

Comparative Analysis of Teachers' and Learning Support Educators' Awareness of Dyslexia in Church Secondary Schools in Malta

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Abstract

This study compares the awareness, perceptions and emotional intelligence of teachers and Learning Support Educators about dyslexia in Maltese Church Secondary Schools. Dyslexia, a common Specific Learning Difficulty, has an impact on students' academic and emotional wellbeing, especially in Malta's bilingual education system. The study analyses data from 181 participants to assess differences in awareness and preparedness between teachers and Learning Support Educators regarding support for learners with dyslexia. Findings show that Learning Support Educators are more aware and prepared, particularly in detecting dyslexia's emotional elements, whereas teachers have low confidence and knowledge of dyslexia-specific interventions. Both groups highlight the need for professional development in dyslexia awareness and emotional intelligence. The findings go beyond the comparison between both groups of educators as they emphasise the importance of collaboration and focused training for developing inclusive education practices. Recommendations are presented to remove systemic barriers while boosting outcomes for learners with dyslexia.

Keywords

Dyslexia, emotional intelligence, inclusive education, teacher awareness, learning support educators

Introduction

Dyslexia, a Specific Learning Difficulty - a term used to describe a group of lifelong conditions that affect areas of learning - is defined by persistent difficulties with reading, writing, spelling and phonological processing. These neurodevelopmental issues often coexist with cognitive and emotional concerns, such as deficiencies in working memory, attention span and organisational skills (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Livingston et al., 2018). Dyslexia is not associated with intelligence, but significantly influences students' academic performance and emotional wellbeing, especially in

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educational environments with limited interventions and support mechanisms (Battistuta et al., 2018; Riddick, 2010).

The Maltese bilingual curriculum necessitates proficiency in Maltese and English. The English-dense orthography complicates the grapheme-phoneme correlation for learners with dyslexia (LWD; Peer & Reid, 2016), which is further complicated by introducing foreign languages into secondary schools, worsening students' challenges (Camilleri et al., 2019). These language demands with limited educator awareness cause feelings of marginalisation and academic failure for LWD (Borg & Farrugia, 2018; Scerri, 2012).

LWD's educational success depends on educators' readiness and identifying skills in response to their needs (Gonzalez, 2021; Miciak & Fletcher, 2020). Being the agents of inclusive learning environment development, teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) are central in applying evidence-based techniques addressing the unique difficulties of LWD (Livingston et al., 2018; Masdeu Navarro, 2015). However, research demonstrates significant variations in educators' training, awareness and emotional intelligence (EI), triggering inconsistent support quality for LWD (Borg & Farrugia, 2018; Scerri, 2012).

EI was selected as the focal point due to its significant role in shaping educators' ability to recognise, empathise with and effectively respond to the emotional and academic needs of LWD, as consistently highlighted in the literature. Salovey and Mayer (1990) define EI as the ability to notice, analyse and manage own and others' emotions. EI allows educators to empathise with students, successfully manage classroom dynamics and encourage students' emotional and social growth (Goleman, 1995). Emotionally intelligent educators' major role is encouraging resilience and engagement among LWD, whose academic struggles are exacerbated by low self-esteem, frustration and anxiety (Livingston et al., 2018; Riddick, 2010).

This study employs a comparative approach, concentrating on differences in teacher and LSE awareness, perspectives and EI concerning LWD. Malta's advancement in inclusive education is evidenced in policies, namely, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF; Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2012) and the National Inclusive Education Framework (MEDE, 2019b). They highlight the relevance of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and advocate for flexible teaching practices accommodating distinct learners' requirements. Despite these gains, gaps in inclusive practices exist in educator training and professional development. Further barriers include teachers' feelings of unpreparedness to assist LWD, LSEs' limited collaboration possibilities and resource restrictions (Curmi, 2020; Scerri, 2012).

This study seeks to compare the awareness, perceptions and EI of teachers and LSEs in Maltese Church secondary schools, which serve learners with mixed abilities. These schools were selected for their accessibility and contextual relevance to the researcher, as well as their alignment with the study's focus on inclusive education and educator preparedness. The research questions guiding this study are:

- RQ1. To what extent do teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) differ in their awareness of the needs of learners with dyslexia (LWD)?
- RQ2. What do the findings reveal about the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in how teachers and LSEs support learners with dyslexia (LWD)?

These questions guide the comparative analysis of educators' readiness to support LWD, offering recommendations to improve educator awareness, collaboration and inclusive education practices in Malta.

Literature Review

Dyslexia: Definition and Educational Challenges

Dyslexia, the most prevalent language-based learning difficulty, affects individuals regardless of race, intelligence, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or education (Agius, 2018; The Dyslexia Institute, 2022). It is a lifelong neurological disorder (Zysberg & Kessler, 2017) affecting reading, writing, speaking, reasoning and spelling due to phonological processing difficulties (APA, 2013; Falzon & Camilleri, 2010; Livingston et al., 2018), often running in families (The Dyslexia Institute, 2022). Beyond literacy, dyslexia impacts organisation, emotional wellbeing, working memory (Livingston et al., 2018), concentration, mathematics and sequencing (Mugnaini et al., 2009); posing significant challenges in academics, the workplace and daily life, especially in systems reliant on reading and writing (British Dyslexia Association, 2022; Riddick, 2010).

According to the European Dyslexia Association (2022), dyslexia affects approximately 9-12% of the global population, while the International Dyslexia Association (2022) estimates a prevalence of 5-20%, with 2-4% experiencing severe difficulties. Many individuals struggle academically due to slow reading, poor spelling or writing and word confusion (Sprenger-Charoller et al., 2011). However, the true prevalence remains uncertain, as not everyone receives a formal diagnosis (Pierson, 2014). Although the challenges and outcomes vary considerably, early diagnosis has been shown to enhance understanding of their specific needs and support higher levels of competence during adolescence (Battistuta et al., 2018).

The exam-oriented Maltese educational system, which heavily emphasises summative assessments and written examinations, poses a significant barrier for LWD (Scerri, 2012). These students often struggle with time-constrained, text-heavy formats that do not accommodate their difficulties with reading fluency, spelling and written expression, ultimately affecting their academic progress and emotional wellbeing across their educational journey (Camilleri et al., 2019). Bi/Multilingualism is a key European issue due to freedom of movement and migration (Peer & Reed, 2016) and while dyslexia affects all languages, fluency is especially critical in transparent orthographies—languages with a consistent relationship between letters and sounds, such as Italian and to some extent,

Maltese. Malta's two official languages and principal instruction mediums, Maltese and English, have different orthographic complexity. English's opaque orthography, with inconsistent grapheme-phoneme correlation, presents decoding challenges for LWD (Firman, 2005; Peer & Reid, 2016). Introducing foreign languages in secondary school curricula further complicates literacy development (Camilleri et al., 2019). Students finishing primary education from Church schools that do not offer continuation (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007) further exacerbate their academic, social and emotional challenges, necessitating interventions to support literacy and wellbeing (Saliba, 2020).

Despite inclusive policies, Maltese LWD often feel marginalised in the classroom, due to inadequate accommodations (Borg & Farrugia, 2018; Scerri, 2012). This leads to anxiety, reduced self-confidence and disengagement, reinforcing the need for early identification and intervention (Battistuta et al., 2018; Riddick, 2010).

Emotional Intelligence in Educators

Salovey and Mayer's (1990) EI concept encompasses perceiving, understanding, regulating and using emotions effectively. In education, EI is crucial for building relationships, managing classroom dynamics and addressing learners' emotional needs (Goleman, 1995; Livingston et al., 2018). Self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy enable educators to manage emotional expression, vital when supporting diverse learners.

EI is particularly essential in inclusive education, where educators shape students' emotional and social development (Glazzard, 2010; Hewitt, 2007; Humphrey, 2002). For LWD, educators' EI is critical, given the social and emotional challenges accompanying their academic struggles. With 60% of individuals with dyslexia meeting criteria for psychiatric disorders (Wilson et al., 2009), educators must collaborate with parents and professionals to support LWD's wellbeing (Livingston et al., 2018) and remain sensitive to their emotional experiences (Nalavany et al., 2011).

Educators' anxiety in teaching LWD often stems from personality and environmental factors (Frenzel et al., 2015). Higher EI fosters resilience, engagement and supportive teaching practices (Humphrey, 2002; Zysberg & Kassler, 2017) while also mitigating occupational stress, preventing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction, through coping mechanisms and self-efficacy (Vesely et al., 2013).

Despite its importance, EI in educators is often underdeveloped due to limited formal training and professional development (Bezzina & Falzon, 2022). In Malta, professional development programmes rarely integrate EI with inclusive education strategies. This leaves many educators ill-equipped to address the emotional challenges of supporting LWD, resulting in inconsistent support and learner outcomes (Scerri, 2012).

Educators' Awareness of Dyslexia

Teachers' Awareness and Preparedness. Teachers experience internal conflict since the exam-oriented education system restricts pedagogical flexibility (Ball, 2003; Falzon, 2020), pushing them toward a banking model of education, where students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in learning (Freire, 2005). UDL offers a potential framework to bridge this gap, but limited multisensory resources and inadequate dyslexia training remain global issues (Mather et al., 2020).

Maltese teachers recognise the dyslexia-related challenges but often lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to support LWD effectively due to insufficient initial training. Dyslexia-specific content, multisensory techniques and the UDL framework – essential for accessible learning – are frequently overlooked in initial teacher education programmes and ongoing professional development (Borg & Farrugia, 2018; Scerri, 2012). Without proper training, rigid lesson plans and traditional assessments may unintentionally create barriers.

Additionally, misconceptions about LWD, such as attributing difficulties to laziness rather than the dyslexia's neurological basis (Livingston et al., 2018; Riddick, 2010), can harm students' self-esteem and motivation. This underscores the need for teacher training programmes that promote awareness, empathy and evidence-based instructional strategies.

Learning Support Educators' Awareness and Preparedness. LSEs in Malta have a significant role in assisting learners with Individual Educational Needs, a task that has been extended since the Education Act (Ministry for Education, 2000). While primarily assisting learners with a Statement of Needs, their role also includes advocating for inclusion, tailoring interventions, mediating among stakeholders (Masdeu Navarro, 2015) and collaborating with teachers, parents and students (MEDE, 2018).

LSEs' perceptions of LWD remain underexplored, both in the Maltese context and internationally. Research highlights limited awareness and training among educators to meet LWD's needs (Bartolo, 2008; Bourke, 2009; Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Knight, 2018). Although teachers often acknowledge LSEs' value in supporting LWD (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Scerri, 2012), studies suggest that responsibilities are sometimes delegated rather than approached collaboratively (Bourke & Carrington, 2007). Strengthening collaboration between teachers and LSEs is essential for accommodating diverse learning styles, ensuring meaningful inclusion (Bourke, 2009; Giangreco et al., 2005).

Effective support for LWD depends on collaboration between teachers and LSEs. Teachers bring subject expertise, while LSEs offer specialised knowledge of learning difficulties (Masdeu Navarro, 2015). LSEs in Malta often possess greater expertise than teachers in supporting LWD, attributable to their specialised training in inclusion strategies

and emotional components of learning difficulties (Livingston et al., 2018; Scerri, 2012). However, they face challenges, including limited resources, assistive technologies and professional development (Curmi, 2020), unclear role definitions, limited co-planning time and inconsistent training (Scerri, 2012). Systemic constraints also hinder effective collaboration with teachers, reducing intervention effectiveness (Borg & Farrugia, 2018). Such must be addressed to ensure effective, sustained support.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive, quantitative cross-sectional approach was employed, drawing on Stockemer's (2019) recommendation for studying comparative behavioural differences. This method was used to investigate differences in teachers' and LSEs' awareness and perceptions of LWD in Maltese Church secondary schools. It ensures objectivity and generalisability (Cohen et al., 2018) and facilitates comparison of EI and dyslexia-related awareness across educator groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study aligns with a positivist epistemology, which assumes that valid knowledge is grounded in observable, measurable data and focuses on educators' self-reported perceptions and behaviours within inclusive classrooms (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling (Taherdoost, 2016) was used to select teachers and LSEs from 22 Maltese Church secondary schools listed on the Secretariat for Catholic Education website, ensuring that participants were actively involved in supporting LWD. While not statistically representative, this sampling method allowed for the inclusion of relevant individuals likely to provide informed insights. Of the 22 Maltese Church secondary schools approached, 12 participated voluntarily, providing a sample comprising 181 educators – 96 teachers and 85 LSEs – across varying years of experience. This ensured a broad and contextually relevant representation within the Maltese Church secondary schools sector.

Data Collection Instrument

The study utilised a self-administered, quantitative cross-sectional survey to examine the relationships between independent variables – educators' EI and their awareness of dyslexia – measured at a single point in time (Behnke et al., 2006). A cross-sectional design refers to data collection at one specific moment, rather than over an extended period. The survey included statements addressing perceptions of LWD, educators' emotional competence, support strategies and inclusive planning approaches. A predictive approach assessed how these variables relate to patterns identified in the existing literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To reach an appropriate sample size, a structured online questionnaire

was utilised (Groves et al., 2009). Microsoft Forms enabled efficient distribution and initial data collation (Microsoft, 2022). The questionnaire comprised three sections: (1) an informed consent form outlining participants' rights and voluntary, anonymous participation; (2) three multiple-choice items on role, school location (Malta/Gozo) and years of experience; and (3) 16 Likert statements (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) with a neutral midpoint to reduce response bias (Kumar, 1999).

The questionnaire included a blend of themed statements covering EI, dyslexia awareness, educators' perceived skills, support strategies and their perceptions of LWD. This thematic variety enhanced reliability and minimised response bias by offering a comprehensive view of related factors (Cohen et al., 2018). Statements were phrased to avoid ambiguity, leading questions, or double-barrelled phrasing and were refined based on feedback from the pilot study.

Pilot Study

A pilot study with five teachers and five LSEs tested the survey's validity and reliability. Participants provided feedback on question clarity, format, length and relevance, resulting in minor adjustments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process enhanced the tool's clarity, optimised survey length to reduce respondent fatigue and ensured internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Microsoft Forms recorded responses in Excel, which were cross-tabulated for statistics (Momeni et al., 2017) and exported into IBM SPSS© Statistics Version 28 for analysis using descriptive deductive statistics. Hypothesis tests, including the Mann-Whitney U test and the Kruskal-Wallis H test, were performed with a significance level of 0.05 to generalise findings to the educator population. The Mann-Whitney U test – a non-parametric test used to compare two independent groups – compared EI scores between teachers and LSEs (Mann & Whitney, 1947) measured by 16 Likert-scale statements. The Kruskal-Wallis H test – a non-parametric method for comparing more than two groups – assessed differences in EI based on years of experience (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952).

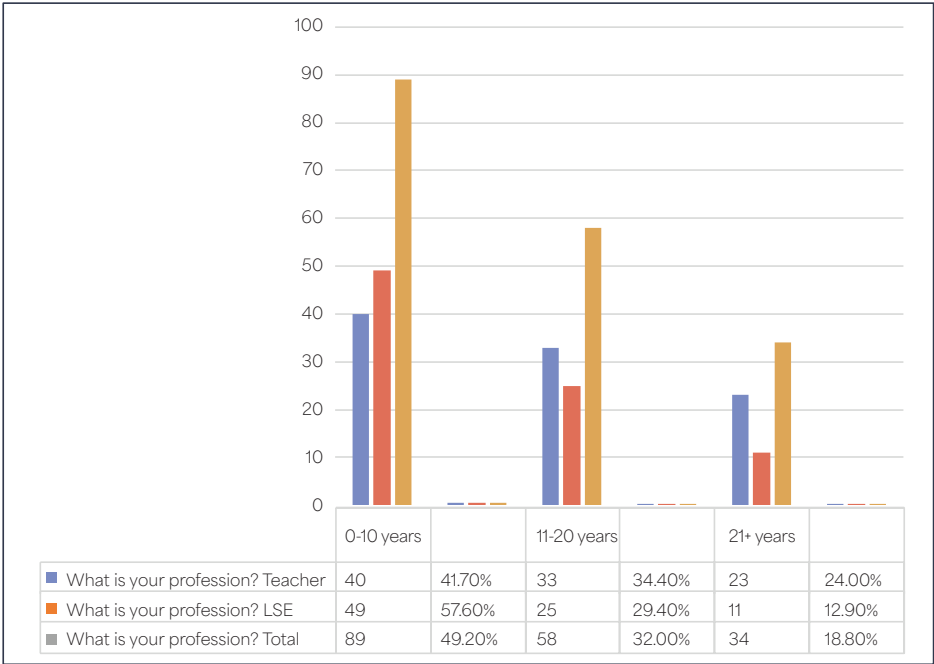
Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld, with participants informed of the study's purpose, assured anonymity and allowed to withdraw before submission. Informed consent was obtained from the schools' leadership and the individual participants. Personal identifiers were not collected to maintain confidentiality. Approval from the MCAST Research Ethics Committee and the Secretariat for Catholic Education ensured compliance with institutional and national guidelines.

Results

Of the 181 participants, 53.0% (n=96) were teachers while 47.0% (n=85) were LSEs. The majority of educators had 0-10 years of work experience (Teachers: 41.7%; LSEs: 57.6%), followed by 11-20 years of experience (Teachers: 34.4%; LSEs: 29.4%) and 21+ years of experience (Teachers: 24.0%; LSEs: 12.9%), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Distribution of Respondents by Profession and Years of Experience



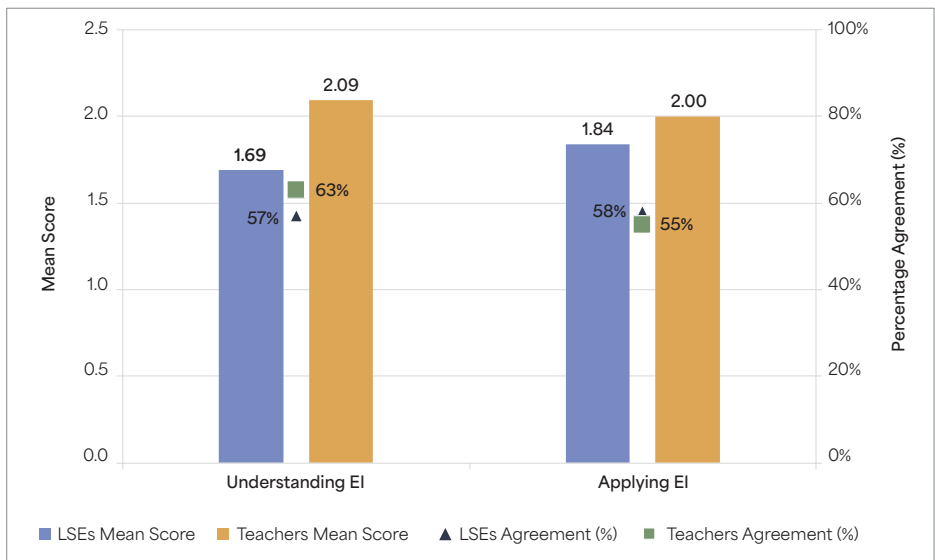
The findings are presented thematically and include participant demographics, followed by analyses of emotional intelligence (EI), dyslexia awareness and support-related perceptions. Comparisons between teachers and LSEs and across experience levels are also explored.

Awareness and Understanding of Emotional Intelligence

The educators showed similar trends in their understanding of EI with mean scores for LSEs ($M=1.69$), slightly higher than that of teachers ($M=1.84$), indicating that LSEs were slightly more likely to understand what is meant by EI. The Mann-Whitney U test found no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($U=3684.4$, $z=-1.286$, $p=0.199$). The minor effect size suggests that the majority of teachers (58.3%) and LSEs (57.6%) agreed that they understood the meaning of EI.

Furthermore, no substantial difference emerged in the application of EI in the classroom, with mean scores for LSEs ($M=2.09$) and teachers ($M=2.00$) being closely aligned. The small effect size ($U=4258.5$, $z=0.575$, $p=0.565$) reveals that there are no variations in the responses of both groups, as LSEs (63.5%) and teachers (55.2%) might feel confident in applying EI strategies in the classroom, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Educators' Understanding of EI



Training on Dyslexia and Emotional Struggles

A notable disparity was observed in the training received concerning the emotional challenges faced by LWD. Teachers' higher mean score ($M=3.49$) compared to the LSEs' ($M=2.88$) suggests that teachers (47.9%) were less likely to have received training on this aspect. Specifically, a greater proportion of LSEs indicated having received training on the emotional struggles of LWD (31.8% agree, 11.8% strongly agree). This difference was statistically significant ($U=2880.5$, $z=3.553$, $p<0.001$).

These findings highlight a critical gap in training opportunities, especially for teachers, who appear significantly less prepared in this area. Both teachers (53.1% agree, 30.2% strongly agree) and LSEs (64.7% agree, 27.1% strongly agree) expressed that they need more training on dyslexia. Teachers' mean score ($M=1.93$) was slightly higher than LSEs' ($M=1.83$), but no statistically significant differences were found ($U=3954.0$, $z=0.407$, $p=0.684$), underscoring the shared need for dyslexia-specific training for both groups.

Identification and Support of Learners with Dyslexia

A significant difference in mean scores was identified in the ability to recognise LWD. The teachers' mean score ($M=2.23$) was significantly higher than the LSEs' ($M=1.87$), implying that teachers were more likely to recognise LWD compared to LSEs. Mann-Whitney U test found a significant difference in their scores ($U=3016.0$, $z=3.592$, $p<0.001$). Despite this disparity, a substantial proportion of both groups affirm their ability to recognise LWD (teachers=69.8%, LSEs=61.2%).

During lessons, LSEs (59.4% agree, 14.6% strongly agree) were more likely than teachers (59.4% agree, 14.6% strongly agree) to approach LWD regularly to provide them with proper support when needed. The statistically significant difference in scores ($U=2963.0$, $z=3.554$, $p<0.001$) further confirms this as the teachers' ($M=2.18$) was slightly higher than the LSEs' ($M=1.78$). This shows that LSEs are taking a more active approach, likely because of their specialised training and role in supporting learners with specific learning needs.

Managing Emotional and Academic Struggles

Both groups reported considerable involvement in helping LWD manage their emotions, but LSEs exhibited a greater commitment. Teachers' mean score ($M=2.24$) was significantly higher than the LSEs' ($M=1.92$) with a statistically significant difference ($U=3104.5$, $z=3.327$, $p<0.001$) indicating that LSEs (71.8%) were more likely than teachers (62.5%) to agree with helping LWD manage their emotions when struggling with academic tasks.

A significant difference emerged between teachers and LSEs in their perceptions of whether LWD were marginalised in class, with teachers' higher mean score ($M=3.25$) than

the LSEs' ($M=2.46$) and statistically significant score differences ($U=2161.0$, $z=-5.709$, $p<0.001$). While LSEs (48.2%) agreed that marginalisation occurred, teachers were more likely to respond neutrally (39.6%) or disagree (37.5%). These differing patterns suggest that LSEs may be more likely to observe subtle forms of marginalisation, potentially due to their closer, often more individualised, support roles with LWD. It must be acknowledged that the roles and responsibilities of the educators differ, which may shape their perspectives.

UDL and Lesson Planning

Both teachers (54.2%) and LSEs (57.6%) agree that they cater for LWD by planning lessons/activities which involve different modes of representation, engagement, action and expression (UDL). The similar mean scores (teachers: $M=2.34$; LSEs: $M=2.15$) and no statistically significant difference ($U=3603.5$, $z=-1$, $p=0.132$) confirm minimal differences between group responses. However, the LSEs were more likely to strongly agree (15.3% vs 10.4%), suggesting they might integrate UDL more actively into their support.

Stress and Coping When Supporting Students with Dyslexia

The distribution of scores between teachers ($M=3.16$) and LSEs (3.40) ($U=4885.5$, $z=2.425$, $p=0.015$) was statistically significantly different. The data revealed that LSEs (38.8% agree) experience more stress in supporting LWD than teachers (4.2% agree, 15.3% agree, 0.0% strongly agree) who tend to be more neutral (49%). However, some LSEs (32.9%) also express neutrality, possibly indicating the different perceptions of stress depending on role expectations and prior training.

Furthermore, when helping LWD in dealing with stress, both groups scored similarly (teachers: $M=2.35$; LSEs: $M=2.20$; $U=3655.0$, $z=-1.369$, $p=0.171$). This implies that both teachers (60.4%) and LSEs (57.6%) agree in supporting LWD in dealing with stress.

Likewise, teachers (64.6%) and LSEs (61.2%) agree that they maintain positive attitudes towards LWD, even when faced with challenges. This is further confirmed by their mean scores (teachers: $M=1.83$; LSEs: $M=1.72$; $U=3645.0$, $z=-1.454$, $p=0.146$).

Anticipation and Preparation for Students' Needs

The distribution of scores for teachers ($M=2.45$) and LSEs ($M=2.05$) was statistically significantly different ($U=2970.0$, $z=-3.483$, $p<0.001$) when asked whether they anticipated any struggles that LWD might face and prepare for them. This suggests that LSEs (62.4% agree, 14.1% neutral), unlike teachers (47.9% agree, 31.3% neutral), have a more specialised role in addressing LWD's unique needs.

This is further confirmed when LSEs' responses (63.5%) suggest that they know how to

facilitate effective communication with LWD more than teachers (55.2%). Teachers' mean score ($M=2.41$) was higher than the LSEs' ($M=1.99$) with a statistically significant difference ($U=2926.5$, $z=-3.709$, $p<0.001$).

However, both teachers (45.8% agree, 34.4% strongly agree) and LSEs (38.8% agree, 36.5% strongly agree) agree that LWD can achieve the same goals as their same-age peers. The mean scores (teachers: $M=1.92$; LSEs: $M=1.93$) confirm this with no statistically significant difference ($U=4118.0$, $z=0.116$, $p=0.908$).

The Impact of Years of Experience

Kruskal-Wallis H test, used to assess differences across more than two groups, revealed that years of experience did not significantly influence educators' responses.

Discussion

The discussion of findings is organised to answer the research questions that guided this study, thoroughly examining the outcomes in line with the study's objectives and existing literature.

RQ1. To what extent do teachers and Learning Support Educators differ in their awareness of the needs of learners with dyslexia (LWD)?

The findings indicate distinct differences between teachers and LSEs in their awareness of the needs of LWD. While teachers may demonstrate higher expectations regarding the academic potential of LWD, this may stem from their traditional instructional role, which prioritises achievement and curriculum outcomes (OECD, 2009). Conversely, LSEs appear to possess a deeper understanding of the emotional and academic challenges faced by these learners. This likely results from their closer interactions with students and more targeted training in inclusive education strategies (Takala, 2007).

LSEs expressed greater confidence in recognising both the behavioural signs and emotional manifestations of dyslexia. Their responses suggest a higher level of preparedness in anticipating and addressing LWD's challenges. These outcomes align with prior studies, both local and foreign, which report that LSEs typically receive more specialised training on Specific Learning Difficulties, equipping them with more effective inclusive practices (Masdeu Navarro, 2015; Scerri, 2012). In contrast, the findings suggest that many teachers lack confidence in identifying and supporting LWD, a gap which could negatively affect both academic progress and emotional wellbeing.

Both groups agreed on the need for further training in dyslexia, regardless of their years of experience. This is consistent with research stressing the critical role of continued professional development in improving inclusive teaching practices (Bartolo, 2008; Bourke,

2009; Gibson & Kendall, 2010; Knight, 2018; Marshall, 2005; Sherrard, 2004). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2003) asserts that the presence of a supportive school leadership team enhances the effectiveness of such training by promoting a culture of inclusion and staff empowerment.

While LSEs reported greater confidence and preparedness, their role also appears to be associated with a greater sensitivity to classroom dynamics. For instance, LSEs were more likely to recognise signs of marginalisation and stress among LWD and were more proactive in offering support during lessons. Teachers, meanwhile, often remained neutral or uncertain on issues related to emotional support, which may reflect variations in role expectations, training, or levels of classroom engagement, aligning with the argument of Frenzel et al. (2015).

Both groups endorsed the use of UDL principles to accommodate diverse learning needs. Nevertheless, LSEs seemed more confident in applying such strategies. This supports Falzon's (2020) assertion that UDL offers a flexible framework capable of addressing the systemic limitations in inclusive education. The proactive role of LSEs in lesson planning and direct support, especially when compared to teachers, highlights a critical opportunity for strengthening collaboration and role integration in schools, aligning with local policies (MEDE, 2014; 2018; 2019a; 2019b).

Overall, these findings suggest that while educators value inclusion, LSEs demonstrate greater awareness and practical readiness to support LWD. The variability in awareness and emotional attunement reinforces the need for a systemic approach to training, co-planning and school-wide collaboration to ensure consistent and equitable support for all learners.

RQ2. What do the findings reveal about the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in how teachers and LSEs support learners with dyslexia (LWD)?

EI emerged as a critical factor in supporting LWD, with both teachers and LSEs recognising its importance and a willingness to apply it in practice. This echoes Glazzard's (2010) view that emotionally intelligent educators promote inclusive, empathetic learning environments. Although no statistically significant difference was found between the groups' self-reported use of EI, LSEs scored slightly higher across domains such as empathy, emotional regulation and adaptability. This likely stems from LSEs' support-focused role and closer daily interactions with LWD, as Livingston et al. (2018) noted.

This proximity may also explain why LSEs more often identify marginalisation in the classroom, which Goldup and Ostler (2000), Oga and Haron (2012) and Zysberg and Kassler (2017) note that LWD often experience exclusion and a sense of being outsiders. In contrast, teachers often remained neutral or disagreed, possibly reflecting role expectations that prioritise curriculum goals over emotional support. These findings support Kenely's (2019) assertion that emotionally intelligent educators are better equipped to manage diverse classroom needs.

The perception of stress when supporting LWD further distinguished the groups. While teachers tended to remain neutral, LSEs were more likely to acknowledge such stress, suggesting either a deeper emotional connection or a clearer recognition of the demands of inclusive emotional support. This aligns with Goleman's (2011) and Dolev and Leshem's (2016) findings that EI can buffer stress and enhance professional resilience.

When comparing across years of experience, teachers scored significantly higher in EI measures. However, this may not reflect training quality but rather exposure over time, as both groups agreed on the need for further development in EI – a skill that can be cultivated in adulthood with appropriate support and intervention (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Dolev & Leshem, 2016; European Agency, 2014; Goleman, 2011).

Additionally, LSEs reported more confidence in anticipating the needs of LWD and facilitating effective communication, reinforcing their preparedness in managing the emotional and behavioural complexities associated with dyslexia. These results support Nalavany et al.'s (2011) emphasis on acknowledging the emotional experiences of LWD as a cornerstone of inclusive practice.

Additionally, the findings suggest a need to reflect on how responsibilities are distributed between teachers and LSEs, particularly in the context of supporting LWD. As Bourke and Carrington (2007) argue, when roles are not clearly defined or mutually reinforced, collaborative practices may be affected. These results highlight the importance of structured, co-working models that promote shared ownership and professional synergy within inclusive settings.

Overall, the findings affirm that while both groups value EI, LSEs demonstrate greater awareness of the emotional struggles of LWD. However, the consistent call for more training across educator groups indicates a system-wide need for targeted training that supports inclusive classroom practices rooted in EI.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This final section presents a synthesis of the study's key findings, acknowledges its limitations and discusses the broader implications for practice and policy. It provides recommendations for future research and concludes with final reflections on the study's contributions.

Summary of Findings

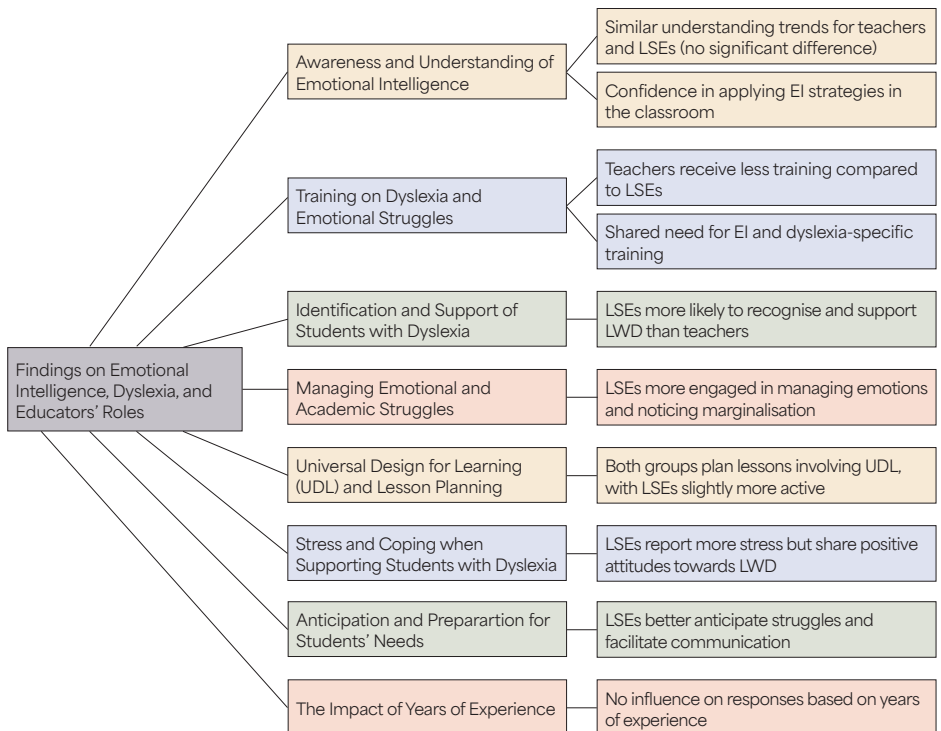
As visually presented in Figure 3, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the comparative awareness and perspectives of teachers and LSEs regarding the unique needs of LWD in Maltese Church secondary schools. The findings revealed valuable differences

between the two groups. LSEs exhibited higher EI levels and a deeper understanding of the challenges LWD encounter and were more likely to take proactive and empathetic approaches, reflecting their specialised training and close interactions with students.

However, the study highlights significant gaps that teachers and LSEs have in their training, especially concerning dyslexia awareness and EI in their professional development. Teachers reported less confidence in recognising and addressing dyslexia-related issues, possibly stemming from inconsistent training and barriers within the education system.

These findings underscore the need for a cohesive and evidence-based approach to professional development and policy reform. By addressing these gaps, policymakers, educators and school leaders can collaborate to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for LWD.

Figure 3
Mind Map of Summary of Findings



Limitations of the Study

As a cross-sectional design, this study captures educators' views at a single point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes or developments over time. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants could have over- or underestimated their awareness and skills. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal approaches and incorporating qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into educators' evolving experiences and perspectives.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings have substantial implications for educational practice and policy in Malta. There is a pressing need for mandatory training on dyslexia for all educators, including theoretical and practical components focusing on early identification, evidence-based interventions, the use of assistive technologies and applying UDL to support LWD effectively to create a more inclusive learning environment (CAST, 2018; Coy et al., 2015).

EI development must become a central component of educator training. EI is a critical factor in educators' ability to foster resilience and manage the emotional challenges faced by LWD (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Dolev & Leshem, 2016). Training programmes should include practical strategies for enhancing empathy, adaptability and emotional regulation, equipping educators to create supportive and inclusive classrooms.

Coupling EI and dyslexia training with practical integration of UDL strategies can further enhance the educator's skills to meet the LWD's needs while creating holistic, inclusive classrooms (Anastasiou, 2015; Cefai et al., 2008). Collaboration between teachers and LSEs should be prioritised to maximise the benefits of their complementary skill sets. Professional learning communities and co-planning sessions could serve as platforms for knowledge-sharing and joint problem-solving, ensuring that all learners receive regular and effective support (Aguilar, 2016).

It is essential to address resource gaps and ensure that schools are equipped to meet the learners' diverse needs. Investing in dyslexia-friendly materials, assistive technologies, classroom modifications and accommodations, as well as ongoing support for educators through mentoring and coaching initiatives, stimulates positive attitudes among educators and learners (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003).

Recommendations for Future Research

Replicating the study in state and independent schools would further explore educators' perceptions of LWD in different contexts, considering this study's limitations. A qualitative research study in the same 12 Maltese Church secondary schools would provide deeper insights into educators' perceptions, informing specialised interventions and support

strategies. Since dyslexia is the most common learning disability (Peer & Reid, 2001), expanding research to the wider community could gauge public awareness, guiding action. Educators and primary school parents could be surveyed to assess their awareness of dyslexia, support and resources. With the scarcity of literature on educators' EI towards LWD in Maltese Church secondary schools, further research can address this gap, with LWD included in future research, allowing them to voice their needs, per Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Final Reflections

In conclusion, literacy skills are vital for daily living and all aspects of life, influencing the citizens' wellbeing. Acquiring these abilities presents distinct challenges for LWD. To ensure they reach their full potential, educators should receive training in EI and dyslexia to support them holistically. They are urged to inform themselves and to create dyslexia-friendly classrooms and school communities. Policymakers should prioritise the creation of inclusive schools and societies. This study stresses the importance of raising awareness about dyslexia and its effects on students' lives, hoping it catalyses change to create a more equitable and just environment that empowers everyone to thrive.

Notes on Contributor

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