

Applying a SWOT Analysis to Inform the Educational Provision of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract : Introduction: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has become recognized as being the most common childhood neurological condition. Indeed, numerous studies demonstrate an increase in the prevalence rate of children diagnosed with ASD. Concurrent with these findings, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education reported a similar escalating tendency in prevalence also in Malta. Such an increase within the educational context in Malta has led the European Agency to call for increased support within educational settings in Malta. However, although research has addressed the positive impact of mainstream education on learners with ASD, empirical studies vis-à-vis the internal and external strengths and weaknesses present within the support provided in mainstream settings in Malta is distinctly limited. In light of the aforementioned argument, Malta would benefit from research which focuses on analysing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs) which are present within the support provision of learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools. Such SWOT analysis is crucial as lack of appropriate opportunities might jeopardize the educational and social experiences of persons with ASD throughout their schooling. Methodology: A mixed methodological approach would be well suited to examine the provision of support of learners with ASD as the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches allows researchers to collect a comprehensive range of data and validate their results. Hence, it is intended that questionnaires will be distributed to all the stakeholders involved so as to acquire a broader perspective to be collected from a wider group who provide support to students with ASD across schools in Malta. Moreover, the use of a qualitative approach in the form of interviews with a sample group will be implemented. Such an approach will be considered as it would potentially allow the researcher to gather an in-depth perspective vis-à-vis to the nature of the services which are currently provided to learners with ASD. The intentions of the study: Through the analysis of the data collected vis-à-vis to the SWOTs within the provision of support of learners with ASD it is intended that; i) a description in regards to the educational provision for learners with ASD within mainstream primary schools in Malta in light of the experiences and perceptions of the stakeholders involved will be acquired; ii) an analysis of the SWOTs which exist within the services for learners with ASD in primary state schools in Malta is carried out and iii) based on the SWOT analysis, recommendations that can lead to improvements in practice in the field of ASD in Malta and beyond will be provided. Conclusion: Due to the heterogeneity of individuals with ASD which spans across several deficits related to the social communication and interaction domain and also across areas linked to restricted, repetitive behavioural patterns, educational settings need to alter their standards according to the needs of their students. Thus, the standards established by schools throughout prior phases do not remain applicable forever, and therefore these need to be reviewed periodically in accordance with the diversities and the necessities of their learners.

Keywords : autism spectrum disorders, mainstream educational settings, provision of support, SWOT analysis

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