



PROMOTING POSITIVE  
ATTITUDES AND EVIDENCE-  
BASED POLICY FOR  
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

# TOGETHER WE LEARN BETTER

## IE+ Co-Production Manual



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The photos featured in this Manual are of the 'Ivan Bogorov' Secondary School in Sofia, Bulgaria who are the winners of the IE+ 'Together we Learn Better' Dream inclusive classroom competition.

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The other deliverables of the IE+ project can be found on the project webpage [www.easpd.eu/en/content/promoting-inclusive-education](http://www.easpd.eu/en/content/promoting-inclusive-education)



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## Introduction

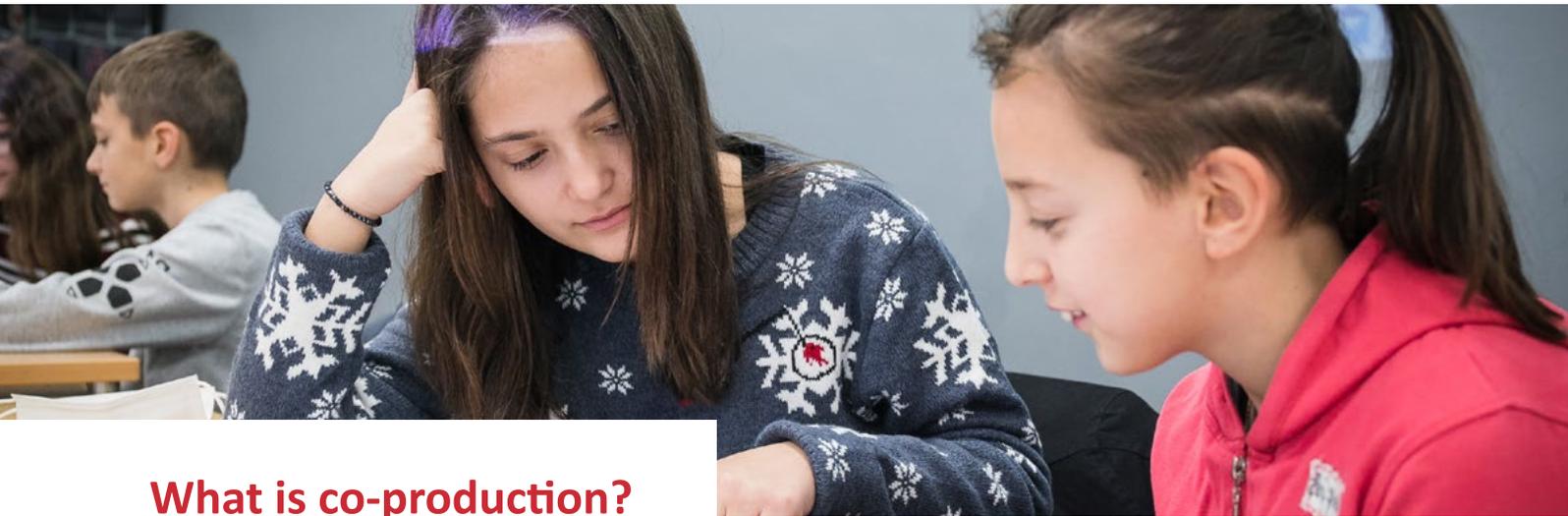
More inclusive education systems are not only for the benefit of children with disabilities. Fostering inclusive learning environments, which more accurately reflect our diverse societies, help to ensure that the learning needs of all students are met and that all children are able to flourish and fulfil their full potential.

Despite its benefits, inclusive education is yet to become a reality across Europe. With this in mind, the partners of ‘Promoting positive attitudes and evidence-based policy for inclusive education’ (IE+) project want to contribute to the realisation of more inclusive education systems. Co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme, the project aims to provide decision-makers (including policy-makers and education providers) with the information, training and tools that allow for evidence-based

policy making, that will support the transition towards inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities aged between 3-18 years old.

Developing inclusive policy is just the first step to achieve inclusive education systems. However, for inclusion to be sustainable, commitment and cooperation of all stakeholders is crucial. We all play a role in creating more inclusive communities and the process of co-production is a key tool which can facilitate the active involvement of all stakeholders. In the spirit of ‘together we learn better’ this manual will provide guidance to enable readers to promote cooperation between all actors involved in their school communities for the achievement of more inclusive education at a local level.





## What is co-production?

In the disability field, co-production is an inclusive working practice between experts by experience (users), support organisations, public authorities and, if relevant, families and other stakeholders (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2016a). The ultimate goal of co-production is the delivery of a service, policy or activity that is responsive to the individual's needs and preferences in line with the 'nothing about us, without us' principle and articles of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Through co-production, all stakeholders are empowered and are empowering as they are continuously involved in the design, development and delivery of the service, policy or activity. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2016a) Co-production empowers persons with disabilities and their families to be in control of their lives, while they take ownership and express choice through active and meaningful partnerships.

The main elements that characterise co-production are (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2016b):

1. **Shifting the balance of power and responsibility solely from professional support services and authorities.** The process establishes that all stakeholders are integral to the policy, service or activity, developed in equal partnership with persons with support needs as the drivers. Importantly, co-production is more than simply consulting with partners but creates collective ownership of the implementation of the process or activity.
2. **Recognising that every individual with support needs should be fully, structurally, meaningfully and in an ongoing manner involved at all stages in the design, development and delivery of the relevant service, policy or activity.** Stakeholders must acknowledge and recognise the expertise, desires, will and preferences of the person with support needs. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that people are provided with the right level of independent support, which empowers them to make fully informed decisions on how to engage in a co-productive process.
3. **Ensuring that all stakeholders actively rethink and reassess how they are currently operating.** Shared dialogue, jointly agreed outcomes, fully inclusive environments and reasonable accommodations must become an essential part of their work structures.





## Co-production in education

Learning is a natural process of co-production as it always requires cooperation, both between pupils and teachers, and between the school and the broader community, including parents, guardians and civil society as a whole to be successful. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) Despite the co-productive nature of education, traditional educational systems are often too rigid and not flexible enough to allow learners with disabilities and their families to be part of the conception, design, steering, and management of schools. Importantly, although these education systems often offer opportunities

for community involvement, for example via consultations or surveys, they do not provide direct accountability or the re-balancing of power between stakeholders. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) As a result, true co-production is not achieved and its use appears less well developed in education than in other areas of public service provision. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019)





## What do we want to achieve from co-production in education?

There are a wide range of co-production opportunities in education, which can facilitate cooperation between different stakeholders. These coproduction opportunities can enable stakeholders to work together for an agreed outcome, this being the realisation of inclusive education.

Taking this first step, to an agreed outcome for inclusive education can be a challenge in itself however, and many stakeholders within the education system hold misconceptions or poor experiences towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream learning environments, which can cause them to have a negative view of inclusion. (IE+ Project, 2019) For example, these negative views could be held by teachers, who often lack the resources and training to meet the needs of children with disabilities in their classroom, or by parents of children without disabilities who believe that the education of their children will be negatively impacted by the presence of learners with disabilities in their child's class. In addition to the negative beliefs' stakeholders may hold towards inclusion, many stakeholders often possess misconceptions towards each other, which prevent them from

working together to support the full inclusion of learners with disabilities in society.

Negative views and misconceptions have the potential to prevent stakeholders from successfully working co-productively towards inclusion in their school and can be hard to overcome. However, by working co-productively stakeholders can also begin to understand each other's situation better and promote more positive attitudes towards each other.

Therefore, co-production can help us to:

- Create more connections between the different stakeholders
- Address negative stereotypes and beliefs
- Reduce power imbalances
- Involve the wider community in the school's development
- Increase ownership of all stakeholders
- Promote diversity amongst decision makers including experts by experience
- Facilitate communication between stakeholders
- Empower learners with disabilities
- Promote real inclusion!





## Who should be represented in the co-production process?

School staff, parents and families as well as students are key actors in co-production in education. The education sector, and the communities in which they operate, represent a diverse array of stakeholders and so

co-production is not limited to the participation of only these actors. The stakeholders involved in the co-production process will be unique to each school community and could include:

- **Users**
  - All learners with or without disabilities
  - Families
- **Practitioners**
  - Support service providers
  - Teachers
  - Board school representatives
  - Headmasters
  - Teacher Trainers
  - School Administrators
  - Inspectors
- **Organisations**
  - Disabled People Organisations (DPOs)
  - Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)
  - Teachers Trade Unions
  - Local charities
- **Members of the Wider Community**
- **Business owners**
- **Local residents**
- **Governmental Decision-makers**
  - Civil servant/administration in education
  - Law-makers
  - Policy-makers





## How can stakeholders work together?

Working together co-productively is easier said than done. While working together stakeholders should consider a number of key principles to facilitate the co-production process and cooperate successfully. The key principles include:

### A Production process that allows genuine participation at all stages

From the very first stage (co-creation) until the very last one (co-assessment), the process of co-production needs to be accessible, adaptable and flexible to include and foster the participation of all stakeholders identified above.

- In order to be accessible, all the communication throughout all the production process needs to be understandable and clear for everybody. It is important to use a language that can be fully understood by others, avoid medical or academic terminology and check for understanding when needed. Support and accommodation should be made available for people who need it.
- In order to be adaptable, all misunderstandings and disagreements should be solved by adequately changing the final product/decision or acknowledging the disagreements when a compromise cannot be found.
- In order to be flexible, the number of objectives defined with those who will be involved need to be realistic both in quantity and quality, bearing in mind that co-production is time-consuming.



## Transparency

All discussions throughout the whole co-production process should happen in presence of all stakeholders or brought to the knowledge of people who could not be present.

## Fostering an equal relationship

The co-production process is essentially characterised by the equal relationship between all stakeholders involved in the co-production. In practice, it means that each partner must have a voice in the process that is heard equally and has the same power in decision-making.

More time, or exercises may be needed to overcome existing hierarchy and tensions between stakeholders that could occur. One example of fostering an equal relationship could be by ensuring an equal speaking time for all stakeholders during meetings. It could also be important to consider how the location of a meeting could make some stakeholders feel more comfortable than others. Time should also be taken to ensure that those who are often left out of the decision making process, for example children, are empowered to participate equally to others.

## Mutual learning and interaction to understand issues and create knowledge

Each stakeholder has their own knowledge and expertise, and this must be respected. The co-production process should provide mutual learning opportunities that can help all those involved to better understand the issues of others and learn from them. For example: roleplaying games could be part of the training to improve mutual learning and understanding of the other stakeholders' situation. Stakeholders could also work together to identify shared challenges and agree how to overcome them.





## Examples of co-production in education

Depending on the way stakeholders interact, different types of co-production can be implemented. As previously highlighted, education already provides opportunities for co-production, which may be present in your school. These opportunities could include:

### School governance

The most obvious route for educational co-production is through school governance. Most education systems have school governance boards that provide some oversight of the school's operations and teaching. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) The ability of these boards, or similar structures such as parent organisations without the same formal powers, to influence or direct school activities depends on each school. In most European country's boards consist of a mixture of teachers, administrative staff, parents and sometimes

student representatives.

This form of co-production in education is common but while parents express an interest in participating in school governance, many simply do not have the time to do so effectively, and so care needs to be taken to allow true participation. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) Attention must also be paid to the composition of these boards to ensure a balance of stakeholders and their representation.

### Individual Education Plans

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) provide a potential method of co-production due to their design to bring together students with disabilities, their family, teachers and other professionals to discuss the education path of the student. Importantly, (IEPs) offer the chance for a co-produced, collaborative process of determining





and implementing place reasonable adjustments and support for pupils with disabilities, to ensure their academic and social inclusion at school. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) In some systems, Individual Education Plans are created for every child regardless of disability. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) Despite the potential of IEPs, they are underexplored form of coproduction and their use is not always viewed positively by parents and families, who can believe them to be a form of tokenism. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) As a result, it is important that the decisions made in the development of the IEP are fully implemented to ensure that parents, families and learners can be confident that they are respected as equal partners in the process and their needs and opinions are heard.

## Parental involvement

Outside of governance structures, there are opportunities for parents to participate in their child's education, including for the parents of children with disabilities to advocate for their children to have adequate support and to be educated in inclusive settings. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019) The parents of children with education support needs often have more formal and informal opportunities to engage with teachers and the education system as a whole, including involvement in developing education and support plans and lobbying for their child to receive the support to which they are entitled. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019)

However, there are many barriers to increased parental involvement which stakeholders should be aware of and work to overcome. These barriers can be separated different groups:

### 1. Parent and family factors

- Several aspects of parents' life contexts can be barriers to parental involvement. For example, parents' level of education may influence their views on whether they have sufficient skills and knowledge to engage with the school and become more involved in their child's education. Parents may also have different views on the role they should play in their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).
- Socio-economic background, which can influence the cultural capital of parents, time and availability can be a significant barrier to parental involvement. (Taskforce for the Support Services of Tomorrow, 2019). This is one reason why the coproduction process must work to address possible differences in the existing hierarchy.
- The perceptions parents have of the school's desires of their involvement is also important. When parents believe that their involvement is not valued by teachers or schools, they are less likely to get involved. Epstein (2001) found that parents are most effectively involved when teachers actively encourage parental involvement.

### 2. Child factors

- The age of children can be a barrier to parental involvement, as it often decreases as children grow older and is at its lowest level for children of secondary school age. Children's performance at school can be a barrier or facilitating factor for parental involvement. If a child is excelling or struggling (due to learning difficulties or disabilities) with their schoolwork, it can often be a catalyst for increased parental involvement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Conversely, when children develop a reputation for exhibiting challenging behaviour, their parents can be reluctant to interact with the school and teachers, fearing more bad news.







## A first step to working together

Despite the benefits of co-production, bringing stakeholders together to work towards a common goal of inclusion is not always easy. To support schools, and in particular teachers and parents to work together, the IE+ project launched its own campaign to help partners break the ice and take the first step to working together to learn better.

The campaign offers 6 tips to promote cooperation between teachers and parents and encourages increased communication between partners. These steps include:

1. Ensure that every individual partaking in the process feels equally welcome.
2. Be considerate of other people's feelings and concerns to understand each other.
3. Use a language that can be fully understood by others, avoid medical or academic terminology and check for understanding when needed.
4. Agree on a way to communicate with each other about the progress that is being made at home and in the classroom and future expectations.
5. Identify potential future challenges in advance and agree how to overcome them together.
6. Remember that all the parties are equal partners in the process, each of them holding the expertise necessary to realise a better support system for children with disabilities.

As well as providing tips on how parents and teachers can better work in partnership together the campaign suggests an initial activity to help start a conversation between teachers, parents and children on their vision for the classroom. The form in which such project should be carried out is to be decided by the stakeholders themselves and they have free rein and full creativity on how to achieve their dream classroom, where children with and without disabilities can learn and interact together. This activity can be done together with the teacher, child and parent or can be completed with the involvement of an entire class, to promote a joint vision for a more inclusive classroom.

Find out more here in [English](#), [Bulgarian](#), [Dutch](#), [Spanish](#), [Greek](#), [French](#), [Italian](#).





## Conclusions

As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities all learners, including those with a disability are entitled to high-quality, inclusive education. Nevertheless, in many European countries learners with disabilities are still prevented from learning in the same classes as their peers.

While national governments have the obligation to legislate accordingly in order to bridge the inclusion gap that students with disabilities are experiencing, grassroots stakeholders, including parents, school staff headmasters and students, are crucial partners in the successful implementation of inclusive education on a day to day basis. Co-production is an important tool which can be used by all stakeholders to implement effective change

in their school community to meet the educational needs of all students and facilitate their full inclusion in mainstream classrooms.

Our current education systems already offer some opportunities for co-production, but more needs to be done to create true co-production which addresses the power imbalances between stakeholders and promotes equal ownership of the learning process.

Working together is not always easy, but the IE+ partners hope that this manual can provide you with the knowledge and inspiration to take the first step towards co-producing more inclusive learning environments as others have done before you. Good luck!



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