



PROMOTING POSITIVE  
ATTITUDES AND EVIDENCE-  
BASED POLICY FOR  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE WAY FORWARD

IE+ POLICY  
RECOMMENDATIONS

# Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right that is enshrined in many international human rights instruments including the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). One of the most notable of these instruments is the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, United Nations, 2006).

Article 24 of the UNCRPD alludes to the right to an inclusive education for students with disabilities, highlighting that states-party must ensure an inclusive educational system at all levels and lifelong learning to promote (United Nations, 2006):

- The full development of human potential
- The development of personality, talents and creativity to their fullest potential
- The effective participation in a free society.

Under the UN CRPD, it is highlighted that inclusive education should not only focus on curricular content (e.g., numeracy or literacy skills), but it should be holistic and promote the fullest development of students with disabilities of any kind, and their participation as valued members within communities and society (Amor, Verdugo, Calvo, Navas, & Aguayo, 2018). Through this approach an inclusive education promotes the Quality of Life of learners with a disability and supports their overall personal well-being.

Despite the enshrinement of this right in a number of human rights treaties and the benefits inclusive education has for all of those in society, access to mainstream education is still far from being the reality for many learners with disabilities, including those with an intellectual disability.

The 'Promoting positive attitudes and evidence-based policy for inclusive education' (IE+) project aims to support the realisation of inclusive education systems for learners with an intellectual disability across Europe by providing decision-makers with the information, training and tools that allow for evidence-based policy making. This document and the recommendations proposed are result of the IE+ project's research and experiences, of the state of inclusive education in 5 different European countries and have been developed in partnership with key stakeholders working in the field of education.

## What is an inclusive education system?

In the education sector, inclusion is defined as every person having the same possibilities to enjoy a high-quality education without being segregated. In an inclusive education system, the framework changes to adapt to the individual needs of the learner and applies attitudes, approaches and strategies that include all learners in all activities, regardless of their support



needs, with respect to their individual learning level. An inclusive education refers to education at all levels from childcare to university, including parallel, informal and post-graduate learning.

## **Barriers to inclusive education**

Despite the benefits of inclusive education for all learners and the commitment every EU Member State has made to its realisation via their ratification of the UN CRPD, the full transition towards inclusive education at all levels is yet to become a reality. Fundamental barriers to the legislation, implementation and monitoring of inclusive education remain and currently EU Member States lack sustained action across all three stages of this process. As a result, while progress has been made, it is still not possible to speak of real inclusion for children with disabilities in Europe's education systems.

The barriers to inclusive education can be found in all aspects of the school, as well as within communities, and in local and national policies. Some barriers also arise in the interaction between students and what and how they are taught.

The IE+ project's research aimed to understand the reality of schooling trajectories of children with disabilities and the problems in the implementation of policies of inclusive education. Our societies are characterised by diversity and as a result it is important to give attention to the history and the context of each individual country's education systems, policies and practices. While care must be taken, to not oversimplify the culture and context of each country or directly compare the developments each country has made on its journey to inclusion, the IE+ research found several common barriers that prevent the progress of multiple EU member states to move towards inclusion. These barriers appear at all levels of the education system and are often most noticeable as a learner moves from one stage of their education into the next. As a result, there is a need to implement targeted action at each level of the education system while also providing an additional focus to the moments at which learners move onto the next stage of their educational career.

## **Attitudes towards disability and inclusion**

A sustained and systemic modification of attitudes and approach, towards both disability and inclusion, is needed if the achievement of inclusive education is to be realised across Europe. The IE+ research (2019) found that the medical model, whereby disability is viewed as an impairment or difference which needs to be fixed, still stands strong. This is pushed by the need to diagnose and label a learner's disability before considering the reasonable accommodations, or support measures that empower them to develop and learn to their fullest potential.

This tendency, to label learners based on their disability, risks reproducing disability as an individual problem, rather than working to remove barriers to make the education systems more accessible and inclusive to all. These negative attitudes can also manifest themselves in



poor attitudes learners then have in their own abilities and in their place as valuable members of the school society. This lack of confidence in a learner's own ability and value can severely impact their personal development and future participation in their communities. As a result, it is crucial that children themselves are also supported to overcome the negative perceptions they may have developed of their own abilities.

It is not only negative attitudes towards disability and inclusion that hinder the progress of inclusive education. Many stakeholders, including teachers, parents, school managers and local authorities, often hold negative attitudes or misconceptions towards each other, which prevent them from working together to support the full inclusion of learners with disabilities in society. In moments of transition in a learner's education career, from one stage to education to the next, learners often come into contact with new people, with fresh misconceptions which must be overcome. The time taken to address and overcome these attitudes can impede a learner's transition into their new environment and thus negatively affect their personal development and full participation in school life.

For the successful transition towards inclusive education positive attitudes, towards disability and inclusion, and of a human rights-based model of support must be widely promoted and adopted at all levels of society. It is also important that time is taken to ensure that key stakeholders, who can help to realise the implementation of inclusive education, overcome their attitudes and misconceptions towards each other to ensure their constructive collaboration. It is only by working together on an equal basis that stakeholders can overcome many of the day-to-day barriers that can hinder a learner's inclusion in the class and school community and move towards lasting change.

## **Absence of a practical action plan to achieve inclusion**

While many European countries have developed comprehensive legislation, which further enshrines the rights of children with intellectual disabilities, to have access to an inclusive education in a mainstream school of their choosing, it appears difficult for this legislation to be implemented on a practical level.

To make national or regional legislation a reality more attention is needed for the development of a comprehensive plan to enable both the schools system to accommodate the complexity of the lives of children and youngsters with a disability and their families and enable families and learners to understand and fully participate in the school system.

Crucially, for the successful realisation of inclusive education, sustained action is needed across all three stages of the transition process: legislation, implementation and monitoring. An effective action plan must address each of these stages to ensure the transition towards inclusion. These stages should not be realised in a solely linear process, but rather each stage can inform the continuous development and adjustment of the others, enabling policy makers and stakeholders to be flexible adapt to the reality on the ground and the barriers to inclusion.



## Need for hard data

IE+'s research found a lack of hard data, or statistics concerning children, especially with intellectual disabilities, and the reality of inclusive education in different countries. This lack of data prevents a deeper analysis of the state of inclusive education and hinders the ability to provide a greater insight into the outcomes of children connected to their schooling trajectory.

Notably, there is a need for the creation and collection of data on structural, progress and outcomes indicators, which facilitates a comprehensive and inclusive approach and enables policy makers and stakeholders to gain a complete understanding of the transition process and its impact. The collection and monitoring of this data is also necessary to provide stakeholders working in inclusive education with the critical information on how they can adjust policies to achieve goals linked to Inclusive education.

In particular, one approach that appears relevant to monitor the extent to which progress is being made in the path towards the inclusive education of students with disabilities is the Quality of Life Model (Schalock & Verdugo, 2002, 2007, 2012). Adopting a quality of life approach to education means adopting a whole-student approach that puts the focus of education on the global development of the students with and without disabilities, as well as on their development to their fullest potential as the UNCRPD embodies. Consequently, this approach goes beyond the traditional view of education as curricular/academic achievement. From this perspective, quality of life is understood as a state of wellbeing that incorporates both subjective (i.e., the satisfaction that the students experience regarding how their needs are met) and objective (i.e., referred to the living conditions that the environment offers to students) elements, and that is influenced by personal and environmental factors, as well as by the interactions between them.

The Quality of Life Model by Schalock and Verdugo (2002, 2007, 2012) highlights eight core domains that make up a persons' quality of life, namely: Personal development, self-determination, interpersonal relations, social inclusion, rights as well as emotional, physical and material wellbeing. These domains are relevant for all the persons and thus monitoring personal outcomes of students with intellectual disabilities in these domains is relevant to gain an insight on the extent to which education is providing inclusive opportunities to this student body.

Using the Quality of Life Model as a foundation, the IE+ project has supported the development of a Quality of Life Index for Inclusive Education (QoLI-IE). This Index has the potential to inform education providers, authorities and parents to monitor and assess the success of inclusive education against a more holistic approach, which considers the personal-desired outcomes of learners, rather than simply academic achievement. This Index is in its infancy however, and in order to collect valid data EU Member states must support its development at a national level to create a valid and reliable tool for the assessment of personal-desired outcomes.



## The continuation of segregated special education

A crucial barrier to the success of inclusive education across Europe is the continued organisation of inclusive education in connection with the remaining special education system across all levels of the education system. For some countries this can be the retention of a complete special school system, which runs in parallel to the mainstream system, in other cases this could be the organisation of special units on a regular school campus.

Rather than being a “twin track approach,” a strategy whereby individual needs of and support for children with disabilities are realized at the same time as eliminating environmental, economic barriers to education, this ‘Parallel Model,’ of supporting both mainstream and special schools, fails to achieve real inclusion.

Instead, the Parallel Model continues to fund special education alongside the funding of mainstream schools, creating a competition of resources and outcomes between mainstream schools, who are trying to become more inclusive, and special schools. The continued funding of separate education systems (both mainstream and segregated) has been found to be far costlier to authorities, in comparison to inclusive education systems (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017).

Although the initial transition towards inclusive education systems can incur higher costs placing high concentrations of students with disabilities in the same schools and classrooms oblige public authorities to provide substantial material and human resources to meet the needs of high numbers of students who may have additional learning support needs (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). Studies have found that, in the long run, these costs can be significantly reduced with the adoption of inclusive education systems (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017).

The impact of the continued prevalence of a segregated school system can be particularly significant as a learner moves upwards through the education system. For some children, a segregated school system can mean that after having been able to enjoy an inclusive education in a mainstream primary school, they are forced back into a special school for their secondary education. For others moving into the next level of their educating brings new challenges of having to address fresh negative attitudes towards inclusion from those within the school community, having to manage inaccessible infrastructure, or encountering staff who have not been equipped with the tools or knowledge to make their classrooms more inclusive. As a result, it is vital that action is taken to end the segregation of the education system at all levels to help learners to progress smoothly through their education and enjoy a high quality, inclusive education at all stages of learning.

To ensure the successful and complete transition towards inclusive education, authorities and national governments must allocate sufficient financial support for mainstream education settings to provide inclusive environments. In particular, efforts must be focused on supporting



the moments of change for learners, to ensure that they are able to continue to develop and learn in inclusive settings.

## **Working in silos and collaboration of stakeholders**

The realisation of inclusive education requires the cooperation of multiple stakeholders including teachers, therapists, support workers, medical professionals and local authorities. Many problems occur because care systems, planned interventions, medical treatment and the school system work in a tradition of silos and are unable to move beyond disciplinary boundaries.

This tradition of working in silos is often reinforced by the method that a county's, or authority's, budget is allocated. Working in silos often results in the increased dominance of a label or diagnose based support system. Starting from the beginning of a learner's development, countries that work with a tradition of "a system of early intervention" are often confronted with the reality that once children enter the school system at age 3 or 4, they have already been labels and a diagnosis based on the medical model.

Moving beyond these silos is an important step to working co-productively towards inclusion. Coproduction refers to an inclusive working practice between experts by experience (users), organisations of support, public authorities and, if relevant, families and other stakeholders. Via co-production the ultimate goal is the delivery of a service, policy or activity that is responsive to the user, or learner's, needs and preferences in line with the principles of the UN CRPD. Importantly, it is key that professional do not just work in equal partnership with each other, but also involved learners and their parents equally in the process.

Co-production is a key practice for the long-term success of inclusive education where all stakeholders are empowered through their continuous involvement in the design, development and delivery of the service, policy or activity. To enable stakeholders to adapt to the challenges that the transition to inclusive education may bring, all affected parties must be brought around the table, to work together constructively in teams that reach across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

## **Conclusions**

Access to education and lifelong learning programmes in mainstream schools and other educational facilities is still far from being the reality for many pupils and learners with intellectual disabilities. There are many barriers which have prevented its realisation. This includes the prevalence of poor attitudes towards disability and inclusion, the persistence of the medical model of disability, the continuation of two education systems (both mainstream and segregated) as well as lack of hard data to monitor the progress of inclusion.

Despite the challenges, the partners of the IE+ project believe that the goal of inclusive



education is real and achievable. To do this the commitment of all stakeholders is needed. Teachers, headteachers, members of the school administration, students (both with and without disabilities), parents/guardians, family and informal carers, psychologists, social service technicians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and psychiatrist and local communities must work together to create more inclusive learning environments for children with disabilities. Multi-stakeholder partnerships can get a deeper understanding of the specific needs of the children with disabilities and plan individualised tailor-made activities including formal education, non-formal education and family empowerment.

These stakeholders should develop new methodologies with a personalised pedagogical approach centred on needs of the student and aiming at developing Individual Educational Plans to be implemented in structural partnership with families and services, in continuous and mutual training aiming at the best interest of the child. Meanwhile, it is fundamental to ensure the accessibility of the teaching/learning process and of its evaluation. Curricular adaptations, flexibility and methodological alternatives, organizational adaptations, are necessary. It is essential to have support teachers and the technical support resources that each student needs. It is also important to pay special attention during the change of education level, from primary to secondary, from secondary to post-compulsory etc. as these are critical times when high dropouts might occur.

A strong leadership from Member States and European institutions must provide the framework to encourage local and community actors to shift their attitude and approach towards an inclusive setting. This leadership must be joined by sustained efforts, made at every stage of the education system via an action plan that addresses the legislation, implementation and monitoring of inclusive education.

Below are our recommendations for European national and regional policy makers, education providers, support services and schools on the actions that they can take to contribute to the realisation of inclusive education across Europe.

## Recommendations for European policy makers

- Develop clear and coherent policy framework and legislation promoting inclusive education, in co-operation with pupils, families, education providers and other stakeholders.
- Enable the comprehensive collection of data for inclusive education across a number of target groups, including learners with disabilities through the incorporation of additional data collection mechanism within the European Semester process.
- Lead the way for inclusive education and de-segregate current and future European Schools and include all learners in their classrooms.
- Facilitate the exchange of policies and practices among countries and stakeholders with the aim of facilitating the transition towards inclusive education.
- Contribute to the achievement of inclusive education systems via EU Funding Programmes including Erasmus+, ESF+ and InvestEU.





## Recommendations for national and regional policy makers

- Shift from segregated structures towards inclusive systems.
- Work with schools, parents and learners to redefine school achievements and assessment methods for a more flexible system.
- Ensure that all public education material and platforms are accessible to all learners, despite of their disabilities and fund the immediate adaptation of the existing non-accessible platforms and contents, working in cooperation with DPOs and self-advocates.
- Gather reliable data on the incidence, effectiveness and comparative economic and social costs and benefits of inclusive and segregating education.
- Support the development of a comprehensive, reliable and valid framework to measure the Quality of Life-related outcomes of Students in education.
- Allocate sufficient financial support for mainstream education settings to provide inclusive environments and reasonable accommodation, according to the needs of the students living in the community.
- Ensure that training in inclusive education is a compulsory component of teacher training and of school staff.

## Recommendations for education providers, teachers and staff

- Ensure all educational material and educational platform are available and accessible to all children with support needs, starting from those living in the community.
- Strengthen the awareness of local community actors about the importance of inclusive teaching.
- Adapt educational curricula to ensure the accessibility. Adaptations, flexibility and methodological alternatives, organizational adaptations, are necessary.
- Employ support teachers and buy the technical support resources that learner disability might need.
- Support the students with support needs when changing the education level, from primary to secondary, from secondary to post-compulsory.
- Establish a clear vision on inclusive education with all stakeholders based on the UNCRPD, and make sure it is shared by all levels of staff.
- Work co-productively with all stakeholders, particularly parents and learners, in the development and delivery of an inclusive school environment.
- Transfer good practices among teachers, educators and other training professionals.
- Share the knowledge and expertise of special education providers with mainstream providers through partnerships and common understandings.
- Invest in adequate education and training for teachers and staff to ensure the understanding of Inclusive Education and Special Educational Needs.
- Encourage the collaboration of children and peer learning amongst learners.
- Work to introduce a whole school approach for Inclusive School Culture.



## Recommendations for support service providers in the field of education

- Work with schools, families and other stakeholders to provide community-based support to learners with disabilities.
- Facilitate the collaboration of families, teachers and learners to co-produce inclusive learning environments and education materials accessible to all students.
- Create open resource centers and share your knowledge and expertise of special education providers with mainstream providers.
- Promote the sharing of good practices among teachers, educators, families and other training professionals.



# References

- Amor, A. M., Verdugo, M. A., Calvo, M. I., Navas, P., & Aguayo, V. (2018). Psychoeducational assessment of students with intellectual disability: professional-action framework analysis. *Psicothema*, 30(1), 39-45. doi: 10.7334/psicothema2017.175.
- Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, (2017). Fighting school segregation in Europe through inclusive education: a position paper. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fighting-school-segregation-in-europe-through-inclusive-education-a-posi/168073fb65>
- Schalock, R. L., & Verdugo, M. A. (2002). Handbook on quality of life for human service practitioners. Washington, D.C.: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Schalock, R. L., & Verdugo, M. A. (2007). El concepto de calidad de vida en los servicios y apoyos para personas con discapacidad intelectual [The concept of Quality of Life in the services and supports for persons with intellectual disability]. *Siglo Cero*, 38(4), 21-36.
- Schalock, R. L., & Verdugo, M. A. (2012). A leadership guide to redefining intellectual and developmental disabilities organizations: Eight successful change strategies. Baltimore, M. D.: Brookes.
- United Nations (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12949&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12949&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
- United Nations (1994a). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. Available at: [http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF)
- United Nations (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Available at: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- Van Hove, G., De Schauwer, E., (2019) Realizing Article 24 of the UNCRPD... 'a piece of cake'? "We don't think so" An analysis of inclusive education in five different European countries from a Critical Disability Studies Perspective.

This document was written with the support of the Erasmus+ funding programme under grant agreement 2017-3338/001-001



The European Commission's support to produce this publication does not constitute an endorsement of its contents, which reflects the views only of the authors. The Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# About the IE+ Project

Promoting positive attitudes and evidence-based policy for inclusive education' (IE+) is a Erasmus + funded project which aims to provide decision-makers (policy-makers and education providers) with the information, training and tools that allow for evidence based policy making. Through these activities the project will facilitate not only adequate policy frameworks but also their real implementation, with a special focus on the transition from segregated to inclusive education settings.

The project partnership is comprised of the following organisations:



The European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) is a wide European network which represents around 17.000 services across Europe and across disabilities.



The European Association of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities and their Families Inclusion Europe (Inclusion Europe) represents the voice of people with intellectual disabilities and their families throughout Europe.



At Ghent University the Department of Special Needs Education has a focus on Inclusive Education in teaching research and service to the community.



UNIVERSIDAD  
DE SALAMANCA  
CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL

The first University of Salamanca's Institute on Community Integration (INICO) is composed of interdisciplinary professionals that lead activities linked to training, research and counseling in the field of disability and special educational needs with the aim of easing and enhancing the quality of life and self-determination of people living at social disadvantages in different contexts and throughout their life cycle.



ESTIA - Support & Social Care Center for People with Intellectual Disability specialises in providing support and care to people with intellectual disabilities from 15 years of age with the aim of improving quality of life and supporting inclusion into the community.



The National Association of Resource Teachers in Bulgaria (NART) is a national NGO umbrella for professionals working for full and quality integration, inclusion and education of children with different abilities and needs in mainstream education.



C.E.C.D. Mira Sintra - Centro de Educação para o Cidadão com Deficiência, C.R.L. (Education Centre for Persons with Disability) is a Cooperative for Social Solidarity, a non-profit organisation and was recognized by the Government as an organization of Public Utility.

With the support of:

