



The Learning Support Zone in a Maltese State Secondary School: a 'Third Space' between Home and School

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Abstract

The Learning Support Zone (LSZ) in the Girls' Secondary School within St Margaret College, Malta was born out of necessity, in turbulent circumstances. It slowly developed from its initial priority of re-socialising adolescent students with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. The focus gradually shifted to the reintegration of these students in the educational mainstream in strict collaboration with their families/carers, and the resumption of their lifelong learning journey. This paper presents and discusses highlights from this journey also through composite case studies which explore the extent to which the LSZ can effectively function as a 'third space' between where the students are residing and the mainstream school. Pertinent strengths and limitations of this approach with special reference to adolescents with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in out-of-home care have been identified. The paper concludes with proposed recommendations based on three years' experience.

Keywords: Education, Learning Support Zone, Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, Out-of-home care

Discourse in Maltese (Cefai, Cooper, & Camilleri 2008; Ministry of Education 1999) and international (Johnston 1998; Cooper 2006) educational theory and policy increasingly suggests that students should be viewed and treated as individuals who due to extensive differences in their biological, psychological and sociological or environmental baggage necessitate varied routes to fulfilling their potential. Yet despite the fact that such beliefs are widely acknowledged by both the academic and the non-academic community (Consultative Committee on Education 1995; Ministry of Education 1999), a vast majority of students in compulsory schooling are in practice still offered the same traditional educational setup in which they are expected, if not forced, to fit. Evident divergences emerge forcefully especially between students who are still struggling to meet their "safety and security needs", if not their "physiological needs" (Maslow, 1943, p. 370-396 – see Table 1) and others who are comfortably working on their "self-esteem" and gradually but steadily moving towards their "self-actualisation" needs.

Inevitably tensions created are manifested in various ways in classrooms. Teachers regularly express their concern that a classroom environment that includes significant disruptive behaviour by the learners is one of the biggest challenges to effective teaching and learning (OECD, 2009). In Malta this reality has become an area of serious concern and contention amongst stakeholders (Sciberras, 2006), due to the significant reduction in stability of societal structures (Ministry for Social Policy 2008; Abela & Tabone 2008) as well as, ironically, the introduction of compulsory schooling systems with far less differentiation than previously in the Maltese Educational System (Grima & Farrugia 2006; Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport 2007).

Table 1
Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943: 370-396)



Since its inception as a pilot school network in 2006, St Margaret College has been at the forefront in exploring ways to address such teacher concerns and student needs, whilst contributing towards the Maltese educational knowledge base. St Margaret College is one of ten networks of secondary and feeder primary schools that together provide the state school service for Malta. Each school is still run by a Head of School and the Senior Management Team, but the entire network or College is led by a College Principal as its Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Colleges enjoy increasing autonomy and legal status, but are still accountable towards the Directorate for Educational Services and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in education, the central service provision and regulatory authorities, within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. Indeed, shortly after the release of a national policy on the subject (Sciberras 2006), the College developed its Good Behaviour Policy in 2007 and soon after set up the first Learning Support Unit (LSU) in Malta, as a service to the Girls' Secondary School within the College.

The first period of operation of the LSU within St Margaret College was reviewed in 2008. This paper gives an overview of the development of the Learning Support Zone (LSZ) that grew out of the original LSU, with a particular focus on the service users who were students in out-of-home care. The relative strengths and limitations of both the LSU and LSZ have been identified through an action research approach and with the help of three composite case studies. The paper ends with recommendations for further research and the development of structures which can facilitate the mediation between traditional educational set-ups and individuals who manifest social emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The Justification for EBD Special Provision

The English, and original, version of the LSU were the Pupil Referral Units (PRU), first set up in the 1996 Education Act, Chapter 56, Section 19. Since then leading academic discourse has shifted increasingly towards inclusion, with ever decreasing references to PRUs in peer-reviewed literature (articles on the peer-reviewed journal *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* that were published from 1996 to date). However in 2001 Jahnukainen was still stating that “full inclusion is still based mainly on ideology, not on scientific evaluation” (2001, p. 162). To a large extent this is still true for Malta.

The literature (such as Pace, 1998, Jahnukainen, 2001, Pigneguy, 2004, Sciberras 2006, and Cooper, 2006) indicates that although whole-school good behaviour policies, preferably with the full contribution of families (see, for example, McDonald & Thomas, 2003) are preferred as prevention mechanism, and although an effective and well-resourced inclusion policy can address many behavioural issues (see, for example, Cole, Visser & Daniels, 1999), there are particular realities where the only viable solution, at least in the immediate term, is the service of a PRU/LSU. As Jahnukainen (2001) argues: “The positive experiences of former EBD pupils show that there could still be a need for this kind of small class intervention, at least for some students in certain phases of their school careers.” (2001, p. 162). Indeed, Head, Kane, and Cogan (2003) indicate that within the overarching context of learners’ entitlement to a full education, it is important to allow secondary schools to develop different behaviour support programmes, which in their study of what works in Scottish schools ranged from PRU-type provision to complete inclusion.

On the other hand, Hill (1997) warns that there may be the temptation of resorting to the LSU in lieu of a strong and well-resourced inclusion policy, perhaps because the latter is costlier. But he also acknowledges that the PRU may be a valuable component of such a policy. Colley (2009) also states that: “Nurture Groups in secondary schools are proving to be highly successful (...) (but) may be required to adapt to the secondary context.” (2009, p. 299). This is confirmed by Cooke, Yeomans, and Parkes (2008). There is, indeed, a lot of similarity between what these authors are referring to and the actual practice of the Learning Support Zone as discussed in this paper.

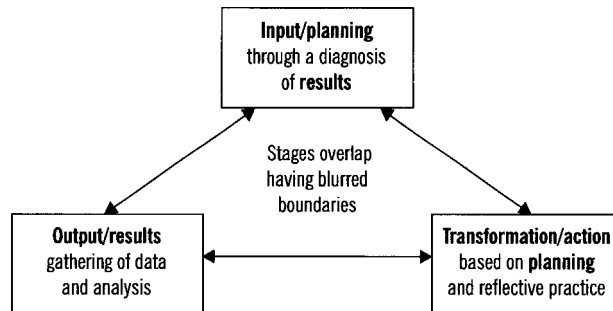
That PRUs need to be very carefully planned is again emphasised by Mainwaring and Hallam (2010); their research indicated that PRU service users tend to have more negative selves and less idea of possible positive futures. This underlines the need for fruitful reintegration to be a central part of the PRU programmes and goal.

Methodology and Timeline

In reviewing the LSU, an action research model was adopted so as to unite theory with practice. Lewin, one of the fathers of action research, defined it as a reflective process of progressive problem solving as part of a community of practice to improve the way they address issues and solve problems” (Lewin, 1946, p. 34-46) (see Table 2). The centrality of action research in professional praxis is highlighted in the National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment, 1999), the legal instrument that gives state direction for compulsory schooling in Malta: “Action research should constitute the fulcrum of curriculum development. (...) Each school should have its own system of action research to monitor the process of curriculum development and propose the necessary amendments” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 86, 105). Our intention was “to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more system-

atically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life” (Kemmis & McTaggart in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2007, p. 297) and in so doing discern the effects of the LSU on its service users and the school community.

Table 2
Action Research Cycle (Lewin, 1946: 34-46)



The timeline in Table 3 illustrates major events in the review of the LSU and development of the LSZ in terms of the Action Research Cycle.

Table 3
Timeline

Time Frame	Description of Stage
2006 – February 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set-up and operation of an autonomous Learning Support Unit located separately from the Girls' Secondary under the direct responsibility of the College Coordinator;
February 2008 – June 2008 Input/Planning – 1st Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination and continuous observation of practices at existing Learning Support Unit (LSU); Development and design of proposals for future implementation by newly appointed College Principal;
September 2008 – January 2009 Transformation/Action – 1st Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointment of a new Learning Support Zone Teacher mostly operating at the Girls' Secondary Main Campus; Initial implementation of proposed Learning Support Zone (LSZ) with enhanced emphasis on integration into mainstream and ongoing observation/reflection;
December 2008 – February 2009 Output/Results – 1st Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gathering of data from reflective practice mostly involving LSU & LSZ staff and Girls' Secondary Senior Management Team;
January 2009 – March 2009 Input/Planning – 2nd Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of current state focusing on strengths and weaknesses, congruence and divergence with proposed development and further planning for improvement;
April 2009 External Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service Manager on LSZs (Student Services Department – Directorate for Educational Services) set up a working-group with representatives from all Colleges, to discuss possible national LSZ guidelines;
April 2009 – June 2009 Transformation/Action – 2nd Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closure of GSS LSU annexed at the Primary School; Introduction of revised services at GSS LSZ;
June 2009 Output/Results – 2nd Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compilation of a detailed report describing process, services, identifying strengths and limitations and proposing recommendations.

The results of our research have been enriched in this paper with three composite case studies of LSU service users who were students in out-of-home care. We felt that these studies would foreground the service users themselves rather than risk situating them as 'objects of study'. However, we have fully taken on board the relevant ethical considerations, given the sensitivity of the subject: no one of the cases illustrated represents a particular student but are composites of various facets from different students. Hence names used are fictitious and are solely intended to benefit the readers' understanding.

The Context

When the review started to be undertaken, the LSU had been in operation for 15 months. It was physically situated about 10 minutes' walk away from the secondary school building itself, within the kindergarten section of the local state primary school and right next door to the Principal's office (see Table 4). This location had been selected partly out of necessity because of space constraints but mainly by design. It was intended to capitalise on the proximity of the Principal, and also to keep a safe but not insurmountable distance between the adolescent girl students referred to the LSU and the secondary school campus itself. The main drive to set up the LSU had been a number of serious clashes between teachers and the students involved, some of which had landed some students in court, and had also led to a strong adversarial situation.

Table 4

The Learning Support Unit at Inception

<p>St. Margaret College Girls' Secondary School</p>
<p>Learning Support Unit (LSU) 15 minutes away from Main School Campus</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom – equipped with 3 PCs and basic necessities for formal teaching; • Multi-purpose room – having a home-like environment including an equipped kitchenette, 2 sofas and dining/activity table used for more informal activities and relaxation;
<p>LSU Staff: 2 LSC Teachers LSC Learning Support Assistant Learning Support Assistant 1-1 with a specific student</p>

The LSU catered at first for five girls who at the time of entry were aged 11 to 14 – others joined later on. It was immediately striking that most service users were young persons in out-of-home care. The Unit was staffed by two teachers and two Learning Support Assistants. The learning programme was built around the students' individual learning plans, updated by regular monthly case conferences that included the LSU staff, social workers and/or probation officers assigned to the service users, parents or carers and the school guidance teacher who acted as liaison to the school.

The pedagogies and strategies adopted at the LSU included:

- Promotion of appropriate social behaviour and cultivation of healthy interpersonal relationships through:

- Setting and monitoring of specific behavioural targets;
- Use of contact book with guardian/legal guardian for ensuring a more coherent approach;
- Group/individual discussions on personal and social attitudes and behaviours;
- Preparation and consumption of breakfast as a community;
- Community work with the inmates in a neighbouring Home for the Elderly;
- Teamwork projects facilitated by Youth Worker;
- Regular review of progress made.
- Development of an Alternative Curriculum:
 - Basic Skills lessons in Maltese, English and Mathematics;
 - Hands-On Activities – various Crafts, Needlework and Cookery;
 - Application of subject content in real life situations – example: budgeting, use of money at the market, use of measurements in needlework (mm, cm...) or cookery (ml, kg...), reading and writing of recipes, etc...
- Educational and Leisure Outings:
 - Appreciation of surrounding environment;
 - Nurturing a healthy lifestyle.

Table 5
Interim LDZ Set up

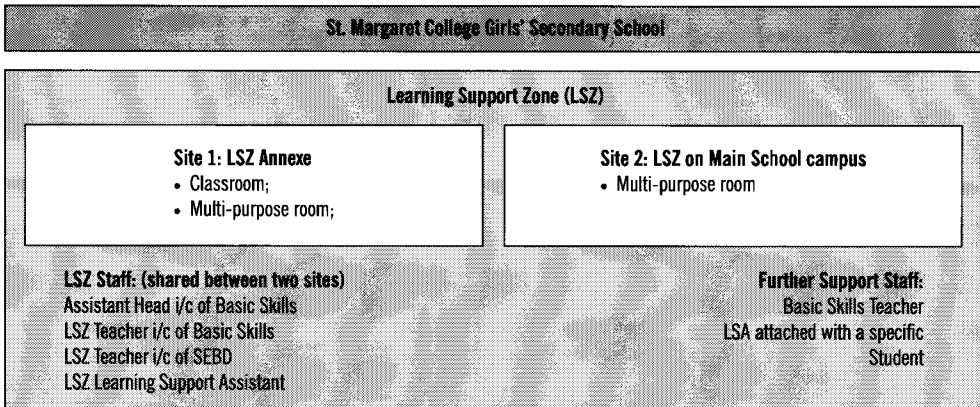
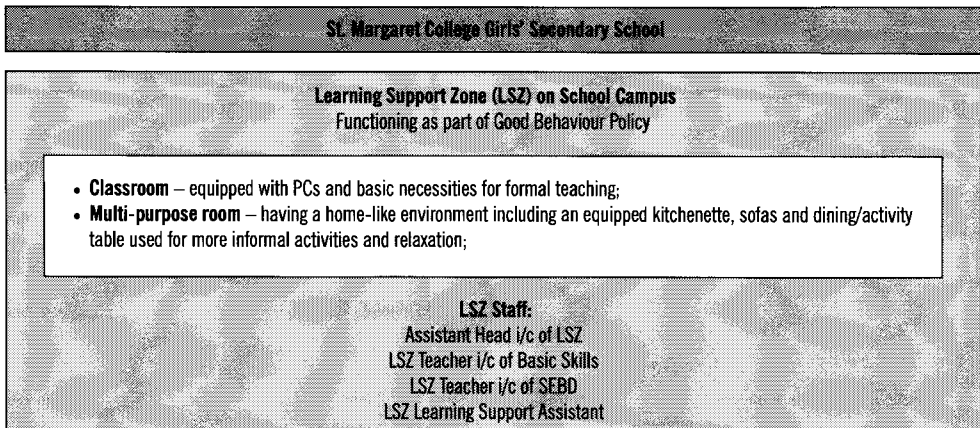


Table 6
LSZ Set up



In order to address the limitations of the LSU (discussed in the Findings), which increasingly became evident whilst reviewing its operation, the shift to an LSZ was proposed and introduced gradually. The shift in structure is illustrated in Tables 5 and 6. Site 1 in Table 5, the LSZ Annex, is the original LSU situated minutes away from the secondary school, whereas Site 2 is the actual LSZ on the main campus. The eventual LSZ (Table 6) differed mostly from the LSU in that it was situated within the Girls' Secondary and was geared towards reintegration rather than seclusion.

Specifically, in addition to the functions of the LSU, the LSZ was intended to:

- “Help identified students with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties to meet their potential.
- Support Staff that work with challenging pupils.
- Contribute to the reduction of both fixed term and permanent exclusions.
- Re-integrate students into mainstream lessons.”

M.Ed. SEBD Group (2007, p. 15)

Composite Case Studies

The following portrayal of students' composite case studies facilitates a better understanding of specific issues. The anonymity of the girls has been safeguarded by merging multiple life stories into three fictitious girls: Ann, Sue and Jane. The common factors amongst these students are that they all receive out-of-home care and have suffered forms of abuse to varying degrees. Each case study gives a cross-sectional account at a particular point in time and is divided into three distinct parts: Who is ...? – What was ...'s experience at school? – What were the student's challenges and achievements?

Ann

Who is Ann? In April 2009, Ann was 15 years old and was completing Form 5, her final year of formal schooling. Throughout her childhood, she had suffered severe forms of emotional and physical and neglect. This led to her being protected by a care order at a very young age and for her to live in different residential homes. Ann had very little contact with her father who lived abroad, whereas her mother, who lived in Malta with a partner and another daughter, refused to have a relationship with her after a series of events. As a result of repeated and escalating challenging behaviour at her residential home, Ann was admitted and given care at the local mental health institution more than once and was regularly followed by a consultant psychiatrist.

What was Ann's experience at school? When Ann was enrolled at St Margaret College Girls' Secondary School in early 2007 she had been transferred from two state secondary schools as a result of the challenging behaviour she regularly exhibited. In the process she had missed more than a whole scholastic year (Form 2 and part of Form 3). Her enrolment at St Margaret College Girls' Secondary coincided with the introduction of the LSU. The LSU was Ann's entry point to the school, and she spent there more than a year (Form 3 & part of Form 4; 2007-2008) completely withdrawn from mainstream students, except for very rare occasions. From March 2008 until June of the same year, Ann started a process of gradual integration into the mainstream. As from September 2008, Ann was completely integrated into the mainstream at Form 5 level supported by LSZ staff on the school premises.

What were Ann's challenges and achievements? Ann's past experiences and erratic behaviour made gaining reciprocal trust a very delicate and slow process which was easily undermined by minor incidents. She managed to establish genuine relationships only with a couple of educators and nonetheless, Ann occasionally still misused the trust given. The extensive period of complete withdrawal from the mainstream to a separate site, forged allegiance to a minority group, led to institutionalisation and hindered mainstream integration. Indeed, in 1995 Bunting and McConnell were already pointing out the potential dangers of institutionalization: "It would seem too that many pupils, having experienced the atmosphere of the special school and units (smaller, less pressure, more tolerance), do not wish to return to the mainstream." (1995, p. 217) Ann's inclusion into the former Learning Support Unit further reinforced labelling by the school's community and the limited pool of expertise at LSU restricted the student's potential. On the other hand, being part of a small group at the LSU encouraged and enabled the individual attention necessary in Ann's case. The initial resistance to mainstream integration by the student herself was manifested in defiant behaviour.

Since Ann belonged to a minority which was raising eyebrows amongst members of the school community, her behaviour was scrutinised more. Hence any inappropriate behaviour she exhibited at the mainstream school led to an increased risk of further labelling, emulation of such behaviour by other students and lack of credibility in the service provided by LSU and eventually the Learning Support Zone. The differences amongst practitioners' approaches or strategies to resolving critical situations occasionally also led to tensions between professionals.

Although Ann pertained to the average ability range and stood a reasonable chance of acquiring formal academic certification, her lack of stability amongst other variables meant that she found it difficult to engage in academic work, resulting in poor academic achievement. However, the support and flexibility of the LSU/LSZ programme assisted Ann to complete her formal schooling as required by law. In the process Ann was also offered opportunities for intra/interpersonal growth and active reflection on a possible and attainable better future.

Sue

Who is Sue? When collating this review, Sue was 14 years old and was voluntarily repeating Form 3. Sue had suffered severe forms of emotional, physical and sexual abuse throughout her childhood and adolescence. In order to protect Sue from further harm, she was taken under care order and lived in a residential home. She had been allegedly led to prostitution by relatives, at a very early age. However, Sue maintained regular supervised contact with her relatives, not necessarily her mother or father, and occasionally had permission for unsupervised stays at her natural home. As a result of uncontrollable behaviour, Sue had also been given care at the local mental health institution for a period of time and was regularly followed by a Consultant Psychiatrist after her discharge. Due to her extreme lifestyle, Sue had been arraigned in Court for loitering and possession of illicit substances. Subsequently she was also admitted to the Young Offenders Rehabilitation Section (YORS – Corradino Corrective Facilities) for a short period at a very young age.

What was Sue's experience at school? Sue had been transferred from a State Secondary School following a request made by her residential social worker and having missed the previous scholastic year (Form 3) she voluntarily enrolled with St Margaret College Girls' Secondary School at Form 3 level in September 2008. In line with her individual learning programme, which recognised Sue's potential, she had minimal complete withdrawal from the mainstream at LSU Annexe (former LSU). As early as mid October 2008, Sue had started a gradual integration into mainstream following a structured programme, negotiated with her and outlined in her

Individual Learning Plan (ILP). The process of Sue's integration had to be slowed down since the student had been missing from school whilst under care at the mental health institution. However, by April 2009, she had started catching up with her ILP and was moving towards full supported integration in the mainstream by the end of the scholastic year.

What were Sue's challenges and achievements? The exposure to extreme experiences and to psycho-social services from an early age taught Sue manipulative techniques which hindered reciprocal trust especially at the early stages. Sue's implied or exhibited 'malicious' behaviour tended to cause educators to interact with a defensive attitude, resisting the formation of genuine relationships. She often manifested a 'dual' personality; from raging verbal aggression to sincere joy exposing the child who still lived within her. Her initial resistance to complying with established boundaries gradually decreased also thanks to motives which went beyond schooling. Although Sue had an evident above average cognitive ability, her achievement was restrained by irregular attendance and inconsistent effort or engagement. Engrained values and attitudes occasionally surfaced both consciously and unconsciously. Of concern was the fact that Sue was often noticed handling considerable amounts of money or expensive items of dubious origins. The fact that Sue had never been completely withdrawn from the mainstream facilitated her gradual integration. Moreover the design and implementation of her ILP proved valuable. However the involvement of various professionals and the continuous updating process that was used to reflect contingent circumstances was significantly time consuming.

Jane

Who is Jane? Jane at 13 years old was, as expected at her age, at Form 3 level. She had suffered severe forms of emotional abuse and physical neglect throughout her life and to varying extents she was still exposed to such abuse. Although Jane was still under the protection of a care order which was issued when she was very young, she wasn't living in residential care any longer for a multitude of reasons. Jane had periodically kept regular contact with her birth parents and siblings. Notwithstanding the care order she also lived for a relatively short period of time with them following the uncertainties raised on her residential service provision. Jane had been given care at the local Mental Health Institution more than once and was regularly followed by a consultant psychiatrist. Having been assessed and diagnosed as having emotional disorders at an early age she was assigned a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) at school.

What was Jane's experience at school? In September 2006 Jane was admitted to St Margaret College Girls' Secondary School at Form 1 (entry level in secondary school) and immediately started exhibiting excessively challenging behaviour. Although she had a full time LSA to support her, she often escalated to unacceptable levels of verbal and occasionally physical aggression. The traditional disciplinary procedures adopted gave no positive results and this led to Jane's inclusion in the LSU. There she spent more than a year completely withdrawn from the mainstream (part of Form 1 + part of Form 2). Following marked progress, Jane had started a gradual integration into the mainstream during the 2nd and 3rd Terms of the 2007/2008 scholastic year (Form 2). However, although Jane was given full support by LSZ staff and the school's administration, her full integration into the mainstream (Form 3) presented extensive difficulties.

What were Jane's challenges and achievements? In a desperate search for love and attachment, as soon as Jane met adults who could offer some form of security and showed genuine interest in her, she soon built hopes of a potential foster family – often expressing a direct request for adoption. Cycles of continuous disillusionment both from birth parents and from vain hopes on other adults, emphasised the sense of instability and loneliness which were eventually mani-

fested in escalated rebellious behaviour. The period during which Jane seemed to be successfully integrating into the mainstream and gradually progressing both socially and academically, was marked by a sense of acceptance of her birth parents' limitations and an attachment with her residential social workers. Sudden changes at her residential home, for which she wasn't emotionally prepared, proved to be psychologically devastating and her behaviour drastically regressed overnight. Jane's personal and academic improvements achieved over a considerable period of time were quickly lost. Due to past experiences, planned changes regarding Jane's integration into the mainstream which were being gradually implemented were negatively interpreted by the student. Moreover her frequent, excessively rebellious behaviour once again led to various problems at school both with other students and staff members. This induced a sense of disappointment and failure amongst the educators involved. It was remarked that the lack of monitoring by central authorities to guarantee properly resourced residential support services (especially in terms of trained professionals with sound values) further aggravated Jane's emotional stability.

General Findings

By the time of the review the LSU had been very successful in acculturating the students involved to school patterns and discipline, as the preceding composite case studies indicate. Temper tantrums, initially a daily occurrence, had become few and far between, and the Unit staff had built excellent relationships with the students and very good working relationships with parents and other stakeholders involved. The students involved had achieved significant academic gains: some had mastered core literacy and numeracy competencies which had been missing previously. Two students had been identified as having the potential to proceed beyond the basic skills level and possibly reach 'O' level standard. Teachers from the secondary school in these subjects had been approached to give extra lessons to the two students concerned, so as to facilitate academic mainstreaming in these subjects. Perhaps most importantly, all five students had started to go back to the main school campus, and were in the process of being reintegrated into the mainstream girls' secondary school on a full-week or partial-week basis – with varied success.

However, the LSU did have its limitations. Indeed, it suffered from the shortcomings that Sciberras (2006) had indicated as possible limitations to such set-ups:

- Inability of permanent staff to provide higher level instruction beyond core competencies;
- Tendency for a 'softer', watered down curricular experience;
- Impaired communication and continuity with mainstream school provision. Indeed, although the guidance teacher had a nominal liaison role, the LSU was for all intents and purposes a separate educational entity, and its staff felt allegiance to the Principal rather than to the secondary school head;
- Not surprisingly, there was a resulting lack of 'ownership' by the mainstream secondary school of the LSU students' educational development, as indicated by Sherbourne (1998). The LSU students were effectively excluded from the school's educational concerns, and the LSU did not even feature in the school's budget;
- There were therefore real difficulties in reintegration; for one thing, the physical distance between the school and the Unit did not help. The school was not prepared to handle or process the LSU students' presence, and old memories and mutual resentments tended to resurface, such that the behaviour of reintegrated students tended to regress;
- There was also a real danger of 'institutionalisation': some of the LSU students felt more comfortable at the protected and less academically challenging LSU, and found it quite difficult to master the will to attempt successful reintegration.

The dilemma that the LSU review revealed is summed up well by Sciberras (2006):

“A major debate when addressing the needs of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties is whether to offer educational provision within a mainstream set up or within a special school set up. Inclusion or segregation – mainstream or out of school programmes?”

Sciberras, M. (2006, p. 11)

From a wider perspective, a major deficiency with the LSU model was that it was wholly reactive and remedial in nature. It did not include components that in some way helped to prevent the occurrence of behaviour and teacher-student clashes that had necessitated the setting up of the LSU in the first place. Moreover, it was not part of a wider School or College strategy promoting good behaviour.

A proposed Good Behaviour Strategy and the setting up of a Learning Support Zone for the whole College were partly devised to address these limitations. The set-up of the Zone was by definition a transitional one, in that it would have to be adapted and changed according to experience and the availability of resources to the College. However for the purposes of this paper, only issues related to the operation of the LSU and LSZ shall be discussed.

“When one analyses international practice, the most effective way forward seems to be a combination of services catered according the needs of the student. The majority of input should always be within the school and the absolute majority of students manifesting challenging behaviour can be offered effective educational programmes within the school.”

Sciberras, M. (2006, p. 11)

In congruence with Sciberras (2006), the ‘old’ LSU was gradually shut down and replaced by an on-site LSZ. This process approximately spanned over an entire scholastic year and was intended to be sensitive towards both service users and staff members. LSZ staff in turn also took time to explain to mainstream staff how to make effective use of the LSZ services, how these could lead to a better classroom environment and the prospective mainstreaming of student service users as long as there was ongoing cooperation and coordination with mainstream staff. Each referred student had an Individual Learning Programme (ILP) that included ways how mainstream teachers could facilitate the student’s inclusion in learning with their respective classes.

ILP strategies included:

- in-class support;
- check-in strategies to maintain contact with LSZ staff throughout the school day whilst remaining in the mainstream classroom;
- time-out protocols;
- pull-out and special classes as necessary;
- tailor-made curricular offerings centred around service users’ needs and interests;
- specific confidence-building educational activities.

The Learning Support Zone also offered its service to and with the mainstream members of staff in the form of:

- Promotion of an inclusive community;
- Promotion of a Good Behaviour Policy;
- Consultative meetings for situation analysis and compilation of Individual Learning Programmes;
- Meetings for facilitation of student’s integration with particular attention to initial stages;
- Monitoring students’ ability in relation with setting especially Basic Skills’ groups;
- Further duties within the Learning Support Zone:

- Continuous internal evaluation and development of LSZ programmes – in respect of Action Research Cycle;
- Regular Case Conferences with stakeholders, on each student who is being closely followed by LSZ;
- Weekly Team meetings;
- Maintaining contact books;
- Cultivating healthy and productive working relationships with various individuals (students' parents, relatives or guardians), and professionals (namely; university students, carers, social workers, nurses, youth workers, educationists, psychologists and psychiatrists) representing various entities.

Summing up the findings, the following strengths and limitations of the LSZ have been noted:

Strengths of the LSZ:

- the focus was the student's needs;
- the LSZ provided flexible, values-oriented learning experiences for its services users;
- highly flexible approach was used that was free from the restrictions of extensive syllabi, enables addressing behavioural issues;
- therefore, a more individual attention could be given, hence the service users felt respected and valued as individuals;
- it was an intense learning experience for all involved, characterised by enhanced relationships with students and a greater sense of belonging by them;
- The LSZ successfully supported mainstream class teachers, and risks of major crisis within mainstream learning activities were reduced;
- there was regular, structured communication with stakeholders involved, including parents/legal guardians, social workers and various other professionals; and
- the LSZ provided an educational opportunity for marginalised students who would otherwise risk becoming long-term absentees.

Limitations and weaknesses of the LSZ:

- the transitory split site offered extensive limitations related with: sharing of staff, mobility, team-building & consistency of strategies, communication, and true inclusion as part of the mainstream school;
- the total withdrawal from mainstream school for an extensive period hindered a prospective reintegration due to limitation of the student's potential and institutionalisation, hence feeling safer and preferring its setup rather than that of the mainstream;
- the adapted curriculum had to fit into the traditional school set-up and timetable for effective implementation, hence offering extensive limitations;
- fallacious perceptions of preferential treatment and inequalities amongst students, which tended to pervade the school community were subtle and not always easy to address;
- mainstream teachers' expectations were not always congruent with LSZ's vision of inclusion – the cultural change required builds up very slowly;
- there was evidence of tendencies to abdicate responsibility by the mainstream staff and allusions to a 'sin-bin' mentality;
- students' unstable social structures hindered performance;
- inconsistent student behavioural patterns and impulsive attitudes undermined service's credibility;
- service provision is very time-consuming – most non-contact work was done after school hours relying on staff members' goodwill;
- the service could only cater for a very limited number of students who necessitated intensive support; and
- there was insufficient training for staff in this specific field and an extensive need of resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Children who suffer from an unmet need for love tend to manifest defiant behaviour (Cooper 2006). Society is likely to interpret such behaviours as a malfunction of the individual, when in fact it is a natural reaction to rejection and consistent disillusionment. Notwithstanding the challenges, it is our duty to guarantee everyone's human right for education. Traditional approaches to education either ignore Maslow's (1943) studies, expecting the individual to seek achievement prior to having met basic needs, or segregating such individuals as a harm reduction strategy in the 'best interest' of the rest. As educators, we have moral, civic and professional responsibilities, to promote the acceptance of all individuals, create structures and approaches which are as inclusive as possible and genuinely attempt to address and meet the individual's needs.

This paper gave a general overview of an approach to behaviour management that was still very much a work-in-progress at the time when the data was compiled. Results gathered from this experience were still being analysed and proposed developments were being considered and implemented. The Learning Support Zone experience in St Margaret College has indicated that once:

- the logic of reintegration is clearly at the heart of its operations and its expected outcome, and
- it includes all stakeholders and is part of an overarching behaviour support programme,
- it can become a tool which educators and educational institutions can adopt to assist them to fulfil their responsibilities towards these vulnerable learners.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that such a strategy could only have been possible because of the networking nature of the College, which itself made possible the bringing together of resources and expertise in ways not possible prior to the setting up of the College structure of compulsory education in Malta, enabled by the 2006 Education (Amendments) Act.

“Effective educational provision and effective teachers work with an awareness of the tensions that are created by external social forces, and make their key priority the identification and meeting of students' individual needs.”

Cooper, P. (2006, p. 51)

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