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Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties in Maltese Primary Schools

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Abstract

This paper presents the result of a national study on social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) in Maltese schools, the first one of the kind in Malta. The study made use of ten percent of the school population in over one hundred state and non-state primary and secondary schools in Malta and Gozo, with seven thousand pupils, their parents and teachers selected to participate in the study. It sought to explore the nature and distribution of SEBD in Maltese schools, examine the relationships between SEBD and socio-cultural factors as reflected in the school, family and community contexts, and identify the risk and protective factors for SEBD. This paper presents the key findings of the study in primary schools, and makes various recommendations in the prevention and management of SEBD and the promotion of socio-emotional literacy in primary schools. A key message is the complexity and multifacetedness of this phenomenon, and the need for early, multisystemic interventions.

Keywords: SEBD Malta, primary school, risk factors, socio-cultural factors

Introduction

Social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) in schools are becoming an increasing cause of concern in many countries (Cooper et al, 2000; Soles et al, 2008; Smeets, 2009). At best SEBD is a loose umbrella term encompassing behaviors and expressions of emotion among school pupils which are experienced by adults and pupils as disruptive and/or disturbing. The breadth of this term allows for considerable subjectivity in definition and variation in its use (Cooper, Smith and Upton, 1994). Having said this, we argue that the most useful working definitions of SEBD draw on established psychological and psychiatric theories of behavioural and emotional disturbance, as well as sociological theories of deviance and disaffection. SEBD can sometimes be understood in relation to biological and/or psychological factors, and are always subject to social influences. Individual cases of SEBD are, therefore, best understood in terms of the social and interpersonal contexts in which the person operates and the ways in which these interact with relevant individual factors, which may be biological, and/or social/emotional, and /or attitudinal. The term SEBD, as used in this paper, refers to social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties which interfere with the child's learning, social functioning and development and/or that of his or her peers, and which necessitate some form of additional support to address the needs emanating from these difficulties (cf. Cefai and Cooper, 2006).

Although the prevalence of SEBD is higher in secondary schools, there is a concern about the increasing incidence of such difficulties in primary schools. While presently there are more difficulties in secondary schools, such difficulties are starting earlier in primary school with a greater rate of increase in the early and junior primary years (Cooper, 2006, Rose et al al, 2009). This pattern is a cause for increasing concern as the onset of SEBD at an early age is a predictor of social and academic difficulties in adolescence (Rose et al, 2009). Farrell and Polat (2003) argue that while children who are formally identified by local educational authorities as having SEBD tend to be nine years old or older, it is clear that many of these children have been identified as having such problems well before they are formally assessed, as early as the first year in the primary school. This underlines the need for early identification and consequent early intervention of SEBD before difficulties become more serious and entrenched in the children's behaviour patterns (Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder, 2005; Soles et al. 2008, Farrell and Humphrey, 2009).

Clearly, understanding and establishing the nature, distribution and aetiology of social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) in school as early as possible in the pupils' lives, is instrumental in developing and implementing effective policies and interventions to address the needs of such pupils. The absence of epidemiological data on the nature and distribution of SEBD in Maltese schools, thus constituted a barrier to developing effective early responses to such difficulties In view of this situation, the authors undertook a national study of social, emotional and behaviour difficulties in Maltese schools. The objectives were to examine the nature and distribution of pupils with SEBD in primary and secondary schools in Malta; to explore the relationships between the nature and distribution of SEBD and socio-cultural factors as reflected in the school context and family/community factors; and to identify the associated protective and risk factors for SEBD. This was a large scale study (see Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri 2008) and in this paper we focus on the prevalence of SEBD in primary school and the various social and educational correlates of these difficulties.

Methodology

The sample in this study constituted ten per cent of the entire school population in the country, thus having one of the largest and most representative data sets in international research since the Isle of Wight Study in the 1960s (Rutter 1971). A random sample of approximately 7000 pupils was stratified mainly by school type, region and level, with comparable number of male and female students for each age group. In a multistage sampling procedure, 69 primary schools and 44 secondary schools were selected, providing a proportional representation of the school population by school type and region. Cluster sampling was used to choose classes within the selected schools; however, for small schools all the classes were included. Random sampling was then used to choose pupils within the selected classes. The primary school sample consisted of 1626 male pupils and 1754 female pupils attending 69 state and non state schools. The parents, teachers and Heads of school of the selected pupils were also asked to participate in the study by providing essential information about the pupil, classroom, school and home backgrounds.

A Maltese revised version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 1997), developed by the authors in consultation with Robert Goodman specifically for the current study, was used as a measure of the pupils' levels of social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. The SDQ is a brief questionnaire which has been used by many researchers as a screening tool to measure social, emotional and behaviour difficulties and identifies the prevalence of mental health difficulties among children and young people. It comprises four difficulty subscales, measuring emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems and peer difficulties respectively. It also includes a fifth subscale measuring pro-social behaviour. In addition, the instrument contains an 'impact supplement' which enables the reportee to indicate the perceived level of 'burden' associated with the norm referenced difficulties score.

The parent and teacher SDQ versions were used in the study. The Maltese versions were developed through a process of forward and backward translations and then piloted with a number of teachers, parents and students. A content validity of the Maltese version, gave Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranging from 0.713 to 0.893 on the five subscales for the teacher and parent scales, suggesting a satisfactory level of content validity. A reliability value of 0.799 was achieved, using the split half method. Moreover, the reliability of the Maltese version was measured item by item using Cronbach's Alpha, with results ranging from 0.657 to 0.920. A test-retest measure, based on the teacher version, compared the teacher responses on a random sample of over 700 pupils selected from the whole study sample, with their (teacher) original responses over an extended period of time, obtained positive and significant correlations greater than 0.7.

A further objective of the study was to explore the relationship between SEBD and a number of individual, classroom, school and home variables. A set of supplementary questionnaires was constructed to collect essential information about these variables. These had to be completed by teachers, parents and Heads of school respectively. The list of variables included the following:

- Individual variables (age, gender, mother language, home region, attainment, attendance, ethnicity, religion, communication, formal assessment, diagnosis, type of support received).

- Classroom and teacher variables (classroom size and space, streaming, teacher experience and qualifications).

- School variables (type of school, region, size, space, staff complement).
- Home variables (parental education and occupation, family size and structure, income, house space and ownership).

From the 3380 questionnaires posted to the parents of primary school students, 1946 (57.6%) completed questionnaires were returned.. A total of 2703 (79.9%) of the questionnaires were returned by the teachers, while 52 out of 69 Heads of school completed their respective questionnaires. Hypothesis testing was carried out via the One-way ANOVA and Chi-Square tests; for both tests a 0.05 level of significance was employed. Generalized Linear Regression models were used to identify the significant predictors of SEBD by analyzing the variables collectively as main effects.

Findings

Prevalence

The teacher version of SDQ Impact Supplement was used to determine the prevalence rate of SEBD in Maltese schools (Goodman 1999). The Impact Supplement included three items on overall distress and social impairment, measuring the severity by which the difficulties upset or distressed the child and interfered with his or her relationships and learning. Using these impact items' scores, the pupils were classified into one of three bands, namely normal, borderline or abnormal. According to primary school teachers, 80.3% of the pupils were in the normal band; 10.5% were borderline, and the remaining 9.1% in the abnormal band. Figure 1 displays the prevalence rate by gender and school level. There are more difficulties in secondary (10.5%) than primary schools (9.1%), with a ratio of 7: 6, and more difficulties amongst boys (10.5%) than girls (8.9%), in both primary and secondary schools, the ratio being 7:6. SEBD are thus more likely to be found in boys' secondary school and the least in girls' primary schools.

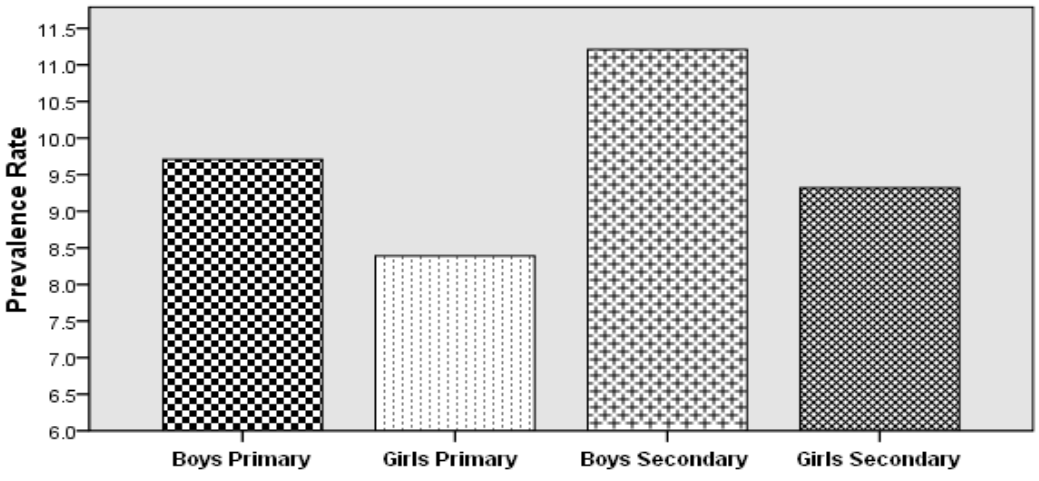

Figure 1 Prevalence of SEBD in Maltese schools by gender and school level

Frequency distributions of SEBD scores

Tables 1 and 2 present the means and standard deviations of the total difficulty scores and the four symptom scores by gender and school level for both teacher and parent SDQs. A

look at the total difficulty scores suggests that teachers see more difficulties in secondary rather primary level, whereas parents' mean scores are less discriminative, though with indications of more difficulties in primary school. The highest mean scores amongst the four difficulty subscales are in hyperactivity, followed by emotional, peer and conduct difficulties respectively. Teachers perceive more emotional difficulties in primary school, and more conduct, hyperactivity and peer problems in secondary school. Parents on the other hand, indicate more emotional and peer difficulties in secondary school, and more conduct and hyperactivity problems in primary school.. Both teachers' and parents' mean scores in prosocial behaviour are higher in primary school when compared to secondary school. Male pupils have higher mean scores than females on total difficulty and on conduct, hyperactivity. The largest difference is observed amongst teacher responses. Female pupils on the other hand, have higher mean scores on the emotional scale as well as on the prosocial scale. While teachers also suggest that male pupils have more peer problems than females, parents' evaluations do not discriminate gender so well on this subscale. The overall findings suggest that boys have more difficulties in conduct and hyperactivity and possibly in peer relationships, while females experience more emotional problems and engage in more prosocial behaviour.

Table 1: Teacher report mean SDQ scores by school level

		Teacher SDQ		Parent SDQ	
		5-10 years	11-16 years	5-10 years	11-16 years
Total Difficulty	Mean	8.39	9.06	10.93	10.32
	St.Dev	6.151	6.452	5.726	5.512
Emotion	Mean	2.04	1.93	2.72	2.82
	St.Dev	2.176	2.130	2.261	2.311
Conduct	Mean	1.33	1.55	1.83	1.74
	St.Dev	1.894	2.110	1.662	1.565
Hyperactivity	Mean	3.35	3.51	4.48	3.80
	St.Dev	2.944	2.983	2.624	2.458
Peer	Mean	1.67	2.08	1.91	1.96
	St.Dev	1.775	1.830	1.752	1.720
Prosocial	Mean	7.78	6.95	8.67	8.33
	St.Dev	2.358	2.607	1.555	1.745

Table 2: Teacher report mean SDQ scores by gender

		Teacher SDQ		Parent SDQ	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Total Difficulty	Mean	9.60	7.81	10.81	10.61
	St.Dev	6.443	6.040	5.656	5.647
Emotion	Mean	1.93	2.06	2.56	2.93
	St.Dev	2.112	2.199	2.149	2.380
Conduct	Mean	1.66	1.21	1.85	1.75
	St.Dev	2.121	1.846	1.659	1.595
Hyperactivity	Mean	3.99	2.84	4.47	4.00
	St.Dev	3.075	2.725	2.681	2.472
Peer	Mean	2.01	1.71	1.93	1.93
	St.Dev	1.888	1.721	1.759	1.722
Prosocial	Mean	6.87	7.90	8.25	8.79
	St.Dev	2.627	2.280	1.735	1.506

Risk Factors

Individual variables

There is little evidence that mother language, ethnicity and religion play a key role in the development of SEBD in Maltese schools.. This finding needs to be considered in view of the largely linguistic, ethic, cultural and religious homogeneity of the country. Gozo (region 6) has the highest level of difficulty in primary schools, while the least difficulties are in the Outer Harbour (region 2) and Northern regions (region 5). Factor analysis revealed that Gozo has the highest level of emotional-peer problems and the lowest conduct-hyperactivity difficulties, while the opposite is true of the Inner Harbour (region 1) and Northern regions (Figures 2).

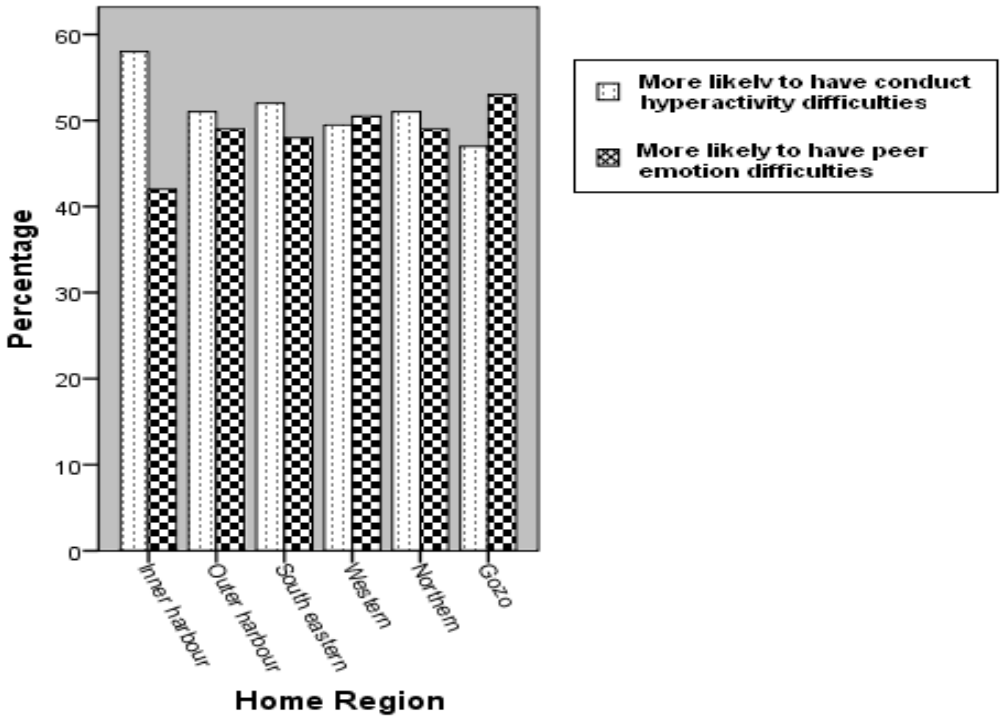

Figure 2: Percentage of students exhibiting type of difficulty by home region

Attendance, attainment, communication and assessment of individual educational needs, are some of the strongest individual factors related to the SEBD. The data strongly suggests that primary school pupils with poor attendance, poor attainment, poor communication skills, and receiving support without a Statement of Educational Needs, are more likely to have SEBD than pupils without these characteristics (see Figures 3-6). School children who have been diagnosed as having some condition or disability and who are receiving some form of intervention for psychological and learning problems, also exhibit more difficulties.

Figure 3: Mean total difficulty scores by attainment

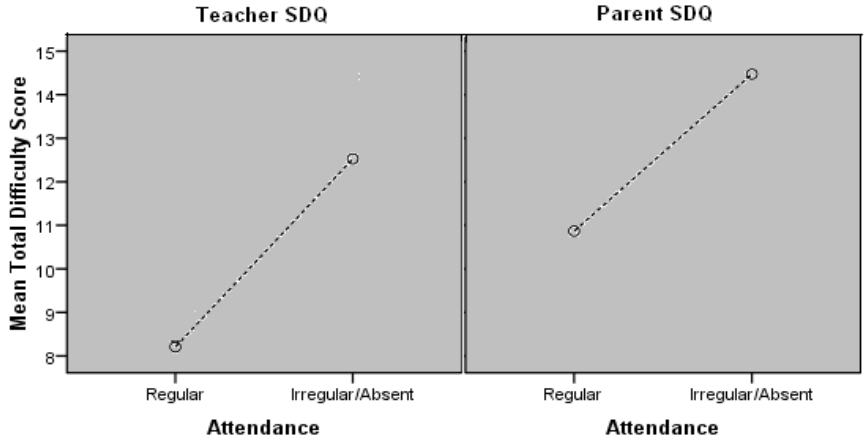

Figure 4: Mean total difficulty scores by attendance

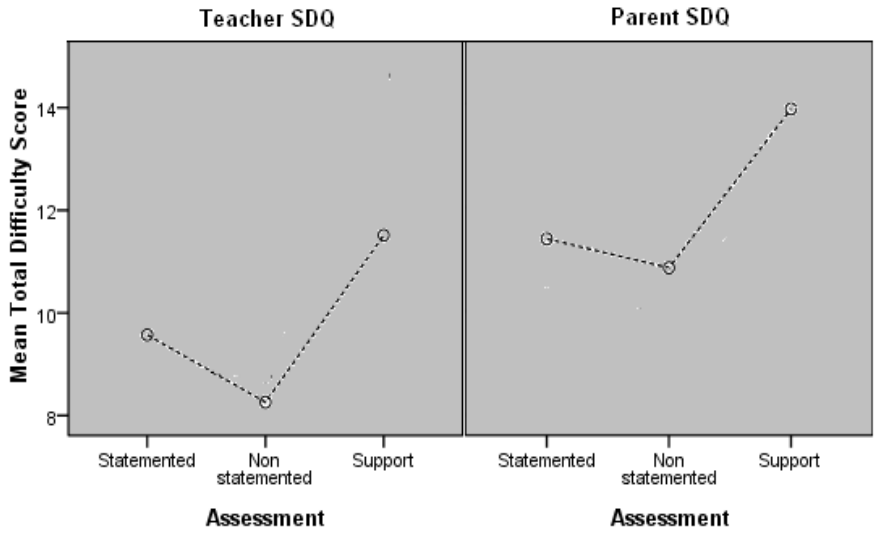

Figure 5: Mean total difficulty scores by assessment

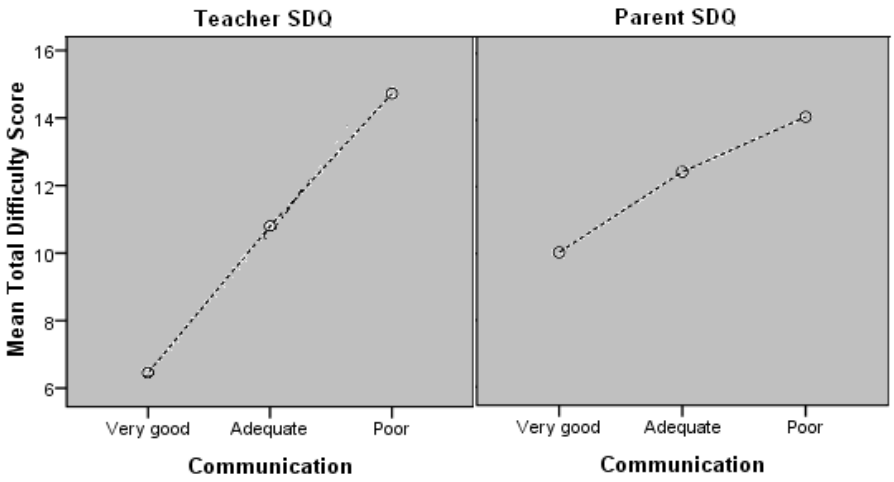

Figure 6: Mean total difficulty scores by communication

Classroom variables

Smaller classrooms have more social, emotional and behaviour difficulties, but this unexpected finding may be related more to these being lower streamed classrooms rather than to classroom size (Figure 7). Streamed classrooms have more difficulties than mixed ability classrooms, and there are more pupils with SEBD in the lower streamed classrooms (Figure 8). There are some indications that teachers with less than five years teaching experience may face more difficulties in their classroom, but this is related to other factors, such as newly qualified teachers being assigned the more difficult classes, than to teaching experience. More significantly related is teacher qualification, with the least qualified teachers having more pupils with SEBD in their classroom, particularly according to teacher evaluations; again this is partly explained by such teachers being placed in schools where there are more pupils with learning and behaviour difficulties (Figures 9).

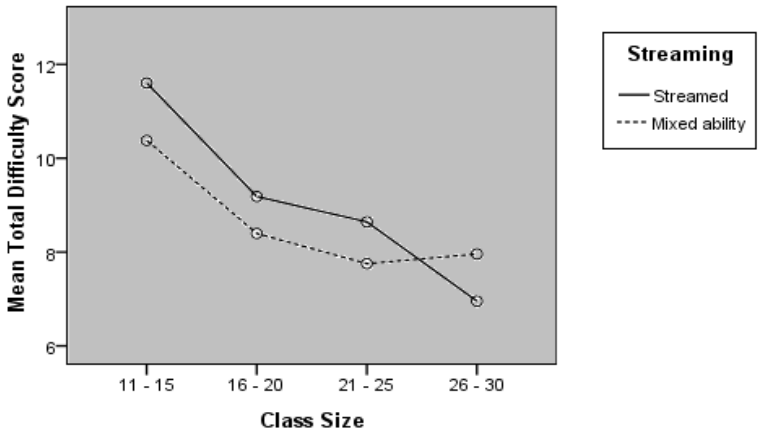

Figure 7: Mean total difficulty scores by class size and stream level

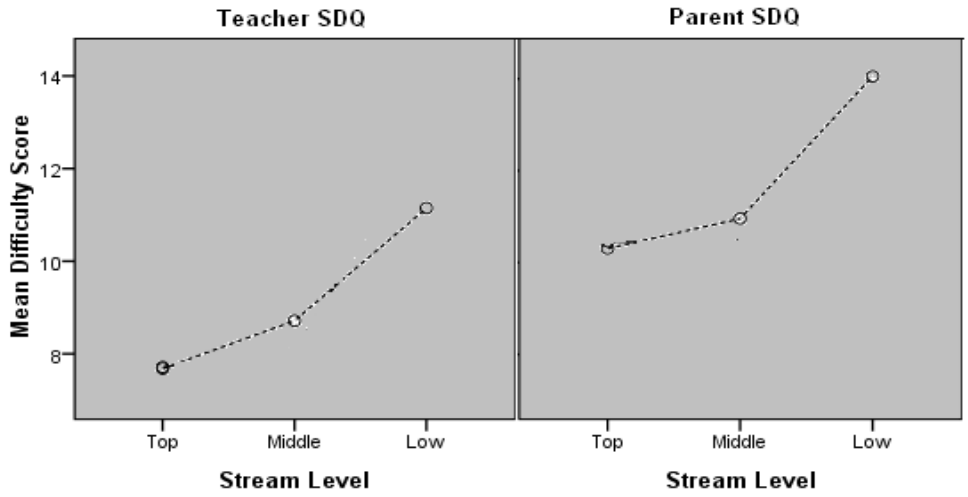

Figure 8: Mean total difficulty scores by stream level

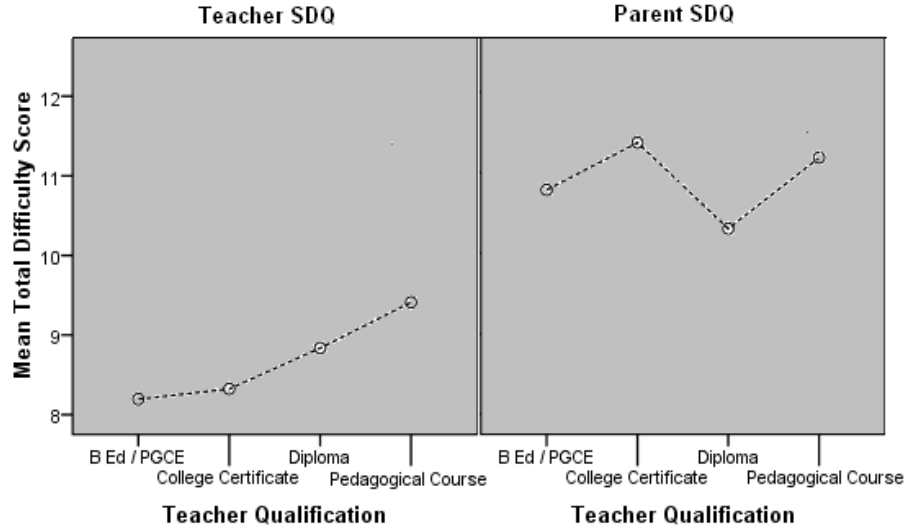

Figure 9: Mean total difficulty scores by teacher qualification

School variables

One of the most clear cut findings is that there are more problems in state schools than in church and independent schools, with the latter having the least difficulties (Figure 10). A rather surprising finding is that primary schools with less than 300 and more than 700 pupils have more difficulties. However, school size is partly explained by school type, with the smaller schools being state primary schools (Figure 11). Teacher evaluations suggest that primary schools with unattractive environments or whose environment needs improvement, are more likely to have higher levels of difficulties (Figure 12).

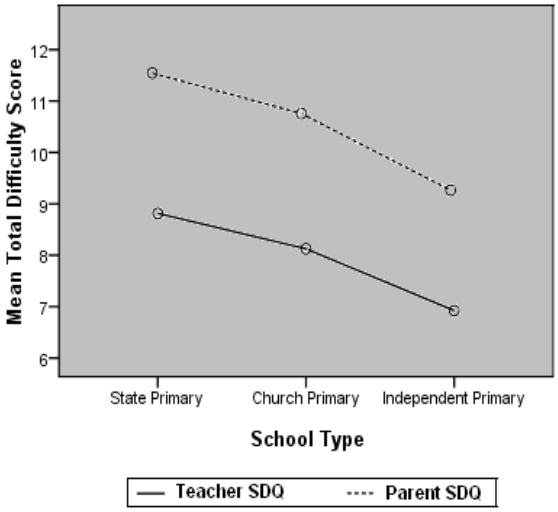

Figure 10: Mean total difficulty scores by school type

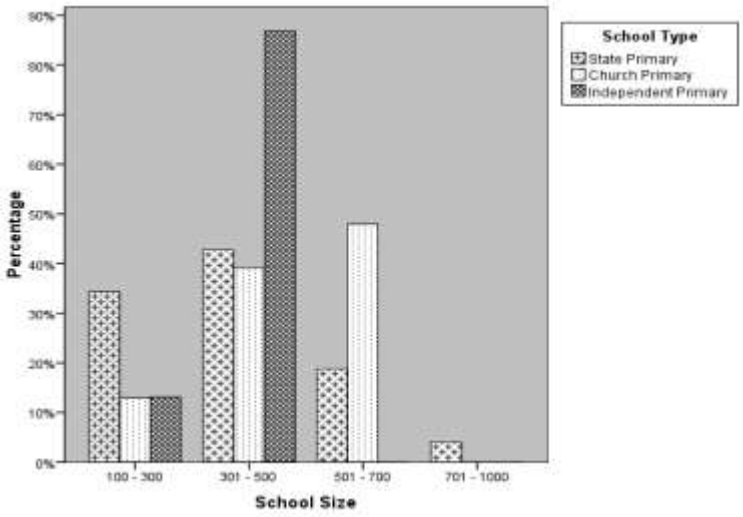

Figure 11: Percentage of schools by school type and size

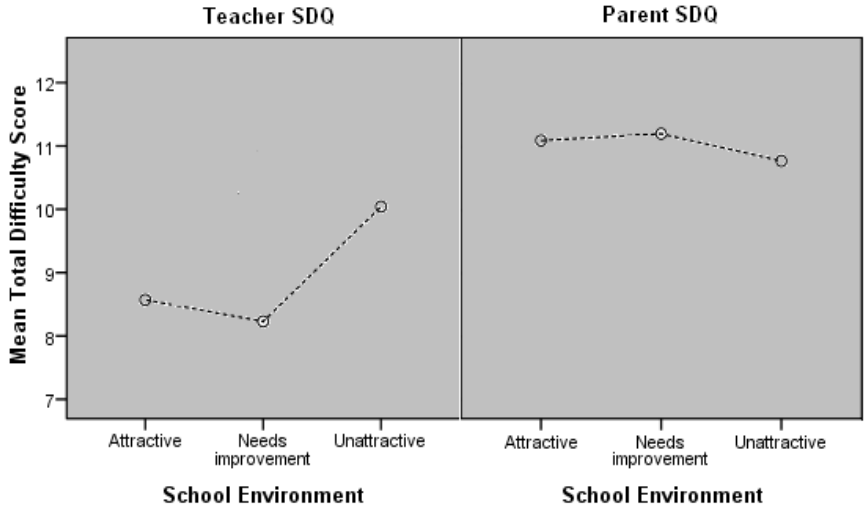

Figure 12: Mean total difficulty scores by school environment

Home variables

The two salient home variables related to SEBD are family structure and socio-economic status. One parent families have more children with SEBD than two parent families, particularly single parent families (Figure 13). Single child families have more problems than bigger families, but this was found to be explained by family structure, since most such families were single parent families. The lower the family's SES, the more likelihood of children with difficulties in the family. Families where one or both parents have semi-skilled or unskilled jobs and have low level of education, where the father does not work, and with low income, are more at risk of having children exhibiting SEBD (Figures 14-16).

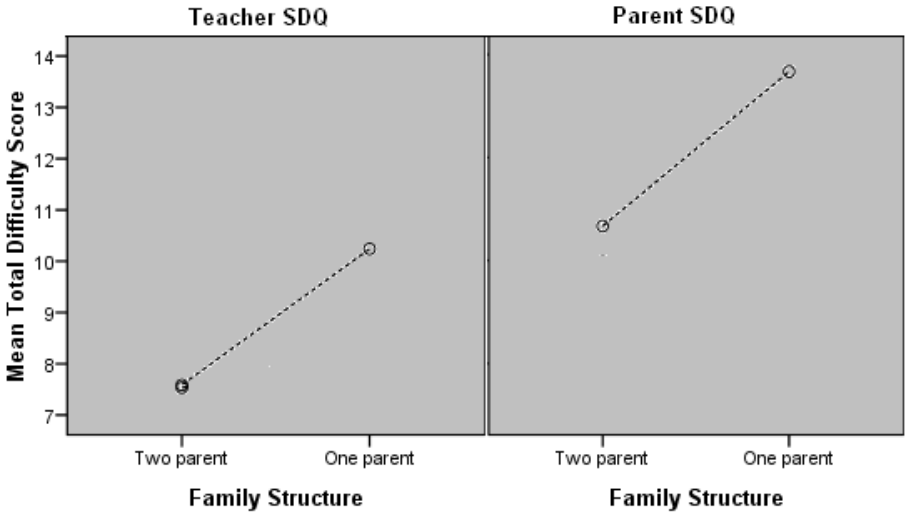

Figure 13: Mean total difficulty scores by family structure

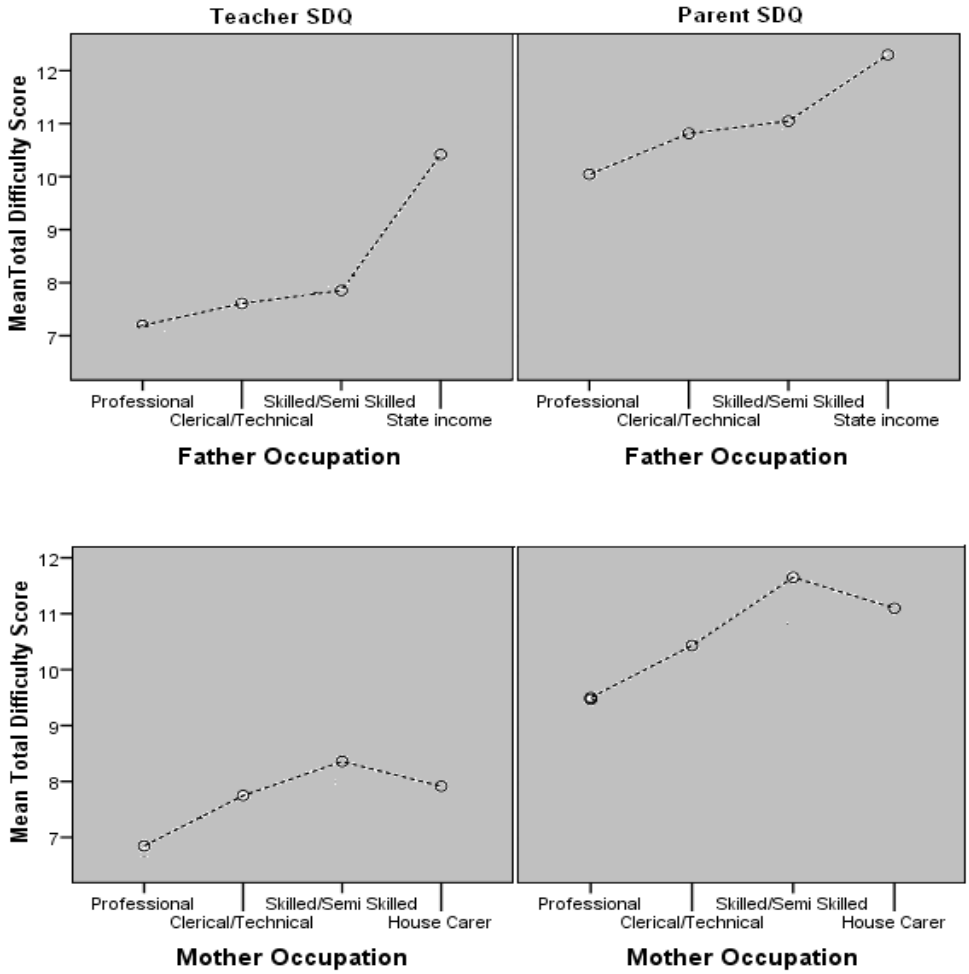

Figure 14: Mean total difficulty scores by mother/father occupation

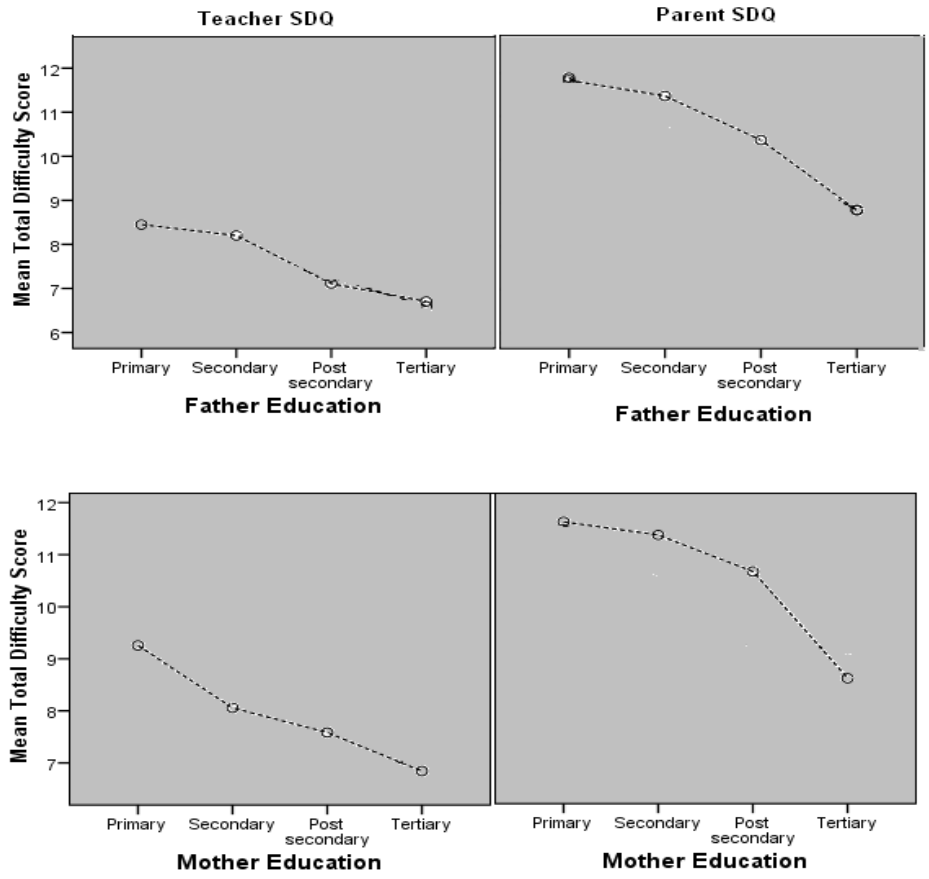

Figure 15: Mean total difficulty scores by mother and father education

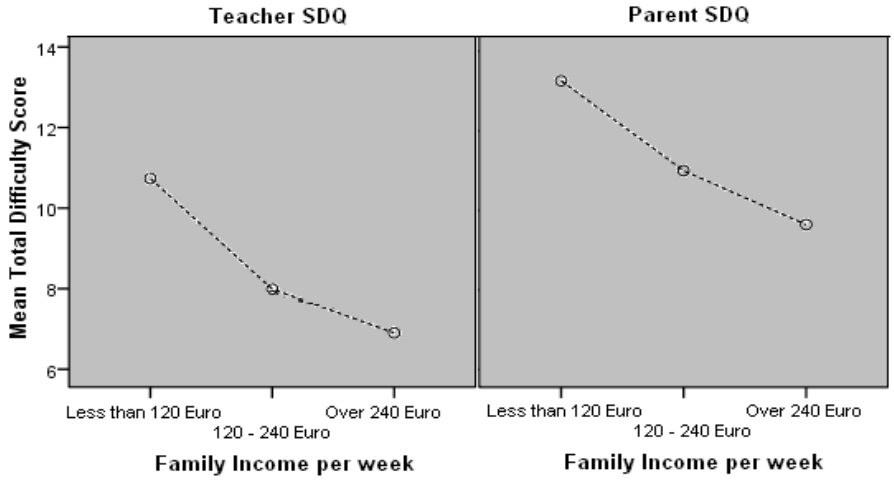

Figure 16: Mean total difficulty scores by family income

Regression analysis

One of the goals of the study was to estimate collectively the quantitative effect of the predictors upon the total difficulty score that they influence. It is well known that a lone predictor could make a significant contribution in explaining variations in the total difficulty scores, but would be rendered unimportant in the presence of other predictors. In other words, the suitability of a predictor in a regression model fit often depends on which other predictors

are included with it. A backward procedure was employed, to identify the dominant predictors which explained most of the variation in total difficulty scores. Regression analysis revealed eight prevailing predictors for primary teachers' evaluations. Streaming was found to be the most significant predictor followed by school type, teacher qualification, school size, family structure, attainment, assessment and residence ownership. According to primary school teachers, streamed pupils with support, who attend small-sized state schools, and who live with a single parent, in a rented house, have more difficulties.

An similar regression analysis of the parent evaluations in primary school identified five dominant predictors. Intervention explained the large proportion of the variation in the total difficulty scores followed by mother occupation, attainment, attendance and child condition/ illness. According to parents, primary school children who have illness/health problems, have poor attainment, attend school irregularly, receive psychological and/or educational interventions, and live with mothers that have low skilled jobs, have higher total difficulty scores.

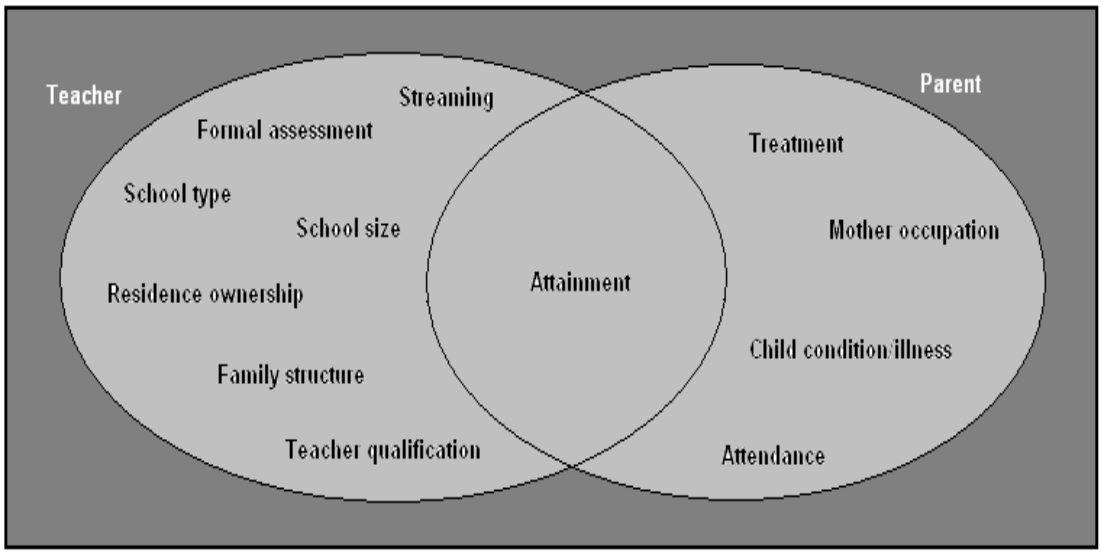

Figure 17 : Variables that best predict differences in SEBD in primary school

Teachers underlined more school-related individual variables such as attainment, communication and assessment, and classroom and school variables, while parents the predictors from the parent evaluations on the other hand, are more within-child individual variables, such as diagnosis and intervention, and home variables such as income, occupation and relatives. However, teacher and parent responses agree that attainment is one the strongest predictors in SEBD (Figure 17).

Discussion

Prevalence

The 9.1% prevalence rate of SEBD in Maltese primary schools is close to the 10% cut off point given by Robert Goodman and colleagues (Goodman 1997; Meltzer et al.2000) and other studies based on teacher perceptions, such as in Denmark (10%) (Egelund and Hansen 2000) and the Netherlands (11%) (Smeets 2009). In the USA, where definitions tend to be more tightly linked to specific psychiatric diagnostic categories, the figure is between 6% -

10% (Kaufman 2005). On the other hand, the British Medical Association (2006) provides a higher estimate (up to 20%), but this includes also the 'borderline' group which covers the next 10% which would be incorporated into the SEBD continuum envisaged in the 1994 Department for Education definition in the UK (DfE 1994). This difference in prevalence is more likely to be attributable to differences in definition, rather than differences in the social, emotional and behavioural characteristics of children, and this study suggests that local statistics are quite close to the international prevalence rates based on teacher perceptions. Pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties increase as they move from primary to secondary school, but the prevalence rate in primary school, particularly amongst boys, is relatively high, underlining the need for preventative, early intervention work in the first years of primary school.

Gender

In line with international trends, boys appear to exhibit higher levels of SEBD than girls, but the difference is less significant, with a local ratio of 7:6 in contrast to the 3:1 ratio usually cited in the international literature. This suggests an increasing rate of difficulty amongst Maltese female pupils; indeed, international data indicates that the level of behaviour difficulties amongst girls is increasing at a greater rate than among boys (Rutter and Smith 1995; Cooper 2006). As expected, boys have markedly more behaviour and conduct problems, while girls experience more emotional difficulties. The most frequent problem exhibited by pupils is hyperactivity, suggesting that a substantial proportion of pupils are restless and fidgety in the classroom and find it difficult to concentrate. Though this is a multifaceted phenomenon, this finding may be related to the fact that the Maltese school system has maintained many 'traditional features'. For instance, Maltese students with SEBD frequently complain about a system which they find rigid, academically oriented and with limited relevance to their daily lives (Cefai and Cooper 2009). Emotional problems are the second most prevalent type of difficulty found in the current study. While there are various factors leading to emotional problems in children and young persons, such as normal developmental processes and family issues, there are indications that Maltese pupils are experiencing high levels of stress and low self esteem as a result of heavy academic pressure, examinations, and lack of free time (Sollars 2006; WHO 2008).

Region

The Inner Harbour region has been traditionally known as the most socio-economically deprived region in the Maltese islands. The data however, suggested that the island of Gozo has the highest level of difficulty in primary schools. Factor analysis of emotional (emotional-peer problems subscales) vs. conduct (conduct-hyperactivity subscales) difficulties, revealed that Gozo has the highest level of emotional problems and the lowest conduct difficulties, while the opposite is true of the Inner Harbour and Northern regions. One explanation for this association in Gozo could be the examination pressure, particularly at the time of 11+ examination, young children undergo in the small village primary schools on the island. On the other hand, the internal migration taking place in the last decades in Malta suggests a shift of younger adults from the Inner Harbour area, a relatively socially disadvantaged area, to other regions such as the Northern region (NSO 2007b).

Attainment, Curricula Flexibility, Streaming and Staff Training

Attainment is the strongest predictor of SEBD in Maltese schools, underlining the inextricable link between learning and behaviour difficulties. Indeed, compared with other pupils with individual educational needs, students with SEBD are more likely to have learning difficulties and problems in completing school successfully (Farrell, Critchley and Mills 2000; Groom and Rose 2004). The relationship between attainment and SEBD is likely to be reciprocal, but high academic pressure, examinations, selection, and the lack of access to a differentiated curriculum, are some of the possible factors which might turn a learning problem into a behavioural one. The goodness of fit between the needs of the pupil and a flexible accommodating learning environment is critical to student engagement (Bartolo *et al.* 2007; Cefai and Cooper 2009).

The study found that pupils in streamed classes, particularly those in the lower streams, exhibit the highest levels of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most children with SEBD are found in the smaller, lower streamed classrooms. This might be taken to suggest that selection by ability and streaming practices have the effect of combining and heightening learning and behavioural difficulties, a finding first demonstrated by Hargreaves (1967). It is well documented that teachers often lower their academic and behavioural expectations for pupils in lower stream classrooms (Hargreaves, Hester and Mellor 1975; MacLure et al. 2008). Staff may also become reluctant to invest their effort and resources in such classes in a culture where they are measured according to the performance and achievement rates of students in examinations. For instance, this study suggests that a large proportion of the least qualified teachers are assigned to the lower streamed classes.

Support for pupils with SEBD

An interesting finding in the study is that pupils receiving some sort of support at school without a Statement of Individual Educational Needs, are more likely to exhibit SEBD than those with a Statement, or without a Statement but not receiving support. This is corroborated by another finding, namely that pupils receiving psychological or educational interventions are more at risk of exhibiting SEBD. In one way this is to be expected, since many of the pupils receiving support without a Statement may doing do because of their challenging behaviour. On the other hand, the number of such pupils should alert the educational authorities to the need for early identification and adequate support for pupils with SEBD to prevent the exacerbation of these difficulties.

Another finding underlines the relationship between communication and SEBD, and the need for more interventions in schools to promote more prosocial behaviour and emotional literacy amongst pupils. This need is being acknowledged with the implementation of various programmes at both universal and selective/indicated levels to promote social and emotional learning in schools in various countries such as Social and Emotional Learning in the USA (Salovey and Sluyter 1997), SEAL (Department for Education and Skills 2005) and Circle Time (Fletcher-Campbell and Wilkin 2003) in the UK, and KidsMatter (KidsMatter 2009) in Australia. The authors of this paper argue elsewhere on the need for schools to promote emotional education as a basic core competence for all pupils across the school years (Cefai and Cooper 2009)

It is also likely that the most challenging and vulnerable pupils are exposed, more than their peers, to learning support assistants. These tend to be trained at a lower level than

teachers, and this has been found in recent studies to have a negative effect on the behaviour and educational performance of vulnerable pupils (MacBeath et al. 2006; Blatchford et al. 2009; Cajkler and Tennant, 2009). Data was not gathered on the functions and qualifications of learning support assistants. This may be seen as a weakness of the current study that, in the light of recent evidence from UK research (Blatchford et al. 2009), should be remedied in future studies.

School Type and School Effectiveness

As expected, more problems are found in state schools in contrast to church and independent schools. The surprising finding that smaller primary and secondary schools have more difficulties than larger ones is at least partly explained by school type, with the smaller schools being state schools. It should be noted that mainstream state schools in Malta are taking increasing numbers of students with learning and behaviour difficulties, but with minimal additional training for teachers. School effectiveness research has consistently shown that schools can make a difference in the social and academic behaviour of pupils despite the baggage students may bring with them to school (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000; Muijs and Reynolds 2005). On the other hand, it should be acknowledge that schools cannot absorb pupils with complex additional needs without this affecting the character and performance of the school. Even the most effective of schools can account for only a proportion of the variance in pupil outcomes (Mortimore 1998). Clearly, if schools are to maximize their effectiveness, then their capacity to deal with an increasingly diverse pupil intake must be enhanced, through training, external specialist support and policy development, in direct proportion to the specific needs expressed by pupils.

Family and socio-economic context

There are also broader social policy implications to be drawn from this study. It was found, for example, that one-parent families are more likely to have children and young persons exhibiting SEBD than two-parent families. This does not only underline the need for strengthening the Maltese family through educational, social and economic packages, but also to provide more support to single parent and separated families. Single parents, particularly young single parents, are at risk for socio-economic hardship, with half of such households living in poverty (NSO 2007a; Deguara 2008). Family structure and socio-economic status may thus interact in the development of SEBD, underlining the complexity of this social phenomenon.

In line with international research, the lower the family's SES in terms of education, occupation and income, the greater the likelihood of SEBD among the children in the family. About 22% of children aged 0-15 years in Malta live in poor families, male boys being the most vulnerable (NSO 2007a; Deguara 2008). Children coming from such families are at high risk for SEBD, and unless supported, the cycle of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation, will be repeated through succeeding generations.

Conclusion

The portrait of pupils with SEBD identified in this study underlines the complexity and multi-factorial nature of the difficulties, and the influence of the various systems in children' lives in determining their behaviour and development. Schools, particularly state schools where the most vulnerable children attend, have a key role to play in the prevention of SEBD from the very early years of primary education, with streaming, selection and learning difficulties being clear targets for immediate attention. They can make a difference in the lives of children as school effectiveness research and resilience literature have consistently shown (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000; Waxman, Padron and Chang 2003; Bernard 2004). Early intervention approaches such as nurture groups and training in emotional literacy have been found to be promising approaches in supporting the healthy social and emotional development of vulnerable children from an early stage (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007, Binne and Allan, 2008; Hallam, 2009; Mosley, 2009; Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney, 2009). The major resources need to be focused on preventative measures at institutional level to promote the healthy socio-emotional development of children, besides providing adequate and timely support to children and young persons already at risk or experiencing difficulty. This calls for a multisystemic and interagency approach addressing systems such as home, school and community, and involving various agencies and services at universal, selective and indicated levels as early in the child's life as possible. While schools do make a difference, they do not operate in a vacuum and cannot, alone, compensate for the effects of wider social and economic inequalities. They can help to direct children's social, emotional and cognitive development towards more positive trajectories, but their success will only be maximized when the relationships between SEBD and wider social policy issues are acknowledged and acted upon. This is particularly salient in the primary school years when children's development is at a crucial stage and where home–school collaboration can have a key determining factor in the promotion of prosocial behaviour and prevention of SEBD (Hagell, 2003; Rose et al, 2009).

This study has identified the prevalence and structural and institutional variables related to SEBD. It did not consider however, how such processes as teacher-pupil, peer and staff relationships, classroom management style, pedagogical approach, and family relationships and dynamics amongst others, contribute to social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. These processes and their relationship to SEBD will be considered in a follow up study which is being presently carried out by the authors. The longitudinal design of the study will also provide a stronger basis for drawing up a profile of risk and protective factors for SEBD than a one off, quantitative snapshot, which is one of the limitations of the study.

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