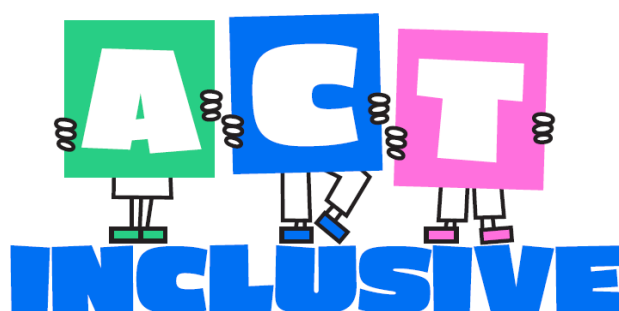


# ACT-Inclusive – Actors of Change Towards Inclusive Education

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## Country Sheets on Inclusiveness in Mainstream Schools in Cyprus

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## Table of Contents

Foreword.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	6
Background.....	8
Structure(s) .....	11
Challenges.....	17
Endnote.....	19
References.....	20





## Foreword

The Country Sheets on Inclusiveness in Mainstream Schools is a series of key deliverables produced in the framework of the European project "ACT INCLUSIVE" funded by the Erasmus+ programme "Partnership for Cooperation in the field of Education and Training" (ERASMUS-EDU-2022-PCOOP-ENGO). The "ACT INCLUSIVE" project brings together different stakeholders with expertise in disability rights, support provision, inclusive education and capacity building. The aim of this project is to enable the dissemination of knowledge to mainstream schools, spreading inclusive practices and materials suited to awareness raising of the school community (students, teachers, school staff) and empowerment of students with disabilities.

The Country Sheets on Inclusiveness in Mainstream Schools were developed through desk research on national level (Cyprus, France, Hungary, Slovenia and Spain) and conduction of interviews to teachers, students and school staff from the same target countries. This research format aimed at making sense of the state of play of inclusiveness in school settings based on the current structure of the educational system, recognition of students rights and needs, and support instruments available, as well as the views and concerns as expressed by interviewees. The Country Sheets will constitute a basis for the development of ACT INCLUSIVE Targeted Awareness Raising Manuals, but are also composed as an informative material for education professionals, researchers, policy makers and interested public.

The ACT INCLUSIVE project is supported by the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (Belgium), besides educational centres and service providers supporting people with disabilities from 5 different countries: Spain (COGAMI), Hungary (ETA), Cyprus (CARDET), France (LADAPT), and Slovenia (Center VAL). For each target country, one Country Sheet has been issued with key information on Inclusiveness for students with disabilities, detailing current structures for access to education, legal provisions,



current challenges to build inclusiveness in mainstream schools and ways forward.

The European Commission's support for 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 that may be made of the information contained therein.

## Introduction

Inclusive education is an evolving concept that, today, englobes the full access to *quality* instruction and educational guidance by all groups of society, regardless of their level of vulnerability or marginalisation (Florian 2019). Equally important, as precised by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, inclusive education provides the means to realisation of other human rights, holding an overarching empowerment effect towards social mobility, participation and autonomy<sup>1</sup>.

In the specific context of disability-inclusiveness, Inclusive education has been repeatedly enriched at European and International level through different instruments<sup>2</sup>. Those clearly state the right to equal opportunities and high-quality appropriate education; the right to participate in and contribute fully to an inclusive society; the right to choose and receive education in an inclusive environment; and to appropriate resources and expertise to meet their educational, social and health-related needs (including respect to the best interest of the child).

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<sup>1</sup> paragraph 85 of its general comment No. 7 (2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention, the Committee provided further recognition of how inclusive education is essential to the right to participate.

<sup>2</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24 on Education and General Comment No.4 on Inclusive Education); The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4 - targets 4.4 and 4.5); The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (Area of Action 5.3); The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021), The European Child Guarantee (2021), etc.

Inclusiveness on School environment also has supported evidence of bringing overall benefits to all students, since the interaction between students with and without disabilities on school context enable both groups to learn more<sup>3</sup>. Despite that, the realisation of fully inclusive education systems across Europe is yet to be achieved. The recent restrictive measures due to COVID-19 pandemic brought more emphasis to the urgent need for inclusive approaches for conceiving adapted environments that can respond to all students' needs. Bhan and Julka (2021) pointed out that Educational challenges faced by children with disabilities in this context were: lack of peer interaction; lack of therapies; lack of diagnostic assessment; break in routine; lack of teacher support; lack of access to meals.

Special rapporteur also points out stigma and stereotypes due to their age, gender, impairment or other factor as some of the key factors for continued segregation of children with disabilities to the mainstream school system.

While the response to educational systems transformation must certainly involve measures in multiple levels, the awareness of the school community, and capacity building of its professionals, is key to build up diversity in the school environment. The identification of the state of play of current context and existing structures of school system comes as a logical step.

## Methodology

In order to achieve our goals, partners developed an extensive literature review concerning the history background, legislation and current school system structure and challenges/ limitations in the current state of play of inclusiveness in mainstream schools. The development of such material was guided by a set of questions developed by LADAPT, with inputs from all partners. The information collected was also reviewed by expert organisations with field expertise and

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<sup>3</sup> (Bui, et al., 2010; Dupuis, Barclay, Holms, Platt, Shaha, & Lewis, 2006; Newman, 2006; Alquraini & Gut, 2012)

knowledge on the national context in each country. Comments were incorporated, and content was summarised to compose this Country Sheet.

On a second phase, partners collected and analyzed the perspectives, opinions, experiences, specific needs and challenges faced by students (disabled and non-disabled), teachers and staff of local schools. Through data collection in schools, we aim to gain a comprehensive overview of the state of inclusive education in schools, as well as a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of school staff, teachers and students and the main difficulties they face in their daily work.

In line with the research objectives, we collected data during the first quarter of 2023 using different measurement tools to understand schools' practices and opinions on inclusive education, its challenges and successes. The measurement tools were developed and finalised with our project partners under the guidance of the French partner LADAPT.

In Cyprus data collection involved 10 teachers (from 3 different schools) and 25 students. When selecting the schools, it was important to select mainstream schools and to get the views of staff and students of primary and secondary education institutions. The schools were selected with particular attention being paid to the school's openness to the situation of people with disabilities and the importance of promoting acceptance and inclusion within the institution.

The professional profile of interviewees mainly comprised of teachers and school psychologists as well as other support staff with different relevant positions in relation to inclusive education. Participation was voluntary and respondents were granted anonymity when summarising the results.

Due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of the data collection and the aim to learn about school practices, the data collection does not aim to describe the entire institutional system and its functioning in Cyprus (and the rest of the 5 partner-countries, so the results presented in the present report, may not be

generalisable. Data on this report bring in evidence to views, needs and ways forward for enabling more inclusive practices and build welcoming and diverse environments for students and the school community as a whole.

## Background

This is an Overview of the state of the art regarding inclusive education on a national level, adopting a brief historical perspective until present context and legal provisions within the Cypriot realm.

The history of inclusive education in Cyprus start with a focus on special education in Cyprus that “*dates back to 1929 with the establishment of separate, independent and charity run special schools*” (Phtiaka, 2008, p. 149). This historical period can be divided into four stages (Phtiaka, 2008):

- 1929-1979: Gradual Establishment of Special Schools: A period characterized by the development and gradual establishment of Special Schools all over Cyprus, by charity-based initiatives and associations, in the absence of an independent and solid state. The Special schools established in Cyprus during this period were of a charitable instead of an educational nature.
- 1979-1988: Unified Legislation – Special Schools – Segregation: A period when all charity-based Special Schools, established during the previous phase, had to comply with the first Special Education Law in Cyprus that was voted by the Cyprus Parliament. This law was of a ‘separatism’ philosophy, as it was promoting Special Schools in Cyprus as ideal places for all students who ‘deviated from the norm’.
- 1988-1999: Informal Integration Practices: A period marked with a conflict between the separatist official legislation and informal integration practices. The term “Integration” appeared in the Special Education



Bulletin published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1988 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1988). Changes in practice took the form of isolated and unofficial instances of integration of students with disabilities, mainly deaf, into the mainstream school (Kouppanou and Phtiaka, 2004).

- 1999: Legislative Enforcement of Integration: A period, when the previous conflict between the separatist official legislation and informal integration practices ceased as the Cyprus Parliament voted the Law 113(I)/99. This law provides the main legislative framework to this date and highlights that students with disabilities have the right to be integrated in the mainstream schools. Known as the Education Act for children with special needs, this law highlights that the state takes responsibility for all students from the age of three (3) until the completion of post-secondary and higher education studies. The Law states that the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing equal educational opportunities to all students within the mainstream school and, if necessary, in the least restrictive environment. The Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education has under its supervision the schools for students with disabilities (Public preschools – Kindergarten for Pre-primary Education and Grades 1- 6 for Primary Education), while there is also a Regional Committee for Special Education and Training According to Law 113(I)/ 1999), this committee is responsible for:

- (a) the assessment and re-assessment of special education services provided to students with disabilities and
- (b) the description of learning and environmental accommodations to be included in the student's individualized education plan.

In addition, according to the Law of 113(I)/1999, the state should ensure a non-isolated environment for students with disabilities, who have every right to be integrated into the single core of education, known today as

inclusive education. The school settings for students with disabilities are distinguished in the three categories:

- (a) Schooling in the Mainstream Classroom with additional support from a special education teacher and/or a speech therapist,
- (b) Schooling in a Special Unit of the mainstream school with partial, where applicable, integration in the mainstream classroom, and
- (c) Public special schools.

Hence, this Education Act for children with special needs together with the regulations that govern it, makes it clear which student can be considered as having a specific disability, while also specifies the necessary provisions and school settings for special education, according to each case.

- 2004: The Committee of Educational Reform in Cyprus (CER): Background-wise it should be pointed out that the reform of intercultural policy in Cyprus impacted highly the fields of inclusive education and special education, adding to the field other perspectives and opportunities. The Committee of the Educational Reform reinforced the following educational goals (CER 2004):
  - (a) eliminating the ethnocentric and monocultural elements in Cypriot education; and
  - (b) promoting an intercultural ideology that connects the Cypriot with knowledge of other cultures. In order to explain its policy guidelines, the Ministry of Education sent various circulars to the schools, suggesting, amongst others the following:
    - Revision of the curriculum in terms of intercultural education;
    - Teaching of the musical tradition, history, literature and the religious rituals of minorities; and
    - Launching of Greek-language programmes that smooth the inclusion of immigrants in local society (MEC 2004).

- 2008: Policy Document for Intercultural Education: Another highlight inclusive education background-wise dates back in 2008, with the Council of Ministers of Cyprus approving the “Policy Document of the Ministry of Education and Culture for Intercultural Education” (MEC 2008, 1). The ‘new’ policy directive aimed to create an intercultural **school that does not exclude, but seeks to promote inclusion in the education system and society of Cyprus**. Instead, intercultural schools should be conducive to the success of all students despite their socio-cultural, linguistic or religious diversity. The Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus (MEC) declared its willingness **to promote social justice in education, while eradicating stereotypes and prejudices** (MEC 2008c).

### Overview on the history of inclusive education and evolution of practices in Cyprus

The Cyprus law of 1999 has developed and legitimized a two-track system of education, which means that students’ education happens in both mainstream schools and totally isolated special schools (Barnard, 1997). According to the Document of Information about Special Education (1996) published by the Ministry of Education and Culture, for students with disabilities who are integrated in the mainstream school, a part of the programme is offered by a specialised teacher in a special class, and the rest of the teaching and learning needs are covered by the general teacher, in the ordinary class. As derived from the above, context, in Cyprus, educators are distinguished as “special” and “regular” teachers, something that also affects teacher education, with teachers being again classified into “special” and “regular” categories.

In Cyprus there are no universities (public or private ones) that provide undergraduate programs which are fully focused on educating “special education” teachers, with the exception of undergraduate studies in logotherapy (e.g. in the European University Cyprus and the Cyprus University of Technology). The rest of the Special Education teachers obtain their degrees from countries outside Cyprus. According to the Annual Report of the Educational

Service Committee (2016) a total of 648 teachers qualified in special education, were placed in schools but they were not sufficient in meeting the diverse needs of the Cypriot students. Besides, the special education teachers are placed only in the pre-primary and primary level. In secondary education there are no special teachers and special units are more limited. In fact, teachers in middle schools are usually requested to serve as special education resource teachers, where they form groups of students with disabilities to provide small-group instruction. In the middle school “Special Education” is termed as “Support” stressing the provision of educational services for students with disabilities. In addition, school career counsellors are anticipated to coordinate individualized support for students with disabilities or difficulties with literacy. However, due to their busy schedule, their support is insufficient. At the same time, primary school teachers are expected to have in their mainstream classes mild cases of students with disabilities, with training being again insufficient. At the time being, pre-primary and primary school educators are graduates of a four-year programme provided by the University of Cyprus (as one of the three public universities of the country) or by the private universities in Cyprus (University of Nicosia, European University Cyprus, Frederick University). A compulsory course in special or inclusive education is usually offered to undergraduate students, while other disability-related courses are provided as optional, for all the students who would like to obtain deeper knowledge in the subject. Lately, MA programmes are offered in the field area from the Cypriot universities (e.g. University of Cyprus, University of Nicosia), whereas there is a possibility for Doctoral Studies.

Since 2007 the University of Cyprus has been offering a Pre-service Training Programme, as a one-year long programme, which was established for bridging the gap in particular subjects and pedagogy. In the course of this programme students may choose the inclusive education course.

## Structure

### Rates on students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties in mainstream schools and institutions

Legislation-wise, exact scientific recording of students with mild disabilities and severe disabilities is a sine qua non prerequisite for the satisfactory formulation of policy on integration (Koutrouba, Vamvakari, & Steliou, 2006). According to the last available recording derived from the Statistics of Education Report (Statistic Service, 2014), during 2014-15 there were a total of 178,116 students with mild disabilities and severe disabilities, from which 88,390 were boys (49,6%) and 89,726 were girls (50,4%).

Students with disabilities in Cyprus may belong to two groups:

Group 1: Students with severe disabilities, who are excluded from mainstream educational system and attend Special Schools. Based on the Statistics of Education Report (Statistic Service, 2014), during 2014-15 there were 11 Special Schools with a total of 388 students (covering 0.22% of the student population), from which 259 were boys (66.8%) and 129 were girls (33.2%). The students' age at the Special Schools ranged from 2-years old (0.5%) to 20+ years old (6.7%).

Group 2: The remaining students, who have mild disabilities, are included in the mainstream classrooms. Some of these students receive additional teaching aid from a special education teacher and/or a speech therapist while others have schooling in a Special Unit.

### Status for students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties

The Cyprus educational system recognises that all learners have the right to an education appropriate to their needs. Attempts are made to provide a legal framework where individuals with special educational requirements can receive an education that meets their individual needs, within the least limiting environment. Through on-going re-evaluation, it aims to ensure that the learner's

individual education plan (IEP) develops along with the learner and that every effort is made to create the least isolated educational environment possible.

### **Accessibility in schools**

Learners attending special units within mainstream schools have the same school day as the mainstream classes. Depending on their individual needs, they may attend most lessons in their mainstream class. They also attend inclusive lessons and participate in celebratory or festive events with this class. The time they spend in the special unit depends on the nature and level of their learning difficulty. This also determines the level(s) of differentiation that the learner's personalised curriculum will have comparing to their peer group.

For the case of the secondary school, support is primarily of the form of additional language and numeric tuition. At times, once necessary, a learner may be exempted from certain subjects. Learners with special needs attending mainstream secondary schools receive transition services designed for their age-equivalent peers, normally entailing advice on careers or further educational opportunities. Those with specific sensory disabilities receive specialised assistance from the special schools.

In an attempt to ensure accessibility and maximize learning within these contexts, the use of assistive technology is constantly increasing. In the same line is hands-on learning, visits and course trips.

Learners attending technical schools are, by definition, in a vocational training environment.

### **Rate of students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties accessing higher education**

Within the Cypriot context, research on disability, access and provision in higher education is limited. It is estimated that 8–10% of students attending higher

education are registered with disability, with learning difficulties being the most commonly reported disability (Hadjikakou and Hartas, 2008)

### **Support to schools in accommodating students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties**

Based on EURYDICE (2022), the Ministry of Education and Culture has introduced the following measures at primary and secondary level in assisting the integration of children with special needs and children of migrant biographies in mainstream education and in improving the quality of special education provision:

- Increasing the number of special education teaching staff;
- Carrying out public awareness campaigns;
- Organizing in-service training seminars for teaching personnel by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus (Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο Κύπρου);
- Inviting specialists on issues of special education from abroad to share their know-how and practice with their Cypriot counterparts;
- Offering scholarships to teachers of special education for training abroad;
- Increasing the number of special units in mainstream schools;
- Employing new teaching aids and ICT in the teaching of children with special needs;
- Introducing special arrangements for pupils with special needs as regards examinations;
- Introducing new schemes of service and regulations (Regulations Κ.Δ.Π. 35/2008 based on Laws N. 10/1969 – N. 52(I)/2007) for teaching personnel for students with special needs;
- Offering courses of the Greek language to children whose first language is not Greek, both at the primary and secondary level of education;
- Reducing the number of children for all classes from pre-primary to the upper secondary level of education; with the possibility of further reduction, as regulated, in the case of classes with children with special needs.



## **Accessibility of schools to students with special needs and/ or learning disabilities**

It is anticipated that special educational support within mainstream education will be provided at any public school, pre-primary, primary or secondary. Public schools are obligated to adapt their facilities to suit students with special educational needs. For the vast majority of students with special needs support is provided within a class at the child's local school, which receives all of the necessary modifications and resources. According to the educational programme adapted to satisfy the specific needs of children, schools and classrooms which include children with special needs are equipped with the appropriate infrastructure. In practice, however, and as it was highlighted from the national-based interviews, several gaps and needs are identified and reported, making this issue an important educational challenge for the case of the Cypriot educational system.

## **National training programmes for teachers and school staff on how to support students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties**

There are five main training providers in Cyprus that attempt to provide teacher training sessions regarding special and inclusive education:

- (a) Public universities,
- (b) Private universities,
- (c) The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute,
- (d) The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, and
- (e) Different NGOs and other bodies which provide seminars and workshops on a voluntary basis (e.g. Cyprus Inclusive Education Club, Youth Organisation, CARDDET, etc.)

However, as it is highlighted in research attempts and through our interviews, teacher training in Cyprus regarding special and inclusive education is considered to be insufficient, especially concerning pre-primary, primary and secondary education teachers. Though certain entities are training providers (see



the list above) limited opportunities are offered, whereas the NGOs initiatives seem to be mostly useful, addressing gaps and needs more effectively than other entities.

### **National training programmes for parents on how to support students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties**

There are very few opportunities for parents' training focusing on how to support students with disabilities and/ or learning difficulties. The entities/institutions referred to above are the main providers of such training, with NGOs initiatives, however, being highlighted as prevalent and more useful.

### **Entities providing information on inclusive education on a national level**

Information and updates on a national level on the progress of inclusive education in Cyprus may be provided by the following entities: (a) Public universities, (b) Private universities, (c) The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, (d) The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth, and (e) Different NGOs and other bodies which provide seminars and workshops on a voluntary basis (e.g. Cyprus Inclusive Education Club, Youth Organisation, CARDDET, INNOVADE LI, IoD, etc.).

## Challenges

There are several challenges to a more inclusive education on the island of Cyprus (Angelides, 2004; Angelides & Michaelidou, 2007; Angelides, Vrasidas & Charalambous, 2007; Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2013; Chadjisoteriou & Angelides, 2013); Kipriotakis et al, 2000; Koutrouba et al., 2006; Symeonidou & Mavrou, 2013; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009; 2014):

- Taking into account the overview presented so far regarding the current legislation framework and teachers' training in the area of (special and) inclusive education in Cyprus, it is more than obvious that **inclusive education is a goal that has not yet been fulfilled so far on the island of Cyprus.**
- Despite the current rhetoric calling for teacher training as a crucial step towards inclusion and the provisions of the Law of 113(I)/1999 for Special Education, teachers; **initial education concerning inclusive education is insufficient and applicable teacher training for inclusion in Cyprus hardly exists.**
- There is an urgent need for **careful planning and delivering of teacher training programmes** for addressing both theoretical and practical aspects of inclusive education effectively.
- The majority of pre-primary, primary and secondary education teachers at Cyprus form **a superficial view of inclusive education**, and as such, in most of the cases **they do not favour inclusion.**
- The concept that teachers have on inclusive education is problematic. **Teachers do not conceptualise inclusion properly** and this has an impact in their decision-making, daily practices, future of inclusive education, etc.

- Most of the general teachers **seem reluctant to undertake an active role towards inclusive education**, as they assume that the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream classroom will be a **time-consuming and difficult process**, in which they do not wish to be involved.
- **The lack of a particular policy (or policies) or programme(s) for differentiating the curriculum or the teaching methods and resources**, in order to be able to provide equal opportunities for learning to all students is a major obstacle in implementing inclusion
- **The lack of the provision of essential material and technical infrastructure** that would address a prevalent teachers' need.
- The **absence of satisfactory support from specialists** in the field that would ensure provision of support and high quality.

## Conclusion

Highlights in history as well as needs, gaps and challenges discussed on this report, hold both, similarities and differences with the reality in other EU contexts currently.

Cyprus could address these challenges, difficulties and problems by focusing on the following teacher training activities, initiatives and goals:

- Support teachers in developing a practical conceptualization of inclusion and inclusive education, based on hands-on implementation of innovative methods and techniques;
- Support teachers in using teaching methods and pedagogical approaches to provide equal opportunities for learning for all students;
- Support teachers by providing access to essential materials and technological resources supporting addressing the needs of all students;



- Allow teachers to share their new experiences in a Community of Practice (CoP).
- Carefully plan and deliver teacher training programmes for addressing both theoretical and practical aspects of inclusive education effectively.



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