II and from up there he had a greater vision, here he's looking at the broader view. He didn't want to stick to what was there and take it for granted. He had a broader view to meet the broader styles of learning for everyone. (MMA)*

At the start of the interviews, Muscat Azzopardi remarked that her father 'died a happy man'. He had a fulfilling life and 'he himself felt that he gained so much as a person that, even though many people used to think of him on the giving end, he used to consider himself on the receiving end' (MMA). But he was also very much on the giving end and his legacy should continue to be celebrated and acknowledged.

### **Conclusion: The situation today**

In 1994, a year after Burló died, Malta signed the Salamanca Statement (1994) and introduced inclusive education. In 2010, there was an attempt to turn special schools into resource centers that provide expertise and resources for teachers in mainstream schools to support children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2010). However, this reform has not delivered on its promise (Calleja, C., 2025). What we have witnessed in the past 15 years is a gradual return to a segregated system, especially for children with intellectual disabilities and those who present with behaviours that challenge the smooth running of mainstream classrooms (Calleja, K., 2019). Special schools are now called resource centres, in line with the vision of the 2010 reform. However, they remain places where many children with intellectual disabilities are receiving a segregated education, with little prospect of inclusive opportunities, while they are at school and once they leave (Buttigieg, 2025; Rzogha, 2025).

In Burló's time, having children with disabilities leave their homes every day to go to school was countercultural. By time, special schools and other segregated services set up became so well established that they seemed to be the only way that children with disabilities could receive an education, unless they could fit into the mainstream education system (Bartolo, 2010; Cardona, 2011; Times of Malta, 1955).

Just because this was how education started for children with disabilities, it does not mean that this is how it necessarily has to be. When special schools were set up, Burló used the wisdom and knowledge available to him and his pioneering insights to create something new. He dared envision a system to provide an education to

children that were otherwise all but forgotten. His and his colleagues' actions challenged misconceptions, fought prejudice, and shook up the status quo. Our knowledge has continued to develop, with the disability movement (which was nascent in Burló's time) showing, through the social model, how societal structures and practices (including educational ones) created disabling barriers (Oliver, 1990).

Unfortunately, the social model's insight has not really been fully applied to the education of children with disabilities. What Burló, and those working with him, created has itself become itself the status quo. The idea of educating certain children separately has become institutionalised. We no longer need to fight to stop children with disabilities from being hidden in their homes. But we do need to fight for their placement in a special school being seen as the default option if they need substantial support to be in the mainstream.

The wrong question - does this child fit into a regular school? - keeps being asked. The question of what the regular school has to do to meet each child's needs seems to be avoided if the answer is likely to involve a complex rethinking of how things are done. We can pride ourselves in having come a long way since persons with disabilities in Malta were kept hidden in cellars. We certainly do not think that disability is not a subject for polite company and, while there may still be misplaced, if well-meaning, admiration for those who work in the disability sector, there is also a recognition of disability rights and the need for such work to be oriented towards the realization of these rights. But discourse and action only seem to go so far. We still have a way to go to achieving unconditional acceptance of persons with disabilities, and of all children with disabilities in our regular schools.

In a letter to *The Times of Malta*, Falzon (2007) wrote of Burló:

*As one who worked with, and learnt so much from, him I would have no hesitation in placing him as one of the ablest men to have worked in the area of education in these islands. To the best of my knowledge the only recognition of his services comes from a street in Tarxien named after him.*  
(p. 11)

Adrian Muscat Azzopardi, Burló's grandson, then wrote, to thank Falzon for shining a light on his grandfather's achievement. He pointed out that Burló would not have wanted worldly recognition. He 'acted purely in the interest of the disabled, out of love and selflessness' (p. 10). The best thing we can do is to build on his legacy, challenge the current

status quo where it is necessary to do so, and seek to benefit from current wisdom and knowledge about the benefits of a truly inclusive education system.

### **Acknowledgements**

Georgette Bajada  
Sarah Carabott  
Andrea Catania  
Kevin Ellul  
Joseph A. Farrugia  
Antida Mizzi  
Marian Muscat Azzopardi  
Mary Rose Zahra

### **References**

#### *Documents from the Burló Collection:*

- Albani, S. (1961). Letter to J. Burló from S. Albani, A.M.I.A., Valletta.
- Attard, P. (1973) Letter from Phil. Attard, Teacher of the Blind, E.S.N. Children's Unit, Msida.
- Burló, J. (undated, a). Handicapped children at St Vincent de Paule Hospital.
- Burló, J. (undated, b). The Education of the Handicapped Child.
- Burló, J. (1951, March). Il-kura tad-difett tal-ilsien. Taħdita tas-Sur Joe Burló fuq il-BBC. (Newspaper article; no further details available)
- Burló, J. (1953, 6 December). International Conference for Speech and Voice Therapy. *The Sunday Times of Malta*, p. 6.
- Burló, J. (1954, 19 May). L-Isports u l-Hobbies Mezz għall-Edukazzjoni tal-Qalb. Broadcast Talk: Malta Education Week.
- Burló, J. (1956, 13 February). A Survey of Child Needs in Malta: The child with defective speech.
- Burló, J. (1957, 10 April). Broadcast Talk: Tifimhom lill-Uliedek?
- Burló, J. (1958, 16 February). Letter to unspecified correspondent.
- Burló, J. (1959). Special education for the handicapped. In B. Hilary, ed. *The Malta Year Book*, pp. 173-177.
- Burló, J. (1961, 2 June). Letter to Mr A. Sutcliffe, Chief Education Officer, Lincoln.
- Burló, J. (1972, 30 November). Special education.
- Burló, J. (1974, 29 July). Uliedna. Radio Malta.
- Burló, J. (1976, 13 May). L-Edukazzjoni Speċjali tad-Dipartiment tal-Edukazzjoni. Broadcasst on T.V.
- Burló, J. (1978). Letter to Prof. David Boswell, Department of Economics and Social Studies, University of Malta.
- Dean, F. (1966). Letter from Frances Dean, National Association for Mental Health, Training and Education Department.
- Falzon, J. (1987, 6 August). Letter from Joe Falzon, Tarxien.
- Goodley, D. (2011). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Sage.
- Grantham, B. (1962). Letter from Lord Bert Grantham, Governor of Malta.
- L-Orizzont. (1967, 18 July). Bil-Hasra Biss Ma Tghix. *L-Orizzont*, pp. 7-8.

- Macelli, T. (1972). Letter from Tarcisio Macelli, Court of Judicial Police, Valletta.
- Mallia, F. (1966, 16 October). Letter from F. Mallia, Attard.
- Review, The. (1960, 11 February). Special education for the handicapped: Lady Grantham visits the Deaf Children's Unit and the Centre for the Blind. *The Review*, p. 1.
- Rossi, D. (2004). The legacy of Mr Joseph Burló. In D. Rossi, ed. *Guardian Angel School Magazine*, p. 13.
- Stilon, E.A. (1961) Report of the Board appointed to study and report on psychiatric services to (i) children and adolescents and (ii) juvenile delinquents. Medical and Health Department, Valletta.
- Times of Malta. (1966, 28 March). Lady Dorman visits mentally handicapped. *The Times*, n.p.
- Valmos, C.S. (1954, 13 August) Letter from C.S. Valmos, Assistant Secretary, National Institute for the Deaf, London.
- World Council for the Welfare of the Blind. (1959). World Assembly programme.
- Third International Conference of Educators of Blind Youth. (1972). Information booklet.

### **Other references:**

- Bartolo, P. (2010). The process of teacher education for inclusion: the Maltese experience. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10(1), 139-148.
- Bonnici, A. (2005). *Id-Dar tal-Providenza minsuġa fil-ħajja ta' Monsinjur Mikiel Azzopardi*. Dar tal-Providenza.
- Bonnici, G. (1984). Meeting teachers' needs (2): effects of change: in-service education and training (INSET). *Education*, 1(4), 16-18.
- Buckley, B. (2003). *Children's communication skills: From birth to five years*. Taylor & Francis.
- Buttigieg, K. (2025, 31 May). When inclusion ends at 16. *The Times of Malta*. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/when-inclusion-ends-16.1110539>
- Calleja, C. (2025, 27 May), 'It's heartbreaking, frightening': parents worried about their children's future *The Times of Malta*. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/it-heartbreaking-frightening-parents-worried-children-future.1110376>.
- Calleja, K. (2019). Too challenging to be included? : three case studies of inclusion of children on the autism spectrum with challenging behaviour in Maltese schools. Universty of Malta Masters dissertation.
- Camilleri, J.M. and Callus, A.M. (2001). Out of the cellars: disability, politics and the struggle for change - the Maltese experience. In L. Barton, ed. *Disability, Politics and the Struggle for Change*. David Fulton Publishers, pp. 79-92.
- Carabott, S. (2023a, 8 October). The story of an unsung hero. *The Times of Malta*, p. 14.
- Carabott, S. (2023b, 4 November). The woman who fought stigma and taught children with disabilities. *The Times of Malta*. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/the-woman-fought-stigma-taught-children-disabilities.1064055#:~:text=The%20woman%20who%20fought%20stigma%20and%20taught%20children%20with%20disabilities,-Mary%20Rose%20Zahra&text=When%20Mary%20Rose%20Abela%20was,knocking%20on%20the%20family%20door>
- Cardona, G. (2011). Inclusive education: a special right? *Commonwealth Education Partnership*, 34-36. <https://www.cedol.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Gordon-Cardona-article.pdf>

- Cassar, G. (2019). The transformation of Maltese public education: 1940-1964. *Arkivju*, 10, 11-28.
- Cassar, P. (1947). The education of the mentally subnormal child. *Scientia* 13(4), 159-164.
- Cassar, P. (1965/2022). *Medical History of Malta*. Maltese translation by Godwin Ellul published in 2022. Faraxa Publishing.
- Cuschieri, L. (1995). Monsinjur Mikiel Azzopardi 1910-1987. Lino Cuschieri.
- Dar tal-Providenza. (2017) History. <https://www.dartalprovidenza.org/history/>
- Falzon, J. (2007, 15 March). A pioneering educationist. *The Times of Malta*, p. 11.
- Farrugia, C. (2020). Professor Joe Falzon. <https://www.um.edu.mt/media/um/docs/faculties/educ/ourstaff/AppreciationProfessorJosephFalzon.pdf>
- Farrugia, J.A. (2007). *Triqat Hal Tarxien*. Kunsill Lokali Hal Tarxien.
- Gauci, V. (2022) Disability. In S. Vella and E. Galea-Curmi, *Social Policy in Malta: An introduction*. Midsea Books, pp. 361-384.
- Mallia, F. (1995). Special educational needs: A managerial perspective. Diploma in Education (Administration and Management), University of Malta.
- Malta Independent. (2021, 1 October). British Council's online education fair to offer information related to studying in the UK. <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2021-10-01/education/British-Council-s-online-education-fair-to-offer-information-related-to-studying-in-the-UK-6736237180>
- Ministry for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. (2010). Special Schools Reform. [https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/malta\\_special\\_schools\\_reform\\_eng.pdf](https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/malta_special_schools_reform_eng.pdf)
- Muscat Azzopardi, A. (2007, 27 March). Due recognition. *The Times of Malta*, p. 11.
- Oliver, M. (1990). *The politics of disablement*. Springer Nature.
- Rzogha, C. (2025). LinkedIn: [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/charlene-rzogha-5300ab276\\_disabilityinclusion-educationmatters-parentadvocate-activity-7335295469444595713-BO7W?utm\\_source=social\\_share\\_send&utm\\_medium=member\\_desktop\\_web&rcm=ACoAABKbpk0BxSY09UPoXqBfm5pdFkWg4AfAsCU](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/charlene-rzogha-5300ab276_disabilityinclusion-educationmatters-parentadvocate-activity-7335295469444595713-BO7W?utm_source=social_share_send&utm_medium=member_desktop_web&rcm=ACoAABKbpk0BxSY09UPoXqBfm5pdFkWg4AfAsCU)
- Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education. (1994). UNESCO. Available from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>
- Schiavone, J. (1997). Burló, Joseph. *Biographies of the 20th Century*. PIN.
- Sunday Times of Malta. (1966, 27 March). Looking after the mentally handicapped. *The Sunday Times of Malta*, p. 8.
- Times of Malta. (1955, 21 June). Handicapped children. *The Times of Malta*, p.5.
- University of Malta. (2023). Joseph Burló: A life in the service of persons with disability in Malta. <https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/events/um/2023/10/joseph-burlo-exhibition>
- Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing: biographic narrative and semi-structured methods*. SAGE.
- Zammit, E.L. (1988). Aspects of British colonial policies and Maltese patterns of behaviour. In V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.) *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964: The impact on Maltese society*. Mireva, pp. 163-183.