

# The practical role of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Heads of Department (inclusion) in Maltese primary schools

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## Abstract

This research study explores the role of the Inclusive Education Coordinators and Heads of Department [Inclusion] across State, Church and Independent primary schools in Malta. It examines the responsibilities and the impact of their role in educating all learners. A mixed-method approach was applied to this study. The emergence of this role is described through a document analysis carried out on 21 ministerial documents, in parallel to a questionnaire that was distributed to all Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments working in primary schools, across the three sectors. The main conclusions from this study imply that the role lacks status in itself and in relation to its leadership role. The findings of this study present an insight into this role and an innovative scenario that requires supplementary research. This is necessary to provide further data in understanding the impact of this role and the changes required to support the sustainability of inclusive education.

## Keywords

Educational leadership, Head of Department [Inclusion], inclusive education, Inclusive Education Coordinator, Maltese education, primary education

## Introduction

Inclusion is "increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners" (UNESCO, 2008, p. 5), albeit several countries still associate it with the assistance provided to children with disabilities. In view of this perspective, this study explores the roles of the Inclusive Education Coordinator and Head of Department [Inclusion] and their evolution in relation to theory and practice within the Maltese context, specifically in the

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primary sector. Indirectly, this study explores factors influencing how primary schools across the three different sectors lead and manage inclusive education. In addition, it also investigates the workload and the support system available in primary schools.

In conjunction with understanding better the role of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments, the study also explores their role in view of the nature of the learners' needs and difficulties, with specific reference to the recent National Inclusion Policy, *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). This policy emphasizes the significance of a whole school inclusive approach, based on the conclusions held in 2017 by the Council of the European Union on *Inclusion in Diversity to achieve a High Quality Education For All*. For both the Council and the Policy, the meaning of all learners includes children who also originate "from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds or geographically depressed areas or war-torn zones, regardless of sex racial or ethnic origin, religion of belief, age or sexual orientations" (Council of the European Union, 2017, p. 3).

Linking and transforming policy to practice is not always smooth and effortless. Cutajar (2007) claims that the major educational reforms generated changes that were often accompanied by new opportunities, but also presented challenges. Indeed, inclusive education brought about changes that required a dynamic role within the management and administration of schools (Ward, 2019). The status of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator has evolved, and Layton (2005) suggests that it is important to explore this role in evaluating the sustainability of inclusive education. Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) found that the Special Educational Needs Coordinators' administrative tasks are substantial and are impeding the commitment of a strategic nature towards the whole-school improvement plan. Winwood (2018) argues that this role should not only be supporting learners with special educational needs but also enhancing the development of the inclusive practice of all learners. Thus, within the context of Maltese schools research it is essential to evaluate the impact this role is having on the various spheres of inclusion.

## Methodology

An exploratory research design was used as no local research about these roles was available. This initiated an investigation about the role of Inclusive Education

Coordinators and Head of Departments from two different perspectives. The first perspective is from a policy point of view which was evaluated through an analysis of official documents. The second perspective viewed the practical aspect of these roles through the perception of the professionals working within these roles.

#### The document analysis

The document analysis was conducted to systematically outline the development of these roles and the evolution of the job title. This qualitative research method focuses on public documents, such as ministerial reports, official documents and policies. Analyzing these documents, published through the years 1995 to 2020, presented the descriptive data relating to the functionality of this role. In effect, documents are a significant source of data, since they are a "product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 126).

#### The questionnaire

The data regarding the actual practice of these roles was collected through a remote questionnaire given to the Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments in the primary sector of all state, church and independent schools. Hence total population sampling was used to target all the professionals defined by the attribute of their occupation and experience in inclusion. Throughout the questionnaire, the participants evaluated their role and daily practice to present an understanding of their responsibilities, duties and challenges encountered in view of a whole-school approach.

#### The document analysis

The thematic approach predisposed the background information and "contextual richness in the research" (Bowen, 2009, p. 36). The documents were used to gather information about the progression of this within the Maltese educational system. The analysis outlines the frequency of the terms, Inclusive Education Coordinator and/or Head of Department, in the ministerial documents for education, in conjunction with qualitative inferences in understanding the significance and responsibilities of this role.

Borg (2019) declares that since 1995, inclusion has been an important consideration within the Maltese educational system, as documented in the official reports. The process of developing inclusive practice went through “special education, mainstreaming (integration), and inclusion” (Bartolo, 2001, p. 66). This gradual shift brought about new structures and processes, including the role of Inclusive Education Coordinators. Consequently, in the *Collective Agreement* (MEDE, 2017), the grade of an Inclusive Education Coordinator was shifted to Head of Department (Inclusion). The majority of the duties remained the same when comparing the *Job Descriptions Handbook* (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEYE], 2007) and *Annex A* (MEDE, 2020b), which is attached to the circular (MEDE, 2020a) when issuing a call for application for this role. However, the change or rather the extension to this role was rather significant as it related to this role’s leadership responsibilities. Nevertheless, this role lacks any form of legislation, contrary to the *Teachers’ Code of Ethics and Practice* (MEDE, 2012b), which was included in the Education Act in 2012.

## Findings from the questionnaire

The questionnaire was directed to all Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments in all primary schools in Malta. Although the return rate was 56%, the responses were distributed relatively equivalently across the different sectors, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Data relating to questionnaires sent out and submitted**

Primary sector	Questionnaires sent out	Submitted responses	Percentage of responses
State	17	6 (30%)	35%
Church	10	7 (35%)	70%
Independent	9	7 (35%)	78%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>56%</b>

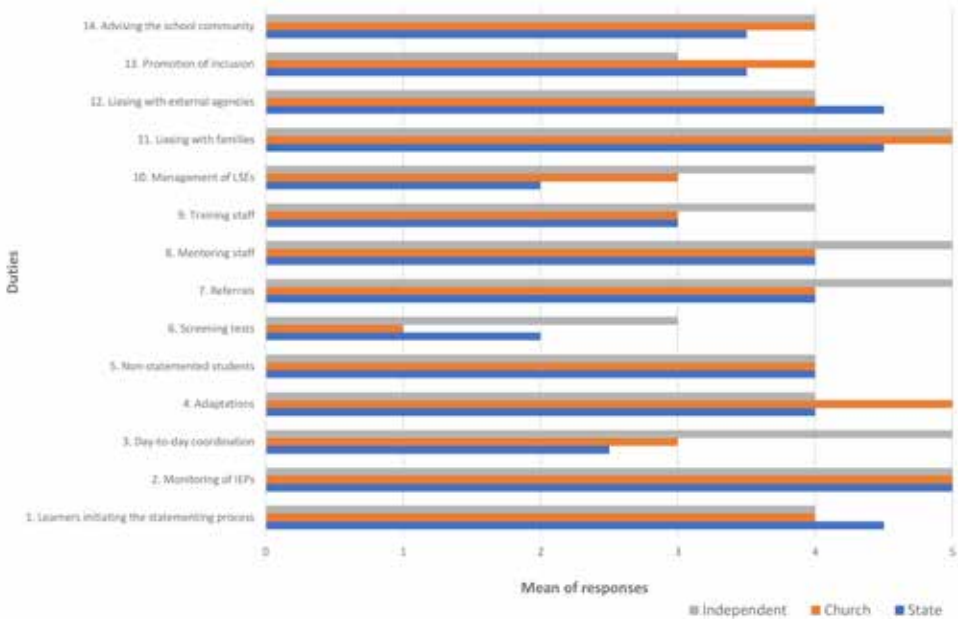
All the six Head of Departments, fulfilling their role in state schools, have more than one school to support. These may include both primary and secondary schools. Five out of the six are supported by Assistant Heads who have specific duties in relation to inclusive education within the school. Furthermore, two out of these five mentioned that they have other professional support which derives

from the education psycho-social team, who gives support to the schools that make part of their respective College Network. This team consists of different professionals, namely educational psychologists, social workers, counsellors, dyslexia specialists, occupational therapists and autism support teachers.

Similarly, the participants that carry out their role in church schools, six out of the seven respondents are supported by Assistant Heads, who also have the assistance of an education psycho-social team. The latter forms part of the Secretariat for Catholic Education and provides its support to all church schools in Malta. In contrast, only two out of seven independent schools have Assistant Heads who directly provide the services in relation to the special educational needs' provision. This is related to the notion that in independent schools, the role of Head of Department, mainly referred to as Inclusive Education Coordinator, works solely in one school, and is not shared among several schools. Nevertheless, the participants from the independent schools, who have a substantial population, declared that they have assistance from support staff, such as trainees.

### The role's responsibilities and duties

The responsibilities and duties of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments were classified into three major categories for the purpose of this study: specific duties relating directly to learners, others towards educators, and those associated with the whole school. Figure 1 represents a comparison of the duties across the different sectors. This visual representation gives evidence that there are similarities and differences within the same sectors, but also across different sectors. *Monitoring progress of students with a statement, through day-to-day performance, school assessments and Individual Educational Plans (IEPs)* is the duty which was rated across all sectors as being the one frequently carried out. Contrary to the findings acquired from the Head of Departments working in the state schools, the other two sectors identified more than one duty as being executed frequently. The Head of Departments in church schools predominantly marked *approving adaptations and access arrangements done by learning support educators (LSEs) and liaising with parents/guardians through meetings and emails*. The latter was also identified as a high-frequency duty by the Inclusive Education Coordinators working in independent schools.



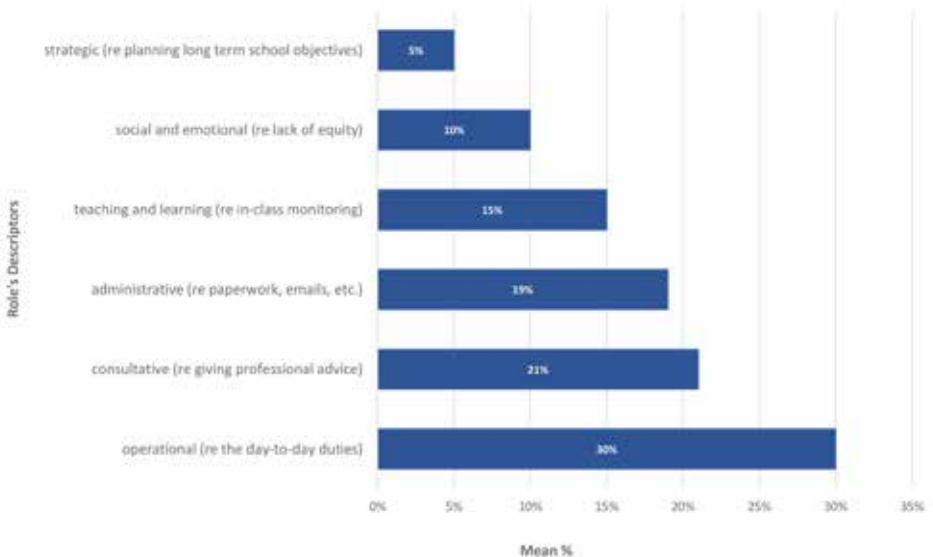
**Figure 1: Comparison of duties across sectors**

The key differences are identified in items 3, 6 and 10, specifically relating to the daily coordination and operational duties, screening of all learners from which action plans and recommendations are formulated, as well as the management and deployment of LSEs. These three duties focus on the day-to-day logistical and managerial tasks. As a matter of fact, these discrepancies highlight the crucial difference between the role of an Inclusive Education Coordinator, who permanently works in one school, and Head of Departments, who fulfil their role in a number of schools.

Participants across sectors gave particular emphasis to their responsibilities associated with a specific time, such as the formulation and procedures of IEPs, which are held at the beginning of the scholastic year. One of the Head of Departments working in the church sector shared in detail all the work that this process entails. They stated that “during the first term of school I prepare around 80 LSEs for preparation of 140 IEPs for 140 students, (in 5 different schools)”, which evidently does not allow for other duties to be accomplished.

Consequently, there are also the IEP review meetings towards the end of the scholastic year.

Within their role description, Head of Departments in both state and church schools have a leadership role. However, the data show that they do not consider their role as being dominantly strategic, but consultative and operational, and administrative respectively, while Inclusive Education Coordinators in independent schools define their role as being more operational. Figure 2 presents this data as mean percentages of the three sectors.

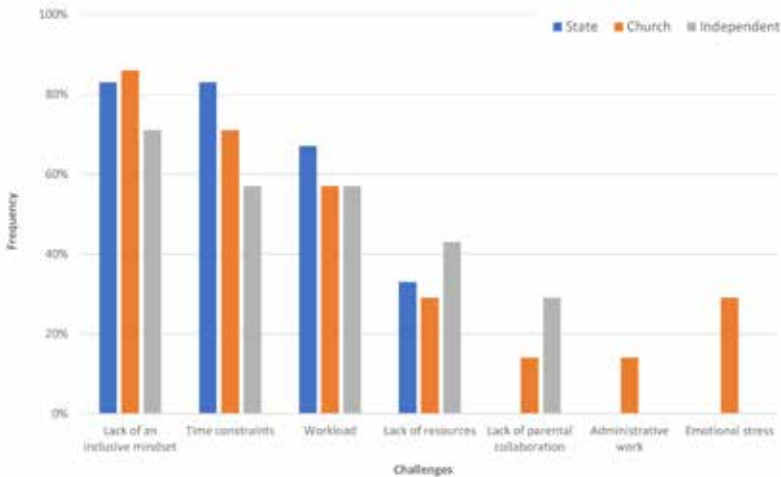


**Figure 2: The mean percentage across sectors in describing one's role**

### The challenges encountered

The participants discussed the three main challenges that they encounter when fulfilling their role and these were coded in 7 definitions, as shown in Figure 3. Nevertheless, some responses overlapped from one category to another. For example, one of the respondents working in the state sector explained that due to being assigned to more than one school, there is a large number of students that inevitably translate into a considerable workload. Consequently, this leaves little time to monitor regularly and effectively the students and

the work of LSEs. As a matter of fact, 83% of Head of Departments within the state sector and 50% in church schools consider that being assigned to more than one school has repercussions on one's work. One of the participants commented that these challenges have a negative impact on one's efficiency and continuity at work. Since the response "assigned to more than one school" was amalgamated with other challenges, it is being displayed according to the explanation provided by the respondents, particularly *time constraints* or *heavy workload*. These two challenges are observed to be common across all sectors, with an average of 70% and 60% respectively, at times also interrelated. Similar to other responses, a participant shared that one of the challenges is that the "workload is continuously increasing which does not leave time to cater adequately for the students or the LSEs".



**Figure 3: Challenges encountered within the role of Inclusive Education Coordinator/ Head of Department**

In conclusion, *lack of an inclusive mindset* is high across the three sectors, where 80% of the respondents consider this aspect a major challenge. One of the participants working in state schools revealed that the main challenges are "lack of inclusive staff and rigid thinking amongst the Senior Management Team; lack of knowledge and lack of understanding and oppositionality to change to new strategies". The concluding comment was that "these are the actual 'professionals' who are supposed to be promoting the education and well-being of all students".



## The leadership role

The last few questions of the questionnaire addressed the leadership position of this role. As stated in the job description of Head of Departments, they are "expected to act as the inclusive educational leaders" (MEDE, 2017, p. 46), under the supervision of Heads of School. Most of the Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments consider themselves as being involved in the Senior Management Team or Senior Leadership Team meetings. Of the total population participating in this study, 65% declared that they are part of their respective schools' leadership team. Their involvement consists mainly in attending regular meetings that provide the space and time for open communication and consultation during the discussions and planning being held. Through this intervention, the action plans and decisions taken will incorporate effective inclusion-related strategies and inclusive practices, argued one of the respondents.

On the other hand, all the others who are not currently involved in the Senior Management Team /School Leadership Team recommend that they should be included as part of the team. The reasons they presented were mainly that as practitioners they have "valuable insight" to improve inclusion in schools, as

unfortunately, some SLTs are still rigid when it comes to inclusion. We are associated with students with special needs only but inclusion goes beyond and I think that I have a lot more to offer if only I am involved and if I have the time. (Head of Department working in State schools)

When comparing the "yes" responses across sectors, there is a distinct difference, namely, the leadership perspective is less in state schools than in the other two sectors. Only 50% of the former sector consider themselves involved in the Senior Management Team meetings, as well as part of the school's decision-making process, in comparison to 71% of the other two sectors. As expressed by some of the participants who work in state schools, this lack of participation is related to not being constantly present in one learning community. This shows that the feeling of belonging is somewhat lacking and the involvement on a school level is also minimal. One also added that they "would be trusted more" if "considered part of the school's 'home' team".

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## Discussion

Notwithstanding the vital concept of inclusion in its wide meaning of including all learners, it creates an opaque understanding within the educational system, even when addressing specific roles, such as Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments. It is recommended that inclusive education should be a whole school approach, with all stakeholders involved and participative in this process to sustain inclusive practices (McMaster, 2013). As Layton (2005) advocates, this is achieved by “creating communities of inclusive practice” (p. 58) that are embedded with a moral purpose rather than by law or policy. Implementing inclusive education requires resources and professionals that can adequately offer support according to their training and profession (Spiteri et al., 2005). Although Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments have an overall job title regarding inclusive education, their specific current role is directly related to special educational needs. As evidenced from this research study, 40% of the participants most frequently encounter situations relating to special educational needs and disability, rather than the 20% and 10% who address situations in relation to social injustice and emotional well-being respectively.

### Definition of the role(s) within the local context

It is evident from the document analysis that changes have occurred within the educational system, where inclusive education has been taking a more prominent role. This progress has led to this new role, similar to other countries, such as Ireland, where in the 1990s, “the Special Educational Needs Coordinator role ... evolved in response to this rapidly transforming educational landscape” (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017, p. 4). In 2005, the *Inclusive and Special Education Review* (Spiteri et al., 2005) recommended that Inclusive Education Coordinators guide and assist educators to implement inclusive practices for students with individual educational needs as well as their parents. However, throughout the local ministerial documents, this role was minimally mentioned, which reflects the role’s lack of status (Cole, 2005). Progressively, other transformations within the education system were established, namely as from 2017, Inclusive Education Coordinators working in state schools have been called Head of Departments.

## Differences across and within educational sectors

The job title, Head of Department, is mainly targeted at state and church schools, but it is also being inconsistently used in independent schools since most of the latter refer to this role as Inclusive Education Coordinator. A common characteristic for all Head of Departments in state and church schools is that they fulfil their duties and responsibilities in several different schools, while Inclusive Education Coordinators in independent schools make part of only one school community. This major difference between Head of Departments and Inclusive Education Coordinators is also considered a challenge by 67% of the respondents, who work in different schools, as they consider themselves as not belonging and not conducting their work effectively because it is a “touch and go” service.

Consequently, 85% of Head of Departments working in state and church schools declared that their respective schools are supported by Assistant Heads, in relation to inclusive procedures. Hence, there seems to be an overlap of responsibilities, even though their expertise is diverse and they “do not possess an intensive knowledge of the implications of practising inclusion” (Head of Department working within state schools). Nevertheless, it is stated in the agreement that the Assistant Heads of School are expected to:

lead and coordinate all initiatives related to meeting the needs of individual students, including children with a statement of needs and those related to Individual Educational Programmes guaranteeing access to learning and assessment, supported by the presence of the Head of Department. (MEDE, 2017, p. 50)

However, the presence of the Head of Departments is quite dispersed, due to being shared among several schools. Conversely, Assistant Heads are based in one school and have a specific proportion of the school to follow (MEDE, 2017), while the workload of a Head of Department is not officially stipulated. The statistical data of their respective workload and distribution across primary and secondary schools are not documented for it to be evaluated. The probability is that placements are regulated according to need as indicated in *Annex A* (MEDE, 2020b), whereby the Head of Department may be deployed in more than one college. Despite this major contextual contrast and also a variation in workload, Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments have approximately similar responsibilities and duties.

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## The role's responsibilities and duties

The role of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments lacks a code of ethics and practice and the only documents that have outlined their responsibilities and duties are *Job Descriptions Handbook* (MEYE, 2007), *Staff Handbook* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2010) and *Annex A* (MEDE, 2020b). These duties relate to three main categories, primarily responsibilities towards the learners, the educators, including teachers and LSEs and the whole school. In addition to these major categories, there are duties that relate to liaising with families and external agencies. These duties were discussed in the findings from the questionnaire, where respondents across the three sectors displayed their execution of these duties, with some variation in the frequency, as they gave an estimated time spent on each duty mentioned. In parallel to the findings of Layton (2005), reviewing IEPs and discussing the students' progress featured prominently in the responses. An equally frequent duty is liaising with parents or guardians through meetings and emails. Reflecting on these responses, the duties and responsibilities of these practitioners are not only related to their nature or the frequency of executing them, though to what extent is the workload, time and support available for them to adhere to them effectively and efficiently. The participants of this study, specifically those who fulfil their role and services in more than one school, consider these elements as being major challenges within their daily practice.

## The challenges encountered

Norwich (2014) claims that inclusive education has not only presented theoretical issues but also many challenges within the practice of inclusion. In reaction to these barriers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators are perceived "as 'fire-fighters', primed to react in order to minimise the challenges created by pupils with special educational needs" (Layton, 2005, p. 55). In parallel, participants in this research study also shared similar feedback, such as being consulted when problems arise as they are perceived as having "a magic wand". Another respondent affirmed that many educators have "the impression that inclusion is the onus of the Head of Department for Inclusion." This could be a result of lack of knowledge and of not knowing how to act and/or react to certain situations or it could also be related to having a dismissive attitude.

Haug (2017) affirms that the teachers' poor competencies in inclusive

pedagogy and lack of involvement hinder the implementation of inclusive education. Comparably, 80% of the participants in this study consider that one of the major challenges reflects a poor inclusive mindset, which was experienced in educators across levels, including senior leadership, teachers and LSEs. This category of challenges was elaborated and widely described by the participants. They defined educators as “having inappropriate attitude towards inclusion”, “not cooperative and lacking dedication” or “not adequate due to not having training in inclusive practice”.

Furthermore, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASIE, 2019) reports that Malta considered “the lack of training as a very specific challenge for school leadership. Malta stated that inclusive school leadership may only be addressed through school leaders having the right attitude towards inclusion and diversity in schools” (EASIE, 2019, p. 30). Nevertheless, this is in contrast to having “lack of inclusive staff and rigid thinking amongst Senior Management Team; lack of knowledge and lack of understanding and oppositionality to change to new strategies” (Head of Department working in state schools). Hence, although progress towards developing inclusive schools has been observed, as evidenced in the document analysis, there is still a challenging element of having non-conductive human resources. There is an evident discrepancy between policy and practice across all levels and sectors, which is hindering the process of developing an inclusive culture.

The *National Inclusion Policy* aims at ensuring “collective responsibility for the teaching and learning of all learners” (MEDE, 2019, p. 13). All teachers need to recognize that they are responsible for their students, irrespective of their diversity and needs. For this to be functional, educators need to be trained and equipped with the necessary skills to reach out to all learners. Consequently, the key role of Inclusive Education Coordinators or Head of Departments is to ensure that staff members are fulfilling their responsibility towards meeting the needs of learners and “act as an advisor to all Teaching Grades” (MEDE, 2017). However, having Head of Departments attending state and church schools once or twice a week is not supportive of implementing this service within their respective schools due to them not being constantly present. Hence, this fragmented service influences the impact and sustainability of their inclusive practice. On the other hand, Inclusive Education Coordinators in independent schools, who assist only one school, have a better established inclusive culture,

though they still encounter challenges relating to human resources, primarily with recruiting, mentoring and training LSEs.

#### The elements of leadership in this role

Tissot (2013) argues that placing skilled Special Educational Needs Coordinators on leadership teams, as opposed to being immersed in administrative work, would be supportive to schools in implementing equity in the social and educational spheres. This implies that the role as a leader should be able to contribute strategically within their respective schools. Within the local context, this emphasis has been documented since 2017, when the agreement between the Maltese Government and the Maltese Union of Teachers was signed. This declares that the Head of Department is expected to act as the school's inclusive educational leader under the direction of the school's headship and Education Officers (MEDE, 2017). The *National Inclusion Policy* (MEDE, 2019) defines that the school management team is formed by the school leaders, which include the Head of School and the Assistant Head/s, who work with Head of Departments and Head of Departments (Inclusion), as well as with Learning Support Centre Coordinators, where applicable. This is following the concept of Distributed Leadership encouraged by the *National Curriculum Framework for All* (MEDE, 2012a). However, discrepancies between policy and practice are evident through the responses of this study, as not all Head of Departments are involved with the Senior Management Team. One of the Head of Departments, working in church schools, shared that they are involved in the meetings where they give their contribution to the team but are not involved with decision-making. The respondent added that this also varies from one school to another as it depends on the strategies adopted by the Head of School. This consideration is relevant, especially in view of the Head of Department's role across a number of schools which makes their presence irregular in schools. Thus, their participation and involvement in the issues discussed in all the schools they visit may not be constructive.

The progress from an operational role to a strategic one is still in its initial stages of development and thus still indefinite and unclear when evaluating the different sectors of the state, church and independent schools. This lack of uniformity and clarity highlights some queries relating to the impact of when they execute a leadership role, especially when shared among a number of schools. Another consideration is whether the duties and responsibilities of this

role relate to being a leader or a manager. In effect, leaders and managers are two distinct roles, where the former have a vision and are influential to their followers, whilst the latter work towards operating procedures. Nevertheless, they seem to merge within the role of Head of Department, as defined in its responsibilities and duties, as they create and motivate, whilst at the same time monitor to ensure that the objectives are being achieved. However, to what extent are they being executed consistently and continuously to leave an imprint on the teaching and learning of all learners?

This query, which requires further in-depth research, relates to the debate between policy and practice. Although the intention of bridging these two pillars is ongoing, a discrepancy is still evident when considering the responses of the participants, in relation to how they perceive their role. In parallel to the study by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), many Special Educational Needs Coordinators fulfil operational roles that limit them from being strategic. From the mean percentages across the three sectors, 30% of the respondents consider their role operational in contrast to the 5% who perceive their role as being strategic. It is evident that there is a major gap between what is stated in documents and what is practised. Defining one's role in being operational rather than strategic in nature also relates to how they are perceived by others. Although by agreement Head of Departments should act as the schools' inclusive leaders, only 62% of the respondents are considered members of the School Leadership Team.

Implications related to being a strategic leader

Cowne (2005) concludes that the Special Educational Needs Coordinators' role is widening and demanding new challenges. Hence, to be effective in their role, they require:

good management support and strategic planning which includes sufficient resources of time, space and administrative backup to fulfil the role; and staff with positive attitudes who have access to advice or further training on teaching strategies to meet the range of needs of pupils in their classes. (Cowne, 2005, p. 67)

Lacking these elements, particularly time and resources as identified by 70% and 35% of the participants respectively, the role is being challenged in its practice. Furthermore, 80% of the respondents declared that the lack of

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supportive, trained and dedicated educators is impeding the implementation of inclusion. As stated by a Head of Department working in state schools, “the attitude and understanding of what is inclusion from the school staff makes a big difference and it is the major stumbling block for inclusion”. Hence, in practice, there are many areas to be addressed for the *National Inclusion Policy* to be appropriately implemented. “To ensure that all learners have access to quality instruction, intervention and support to experience success in learning within a high quality Inclusive Education system” (MEDE, 2019, p. 13), all stakeholders need to work in partnership to achieve this vision. Although this process requires a whole-school approach, it also demands stability and consistency, monitoring and evaluation by qualified professionals within inclusive education, specifically Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments are able to lead this journey, given the time, resources and skills (Winwood, 2018).

To summarize, there is no specific distinction between the responsibilities and duties of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments; nevertheless, some minor differences are present even within the same sector. These differences depend on the school’s population, the Inclusive Education Coordinator’s or Head of Department’s workload, the availability of time and the support that is present within the school, which includes human and physical resources. Nevertheless, the findings of what constitutes this role are mainly attributed to the participants’ practice and experiences, and not from the document analysis. Hence, this study, with its limitations, introduces the role of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments and how they are presently functioning.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The role of Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments was discussed through theory and practice and it was also viewed in contrast to the literature, both national and international. However, formulating an identity to this complex role is laborious (Cowne, 2005; Mackenzie, 2007; Pearson and Ralph, 2007; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Mackenzie (2007) proposes that the role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators needs to move away from the burdensome, bureaucratic demands and shift towards “enabling Special Educational Needs Coordinators to have sufficient time to carry out the central tasks of delivering pedagogical and curriculum interventions” (p. 217).



### The role's identity and stability

This study illustrates the complexity of this role, which involves a wide range of duties and responsibilities. However, the ambiguity and non-uniformity of the identity of this role across and within the three sectors in primary education mean that formal recognition of its status is required. The changes and developments within education are creating new opportunities that are leading some schools in Britain to redefine the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator, as they are implementing a fully inclusive approach and incorporating responsibility for all vulnerable groups (Packer, 2013). In parallel, this study urges for clarity with regards to the job title and its definition in relation to the nature of the role. It should reflect the inclusion of all learners and not only the ones identified with a statement of needs.

The overlap that was evidenced between Head of Department and Assistant Heads with inclusion duties was significant to conclude that it would be beneficial for these two roles to merge into one role. This would mean stability in fulfilling one's role in one school according to the population, and allowing more time to execute their duties and responsibilities. In turn, this will lead to continuation, consistency and sustainability of inclusion. Through their expertise, Inclusive Education Coordinators and Head of Departments will be able to overview the teaching and learning of all learners, together with the SLTs and the educators, in order to "focus upon measurable pupil outcomes" (Mackenzie, 2007, p. 217).

### The leadership facet

From a policy perspective, it is indicated that schools have started developing inclusive leadership teams and the role of Head of Department is progressing from an operational role to a strategic one. According to Packer (2013), this role's strategic senior leadership responsibilities are achieved by establishing the school's long-term vision, leading the development of the school's inclusive and collaborative culture, empowering stakeholders and monitoring regularly that practice complements the policy. An essential but challenging aspect of the strategic process is to ensure that all stakeholders understand the vision and demonstrate commitment towards achieving it (Packer, 2013). Similarly, the purpose of the local Inclusion Policy (MEDE, 2019) is to assist school leadership teams "to monitor the quality and standards in inclusive practice and identify strengths, school development priorities, staff training, improvements in

teaching/learning strategies, etc., for all identified themes" (EASIE, 2019, p. 22). This is achieved by having an "expert" in the field, to lead each school towards an inclusive learning community within its broad meaning.

#### Limitations of this study and future research

This study is not exhaustive due to its scale, limited responses and lack of official statistics and data. It addresses this role solely within the primary sector, even though some of the participants fulfil their role in both primary and secondary schools. Therefore, the subject matter requires further research in order to acquire additional data. The role's effectiveness and impact need to be evaluated, not only in relation to learners with a statement of needs but also to inclusive education as a whole-school approach. Research on a national basis is necessary to study this role and its impact from various perspectives, including all stakeholders, namely the practitioners themselves, educators, parents and learners. This will in turn lead to a better and deeper understanding of the strengths and needs, which will highlight the way forward in leading inclusive education.

#### The way forward

This research study created an awareness of this role and conveyed its valuable practice which has an impact in supporting the inclusive communities and cultures in schools. Following this, it is recommended that the policymakers together with the authorities evaluate the changes that are required to develop this profession into a more functional and established role with the intention to support the provision of all learners. These discussions need to consider each Head of Department's stable placement, workload and strategic leadership responsibilities to acquire inclusive sustainability within each respective school. Another recommendation that will cater for the diverse needs in schools is the intrinsic ongoing training for all educators. Inclusive pedagogical strategies need to be incorporated in daily practice as all learners will benefit from these approaches. Additionally, having the expertise of an Inclusive Education Coordinator or Head of Department within the School Leadership Team, one who is physically present on a daily basis in schools, will also contribute to upskilling educators. This is necessary to maximize the impact of the intervention provided. Consequently, with this guidance and support, a collaborative culture will be instilled to be able to work together as an inclusive community.

This research study brought to the foreground different realities that were noted to be related but at the same time concomitantly varied and complex. There is a need for clarity and a deeper understanding of the role to be able to develop an identity and status across the different educational sectors and to further enhance inclusive education. Having a strategic position within schools, Inclusive Education Coordinators and/or Head of Departments will be in a position to promote, monitor and maintain inclusive practices.

## Notes on contributor

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