

ACT-InclusivE – Actors of Change Towards Inclusive Education

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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.

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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 autonomy¹.

In the specific context of disability-inclusiveness, Inclusive education has been repeatedly enriched at European and International level through different instruments². 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).

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 more³. 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.

The 2019 report on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also points out stigma and stereotypes due to their age, gender, impairment or other factor (page 14) as some of the key factors for continued segregation of children with disabilities to the mainstream school system.

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ (Bui,etal.,2010;Dupuis,Barclay,Holms,Platt,Shaha,&Lewis,2006;Newman,2006;Alquraini&Gut,2012)

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

In a second phase, partners collected and analysed 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 between May and September 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.

The data collection focused on a total of 13 schools in France. 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.

In total, 13 semi-structured interviews were done 13 in France, with 2-2 interviews in each school. The professional profile of interviewees comprised: head and vice principal school staff, teachers, conductive educator, school psychologists and other support staff with different relevant positions in relation to inclusive education in the school. 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 the 5 countries, so the results presented in the following chapters are not, or only to a very limited extent, generalisable. Nevertheless, they 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.



Mainstream school system and inclusive education

The mainstream school system is treated as the default option for all students, and students with disabilities retain their right to return to the mainstream school at any time, though they may choose to attend specialised schools or specialised classrooms within mainstream schools as well. This is outlined by Decree No. 2005-1752 of 30 December 2005 which determines the training plan for students with disabilities. Article 19 of the 2005 law provides that **any student with a disability or a disabling health disorder should be enrolled in the school, collège (lower-secondary school) or lycée (upper-secondary school) closest to home**. This school is their reference institution. If it is subsequently necessary to enroll a student with disabilities in a special school or special unit, they retain the right to be enrolled in mainstream educational settings.

Within mainstream educational settings, students with disabilities can be enrolled in either a mainstream class or a Local Unit for Educational Inclusion (unité localisée pour l'inclusion scolaire – ULIS)⁸. ULIS are designated learning environments set aside for students with disabilities and are available in some mainstream primary schools, middle, and high schools. Students with a diagnosed disability including learning disabilities, physical, and intellectual disabilities are identified as SENs (élève en situation de handicap – 2.9% of all students for the 2019–2020 school year) and receive additional support. **In the 2021-2022 school year, 75% of the 212,400 pupils with disabilities enrolled in primary schools were in ordinary classes**. 141,600, i.e. two-thirds of them, receive human assistance, either individual or mutualised⁹. Around 4% of students with disabilities in primary school are provided with adapted educational materials (keyboard braille, adapted peripherals, specific software, etc.), mainly for sensorial and psychomotor impairments¹⁰.

In the 2021-2022 school year, 72% of the 197,000 pupils with disabilities enrolled in secondary schools were in ordinary classes. Nearly half of them receive human assistance, either individually or mutualised. During the 2021-2022 school year, 45,754 students with disabilities in France were recorded as attending university and 50,984 were reported as reaching higher education generally. This amounted to 2.2 percent of students in higher education having a disability. 76.4 percent of students with disabilities in higher education received testing accommodations with 91.6 percent benefitting from a PAEH (plan

⁸ “La Scolarisation Des Élèves En Situation de Handicap : Textes de Référence et Rapports.” *Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*,

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ministère de La Santé et de La Prévention

d'accompagnement de l'étudiant en situation de handicap or accommodation plan for students with disabilities)¹¹.

The state covers expenses relating to the schooling of learners with disabilities from pre-primary level through to secondary school. Related expenditure includes the salaries of specialised teachers, the cost of individual or collective school assistants, and subsidised jobs assigned to support missions and the various expenses connected with receiving learners (travel expenses of school assistants, cost of adapted teaching materials). Since the start of the 2019 school year, **Inclusive Localised Support Poles (PIAL)** have been developed to better co-ordinate and manage human support means (support assistants as well as educational and health support)¹². Human assistance is mutualised 54% of the time in primary education and 65% in secondary education (Statistical Surveys no. 3 and 12, French Ministry of Education).

In order to account for a lack of teachers trained to teach those with disabilities, France has created **modules for non-specialised teachers**. The courses are based on feedback collected from educators and last between 25 and 50 hours¹³. France has also implemented joint training programs which bring together education, healthcare and social work professionals. Teacher training colleges (ESPEs) are now required to deliver inclusive education training to all trainee teachers, although they are free to determine how many hours they devote to this subject in their teacher training programmes.

In terms of familial support, a dedicated helpline has been established by the ministry of education for the parents of children with disabilities to call for support. Additionally, School circular No. 2019-088 of 5 June 2019: Pour une École inclusive (For an inclusive education) outlines parent support as one of its 7 goals¹⁴.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² "Persons with Disabilities." *Right to Education Initiative*.

¹³ *Reception of Disabled Students in Public Higher Education Institutions*

¹⁴ "La Scolarisation Des Élèves En Situation de Handicap : Textes de Référence et Rapports." *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*

Structures

Inclusive education efforts in schools are carried out by a variety of figures and structures. A key actor in the inclusive education landscape is that of the **referent teacher**. The role of the referent teacher was created by the 2005 law, and depends on the French National Education. Their role is to make the connections between the children, the parents, the school and the socio-medical actors. They are contacted directly by the schools. For each sector, there is one referent teacher responsible for public schools, and one for private schools. They work together with preschools, primary schools, middle schools and high schools. The referent teachers are supposed to carry out one meeting per child per year at minimum where the child's educational team can come together to discuss their progress and goals¹⁵.

Other forms of support workers include AESH (Accompagnant des élèves en situation de handicap) who supports the child in school, and the EMAS (Equipes mobiles d'appui à la scolarisation). The EMAS mobile teams raise awareness in schools for the staff, create connections between the education staff, students and their families, and give direct advice to teachers and school staff on specific situations¹⁶.

These roles are accompanied by different formalised methods of supporting the students. One form of support is the PAI (Projet d'accueil individualisé) or **individualised welcome project**. This concerns pupils with a disabling health problem such as a chronic illness (asthma or diabetes, for example), allergy or food intolerance. The PAI is drawn up at the request of, or in agreement with, the families. It is designed to ensure the safety of pupils who have a PAI (medical treatment, specific diet, regular blood sugar checks, for example) and includes an emergency protocol¹⁷.

Another key form of support is the PAP (Plan d'accompagnement personnalisé) or **personalised support plan**. This concerns all pupils, whatever their nationality, whose persistent difficulties are the result of a specific learning disability and for whom educational adjustments and adaptations are necessary so that they can continue their school career in the best possible conditions. It is a plan that can be requested by the family or proposed either

¹⁵ "Country Information for France - Legislation and Policy." *Legislation and Policy | European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education*, www.european-agency.org/country-information/france/legislation-and-policy. Accessed 14 Sept. 2023.

¹⁶ "La Scolarisation Des Élèves En Situation De Handicap." *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*, www.education.gouv.fr/la-scolarisation-des-eleves-en-situation-de-handicap-1022. Accessed 14 Sept. 2023.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

by the teachers; council or by the class council with the agreement of the family, the legal representatives or the pupil if he/she is of age¹⁸.

A variety of techniques have been taken up in order to foster an inclusive social environment within schools. These techniques have included methods such as LADAPT'S Handi'mallette program, an educational series of workshops which allow the children to become more aware of disability. During Handi'mallette workshops, students use a variety of games, books, and discussions to explore the topic of disability. They also have the opportunity to meet with and ask questions of adults with disabilities.

The July 18, 2019 Law for a School of Confidence has strengthened measures for the inclusive education of students with disabilities¹⁹. In particular, it deepens cooperation between stakeholders and particularly invites medico-social establishments and services (ESMS) to make their expertise available to the educational community.

In this context, it has been decided to reinforce the mobile medical-social support teams for schooling (EMAS) and to ensure their deployment throughout the country, in order to increase the mobilization of existing resources in a given region to the benefit of the schooling pathways of young people with disabilities. The aim is for all schools to be able to call on a mobile support team as quickly as possible²⁰.

The main missions of these mobile teams are to :

- Advise and take part in awareness-raising initiatives, particularly in the context of inclusive education;
- Provide support and advice to a school in the event of difficulty with a student with disabilities, whether or not he or she benefits from human support (AESH), it being understood that the mobile team does not act as a substitute for an AESH;

Help the educational community manage a difficult situation;

- Advise a multi-disciplinary assessment team from the MDPH (regional disability office).

Lastly, school staff and teachers interviewed report social efforts to introduce students with disabilities to the wider school community. Students are introduced during school assemblies and the nature of their disabilities and needs are communicated to teachers at teacher assemblies. One school surveyed reported that their school festival now includes adapted sports and school skits on the theme of inclusivity. Reports from teachers and students alike point to these programs being successful in inciting the interest of students.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ "International Perspectives on Inclusive Education." *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*,

²⁰ "La Scolarisation Des Élèves En Situation de Handicap : Textes de Référence et Rapports." *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*

Challenges identified in France

A low teacher-pupil ratio

One of the main challenges is the low teacher-pupil ratio, which represents the number of teachers per pupil. Throughout France, teachers stress the difficulty of the pressure exerted on their role. They report workloads with more students per teacher than is ideal, and improper or absent training that leaves them unable to fully respond to the needs of their students with disabilities. Placing **too many students per class** poses a threat to proper and full inclusion of students with disabilities, as the teachers cannot grant them the attention needed. This situation reveals a structural weakness in the French education system: the insufficient pupil-teacher ratio reveals a significant shortage of teachers.

Insufficient training of teachers

Another major problem is the lack of qualified teachers, which means that teachers are not sufficiently trained in the principles of inclusive education nor to answer the special needs that some children with disabilities may require²¹. This has a direct impact on the ability of each pupil to progress at his or her own pace and according to his or her own needs.

Improper training of teachers can sometimes manifest more pronouncedly in the **middle school environment**, as students then work with many different teachers each day rather than only one as in primary school. As teachers interact with more students, they may be less familiar with the accommodation requirements of each student, leading to flaws in the provision of those accommodations. This poses potentially **greater risks for students less able to advocate on their own behalf as well as for those with more complex needs**.

Teachers also report that a lack of proper training leads to instances where they have to improvise, leading to stress for both teachers and students. For example, if new technologies are introduced, there must be adequate time for the teachers to familiarise themselves with that technology before incorporating it into their work with students.

A highly rigid system

The rigorous requirements of the national curriculum and, more generally, the high degree of rigidity of the centralised French system have an impact on its inclusiveness and can put a

²¹ UNAPEI 2021 survey among its members (support services associations) indicated that 36% of responding members had teachers who are not specialized (meaning, without the official Certificate of Professional Aptitude for Inclusive Education Practices).

great deal of pressure on teachers. The rigour and 'pursuit of excellence' reflected in the goals of the National Curriculum encourage achievement rather than inclusion.

This can create difficulties for teachers, including, for example, in cases where teachers wish to make adjustments to accommodate the specific needs of pupils with disabilities. For example, there were reported cases where the teacher was willing to grant accommodations to a student with disabilities, but the rigidity of the exam system would not allow it. Adapted school and educational programmes are key. Teachers interviewed also emphasised that the **objectives set for students must be set in a way that is adapted, achievable, and clear**. A lack of clarity arising from bureaucratic difficulties or otherwise leads to undue stress on both students and teachers, not to mention the consequences for the difficulty of ensuring inclusion.

Administrative and bureaucratic barriers

Administrative and bureaucratic barriers pose a major challenge in ensuring proper access to all students. The bureaucracy involved with receiving a diagnosis, for example, can severely delay the proper accommodations being granted. The collaboration of the medical and educational teams that aid the student poses logistical challenges for all involved, with teachers emphasising the need for collaborative scheduling to neither impede the child's learning nor their medical appointments. The high degree of bureaucracy can be a barrier to accessing support workers like AESH (Accompagnant des élèves en situation de handicap). This is compounded by low staff availability to begin with.

In addition, the teachers interviewed highlighted the challenge of taking account of **invisible disabilities** as part of fully inclusive education. The accommodations granted, they report, are most commonly to students with visible disabilities that can be easily understood and responded to. In cases where the disability is not immediately apparent or understood, such as with students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities, ensuring full access and inclusion appear to be more difficult.

An educational environment that is not sufficiently accessible and adaptable

In addition to a sufficient number of qualified teachers and a flexible educational approach, the school environment and premises must also be inclusive. The premises must be accessible to all types of learners. This includes physical adaptation but also, for example, attention to the visual and auditory environment and signage that is easy to read and understand ²².

²² *Education Inclusive - UNAPEI*

Disability awareness

Concluding observations on the initial report of France (2021) by the CRPD Committee also recommended the development of more specific statistical information concerning children with disabilities school attendance in each french territory (§ 50.a). In this regard, the Committee also recommends the development of data that is 'disaggregated b, place of residence, sex and ethnic background, including information about the percentage of enrolment in and attendance at school' (§51.a)

Some hopes for improvement for the year 2023-2024

A. Outcomes of the 2023 National Conference on Disability

Following the French National Conference on Disability on April 26, 2023, certain measures were outlined as upcoming goals and initiatives in the field of inclusive education. Special attention was paid for the need for collaboration of all those involved in the lives of children with disabilities in order to better address the children's needs. The conference set out to outline the next three years' progress goals. The specific measures included implementing a new method of assigning all students an individual student number to respond to bureaucratic difficulties, deploying mobile teams of medical-social professionals, protecting teachers' planning time, and new methods of ensuring enough professionals are trained to respond to the needs of students with disabilities²³.

In many ways, these measures and the targets of the conference are in line with the results of the interviews carried out as part of this report. It is clear that teachers are united in the issues faced by their students across France and the support they need.

B. Changes to Come in the 2023-24 School Year

The beginning of the 2023-2024 has already brought about expansions to inclusive education in France. 110 new inclusive classes have been opened across France, including 37 pre-school classes, and 73 in elementary, middle, and high school²⁴. This represents a positive move towards not only expanding inclusive education but specifically expanding early childhood inclusive education which has long been cited as a major need. Among the new classes opened, 29 of them include a new pedagogical approach called dispositif d'autoregulation (DAR) or a self-regulation mechanism. The DAR is a technique in which students are in ordinary

²³ "La Scolarisation Des Élèves En Situation De Handicap." *Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de La Jeunesse*,

²⁴"Rentrée 2023 : Plus d'élèves En École Inclusive." *Gouvernement.Fr*,



classrooms with an assigned specialised aid. It was designed with students with autism in mind and has been put in place among those students²⁵.

This school year represents a major effort to increase inclusive education for students with autism. The inclusion of students with autism or cognitive development disabilities makes up the third pillar of the French National Strategy for Autism²⁶. This pillar highlights access to apprenticeships, socialisation, and both present and future inclusion in society. The efforts are clear in this school year's statistics as well as 1000 new students with autism started school this year among their peers, joining the 45000 students with autism already enrolled in ordinary schools across France²⁷.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ "Rentrée 2023 : Plus d'élèves En École Inclusive." *Gouvernement.Fr*, www.gouvernement.fr/actualite/rentree-2023-plus-deleves-en-ecole-inclusive. Accessed 14 Sept. 2023.



Conclusion

French law enshrines the right to education for every child, whether or not they have a disability. The reform of 11 February 2005 introduced compulsory education. However, despite the existence of legislative frameworks, mainstream schools are still not sufficiently accessible to pupils with disabilities²⁸.

The interviews carried out as part of this work aid in developing a fuller understanding of the status of inclusive education from the perspective of the educators themselves. In collecting their experiences and giving voice to the challenges experienced in the classroom, new challenges are made clear. Through their responses, the resonances between policy and on-the-ground narratives are made clear. Across France, similar barriers to full inclusion are present, with some degrees of variation. In many ways, these challenges are recognized by policy-makers, yet the path forward to greater inclusion is not always agreed upon.

Insufficient staff resources to respond to the demands of the student population remain an issue, with teachers echoing the need for more properly trained staff. With the diverse needs posed by students, efforts must be taken to equip both current and future teachers. Without proper professionals available, both teachers and students alike cannot receive the support they need. The French context also poses unique challenges as students, teachers, and families attempt to navigate a rigid and bureaucratic educational system.

The concerns arising from these findings are echoes of a 2021 report by the UN CRPD committee following their 2021 visit to France. The Committee specifically voiced concerns about the continued segregation of students with disabilities and the stigmatisation which prevents inclusive education²⁹. Policy makers, educators, and students alike recognize the barriers, bureaucratic and attitudinal, across France. In describing the status-quo in France, the observations collected might be used not only to advance inclusive education within France but to provide a point of comparison with its European neighbours so they may collaborate on their shared goals.

To know more

To find some basic statistics regarding persons with disabilities access to services, employment, as well as the inclusion of students with disability in multiple levels, you can consult the sheets available at: [Le handicap en chiffres - Édition 2023 | Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques \(solidarites-sante.gouv.fr\)](https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/le-handicap-en-chiffres-edition-2023)

More information on the helpline for parents and support network of students with disabilities can be found at: [Le 0 800 360 360 : un numéro de téléphone pour m'aider | handicap.gouv.fr](https://handicap.gouv.fr)

²⁸ *Education Inclusive - UNAPEI*

²⁹ "Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of France ." *United Nations*

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