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# Attitudes Toward Inclusion and Utilitarian–Progressive Philosophical Orientations: A Survey Study of Maltese State Primary School Educators

Gabrielle Said , Matthew Muscat–Inglott, Heathcliff Schembri

## Abstract

This article conceptualises Maltese educational philosophy according to a utilitarian–progressive dualism, with critical theory as the source of antagonism between the two positions. In this sense, education for work and economic development serves as a utilitarian or technocratic justification for the prevailing socioeconomic status quo. In contrast, education for personal and social development serves more progressive or humanistic goals of personal empowerment and sociopolitical emancipation. Given that inclusion is a relatively explicit feature of Maltese educational policy and practice, we asked how attitudes towards inclusion currently interact with the broader foregoing philosophical orientations among Maltese primary school educators. A survey of 62 educators in a large state primary school was carried out, consisting of an existing scale for measuring attitudes toward inclusion, as well as a locally contextualised bespoke scale designed to measure philosophical orientations. Factors such as role and experience, as well as initial and ongoing training were included as explanatory factors. The results suggest overall positive attitudes toward inclusion, combined with a juxtaposition of utilitarian and progressive views about education. Based on the findings, we argue that initial training is a particularly important opportunity for educators to engage more fully with philosophy of education and critical pedagogy since they are less likely to do so later in their careers in the Maltese primary state school sector.

## Keywords

Inclusive education, Malta, philosophy of education, primary education, progressivism, utilitarianism

## Introduction

Philosophical orientations among educators are generally thought to at least partially influence classroom behaviours in practice. If so, primary

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schools represent a particularly important space amenable to the influence of philosophy (Farquhar & White, 2014). Ideas and beliefs surrounding child-centredness, for instance, or learning through play, have had a marked impact on the realities of contemporary classrooms (Kim, 2004). According to Makaiou and Miller (2012), “big P” philosophy is concerned with major shared ideas that significantly influence given cultures, while “little p” philosophy is more idiosyncratic and personalised. Little p philosophies are continually negotiated and updated by educators through their ongoing interactions with learners and the environment. Conceptualising the philosophical orientations of educators in this way helps explain why observing and matching consistent philosophical influences with observed teaching styles can be substantially difficult (Strout, 2015). Classroom pedagogical practice may fail to reveal clear traces of big P ideas like idealism, realism or pragmatism (Gezer, 2018), but this does not preclude the import of multiple little p ideas that are difficult to define and observe. Such ideas are further complicated by the likely influence of context and circumstance in their formation and application. The present study was primarily motivated, in this sense, to engage in a more in-depth exploration of the effects of philosophical orientations on educators in the context of the inclusive Maltese classroom.

Inclusion in education has long been an explicit feature of the Maltese national agenda (Bartolo, 2010; Borg & Schembri, 2022). Accordingly, educators in local schools are generally expected to be on board with the fundamental idea and spirit of inclusive education. We know that attitudes towards inclusion and classroom practice are to some degree correlated (Avramidis & Norwich; Sharma & Sokal, 2016), so understanding additional factors influencing this relationship represents a compelling line of inquiry for local educational researchers. Therefore, we set out to explore if philosophy might constitute just such a factor, and, if so, to ascertain the nature of its influence. More specifically, the study aimed to define and measure a locally contextualised set of philosophical orientations pertinent to Maltese educators, to investigate its potential association with general attitudes towards inclusion, and finally, to consider the implications of such an analysis in practice.

### ***A Locally Contextualised Philosophy of Education***

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, against an international backdrop of intensifying neoliberal globalisation, Sultana (1994) noted that consumerism and individualism were on the rise in Maltese society. Though his work is

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extensive and multifaceted, Sultana framed the local philosophical debate in education in terms of, among others, a technocratic/vocationalist as opposed to a humanistic divide (Sultana, 1992). These positions broadly relate to the ideas of teaching for work and economic development on the one hand, or for personal and social development on the other. While at face value there appears to be little conflict here, antagonism arises when taking into account critical theory/pedagogy. From the critical perspective, education as an efficient and utilitarian route to practical work has the effect of serving and reproducing an existing socioeconomic status quo. The humanistic approach implies a degree of personal empowerment and political emancipation, and the possibility of social reconstruction in the classical Deweyan sense, or, more radically, political revolution in the Freirean sense. In other words, little tension between the technocratic and humanistic approaches to education exists in the absence of critical theory.

History has since proceeded in step with intensifying global neoliberalism, rendering Sultana's ideas prophetic and increasingly pertinent. Defined as an ideology of privatisation, marketisation, and competition (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Whitehead & Crawshaw, 2014), critical theorists commonly associate neoliberalism with evolved forms of hyper-individualism and consumerism. Mayo (2021) argued that the neoliberal scourge has wedded education to a market ideology, with individual self-interest and responsibility becoming the order of the day. Education is thereby reduced to a product, good, or service, to be bought, sold and consumed, rather than serve as a public good and be a mechanism for genuine democracy and informed, engaged active citizenship. Under the guise of being hands-on, practical and useful, the technocratic, job-oriented view of education encourages learners to treat education as a tool for increasing their own individual human capital, utility, and employability, while at the same time denying them knowledge that might otherwise enable fundamental changes in the way societies are organised.

Deepening integration between state-sponsored vocational institutions and the local private sector, as well as the introduction of vocational subjects in state schools, have been met with surprisingly little critique by educationalists (Muscat-Inglott, 2021). Sultana (1992) argued long ago that teachers harboured a technocratic-humanistic "dilemma" in attempting to reconcile their philosophical orientations and beliefs concerning the overall function of education for Maltese individuals and society. The absence of critical voices

attempting to stem current trends towards increasing neoliberal utilitarianism in education would suggest that if any such dilemma still exists, it does so only at an obscure subconscious level. In this setting, the measurement of philosophical orientations appears increasingly difficult and important.

### ***Attitudes Towards Inclusion Among Maltese Educators***

The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of inclusive education are likely internalised by educators not only through initial formal education and training, but also through processes of acculturation in typical Maltese educational workplaces. Therefore, it is a reasonable prediction that Maltese educators will hold attitudes and philosophical orientations generally compatible with pragmatic and progressive schools of philosophical thought. While inclusive education is typically presented as progressive and emancipatory, Bajada et al. (2022) criticised its current form as “tarnished” by an obsolete “special education needs” paradigm. In this view, children with a statement of needs are singled out, labelled, categorised, and ultimately “disabled” by current inclusive educational practices. Congruent with Mayo’s (2021) vision of a dystopian neoliberal contemporary education system, such an approach to inclusion has the effect of holding students personally accountable/responsible for their unsuccessful integration and ability to compete.

A contradiction arises here, between the application of day-to-day inclusive educational practices in schools, and the genuine embodiment of progressive or emancipatory philosophies of education. Where inclusion runs the risk of becoming vacuous and superficial, attempts to recognise and critically engage with educators’ attitudes and assumptions relating to their practice appear increasingly warranted. According to the critical view, the *appearance* of a functioning inclusive educational system may actually serve to preserve a broader socioeconomic status quo that is, at its core, arbitrarily hierarchical, fundamentally unjust, and ultimately exclusionary. In this vein, Bartolo (2010) argued that inclusive education in Malta needs to move towards a system based more on rights than charity. Invoking charity is poignant, because like superficial gestures of inclusion, charity itself has been similarly criticised for serving as a stopgap for a fundamentally unjust socioeconomic system, undermining the possibility of real systemic change that would otherwise eliminate the need for charity in the first place (Syme, 2019).

So, how do attitudes towards inclusion relate to any more fundamental

philosophical beliefs and orientations among Maltese educators? How critical, for that matter, are Maltese educators in reconciling their views of education and its function for individuals and society? In view of the technocratic-humanist dichotomy that remains as pertinent as ever in the Maltese context, and the foregoing interplay, or lack thereof, between attitudes to inclusion and broader underlying philosophical assumptions, we planned a study to more formally address the following questions. In Maltese state primary school settings:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are educators' general attitudes towards inclusion?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are educators' philosophical orientations in terms of the technocratic-humanistic dilemma?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>: What is the relationship between attitudes to inclusion and philosophical orientation?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>: Across which major factors do attitudes to inclusion and philosophical orientations vary?

## Methodology

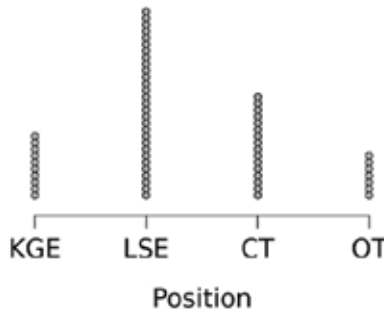
A large state primary school was selected as a case study in Malta, a small island state with its ethical considerations and limitations (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020). For the purpose of inferring from our results, we considered the selected school to be representative of a "typical" large Maltese state school. The study took the form of a survey with a quantitative statistical analysis of data. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board at the Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology (MCAST) and the Research Ethics Committee at the Maltese Ministry of Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) in October 2022.

### **Data Collection**

An online questionnaire was developed and hosted on *Google Forms*. The data collection period lasted from November 2022 to the end of January 2023, during which the questionnaire was circulated among all educators employed at the selected primary school. From a total staff of around 90 educators, a final sample of 10 Kindergarten Educators (KGEs), 29 Learning Support Educators (LSEs), 16 Class Teachers (CTs), and seven Other Teachers (OTs) agreed to participate ( $N = 62$ ). Apart from their position/role, Table 1 presents all remaining independent variables in the study.

**Figure 1**

*Dot Plot for Sample Distribution Across Roles*



**Table 1**

*Independent Variables and Their Levels Of Measurement*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Experience	Scale: Years in role
Education	Ordinal: 4 levels (MQF/EQF Levels 4, 5, 6, 7)
Position	Nominal: 4 levels (KGE, LSE, CT, OT)
Initial training	Nominal: 3 levels (Initial main qualification was; specialised on inclusive education, included inclusive education, did not include inclusive education)
Ongoing training	Nominal: 3 levels (Ever <i>voluntarily</i> attended a short course specialised on inclusive education, ever <i>voluntarily</i> attended a conference or seminar, did not voluntarily attend any ongoing training on inclusive education)

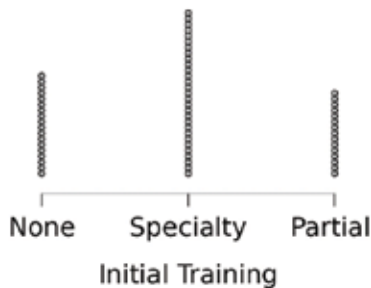
The mean age of the participants was 38.30 years ( $SD = 10.76$ ), with a mean of 14.74 years ( $SD = 9.36$ ) of experience. The data were not normally distributed for experience ( $SW = 0.92, p < .001$ ). The mean MQF/EQF level of education among the sample was 5.68 ( $SD = 0.85$ ), distributed across levels four (8%,  $n = 5$ ), five (31%,  $n = 19$ ), six (42%,  $n = 26$ ), and seven (16%,  $n = 10$ ). Two of the participants

chose not to disclose their education level. A majority (58%), therefore, were educated to Bachelor's level (MQF/EQF level 6) or higher. Sex was omitted as a main variable of interest, particularly given that the vast majority of educators in Maltese primary schools tend to be female. Our interest lay predominantly in modifiable factors, so age and sex/gender were not included in the hypotheses.

In terms of their initial training in inclusive education, the largest proportion (47%,  $n = 29$ ) of educators reported having their main initial qualification specialised in inclusive education, 24% ( $n = 15$ ) reported inclusive education as a component but not the main focus of their initial qualifications, and 29% ( $n = 18$ ) reported having received no notable initial training in inclusive education. In terms of ongoing training undertaken on a *voluntary* basis, 47% ( $n = 29$ ) of the educators reported having attended a short course on inclusive education, 10% ( $n = 6$ ) reported having attended a conference or seminar, while 44% ( $n = 27$ ) reported undergoing no ongoing training in inclusive education.

## Figure 2

*Sample Distribution of Degrees of Initial Training in Inclusive Education*



**Figure 3**

*Sample Distribution of Degrees of Ongoing Training in Inclusive Education*

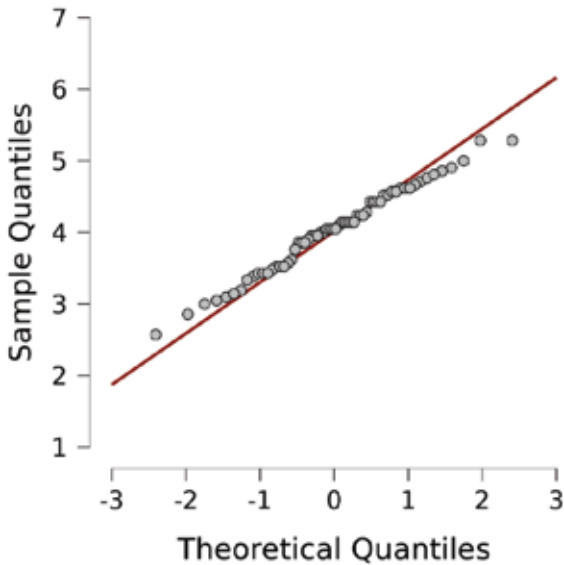


In order to address the main research questions, the dependent variables in the study aimed to measure 1) attitudes towards inclusion, 2) philosophical orientation to education as utilitarian, technocratic, and focused on work and economic development, and 3) philosophical orientation to education as inclusive, progressive, and focused on personal and social development. The latter two constructs were based on Sultana's technocratic-humanistic dilemma as a locally contextualised philosophy of education. For the first construct (attitudes to inclusion), following a review of the literature, we selected the modified Teacher's Attitudes towards Inclusion Scale (*TAIS*) from Boyle (2014). The *TAIS* consists of 21 items accompanied by six-point Likert-style responses ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). Our data yielded good internal consistency for the modified *TAIS* according to Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The overall *TAIS* score was treated as normally distributed, according to the Shapiro-Wilk statistic ( $SW = 0.99, p = .77$ ), and visual inspection of the Q-Q plot.



**Figure 4**

*Q-Q Plot of Normally Distributed Overall TAIS Scores*



For the final two constructs, we designed a short, bespoke six-item scale. Philosophical orientations among educators have been delineated and categorised in the literature in a number of ways. Building on Cheung and Ng (2000) and Cheung and Wong (2002), Jenkins (2009) partitioned “curriculum orientation” among educators according to academic rationalism and humanistic perspectives, which broadly encompassed essentialism and eternalism on the one hand, and reconstructionism and student-centredness on the other. Gezer (2018) similarly defined “philosophical preference” according to perennialism and essentialism as “traditional” (with big P links to idealism and rationalism), and student-centredness, progressivism and reconstructionism as “contemporary” (with big P links to pragmatism).

Sultana’s (1992) discussion of a demarcated technocratic-humanistic philosophical dichotomy drew on the degree of antagonism introduced by sociological conflict theory, since genuine forms of humanistic approaches

to education should be fundamentally emancipatory, and cannot co-exist with an approach to education that seeks to serve and reproduce the status quo. Various scales have been developed to specifically measure the uptake of this specific brand of critical educational theory treated more precisely as critical pedagogy (Pishvaei & Kasaian, 2013; Yilmaz, 2009). Therefore, in an attempt to capture a two-factor model with a capacity to explain orientation to philosophies of education relevant in the local Maltese context with a base in the ideas of critical pedagogy, we created a bespoke 6-item scale, drawing on the work of Yilmaz (2009) for adding the critical aspect. Table 2 shows the items we eventually agreed on to capture the two constructs.

**Table 2**

*Factors Comprising our Contextualised Philosophical Orientation Scale*

**Factor 1**

**Utilitarian education for work and economic development**

Item 2: "Education should be primarily a means of helping learners improve their earning potential."

Item 4: "Education is a means of securing a stable and satisfactory employment."

Item 5: "Education is a means of preserving and enhancing the desired standard of living."

**Factor 2**

**Inclusive education for personal and social development**

Item 1: "Education is a means for personal growth and the acquisition of culturally relevant knowledge."

Item 3: "Education should be equally accessible to all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds or prior experiences."

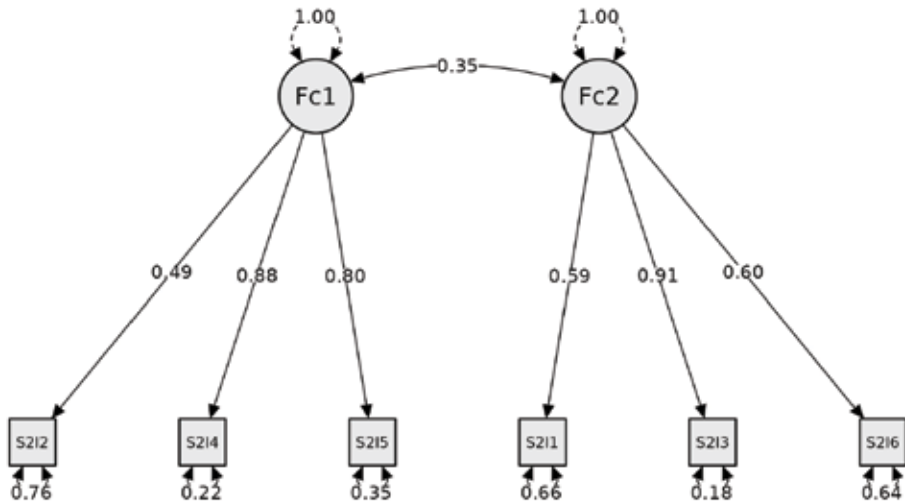
Item 6: "Access to quality education is a fundamental right and must be provided to all members of society."

The statements were devised following substantial discussions by the three authors, drawing on their combined expertise, specifically in early years education, inclusive education, and vocational education. Each statement was accompanied by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. The three items for each construct were averaged to produce an overall measure. We were satisfied with the Comparative Fit Index ( $CFI = .97$ ) yielded by a post hoc confirmatory factor analysis. The two factors were not assumed to be uncorrelated. Figure 5 shows the factor loadings for

our final two-factor model. The data were not normally distributed for both *Fc1* ( $SW = .92, p < .001$ ) and *Fc2* ( $SW = .81, p < .001$ ).

**Figure 5**

*Factor Loading Parameter Estimates for Philosophical Orientation to Education for Work and Economic Development (Fc1), and Education for Life and Social Development (Fc2)*



Based on the main factor descriptors in Table 2, we defined *Fc1* and *Fc2* as “Philosophical orientation to Utilitarian education for Work and Economic development” (*PUWE*) and “Philosophical orientation to Inclusive education for Personal and Social development” (*PIPS*), respectively.

**Data Analysis**

The data were downloaded from Google Forms and sorted using an open-source spreadsheet application running on a Linux operating system. The data were finally imported into JASP (v0.17.1), an open-source statistical analysis software. The “classical” (frequentist) options in JASP were used. To address RQ<sub>1</sub>, concerning general attitudes to inclusion, the descriptive statistics for overall TAIS scores were compiled and presented. We hypothesised (H<sub>1</sub>) that,

given the middle value of the six-point scale was 3.5, the 95% CI did not contain this value. To address RQ<sub>2</sub>, we took the same approach for philosophical orientation, with the only exception that to generalise from the final scores, given their non-normal distributions and original measurement on a five-point scale, we used the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to hypothesise the median was not 3 for both PUWE (H<sub>2</sub>) and PIPS (H<sub>3</sub>).

To differentiate between the two orientations, we also ran a Mann-Whitney test to hypothesise (H<sub>4</sub>) that the means for PUWE and PIPS were not equal. A statistically significant difference between the two constructs would provide some evidence for a technocratic-humanistic dilemma among local educators. To address RQ<sub>3</sub>, concerning the relationship between attitudes about inclusion and philosophical orientation, we hypothesised (H<sub>5</sub>), using Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient, that TAIS and PIPS were correlated. A significant relationship here would support the notion that attitudes to inclusion relate to some deeper underlying orientation towards a fundamentally progressive philosophy of education. To address RQ<sub>4</sub>, concerning the modifiable factors influencing both attitudes to inclusion and philosophical orientations, we tested a range of hypotheses (H<sub>6</sub>, H<sub>7</sub>, H<sub>8</sub>) outlined in Table 3, which also shows the associated statistical procedures selected according to variable types and distributions.

**Table 3**

*Hypotheses and Associated Statistical Procedures Used to Test The Null Hypothesis in each Instance*

	TAIS $y_1$	PUWE $y_2$	PIPS $y_3$
<b>Experience</b>	$x_1$ $H_{6a}$ (Spearman correlation)	$H_{7a}$ (Spearman correlation)	$H_{8a}$ (Spearman correlation)
<b>Position</b>	$x_2$ $H_{6b}$ (ANOVA + Tukey test) [ $F = 0.86, p = .47$ ]	$H_{7b}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)	$H_{8b}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)
<b>Education</b>	$x_3$ $H_{6c}$ (ANOVA + Tukey test) [ $F = .20, p = .90$ ]	$H_{7c}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)	$H_{8c}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)
<b>Initial training</b>	$x_4$ $H_{6d}$ (ANOVA + Tukey test) [ $F = .73, p = .49$ ]	$H_{7d}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)	$H_{8d}$ (Kruskal Wallis + Dunn test)
<b>Ongoing training</b>	$x_5$ $H_{6e}$ (t-test) [ $F = 1.17, p = .32$ ]	$H_{7e}$ (Mann Whitney)	$H_{8e}$ (Mann Whitney)

Note: For ANOVA and the t-test, square brackets contain Levene’s statistic and p values for inferring homoscedasticity as a basic assumption for parametric testing ( $p > .01$ ). The assumption was not met for the remaining hypotheses.

Along with the mean and median for the dependent variables measured on the scale level, we present the standard deviation (SD), interquartile range (IQR), standard error (SE), and 95% confidence intervals (CI). As per social science convention, we set the Alpha level at  $\alpha = .05$ , and the confidence level at 95% for rejecting the null hypothesis and inferring statistical significance, respectively.

## Results

### **Overall Attitudes to Inclusion and Philosophical Orientations**

$RQ_1$  and  $RQ_2$  sought to ascertain what attitudes and orientations, according to our chosen scales, existed in the sample and by extension, what attitudes and orientations could be generalised to the broader population of educators employed in large Maltese state schools.

In terms of general valence, *TAIS* scores were greater than 3.5 according to both the mean and the median. The CIs further suggest, given a lower bound value of 3.89, that the population parameter for attitudes to inclusion was greater than 3.5. These findings support  $H_1$ , or more specifically, they support the claim that educators in Maltese primary schools are generally on board with inclusive education policies and adopt positive attitudes towards inclusion, just like educators elsewhere according to existing research (Emmers et al., 2020; Özokçu, 2018; Subban & Sharma, 2005; Mdikana et al., 2007). In the cases of *PUWE* and *PIPS*, the medians were 4 and 4.67 respectively, indicating general agreement with both philosophical orientations. The Wilcoxon signed rank test provided further evidence that, in both cases ( $H_2$  and  $H_3$ ), the median was not 3 for *PUWE* ( $V = 1823, p < .001$ ) and *PIPS* ( $V = 1891, p < .001$ ). The findings appear to suggest that educators see education both as a route to work and economic

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics for the Main Dependent Variables*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>IQR</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>CI</i>
<i>TAIS y<sub>1</sub></i>	4.04	4.05	0.60	0.99	0.08	3.89, 4.19
<i>PUWE y<sub>2</sub></i>	4.15	4.00	0.62	0.92	0.08	4.00, 4.30
<i>PIPS y<sub>3</sub></i>	4.56	4.67	0.49	1.00	0.06	4.44, 4.68

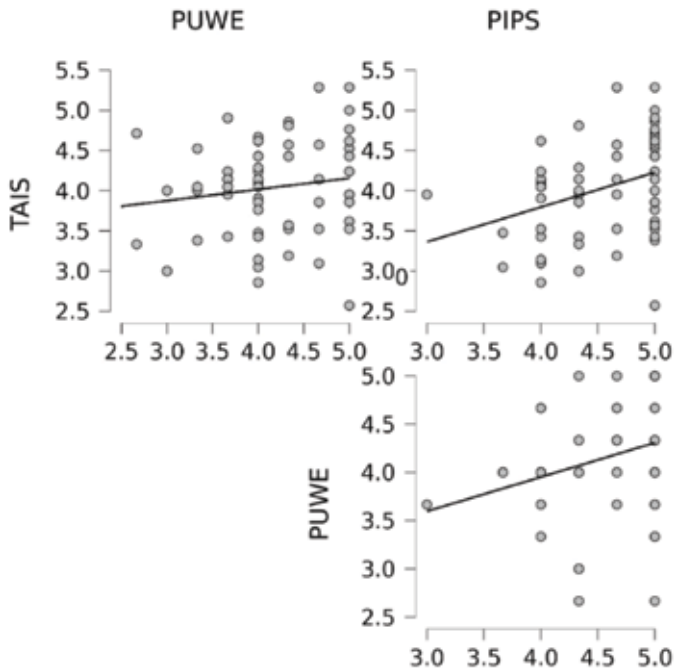
development *and* to personal and social development. However, with respect to  $H_{4t}$ , there was a statistically significant difference between PUWE and PIPS scores ( $U = 2668.50, p < .001$ ). Despite being in agreement with both philosophical orientations, therefore, Maltese primary school educators were more in agreement with education as a means of personal and social development. The effect size according to rank-biserial correlation was relatively mild ( $r_{rb} = 0.39$ ). That educators agree with both, albeit unequally, ultimately lends some general support to the existence of a philosophical "dilemma" (Sultana, 1992).

### ***Relationship Between Attitudes to Inclusion and Philosophical Orientation***

$RQ_3$  sought to explore how attitudes towards inclusion (according to the *TAIS* scores), and philosophical orientation (according to our bespoke scales) were related. A mild but statistically significant association emerged between *TAIS* and *PIPS* ( $r_s = .38, p < .01$ ), whereas no association between *TAIS* and *PUWE* ( $r_s = .14, p = .28$ ) was observed. It is worth noting that a weak correlation also emerged between *PUWE* and *PIPS* ( $r_s = .29, p = .02$ ). These relationships further suggest a lack of antagonism between philosophical orientations in the minds of Maltese primary school educators, signalling, in turn, an absence of influence by critical theories of education, as espoused by Mayo (2021) and Sultana (1994; 1996). In the meantime, according to the correlation coefficient, attitudes to inclusion (as measured by an established, existing scale), only moderately predicted our broader measure of inclusive/progressive philosophical beliefs. Assuming *PIPS* represents a valid measure of a deeper, more underlying philosophical orientation, explicit inclusive policies adopted by the Maltese education system appear to be associated with a progressive philosophical orientation, yet only to a fairly limited degree. Additionally, attitudes towards inclusion do not appear to be associated with a more utilitarian philosophical orientation to education, work, and economic development. In other words, we cannot predict attitudes about education as primarily a route for work, if we know anything about an educator's attitudes toward inclusion or vice versa. If critical pedagogy were an operative factor, we would expect these positions to be antagonistic, represented by an inverse correlation.

**Figure 6**

Scatter Plot Matrix Showing Correlations Among the Main Dependent Variables



### **Factors Affecting Attitudes to Inclusion and Philosophical Orientation**

All hypothesis-testing results related to variations in the three main attitudinal and philosophical outcomes of interest by all the explanatory factors included in the study are combined in Table 5. It is interesting to note that PUWE did not vary significantly according to any of these factors. This suggests that philosophical orientation towards education for work and economic development not only exists among educators in Maltese primary schools (*Median* = 4.15, *V* = 1823, *p* < .001), but is also homogeneous across all groups and factors studied. In other words, Maltese KGEs, LSEs, CTs and OTs are all equally likely to hold such a philosophical view, across all levels of education, all levels of experience, and all types of initial and ongoing training.

**Table 5**

*Results Of All Hypothesis Tests For RQ<sub>4</sub>, As Originally Set Out In Table 3*

	<i>TAIS</i> $y_1$	<i>PUWE</i> $y_2$	<i>PIPS</i> $y_3$
<b>Experience</b> $x_1$	$H_{6a}$ ( $r_s = .21, p = .11$ )	$H_{7a}$ ( $r_s = .20, p = .13$ )	$H_{8a}$ ( $r_s = .13, p = .32$ )
<b>Position</b> $x_2$	$H_{6b}$ ( $F = 3.11, p = .03^*$ )	$H_{7b}$ ( $H = 4.44, p = .22$ )	$H_{8b}$ ( $H = 9.03, p = .03^*$ )
<b>Education</b> $x_3$	$H_{6c}$ ( $F = 3.98, p = .01^*$ )	$H_{7c}$ ( $H = 4.02, p = .26$ )	$H_{8c}$ ( $H = 1.66, p = .65$ )
<b>Initial training</b> $x_4$	$H_{6d}$ ( $F = 4.38, p = .02^*$ )	$H_{7d}$ ( $H = 0.38, p = .83$ )	$H_{8d}$ ( $H = 8.33, p = .02^*$ )
<b>Ongoing training</b> $x_5$	$H_{6e}$ ( $F = 3.45, p = .04^*$ )	$H_{7e}$ ( $H = 2.94, p = .23$ )	$H_{8e}$ ( $H = 0.83, p = .66$ )

Note: \* Significant at the 95% confidence level

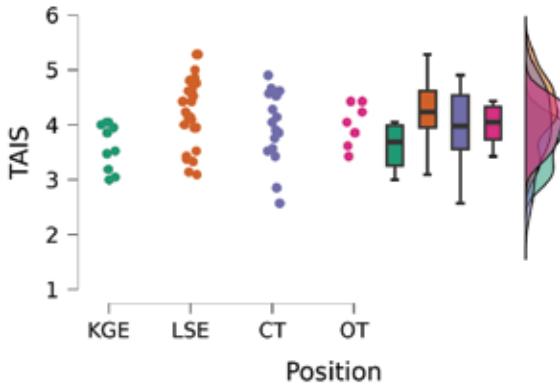
The Spearman rank correlation coefficients showed that experience was not associated with the attitudes and philosophical orientations measured. However, cumulative experience in years was considered without differentiating between positive and negative experiences with children with educational needs. Some studies have posited a positive effect of prior experience on attitudes to inclusion, where such experiences directly involved working with children with educational needs (Ahmmed et al., 2012; Alquraini, 2012; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Unianu, 2012). Kalyva et al. (2007) similarly argued in favour of prior positive experience having an effect on attitudes to inclusion, but were also able to show that experience alone, as our findings corroborate, had no significant effect.

**Table 6**

*Mean TAIS Scores by Position*

<b>Position</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
LSE	29	4.24	0.60	0.11	4.02, 4.45
OT	7	4.01	0.62	0.15	3.72, 4.30
CT	16	3.95	0.49	0.16	3.63, 4.28
KGE	10	3.61	0.49	0.13	3.35, 3.88



**Figure 7***Raincloud Plot for TAIS by Position of Educator*

Position had no effect on *PUWE* scores, but did predict *TAIS* and *PIPS*. For  $H_{\delta b'}$  attitudes to inclusion varied significantly by role ( $F = 3.11, p = .03$ ). Tukey's post hoc test supported the observation of greatest difference specifically between KGEs and LSEs ( $t = -2.96, p = .02$ ), with a mean difference of  $-.62$ . This finding aligns with those reported by Greenway and Rees Edwards (2020), who reported more relatively positive attitudes among UK teaching assistants towards students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

*PIPS* also varied significantly by role ( $H = 9.03, p = .03$ ), with the main difference this time occurring between KGEs and CTs ( $p = .03$ ). It is interesting to note that according to the *TAIS*, which is a more direct measure of attitudes to inclusion, LSEs reported the strongest agreement with inclusion. According to the *PIPS*, however, which sought to measure philosophical orientation more broadly, it was CTs who registered the strongest agreement. This might indicate an increased exposure to big P philosophy among CTs when compared to LSEs.

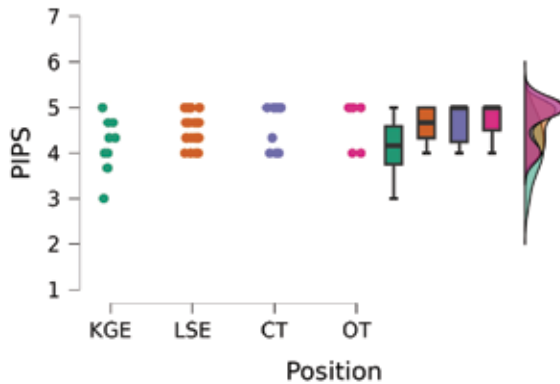
**Table 7**

*Mean PIPS Scores by Position*

<b>Position</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
CT	16	4.71	0.45	0.11	4.49, 4.93
OT	7	4.71	0.49	0.18	4.35, 5.08
LSE	29	4.59	0.40	0.07	4.44, 4.73
KGE	10	4.13	0.59	0.19	3.77, 4.50

**Figure 8**

*Raincloud Plot for PIPS by Position of Educator*



*PUWE* and *PIPS* scores did not vary according to education level. *TAIS* scores, however, did exhibit a statistically significant variation ( $F = 3.98, p = .01$ ). The only significant difference between education level was between MQF/EQF levels 4 (advanced diploma) and 6 (Bachelor's degree), with a mean difference of  $-0.79$ . Hsien et al. (2009) posited that attitudes towards inclusion were positively related to qualification levels among primary school educators. This relationship held to a certain degree in the present study, whereby more positive attitudes to inclusion were reported as education level increased, with level seven (Master's degree) representing the single notable exception to the trend. Perhaps at this level of education, educators become more critical

of overt policy. More research may be needed here, given that international studies have contrarily found more positive attitudes towards inclusion at the Master’s level (Jury et al., 2021; Lindner et al., 2023). The variations in attitudes to inclusion, but not in philosophical orientation, meanwhile appear to suggest that obtaining a Bachelor’s degree does not result in any clear change in philosophical orientation. Still, it does lead to an increased commitment to the ideas that underpin prevailing educational policies. This may point towards a lack of engagement with philosophy at the degree level.

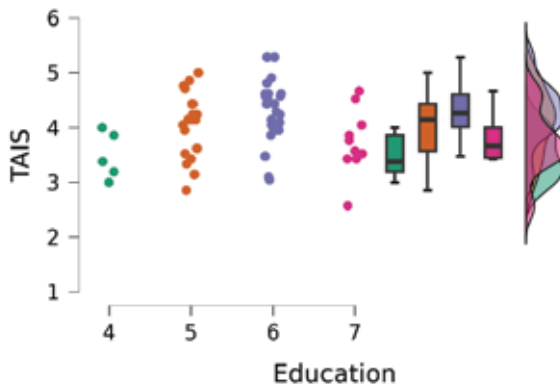
**Table 8**

*Mean TAIS Scores by Education Level*

<b>Education</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
<i>MQF/EQF 6</i>	26	4.27	0.55	0.11	4.49, 4.93
<i>MQF/EQF 5</i>	19	4.04	0.60	0.14	3.77, 4.50
<i>MQF/EQF 7</i>	10	3.74	0.59	0.19	4.35, 5.08
<i>MQF/EQF 4</i>	5	3.49	0.43	0.19	4.44, 4.73

**Figure 9**

*Raincloud Plot for TAIS by Education Level of Educator*



Initial training had an effect on both *TAIS* scores ( $F = 4.38, p = .02$ ) and *PIPS* ( $H = 8.33, p = .02$ ). The main difference ( $-0.51, p = .01$ ) occurred between those reporting no initial training on inclusion, and those whose main qualification was specialised on inclusive education. This supports the claims of Hsien et al. (2009), who specified that qualifications specialised in inclusion yielded more positive attitudes.

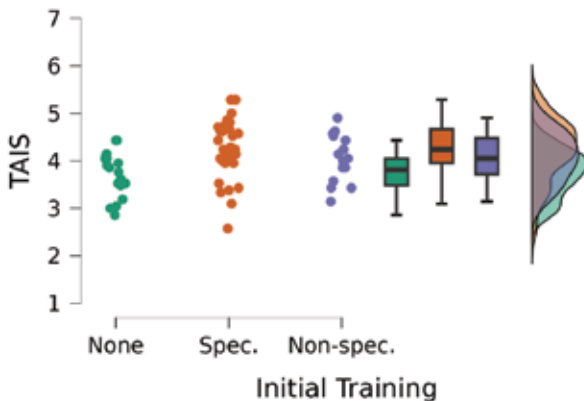
**Table 9**

*Mean TAIS Scores by Initial Training*

<b>Initial Training</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
<i>Specialised</i>	29	4.22	0.65	0.12	3.99, 4.46
<i>Non-specialised</i>	15	4.05	0.51	0.13	3.79, 4.31
<i>None</i>	18	3.72	0.47	0.11	3.50, 3.94

**Figure 10**

*Raincloud Plot for TAIS by Initial Training*



For *PIPS*, the main difference was between no training and non-specialised training ( $p < .01$ ). Specialised and non-specialised training, in this sense, were not significantly different from each other, but both had higher yields than no training at all. The findings cumulatively contradict the views of Alquraini (2012) that initial training had little effect on attitudes to inclusion among educators.

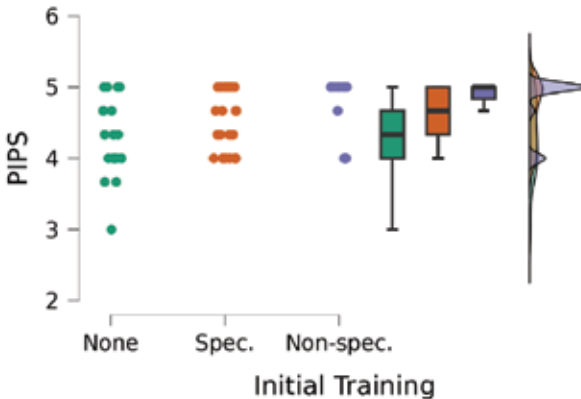
**Table 10**

*Mean PIPS Scores by Initial Training*

<i>Initial Training</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
<i>Non-specialised</i>	15	4.78	0.41	0.11	4.57, 4.99
<i>Specialised</i>	29	4.61	0.41	0.08	4.46, 4.76
<i>None</i>	18	4.30	0.56	0.13	4.04, 4.55

**Figure 11**

*Raincloud Plot for PIPS by Initial Training*



As Seçer (2010) found among educators undergoing in-service training in Turkey, our findings revealed a significant effect ( $F = 3.45, p = .04$ ) of ongoing training on *TAIS* scores. The main discrepancy was between no ongoing training and attending courses ( $p = .04$ ), with a mean difference of  $-0.38$ . Taking into account the lack of variation due to ongoing training in *PUWE* and *PIPS* scores, the findings suggest that ongoing training has some effect on attitudes and assumptions related to prevailing policy, but none on underlying philosophical orientations. If ongoing training is intended to be practical, and to update staff on policies and procedures, then this finding is not unexpected. The onus is thereby placed on initial training to bear the brunt of encouraging educators to engage with philosophy of education. Therefore, more attention should be paid among course coordinators responsible for teacher education and inclusive education courses to promote and encourage engagement with big P educational philosophies.

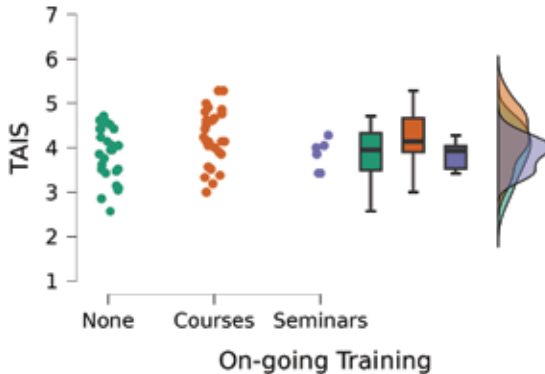
**Table 11**

*Mean TAIS Scores by Ongoing Training*

<b>Ongoing Training</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
Courses	27	4.24	0.61	0.11	4.02, 4.47
None	29	3.86	0.58	0.11	3.64, 4.08
Seminars	6	3.84	0.35	0.14	3.56, 4.12

**Figure 12**

*Raincloud Plot for TAIS by Ongoing Training*



## Discussion

Our exploration of attitudes and philosophical orientations among Maltese state primary school educators toward inclusion provides a lens through which the influence of philosophy on classroom behaviours and practices can be understood, and addresses an important theme in the educational literature. Farquhar & White's (2014) assertion that philosophical orientations impact classroom behaviours is evident in our findings, revealing an interplay between utilitarian and progressive ideas among Maltese educators. The recognition of primary schools as influential spaces for philosophical influence aligns with the broader discourse on the significance of philosophy in shaping educational practices.

The notion of "big P" and "little p" philosophy, highlighted by Makaiau and Miller (2012), finds resonance in our exploration of major shared ideas and idiosyncratic, personalised philosophies among Maltese educators. This study underscores the continuous negotiation and updating of "little p" philosophies through ongoing interactions, aligning with Strout's (2015) perspective on the challenges of observing and matching consistent philosophical influences with teaching styles. While clear traces of big P ideas like idealism, realism, or pragmatism may be challenging to observe in classroom pedagogical practice (Gezer, 2018), our findings illuminate the import of multiple "little p" ideas, adding

complexity to the landscape.

The inclusion of philosophical orientations as a potential factor influencing attitudes toward inclusion resonates with broader discussions on the complex nature of inclusive education. As Bartolo (2010) and Borg and Schembri (2022) highlight, inclusion has long been an explicit feature of the Maltese national agenda. Our study aligns with the call to understand additional factors influencing the relationship between attitudes toward inclusion and classroom practices (Avramidis & Norwich; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). The consideration of philosophy as a factor, as emphasised in our study, invites comparative insights into the broader literature on inclusive education.

Sultana's (1992; 1994) framing of the technocratic/vocational and humanistic divide in Maltese education provides a historical context that remains highly relevant in the face of intensifying neoliberal globalisation. This study draws links between Sultana's prophetic observations on rising consumerism and individualism in Maltese society and evolved forms of hyper-individualism and consumerism associated with neoliberalism (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Whitehead & Crawshaw, 2014).

The absence of critical voices challenging trends towards increasing neoliberal utilitarianism, as noted by Sultana (1992), underscores the importance of measuring philosophical orientations in contemporary settings. Our study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the challenges posed by neoliberal ideologies, linking with broader discussions on the privatisation, marketisation, and competition within education (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Whitehead & Crawshaw, 2014).

## Conclusion

The present study has taken a large Maltese state primary school and treated it as typical. Generalisations about Maltese state primary school educators are made on this basis; however, even in a country as relatively small as Malta, sufficient variation may very well exist to challenge our assertions. More research is needed not only to test the validity of claims about attitudes and assumptions, but also to more clearly and systematically define and measure attitudes and orientations in a manner that is as consistent and faithful to the Maltese historical, cultural and social contexts as is reasonably possible. We invoked the classic and seminal work of Sultana (1992; 1994), arguing



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in favour of its continuing relevance in the broader context of intensifying neoliberal globalisation (Mayo, 2021). More work by educational researchers in discerning local context while taking into account the critical view may permit more substantive and nuanced research on the attitudes and philosophical orientations that shape Maltese educational practice both explicitly and implicitly.

It should be noted that our findings took into account experience only in terms of quantity and not according to quality or type. Avramidis et al. (2000) showed that student teachers in the UK had positive attitudes towards inclusion, but their confidence dropped significantly in proportion to the degree of severity of particular prior difficulties faced by students with education needs in practice. Future studies might, therefore, focus more intently on the influence of prior experiences among Maltese educators in terms of content and type, on their posterior attitudes to inclusion. Furthermore, as a recommendation for future research, we cite Kim (2004), who raised the argument that philosophical education should be directed not only at educators but also at parents. More studies of parental involvement in education are needed, including measurement of their attitudes and assumptions about education more generally.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that state primary school educators juxtapose utilitarian and progressive philosophical ideas about education. General attitudes to inclusion indicate they are on board with the explicit inclusive educational policies in effect in Maltese primary schools. A small but statistically significant increase in preference was directed at a progressive philosophical orientation; however, this was unaccompanied by critical views of utilitarianism. Based on this juxtaposition, as well as the homogeneity of utilitarianism observed across all explanatory factors studied, we argue that there is an overall low level of awareness of critical pedagogy in Maltese primary education. Future studies may seek to measure the uptake of critical theory among Maltese educators in primary as well as other educational settings more directly. Education level, meanwhile, affected attitudes to inclusion but not philosophical orientation, perhaps suggestive of a further lack of engagement with fundamental philosophical ideas at levels where it would otherwise reasonably be expected (MQF/EQF level six or higher). Therefore, we offer the practical recommendation that higher education courses, specifically inclusive education, be more carefully appraised in terms of their philosophical and theoretical content.

If no training is given on inclusive educational practice, either initially or on an ongoing basis, educators appear less likely to exhibit positive attitudes to inclusion. Initial training is more likely to affect deeper underlying philosophical orientation than merely developing a positive attitude towards inclusion. Furthermore, the mild correlation emerging between scores from an existing validated scale for measuring attitudes to inclusion (*TAIS*), and our bespoke philosophical orientation to inclusive education for personal and social development scale (*PUWE-PIPS*), implied a relatively weak translation from overt positive attitudes to inclusion, to any deeper underlying progressive philosophical orientation. Initial training, therefore, stands out as a particularly important opportunity for educators to engage with philosophy of education, as they are less likely, as our findings cumulatively convey, to do so later on in their careers in state primary school settings.

## Notes on Contributors

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