

# Broadening the Possibilities within Special Needs Education

My M.Ed in Inclusion and Special Educational Needs through the University of Birmingham has broadened my knowledge regarding equity within the educational system for all students with different abilities. Educational equity has garnered interest over the years. Locally, the policy on inclusive education was created with the intention of eliminating challenges in the learning environments and fostering a sense of belonging for all learners. As an occupational therapist working within the paediatric field, it felt essential to learn more about how students of different ages and abilities can be supported to thrive within their educational field as this is an important steppingstone towards becoming functioning and contributing members of society.

This postgraduate degree has helped me understand the trends and trajectories in the development of special needs education. It widened my knowledge base on cross-cultural issues that may develop as part of special needs education and how this may impact on professional identity. From curriculum to pedagogy, and assessment, this course allowed me to apply my knowledge on special education while taking into consideration the inclusive-specialist dimension. It exposed me to broader inclusion debates, dilemmas, and solutions. Through this postgraduate degree, I was also able to develop deeper knowledge on the Autism spectrum condition which was the pathway I chose to learn more about in my final years of the course.

For my dissertation in the final year, I chose to focus on primary to secondary school transitions for students on the autism spectrum. Through both my work in this field, as well as local reviews, I had noticed that the Maltese education system could benefit from a small-scale evaluation of primary to secondary school transitions for students on the autism spectrum. The aim of this research work was to establish the challenges faced by parents during their autistic child's transition process to secondary school in Malta and identify factors behind successful transitions to secondary education as well as promote parent-school collaboration during this transition process.

My dissertation findings indicated that the parental experiences of secondary level transitions for autistic students are varied. Limited availability for communication between the family and the school, poor handover from the primary school, and rigidity from the school's end with regards to school protocols are some of the challenges to a successful transition. However, my dissertation also established that mainstream secondary schools can be fit for students on the autism spectrum if the correct adaptations are put in place. Through this research work, effective strategies were able to be shared with parents and professionals. These strategies included the importance of parent-school collaboration and clear transition guidelines for both parents and INCOs so as to ensure uniformity and equitable opportunities. Although a small-scale study, this dissertation may assist an education system with developing the local policy on inclusive education by showing how to reduce challenges and encourage all students by listening and facilitating their transition needs.

Following the completion of this course, I feel that my critical thinking and awareness as a healthcare professional was able to grow through the mix of theoretical and real-life scenarios discussed during online group discussions with tutors and fellow classmates. Furthermore, I feel that I have developed greater analytic capabilities with regards to the evaluation of articles and policies on inclusive education.

Undoubtedly, these studies have allowed me to expand my capability as a healthcare professional within the paediatric field. Following this course, I feel that I am better able at providing a service that can help students grow and thrive through my work and collaboration with other healthcare and educational professionals for the benefit of the students.

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